



MORTAL MATE

SHADOW  SHIFTERS

2

TIA DIDMON

MORTAL MATE

A SHADOW SHIFTERS NOVEL



TIA DIDMON

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Mortal Mate

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CHAPTER 1



The dark pathway was not on the dimensional map. Dannika wrapped her arms around Raine's neck, pressing against his body as her face turned to the side, inhaling his scent before the wrenching of every bone in her body. Molecules flew in every direction, taking her skin with it. She expected what was coming, and Raine had explained it would get easier, but every time they traveled the shadow streams, he took a faster route, conditioning her to the pain.

Dannika needed the training, craved it, as Raine shrouded her shadow. She wanted to crawl inside and live within the dark cocoon he provided. Protected. Loved. The torture of her body being ripped apart reminded her that her destiny was much darker.

The cascading sound whirled like an angry waterfall rushing through her head. She tugged from left to right as Raine switched streams. Her body lurched, almost ripped from his grasp, as he took a shallow pathway. The smaller the stream, the faster they raced through, increasing the chance that a body part would arrive at an alternate destination. An experience she worked to avoid.

Raine's shadow tightened around Dannika, protecting her from the speed, showing her without words he would never let her go. The next wrenching moment flung her to the floor, but Raine was beside her, rubbing her back as she caught her breath.

Dannika allowed Raine to pull her to her feet. "I'm not gonna lie. That sucked."

Raine smirked. “I apologize. There is no tunnel to the Forge. We are forced to take a particularly small pathway. It makes the stream fast, and painful.”

“I noticed.” She surveyed the circular walls. A single tunnel with orange light illuminating it was the only exit. “The Forge isn’t on the cartographer’s map of the cave system?”

“No. Darren was instructed to leave the Forge’s location off the clan members’ maps. Only seniors and blade bearers have access to the Forge.” Raine pointed to the lit tunnel. “Let’s see what the weapons master has for you.”

The heat as they approached the cave mouth was staggering. Sweat beaded her brow and trickled down her face.

The circular interior was strange and comforting. She had expected racks upon racks of weapons, but only a few archaic swords adorned the rock walls. A large man wearing leather pants and no shirt hammered on a steel dagger. Sparks flew as the hot metal gave way to the thunderous blows.

He looked up, smiling, as they entered.

“Raine, it is good to see you.” He wiped his hand on his leather trousers. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Dannika. I apologize for not making an introduction sooner. I no longer leave the Forge.”

Dannika looked around. “You live here? Like, all the time?”

Raine put his hand on Dannika’s back. “Ezra is protecting us. He is the only weapons master we have. If we lost him before he trains his replacement, it would be catastrophic.”

Dannika shook his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. If you don’t mind me saying so, Ezra is a beautiful name.”

Ezra winked. “It’s been a long time since I flirted with a beautiful woman. Raine will need to bring you here more often.”

Raine put his hand over his chest dramatically. “I will add you to the long list of men attempting to steal her from me.”

Ezra took on a feigned expression of innocence.

“You don’t say.” He grabbed a polishing cloth from a stone table and shone the reaper blade in his hands. “You are special, Dannika. This dagger once belonged to a great warrior of the wolf clan. I have inscribed new runes to signify its life with you.”

She glanced between the two men. “What does that mean?”

Ezra ran his fingers over the swirling script. “These weapons are special, and once a warrior passes, I prepare them to be gifted to the next generation. Once called, I add a new rune to the blade, to signify its owner. I leave the previous runes as a reminder of its past.”

Dannika took the blade from Ezra. Three runes were inscribed on one side of the blade. “This last one is me?”

Ezra nodded. “I have never inscribed a rune such as this. The images come to me as I prepare the blade. I have never seen this symbol, nor do I know what it means. All I can tell you is that it’s your destiny.”

Dannika’s finger traced the three intertwined circles with a sword running through them. “It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

“It is I who should thank you.” He motioned to the weapon. “The first rune was the symbol for the first wolf clan shadow shifter. The second was his son. That dagger has never called for a new warrior since.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Called?”

“The daggers call to me. When a blade bearer falls, the weapon is returned to me. When a new blade bearer emerges, I can feel which blade they will receive. This dagger has never called to me until today.”

“That’s your gift, as a weapons master,” she said. “To match the weapons with their owners. You’re a specialist.”

The dagger warmed in her hand, an extension of her demon. Her soul.

Raine pulled his dagger from its holder. “Yes, he is, and he is vital to our clan. We lost Lorne, and we can’t produce new

daggers until a replacement is discovered. Ezra is the only weapons master we have.”

Ezra’s jaw ticked before his eyes turned black. “Lorne’s death was a devastating blow. I would bring retribution to the reapers...”

Raine put his hand on Ezra’s shoulder. “Your fighting skills are legendary, and you would kill dozens of reapers, but your death would ensure the reapers win this war. Only you can redistribute the reaper blades.”

Ezra sighed. “I will continue my duties until my replacement is discovered and trained.”

“You are the pillar of this clan. We don’t thank you enough for what you do. The sacrifices you have made,” Raine said.

Ezra waved his hand dismissively. “If you wish to thank me, do it by training your fledgling. We’ve lost too many already. Every time I inscribe a new rune, it’s a reminder that we have lost another.”

Raine motioned for Dannika to exit the Forge.

Without thinking, she hugged Ezra and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, again.”

His eyes softened as he returned the awkward hug. His shadow connected with hers briefly then receded. “I understand now.”

“What do you understand?” she asked.

“The rune. You’re a female with the heart of a warrior, but capable of great compassion. Your symbol is that of unification. How you achieve that goal is your destiny.”

When Ezra refused to elaborate, Raine led her from the forge to the room they’d arrived. “Traveling the pathways with your weapon takes some getting used to. Pick a destination and concentrate on it. I will help you hold your shadow form while traversing the streams with our blades.”

Dannika concentrated on her shadow form, willing it to enter the singular pathway that exited the forge. Raine’s

shadow wrapped around her, cocooning her in his warmth and power.

She expected the wrenching feeling of her molecules separating, but the reaper blade combined with her shadow form, creating an explosion of dark power. Dannika would never have survived that first trip without Raine's help, so she accepted her limitations and concentrated on her destination.

Even with Raine shrouding her shadow, she was spit from the stream like a rock skipping across a pond. She scraped her hands along the pavement as she exited the shadows at the back of the building.

The overpowering smell of fresh paint wrinkled her nose. "The renovations are almost complete. I'd like to talk to Barry."

Raine surveyed the rear entrance to the shelter. Dannika had promised to leave her old life. Her previous job in the past. "We shouldn't be here, Dannika. The clan donated money, and the renovations are almost complete. It will reopen in a few days. Who is Barry?"

Dannika ran her hand over a pile of plywood. "Barry worked on the weekends. Last time we were in town, training, I called the shelter. The recording said Barry was the new manager and to leave a message. I didn't."

"You need to cut ties with the shelter." Raine folded his arms. "Margo is dead. Why the continued interference with this place?"

She stepped close to him. "It isn't interference. This was my life. Just because Margo is dead, doesn't mean I won't check-in to ensure the people are taken care of."

His eyes flickered with blue fire. "Someone will eventually notice your visits. Do you wish for another reaper attack? Innocents will die, and we'll be forced to burn the place down, again."

She balled her fingers at her sides. "I won't continue to come here after I confirm the rebuild was satisfactory."

Raine's jaw ticked. "Let's get this over with." He entered through the rear door that led to the kitchen.

The layout was as Dannika remembered, but with new appliances and pale blue walls. The industrial gray tile was stark against the pale color scheme, but it would be easier to keep clean.

Raine had kept his word. The shelter looked like it could open as soon as the paint dried.

A young man in a tan suit approached them, his face one of wariness. "May I help... Dannika, is that you?"

"Hi, Barry. We're just passing through, but I thought I'd stop in and see how the renovations were coming along." She waved her hand around the room. "It looks amazing."

Barry swallowed uncomfortably. "An anonymous donation in Margo's name has expedited the shelter's recovery."

"Thanks, Barry. I appreciate your hard work." She turned away as ice slithered along her spine. She wasn't sure if it was the reminder of Margo's death or losing her human life, but she rubbed her chest, attempting to ease the strange sensation. It wasn't until Raine grabbed her hand that she realized she wasn't the only one who was feeling it.

"We need to go, Dannika," Raine said. He led her outside, but his shadow was rippling beneath his skin, attempting to break free.

"What are you doing? What was that back there?" she asked.

His black eyes met hers. "It isn't the shelter. I smell blood. Lots of it."

He pulled her against his body as the shadows consumed them.

Dannika barely had time to catch her breath as the shadows expunged her from the darkness like a discarded toy. She put her hand against a white post to steady her as her stomach recovered.

The smell of rich iron made her eyes snap up from the grassy field. Fresh cut grass and chalk mixed with the odor of death as she took in the grizzly sight.

They stood at the end of a soccer field that held the bodies of blue-shirted men. The opposite end was littered with the dead wearing white jerseys. Red stained the chest of every player on the field, including the ones wearing black and white stripes.

“Dear God. What happened?” she asked.

Raine made his way to the closest body. “This man was drained. Fed on by a reaper.”

Dannika pointed to the hole in his chest. “Do reapers normally rip their hearts out?”

“No. There are over thirty men on this field. This is... new.”

“Why do this?”

Raine shook his head. “I don’t know, but there’s no way to cover this kind of massacre. Even the terrorism claim will fall short with this many dead. No animal could kill this many people in seconds. They didn’t have time to run. This kill was orchestrated by the entire reaper clan. It’s the only way they could kill so many.”

Dannika put her hand over her mouth. “Is this a message? If so, what does it mean?”

Raine turned his head toward the sound of sirens in the distance. “The last time the reapers made an overt kill like this, they were preparing for war.”

Goosebumps formed on her skin as she turned. It was a connection she didn’t understand and didn’t want to.

Killian stepped from the shadows of an evergreen across the field. A myriad of bodies stood between them, yet he smiled like a predator playing his prey. “It’s good to see you, Dannika.”

“Wish I could say the same about you,” she said with a snarl.

Raine put a restraining hand on her arm. “Why have you done this? There’s no way to hide a massacre of this magnitude.”

Killian took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet smell of death. “That’s the point. We are tired of hiding. It’s time the humans learned their place.”

Raine’s body went rigid. “What are you planning, Killian?”

Killian smiled, allowing a drop of venom to drip from his fangs. “A cow isn’t oblivious to the farmer. It understands its role in the food chain.”

Raine’s eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

Killian rolled his shoulders, but his gaze remained on Dannika. “She’s more than I hoped for. A miracle, really.”

“You were once human yourself, Killian,” Raine said.

Killian’s jaw twitched. “An accident of birth; one I have rectified.”

Dark wisps of black mist rolled off Raine’s shoulders, his alpha barely leashed by its human confines. “By your own admission, you’re just a cow that became a farmer.”

Killian hissed. “You will die, begging me for mercy, but not before Dannika stands by my side.”

Raine glanced at Dannika before meeting Killian’s black pupils. “What is your interest in Dannika?”

Killian’s eyes softened when they looked at Dannika, though the red fire returned. “I waited for her. She is very special.”

Dannika shivered, recalling the note left on her when she was abandoned. “What’s special about me?”

Killian arched an eyebrow. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“You said you didn’t know I was a shadow shifter.”

“I didn’t, but your blood is unpredictable. More powerful than I had anticipated.”

Dannika pointed to the array of bodies. “Why do this?”

“This was a gift to you, Dannika.”

She put her hand on her stomach as it rolled. “A gift? You slaughtered over thirty men. Why?”

Killian smiled. “To get your attention.”

“Well, you have it, you sick prick. I plan to remove that smile when I stick a blade in your chest.”

Killian laughed. “Your mother said something similar.”

Dannika’s heart stuttered. “You knew my mother?”

The red pupils ignited with fire before his lips curled. “Yes. I killed her.”

CHAPTER 2



The shadows rolled like smoky waves off Dannika's skin, adding to the oppressive atmosphere. Her surroundings tinted with gray as she fought the rising beast within. Raine was talking to her. The vibrations from his alpha voice surrounded her heart and set her blood on fire, but she couldn't understand a single word as she focused on her prey: the monster with glowing red eyes.

"You killed my mother?"

As an orphan, she'd always wondered about her mother, assuming she had been a teenager or a drug addict. Many homeless people gave up their children because they had no means of supporting them. It had never occurred to her that her mother had died. That abandoning her child wasn't her choice.

There had always been the tiniest hope that she would reach out, and Dannika would discover her mother had regretted her decision to give her up. That she was in a better place now and wanted to be a part of Dannika's life. One where she could have a relationship with her mother. Dannika had never realized how important that fantasy was until Killian ripped it away.

Killian smiled. "Who do you think left that note on you before leaving you at the hospital?"

Raine pulled Dannika against his body, his shadow mixed with hers, wrapping her in a cocoon of warmth and compassion. "Why would you save her?"

Killian licked his lips, tasting the blood in the air. “Dannika is special. Her mother was special.”

Dannika’s beast howled for blood, but the leader of the reapers possessed a piece of information she’d wanted her entire life. She caged her raging emotions. “Who was she? How did you know my mother?”

Long, black fingernails unfurled from Killian’s hand as he reached out to her. “Come with me, Dannika, and I will tell you all about your mother and your history. I assure you, it’s not what you think it is.”

Raine stepped in front of her. “She isn’t going anywhere with you, Killian. Dannika’s mine.”

Killian laughed, but the grating sound that echoed from his lungs made Dannika’s stomach roll. “The shadow wolf clan is no different from the many foster homes she attended—a temporary housing before she realizes her place in the new world.”

“The new world? We heard you fancied yourself a king. Delusions of grandeur are a human trait, Killian. Are you embracing your true heritage?” Raine asked.

The snarl Killian emitted echoed in the air, drowning out the distant sirens. “I am the king. I planned to kill you quickly, but you have earned a special place beneath my boot. You will lick it and fawn at my feet before I kill you.”

Raine shook his head. “You’re more delusional than I thought. Enjoy your fantasies while you can. I will remind you of them when I kill you.”

Killian glanced down the street, where red and blue lights flashed against the buildings. “We are out of time. Come with me now, Dannika.”

She stepped back into Raine’s chest. “No.”

“Bad decision. The next deaths are on you.” The shadows rose from the earth, consuming Killian before sinking to the ground. A black stain charred the grass where he’d stood.

Raine grabbed Dannika's hand, pulling her into the mouth of the shadow pathway. They hovered in the opening, watching as the emergency vehicles parked.

Lights flashed against the mirrored windows on the businesses across the street as men and women in blue uniforms and gold badges ran between the victims. They looked for life, hope, maybe a miracle, but they would get none.

Inside the shadow pathway, Raine and Dannika's raw emotions mixed in a gray cauldron of pain. Fear, anger, and disgust all intertwined so completely, Dannika couldn't tell who they originated from. Raine had warned her mates were entwined, but this was absolute. One being. One soul.

Dannika focused on a detective in a tan overcoat as he approached a victim, taking pictures with his phone. "This is a catastrophe. Why so many?"

"I have no idea. His thirst for power concerns me, but his fascination with you is out of character for a reaper, especially Killian."

She wrapped her arms around herself, though the shadowy limbs offered no warmth. "Did he really leave a note to ensure that I was safe after killing my mother?"

"Hard to say. The reapers spy on us. It's just as likely someone heard you tell us about the note. I detected no lie from him, but Killian is a master deceiver. He mixes enough truth in with his lies to trick our shadows."

She turned to him. "I thought you monitored the shadow pathways. Wouldn't you know if a reaper penetrated the caves?"

"Normally, yes. But reapers are former shadows. Some were specialists. They do not lose those special abilities when they turn reaper."

"There's a reaper that can mask his presence in the pathways?" Dannika asked.

Raine's shadow tightened around her. "Yes. We've tried to take him out for a few years. He is crafty and well protected."

“What do we do next?” The ice in her heart refused to thaw. Ghostly fingers clawed at the fleshy organ, attempting to take a permanent hold.

“We need to investigate your heritage. Killian’s fascination with you originates from your mother. We must find out who she was.”

Dannika turned around, looking up at Raine. His face could’ve been carved from stone. The pale color, with the flickers of black shadow, made him look like a granite Adonis. “I checked my social worker’s documents. Other than the trail of group homes, she had nothing useful in my file. Just the address for the hospital where I was abandoned.”

Raine focused on the sea of blue uniforms that swarmed over the dead. “Regardless of who your mother was, Killian fixated on her. He wants you, but the question is why? I am concerned you are a stand-in for the object of his obsession?”

“Could just be the whole female shadow thing,” she said.

“I don’t think so. Reapers don’t mate, and Killian wants you for something. He was salivating at the sight of you.”

Ice skated down Dannika’s spine. “Don’t remind me.”

Raine pointed to the detective in the tan overcoat. “He appears to be the lead detective. He is taking photos of all the men, likely for identification purposes. Wait here while I make a few suggestions to him.”

Dannika grabbed his arm when he made a move to exit the shadow pathway, but he dissolved and raced across the grass. Each blade created a tiny shadow, a highway of darkness that led him to his prey.

Dark mist rose from the grass beneath the detective’s feet. He looked around, rubbing his neck uncomfortably as the dark molecules entered his eardrum. His eyes glassed over as all movement ceased.

It was only a matter of seconds. To the surrounding officers, the detective appeared to be looking at his phone. Only Dannika knew his heart had stopped beating. Some kind

of stasis locked the detective in place, a rapture created by her mate.

The dark matter exited the detective's eardrum and returned to the grass below. The detective scratched his ear before returning to his crime scene and taking a picture of a dead referee as if nothing had happened.

Raine raced along the ground and reformed in the shadow pathway's mouth. His arms encircled her body before he whispered in her ear, "Did you miss me?"

The words enveloped her heart. Despite the grave circumstances, his voice wrapped around her soul, causing her body to come alive. He did that. Always. There wasn't a moment, good or bad, that Dannika didn't want to be with him.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"I whispered to him."

She pointed at the detective, rubbing his chin. "What did that do to him?"

"You're aware that some shadows have specialized talents. Ones they develop as they mature. Mine is the power of suggestion. If I whisper an idea to a human. More often than not, they will believe the whispers as truth."

Her eyes widened. "What did you tell him?"

"I suggested this was an organized terrorist attack. My brethren will plant some evidence that supports this theory around town, and I will direct the lead detective toward that theory."

Her brows knit together. "This isn't the first time you've done this, is it?"

"I have been using my talent to cover reaper kills for centuries. This is the most overt demonstration of Killian's quest for power to date." He surveyed the field, littered with dead bodies. "I fear it won't be the last."

Dannika glanced at the detective. He was barking orders at several officers and directing the coroners. "What do we do

now?”

“We need to return to the caves and report to Maddock.”

The pain associated with her molecules separating, her skin ripping from bone, and the strange security of the dark pathway was a welcome reprieve from the macabre death scene at that soccer field.

Raine shrouded her and protected her as they raced through the dark streams that made up the shadow network. The wrenching feeling and abrupt halt as he exited the pathway made her stomach flip, but it was getting easier. She didn't throw up, and she recovered from the disorientation much faster.

They walked outside the caves, where Maddock was overseeing a combat trial between two younger clan members. He didn't turn when they stopped beside him.

“The reapers killed over thirty men. Killian oversaw the attack himself,” Raine said.

Maddock turned with black eyes. “That's a massacre. How do we spin that to the humans?”

“I've suggested it was an organized terrorist attack. I will make the necessary arrangements, but we can't continue like this. Killian said he did this for Dannika. He wanted her to go with him.”

Maddock's eyes bored into Dannika. “What's Killian's interest in you?”

Dannika nibbled her lip. “No idea, but I don't want any part of that freak show.”

Raine glanced at the fighting shadows. “Maybe her blood is poisonous to the reapers. They have been watching us, perhaps they know.”

“We are yet to test that theory,” Maddock said.

“They don't want to hurt her. Perhaps it can work to our advantage.”

Maddock's eyes roamed over Dannika. "That's interesting, isn't it? They kill over thirty people, but won't threaten Dannika."

Raine shook his head. "It's concerning. I had planned to wait a bit, but I'm going to have Darren rune Dannika now. The reapers have already proven they will attack us here. If she needs to enter the shadows, she needs those maps."

"She has not passed a single trial. Runes are earned, not given out like cheap pieces of jewelry," Maddock snapped.

Raine stepped up to Maddock. "She is getting the Rune. This is my decision, not yours."

Dannika put her hand on Raine's arm. "What is this all about? What runes?"

Raine's eyes softened when he looked down at her. "I want Darren to give you map runes. The caves. The city. The outlying areas."

"I can't travel the pathways without you. I don't know how to use the maps yet," Dannika said.

"I will teach you. If the reapers come for you, you'll need an escape route."

Maddock huffed. "She is a fledgling. A reaper will enter the pathway and follow her. She's too inexperienced. Too slow to evade a reaper."

Raine's eyes met that of his leader. "I also want her to have maps of the other clans. Darren has made them for the cougar and bear clan. We have access to all of them."

"I don't trust her." Maddock held up his hand when Raine growled. "It isn't just her. I don't trust any fledgling until they prove themselves. You know this."

"Killian is trying to acquire her. This situation is unprecedented," Raine said.

"By your own admission, he won't hurt Dannika. Until we learn who her mother is and why Killian wants her, it's not safe for the clan to give her access to all the pathways."

Raine's eyes flickered black. "She gets them or we are leaving. I'm done with your lack of trust in me."

Maddock stepped back. "I trust you, Raine. Your specialized talent has been invaluable in keeping the humans out of this war."

"Then trust me now," Raine said.

A wisp of dark mist rolled off Maddock's chest. His muscles flexed before his lip twitched. "I will allow the maps of the caves and city, but Killian's interest makes me nervous."

Raine inclined his head. "Me as well. Dannika and I will discover his fascination with her."

Maddock nodded, turning back to the fight.

Raine took Dannika's hand and led her through the cave tunnels. She recognized the door as soon as they stopped.

Darren's smile lit the room when he spotted Dannika. "I was hoping to see you soon."

Dannika hugged Darren despite Raine's hard look. "I would've been back sooner, but I've been training."

"How can I help you?" Darren asked.

Dannika held out her wrist. "I'm getting a rune map."

Darren's eyes widened. "Truly? I have never administered runes on a fledgling."

"There are extenuating circumstances." Raine rubbed his chin. "Give Dannika maps of the city, outlying areas, and the caves."

"It will be my pleasure." He wrapped his fingers around Dannika's wrist, then extended a claw before drawing the intricate patterns that produced the maps when activated. She grunted as his claw bit into her flesh.

After Darren finished the runes on her wrist, he ran a finger over the healed skin. The map of the caves sprung to life, with the spiderweb of dark pathways intersecting the physical tunnels. He turned her wrist, double-checking his work. "All done."

He released her wrist.

Dannika touched the map and discovered that it blurred when she flicked an area she could zoom in. “It’s like an iPhone, only in 3D.”

Darren frowned. “What’s an iPhone?”

She glanced between Darren and Raine. “How can you not know about smart phones?”

Darren looked down. “I have never left the tunnels. I have read about smart phones, but that technology is useless to us. It cannot travel the pathways.”

“I saw a computer in Maddock’s room. You have access to the Internet.”

Darren nodded. “We do. Seniors are required to study the human world before they enter it.” He glanced around the room. “Maddock has let me use his computer to do research on mapping techniques and art.”

“That’s good. Your pictures are beautiful.” She winked at him. “Your maps are pretty good too.”

Darren grabbed her wrist. “I almost forgot. I made you a cougar rune. It’s a perfect replica of your cat.”

The 3D image of a cougar sprang to life as the sting of pain subsided. Dannika moved it left and right, causing the mouth to open, exposing the long incisors. It was beautiful. Deadly. Perfect.

She wrapped her arms around Darren’s neck, kissing his cheek. “I love it.”

They both froze when Raine growled.

CHAPTER 3



Dannika flashed Darren a smile of reassurance before unwinding her arms from his neck. Her eyes flashed with green fire as she turned to Raine.

“Did you just growl at me?” she snapped.

Raine’s face could have been carved from granite. “My wolf does not approve of you molesting my fellow clan mates.”

“Molesting? Are you kidding me right now? Darren is my friend. It was a simple hug.” Her eyes flickered in warning as black mixed with the iridescent green. Her mate, however, was unrepentant. His muscles twitched beneath his perfect skin before he crossed his arms.

“You do not need to hug him, or kiss him.”

Dannika glanced at Darren when he shuffled his feet. His eyes remained downcast as he fidgeted with his fingers.

“You are unbelievable, and you’re making Darren uncomfortable,” she said.

“The warning was for you, not Darren. He did not initiate contact—you did. While I trust him, you need to understand that we are not human. Your affections, though innocent, could get a clan member killed,” Raine said.

She locked with his hard eyes. The swirl of black behind the pupils focused on her. “You’re serious.”

“Deadly serious.”

She stepped up to Raine's chest, pointing her finger. "Darren is like family. At the moment, he's the only wolf shadow shifter I actually like. Drop the macho bullshit before I drop you."

Raine's jaw ticked. "Drop me?"

She tapped his rear. "Right on your ass, if you keep this up."

His body relaxed as his lip twitched. "I am more than happy to continue this discussion in the ring. I love training you."

"You wish." Dannika allowed Raine to lead her from Darren's room, but she sent the cartographer a friendly goodbye wave. "How old is Darren? He seems younger than he looks."

Raine put his hand on her back. The heat sent a sizzle of awareness crackling across her skin.

"He is twenty-two. By our standards, he is very young. He only left the sanctuary a year ago. His father was killed in a reaper attack less than a month after Darren moved into his private room."

"That's terrible," Dannika said.

Raine put his arm around her shoulders. "Your compassion never ceases to amaze me."

A large man leaned against the rock wall of the tunnel. His eyes moved to Raine's arm as his lip curled. "You should have more respect for your leader, Raine."

Raine stepped up to the man. "You got something to say, Ruger?"

Ruger's eyes roamed over Dannika. "It's bad enough Maddock allowed you to train your little tramp, but traipsing her around and throwing it in his face is unbecoming of a future leader."

Raine grabbed Ruger's shirt, pulling him against his chest. "You disrespect her again, and I will challenge you. It won't be training—you will fight my alpha."

Ruger's eyes widened. "You would kill me, over her?"

"Without hesitation."

"Is she really your mate?" Ruger asked with hesitation.

Black smoke rolled off Raine's shoulders, signifying his shadow was vying to be released. "She is."

The dark undertone of his alpha made Ruger flinch.

"But she's an abomination. The next wolf clan leader cannot be attached to her."

Black mist exploded from Raine's body as his alpha emerged, roaring its displeasure. It slashed Ruger's chest, then took the startled man to the ground.

Ruger's shadow emerged to protect him. Black waves rolled off his shoulder as he attempted to protect himself, but he lacked the strength and training to oppose Raine. Ruger's blood splayed across the rock walls before Dannika stepped in.

She put her hands up. "Raine, stop it. He's a jerk, but he doesn't deserve to die."

It was the first time she feared her connection with Raine. While she kept her shadow locked down, his shadow touched her skin. She felt his anger, his need for retribution. He would kill Ruger.

Dayton sprinted toward them. "Raine, stop this. Dannika's right. Ruger is Maddock's lapdog, but he is loyal to the clan."

"I won't put up with the disrespect. They have a problem with me, that's fine, but if they talk smack about Dannika, they pay the price." Raine backed away as his human form surfaced.

Ruger wiped the blood from his lip with the back of his hand. "You saw what he did, Dayton. Raine isn't fit to be the next clan leader."

Dayton stepped up to Ruger. "You instigated this fight, probably with Maddock's encouragement. Move along and try to learn some respect for your betters."

Ruger's face turned red. "Maddock will learn of everything that has transpired here. You can't treat me this way."

Dayton growled. "Perhaps you need a session in the ring. I'm happy to oblige. It's obvious by your pathetic attempt to defend yourself that you need some instruction."

Ruger shook his head. "No..."

"That wasn't a negotiation. That was an order." Dayton grabbed him by the arm. Then pulled the struggling Ruger down the tunnel.

Dannika and Raine returned to his room, but she turned on him when he closed the door.

"What the hell was that? You just about killed him for having a poor attitude. Ruger doesn't like me, but I don't think he'd hurt me," she said.

Raine sat on the couch, putting his feet on the coffee table. He looked tired. "The clan is split on its views about you."

She sat down, clasping her fingers in her lap. "Everyone's entitled to their opinion. I'm the first female shadow. I understand it will take some getting used to."

Raine let his head fall back against the cushion. "I wish that was it. I fear I'll have to challenge for leadership."

Her body went rigid. "Why?"

"We are falling apart. Right or wrong, this derision is what Maddock feared."

She nibbled her thumbnail. "There has to be some other way."

"Half the clan believes you are a miracle, but the other half..."

"Thinks I'm an abomination. A curse." There were times she had to agree with them. Her life had been a series of terrible events, each more horrific than the last. How could she blame these men for thinking the same thing she had?

Raine leaned over and took her hand. “You’re not. You’re more than I could ever hope for. A fantasy I dared not believe in.”

She stood up and walked towards the door. “There must be a way to unite the clans, so you don’t have to kill Maddock.”

Raine winced before covering his eyes with his hand. “This is a nightmare.”

The sadness in his voice made her turn. “You still respect Maddock. Love him. Could you kill him?”

His eyes met hers, the pain as clear as the crystal blue within them. “I don’t know. Maddock is still in his prime. I’m young for an alpha, and Maddock has never lost a fight. His shadow skill is mirrors.”

Ice crystals formed in her blood as her heartbeat slowed. “What is mirrors?”

“Maddock can create replicas of his shadow warrior. Doppelgangers, if you will. While only his true form can hurt you, when there is thirty of him attacking, you lose sight of the genuine threat.”

“That sounds ominous. You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

Raine nodded. “Maddock trained me himself. Though it’s been over fifty years since we sparred, I remember my lessons. He’s a skilled warrior.”

She threw her hands in the air. “How do you fight something like that?”

“I’ve not sparred with Maddock since my shadow skills emerged, but he is fast, as the previous leader found out.”

Her heart stuttered. “What happened to the previous leader?”

Raine sighed. “The previous leader was old, but he was still winning his reaper battles. Maddock had just completed his ascension trials when his skill emerged. He killed the previous alpha and took his rightful place as clan leader.”

Dannika knelt on the floor by Raine's feet. "I don't want you hurt, and I don't want you to have to kill Maddock. There has to be another way."

"I wish there was."

Dannika put her hand on Raine's knee. "I'll have to get Maddock on my side, or at least tolerate my annoying ass."

Raine smirked. "I'm quite fond of your ass."

"My badonkadonk aside, I used to be pretty good at winning people over."

Raine arched his eyebrows.

Dannika rolled her eyes. "I know I don't come off as warm and fuzzy, but when I was younger, I was placed with a family that didn't want me. I'd moved around so much that previous year that I attempted to bring the couple around."

"Did it work?" Raine asked.

"I did chores and helped in every way I could until they were less adversarial with me. In time, they were pretty decent. We had an understanding of sorts."

Raine put his hand over hers. "What happened?"

"Same as the other group homes. Everything was wonderful one day, but the next, they wouldn't look at me. They were afraid of me, and a day or two later I was removed. I viewed reassignment as an inevitable process of growing up."

He pulled her to him. The caress on her skin when he slipped his hand beneath her shirt intended comfort, but the low rumble in his chest turned it into something more.

Dannika pulled him closer. Their shadows reached for one another as their emotions collided, heightening every sensation. His hair slid along her cheek as she nibbled his ear. The whispering caress sent an erotic fire racing through her blood. He slid his hands to her breasts, rolling an erect nipple between his fingers before tracing down her ribs and along her belly.

She used to complain she didn't need a bra, but now she reveled in the sensations his erotic touch produced. Every stroke left a firestorm in its wake, a dark hunger that needed to be sated. She wanted to scream for relief, but the air caught in her throat when his hand moved to her pants, slipping them down her thighs.

He released the button on his jeans, springing his thick cock from its confinement before positioning her legs on either side of his. Dannika moaned when his fingers slipped between her slick, heated flesh, parting her tender lips and pressing inside her.

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

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

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

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

"Don't stop." She hated when she pleaded with him. She should be embarrassed, but her body was on fire, a bomb teetering on the brink of detonation.

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

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

Someone rapped on the door.

Dannika scrambled off of him, pulling on her clothes as Raine fastened his pants.

“Come in,” Raine said.

Dayton entered, closing the door behind him. “Sorry to interrupt, but Steele is here.”

Raine frowned. “Why is that cause for concern?”

Dayton glanced at the door. “Maddock and Steele are having a closed-door meeting, and they did not invite Ryder.”

Raine stood. “What’s going on?”

Dayton shook his head. “All I can confirm is my shadow is uneasy, and he took Maverick in with them.”

“Shit.”

Dannika glanced between the men. “Fill a girl in. Why is this Maverick fellow bad?”

“He isn’t, but he’s loyal, and can create a light circle,” Dayton said.

“What’s a light circle?” Dannika asked.

Raine rubbed his chin. “Maverick can make a circle of light no shadow can penetrate. Maddock is ensuring that no one sees or hears what he and Steele are planning.”

Dannika swallowed. “Steele and Ryder are friends. He wouldn’t betray that, would he?”

“Steele is a clan leader, and we are at war. All the shadow clans are trying to survive. I believe he would ally with any clan that gave him an advantage.”

Her stomach rolled. “We better find out what’s happening at that meeting.”

CHAPTER 4



The bright white light illuminated the rock walls of the tunnel. Shiny bits of quartz reflected the ambient glow, making the walkway appear to be encased in stars. A beautiful entryway to heaven, if the source hadn't been so ominous.

Dannika followed Raine to the end of the tunnel, holding her hand above her eyes when the brightness became too much. Her skin crawled as her blood cooled.

"I feel..." She was unsure how to explain the strange sensation.

Raine held out his hand, signaling for her to stop. "It's the light circle. Unless you're at the center, it's painful to your demon soul. Your shadow is retreating. That is the uneasiness you feel."

She rubbed her chest. "Does it affect our animal?"

"No."

Dannika inspected the light source. "I can't see anything. Are you positive Steele and Maddock are inside?"

Raine nodded. "Maverick won't use his shadow ability unless it's requested. New circles are painful to him, and those of us outside the light. They also exhaust his power, which is primarily used at the sanctuary."

Dannika reached inside the light orb but jerked back when her skin sparked. "Shit. It's like a static charge."

“That was a warning. If you walk through the circle, that charge will stop your heart.”

“Okay, so we’re waiting for Maverick to turn off the light bulb,” she said.

Raine’s lip twitched. “We won’t have to wait long. Maverick already knows we’re here. He can sense a shadow or a reaper within ten feet of the light circle.”

“What effect does the circle have on a reaper?”

Raine narrowed his eyes on her. “They die instantly. Weren’t you curious why they wouldn’t enter the sanctuary?”

Her eyes widened. “Maverick guards the children.”

“Yes. Maverick is too valuable to risk. He stays within the caves except to hunt.”

Dannika glanced down the tunnel. “If he’s here, who’s guarding the children at the sanctuary?”

“Maverick can set a light circle and leave it for a short time. This allows him to... feed.”

Dannika shivered. “Don’t remind me. I’ve only fed once, and that was a nightmare.”

“You fed on a deer that had a mortal wound. While you killed and fed, it was not much of a hunt. You’ll have to find more suitable prey in the future.”

Her lips thinned.

“We’ll see.” She pointed to the light. “That’s quite a skill.”

“It is. Maverick is our only illuminator. We guard him when he leaves the caves.”

Light patterns swirled within the brightness. Ribbons of pink, purple, and yellow twirled around one another in an exotic dance. She wanted to ask about the unique waves of color, but it went dark.

Raine took her hand and led her into the room.

Steele averted his eyes when they entered, but her gaze fell on the young man beside Maddock. He appeared barely more

than a teenager, but his copper eyes held a sadness that made him seem older.

He held out his hand to Dannika. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Maverick. I’m sorry I haven’t been by to welcome you to the clan.”

Maddock frowned. “Your duties are to the children. They are your number one priority.”

Maverick nodded and rushed away before Dannika could shake his hand.

Raine’s eyes locked on Maddock. “What is going on here? You never pull Maverick from the sanctuary.”

Maverick glanced at Steele. “We were discussing Dannika’s heritage. Steele’s clan has an investigative specialist. He has a team working on uncovering her past.”

Raine’s eyes narrowed. “Why didn’t you tell me? We have been searching, but have few leads as to her origins.”

Maddock shrugged. “Steele has this investigation under control.”

Raine turned to Steele. “What have you discovered?”

Steele’s eyes roamed over Dannika. His interest had always been apparent, but it wasn’t sexual. Today, they held an anticipation that made her wolf wary.

“We found an intake document at the hospital. The report says that Dannika’s mother and father are unknown. It lists the social worker that the children were remanded to for placement.”

Dannika’s heart raced as she processed Steele’s words. “Children?”

Steele nodded. “You have a twin sister.”

She stepped toward him. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know. The twin was adopted, but it was a closed file. We are still searching for any information on your sister.”

Black mist rolled over her skin as her eyes turned black, her outward appearance attempting to mirror the rage within. “I have a sister? Why would they separate us? How could they not tell me?”

Steele handed her a file he had under his arm. “This is the pertinent information we have accumulated so far. I will share everything with you as the investigation continues.”

Dannika flipped through the papers, reading the reports from her many group homes. They all ended with a similar statement. *We can't keep her. Collect her immediately.* She tramped down the familiar feeling of abandonment. That part of her life was over. She had Raine. A life. A family. One that wouldn't betray her.

She flinched when she read the report on Carmen, her beautiful best friend. The one that made her believe in goodness and light.

“You have everything on me. Every group home, every report, but nothing in here says I had a sister. Why is that?”

Steele glanced at Maddock. “Our investigator finds it concerning as well. These are confidential reports. There's no need to omit any familiar ties. He's still looking. We need to discover if there's something that makes you unique. We want to find your sister.”

Dannika stepped back. “If you find her, she isn't becoming a shadow.”

Maddock moved toward her. “That isn't your decision, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Steele's investigator suspects she died. That would explain the lack of reference in your files.”

Her heart clenched. “You think she's dead?”

Steele touched her arm. “We haven't found a death certificate, but it is possible, especially if she passed soon after she was born. Either way, we will find out.”

Raine stepped up to Maddock. “What the hell is wrong with you? You just told Dannika she has a sister, and she's likely dead. There's no compassion in your voice.”

His tone echoed with the undertone of his alpha.

Maddock growled before his eyes turned black.

Tension had a distinct taste. It swirled over Dannika's tongue like a fine wine. It took her a minute to understand the nature of her demon soul. The things it thrived on: death, destruction. This apex of violence was like foreplay, and her demon was eager for the main event.

“Stop it. I'm glad Maddock told me about my sister. Regardless of what happened to her, I want the truth,” Dannika said.

Raine kept his gaze focused on his leader. “It's not what he said. It's his treatment of you. He treats you like a tool, not a person. He should have more respect for a member of our clan.”

Maddock's lips curled. “We were just discussing that.”

“Why is Steele doing all the background work? I realize he has an investigator, but you have never trusted another clan with private information. You never sit back and wait for intel.”

Maddock shrugged. “You had every opportunity to gain this information yourself.”

“We have been looking, but Dannika needs training and her safety is my first priority. You of all people should know this.”

Steele nodded. “We agree that your focus should be on Dannika's training. It's the reason we have been handling the investigation into her past.”

Raine glanced between leaders. “I understand you have an investigator, but the wolves also have a shadow with this skill. Why has this been handed off to the cougar clan?”

Maddock's voice vibrated with his alpha. “It was my decision, and you have no right to question it.”

Raine's alpha burst to the surface. Black smoke rolled off his shoulders like a smoldering fire. His claws extended from

his knuckles as blood dripped from the tips. “I won’t sit by while you emotionally attack my mate.”

“She is not your mate!” Maddock roared.

“She is.”

Black smoke burned off Maddock’s body as he stepped up to Raine. Their chests touched as the swirling black mists fought for dominance. “Do you wish to challenge me?”

“I had wanted to avoid it, but perhaps it is time.”

Dannika’s heart stuttered. “Stop this. I don’t want you to fight.”

Maddock’s eyes bored into Raine “We have some clan business to discuss. Tell your fledgling to leave. We will recall her when we are ready.”

Raine stopped Dannika when she attempted to leave. “This isn’t over.”

She touched his face. “It is for me. Talk to Maddock and Steele. If they have any more information about my sister, I want it. That’s more important than my feelings.”

Raine returned to his human form. “I will get this sorted out.”

Dannika hurried out of the room but leaned against the wall outside.

“What is this all about?” Raine snapped at Maddock.

“There is a plan in place.” Maddock’s voice echoed in the tunnel. “One that will benefit the wolf and cougar clan. Unfortunately, you will have to make a sacrifice.”

CHAPTER 5



Walking out of the tunnels, while Maddock and Steele decided her future, was the hardest thing Dannika had ever done. She trusted Raine, and she didn't want to hear the fight that was unfolding as she trudged towards the forest.

The further she penetrated the woods, the more her wolf urged to be released. Raine had warned her there were dangers to running alone, but the whisper of freedom was calling. The picture of her wolf formed in her mind. She was careful to accommodate her clothes and her reaper blade, shifting them to the shadows before her naked body dissolved.

The lush foliage closed around her, creating a sense of wonder. A wildness she craved. This was the world she understood, where the strong survived and politics were left to the humans. The temptation to keep running, to explore the next valley, to never return, was real.

Dannika's wolf was smaller than the other clan members but equally agile. Her soft grey fur rippled in the breeze as she bounded over damp leaves and rotting logs. The musty scent was both strong and soothing as she traversed the foliage. She continued along a steep embankment before a new craving emerged.

She pictured her cougar form in her mind before allowing the change. The gray fur shortened, becoming tighter knit and tawny colored as her bone structure became sleeker and more athletic. In seconds, she was running as a cat. Both her forms were amazing, and she thanked the heavens for the gift of being a poly shifter.

Dannika smelled a predator similar to her cat, but instinct told her he wasn't a threat. She dropped low on her belly to slink under a large fallen tree before leaping over the broken stump. She scaled an evergreen with low-hanging limbs, jumping from one branch to another. Every movement was graceful, a ballet amongst the trees.

The large male trailed behind her, content to watch her performance. He chuffed, calling her attention, before sitting at the base of the tree. She stretched out on a thick limb above him, voicing her displeasure at the interruption.

The ice-blue eyes made her pause. She leapt from her branch, allowing her powerful hind legs to absorb the shock of her landing.

He shifted to his human form and ran his hand through his dark hair. The black t-shirt and jeans, moulded to his body, but he wore no shoes. He looked around. "I'm surprised you are alone. Doesn't the wolf clan protect you?"

He was attractive with an athletic build. While her wolf thought about Raine, there was a pull toward the sexy shadow cougar. An instinct he was more than a friend.

She shifted to her human form. "I don't need protection, but I appreciate your concern. Who are you?"

He averted his eyes. "My name is Colton. I'm Steele's son. As for protection, no fledgling should wander from the caves without a chaperon."

She put her hand on her hip. "I don't need a chaperon. I can take care of myself."

Colton rubbed his eyes, keeping them covered. "If that were true, you would have remembered your clothes."

Dannika grabbed her bare breasts.

"Shit." She reformed her clothes and her blade. "Sorry about that."

Colton winked at her. "That wasn't an entirely horrible experience... for me."

She laughed. "I appreciate you not being a dick about it."

“It’s part of the learning process. I forgot my clothes many times during my fledgling years. In time, it will become second nature.”

“I think it’s a little different for you than it is for me. I stopped wearing a bra and underwear so I would have less to worry about. This is the first time I have shifted back forgetting them.”

Colton glanced towards the caves. “I’m guessing that’s because you shifted to wolf first. I have seen no one shift from one animal form to another. That was something to behold. I admit I’m a little jealous, but I think your problem lies in shifting too quickly and from one animal to another. Your clothes got stuck in shadow form until you thought about them.”

She rubbed her neck. “Good to know. Sorry about the peep show.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t see anything.”

“Just so we’re clear, you’re a terrible liar.”

Colton laughed. “I’m the worst, aren’t I?”

The familiarity and safety she felt with Colton surprised her. She hadn’t been this comfortable in Raine’s presence when she’d first met him. While the attraction wasn’t sexual, the pull was undeniable. The glimmer in his eyes as he laughed conveyed his interest. Whatever she was feeling, he was, too.

She pointed at the caves. “Do you know what’s happening at the meeting? Or what it’s about?”

“No. It’s strange because Steele always keeps me apprised. He was closed-mouthed on the way here,” Colton said.

“I guess we’re both out of the loop.”

He narrows his eyes on her. “I feel a connection to you. I can’t explain it, and I’ve never had this kind of reaction before. Are you feeling it as well?”

She flinched, surprised by his abrupt question, but she wouldn’t lie. “Yes.”

“Will you reconsider the trials?” he asked.

Her heart skipped as her wolf growled in her ear. Had she misjudged him? “No.”

“May I ask why?” His voice was low and held no threat or urgency.

“Raine is my choice. While I feel a connection to you, I love him.” She looked for a sign of anger or aggression, but none was forthcoming.

“I had to ask. I can’t explain it, but I feel the need to protect you. My cougar went crazy the minute he saw you, alone. I believe he thinks you’re his mate.”

Raine snapped a twig as he approached them. “She’s mine.”

Colton turned towards Rain. “If that were true, she wouldn’t be wandering the forest alone. As her mentor, you should be with her at all times.”

Raine’s eyes flashed with blue fire. “Maddock and Steele were having a meeting. They made a request that I didn’t agree to. I’m sure you’re aware of your father’s fascination with Dannika.”

Colton huffed. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. My father is not interested in Dannika in the way you assume. Her emergence interests him. He thinks she is the next evolution of our species. He is not looking to mate her. That part of his life is over.”

“Why did Steele ask me what it would take for me to give her up?”

Colton shook his head. “You lie. My father would not ask that.”

Raine grabbed Colton’s shirt. “You know I’m not lying. You’re just like your father, talking about clan cooperation and protection of our species while conniving behind our backs.”

Colton’s eyes flashed with golden fire. Claws emerged from his knuckles as Raine’s did the same.

Dannika sniffed the air. The scent of danger and approaching predators had her turning toward the trail.

“That’s enough,” Steele snapped as he stepped from the pathway.

Raine and Colton retracted their claws and stepped back.

Maddock and Steele approached, stopping before their men. “There is no need for hostility. Steele and I have made an agreement. One that will benefit both our clans.”

Raine growled. “What agreement?”

Maddock smiled at Raine. “Dannika is now a member of the cougar clan.”

CHAPTER 6



“Are you suggesting dual citizenship?” Raine asked. He attempted to keep his tone even while fighting with the beast within. His shadow was ready to attack Maddock. If his eyes weren’t completely black, they would be soon. The sneer on his adoptive father’s face incited his wolf further. His control slipped, bringing him closer to a showdown he wasn’t sure he could win.

Maddock glanced at Steele. “We have made a pact. The wolf and cougar clan will unite. We will train together, and fight together.”

Colton stepped towards Steele. “I’m not sure I understand what you’re suggesting. Surely, you don’t mean living together under one roof. Our clans can be allies, but our animals won’t tolerate that proximity for extended periods.”

Steele cleared his throat. “We need unification. The drawbacks outweigh the benefits.”

Raine shook his head. “I agree, but not like this. Our animals are too territorial. How do you expect this to work? You and Steele are both alphas.”

The look of triumph and power on Maddock’s face made Raine wary. His leader had accomplished something, and he doubted it was clan unification.

Both Raine and Colton flinched when Steele looked down: the sign of submission, so unnatural for an alpha.

Maddock puffed out his chest. “Steele will step down and I will rule both clans. He will remain a clan head. This will

strengthen us, and the bear clan will have no choice but to fall in line when the time comes.”

Colton grabbed his father. “What the hell were you thinking? You can’t do this. Our members will revolt. Some will turn reaper. We will lose so much.”

Raine didn’t want to feel sorry for his cougar competition, but Colton’s anger was understandable. “I agree. Even if Maddock is the overlord of both clans, it will cause dissension. We need to be allies, not bunk mates.”

Maddock narrowed his eyes on Raine. “We have made the decision. The wolves and the cougars will acclimatize to the new order, or suffer the consequences.”

“This isn’t a dictatorship. We are a family,” Raine said.

Maddock huffed. “Your human weaknesses are showing.”

“As is your thirst for power. I’m curious. How did you get Steele to agree to this?”

Maddock’s gaze darted to Dannika. “She will become Colton’s mate and unify the clans.”

Dannika launched at Maddock with glowing green eyes. Raine grabbed her around the waist, pulling her back. Black mist rolled off her skin. Her claws extended from her knuckles.

Her willingness to oppose Maddock never ceased to amaze him. She didn’t understand the power of the alpha. Not that she shouldn’t oppose him; she shouldn’t be able to. Her demon should acknowledge its leader, but she ignored the natural order at every turn.

“You prick! I’m not some trophy you can pass off when you feel like it,” she snapped.

Raine pulled her against his body. “That’s never going to happen. She is mine.”

Colton hissed at his father. “Why would you do this? I had asked Dannika to reconsider the trials, but I would never force her to mate me.”

Steele held up his hand. "I made the sacrifice so your children can shift into both species. This is an opportunity unlike any other. Our clan members will understand."

Dannika attempted to grab Steele. "I'm not some piece of meat. None of you will decide who I have sex with, let alone if I have children."

"It's not happening. I don't care what Maddock or Steele says. This goes against everything we believe in," Raine said.

Colton nodded. "I agree with Raine. You can't force Dannika to choose a cougar."

Steele grabbed his son's arm. "You don't understand. There's something about her. It's more than her just being a female. We have to protect her."

Colton growled at his father. "I agree, but this isn't how we do it. Denouncing her rights regardless of which clan she is in is a betrayal of everything our forefathers believed. They died for their mates. They didn't abuse them. They would never have condoned this."

Maddock looked away. "Your reference to the past isn't relevant. Our shifter forefathers were not on the brink of a reaper war."

Raine shook his head. "If you disregard our core values, then we are no better than the reapers we fight. You knew I wouldn't agree to this."

Maddock smirked. "True, but you will be the next overlord for the combined clans. I suggest you act like it. I warned you there would be a sacrifice. This is it. "

Raine's form bulked out as his alpha threatened to emerge. Black smoke rolled off him in waves, licking the air above his head. The burn of betrayal would be returned with a flurry of violence. "I will never give her up."

Maddock nodded. "I assumed you would need time to adjust."

Raine looked down at Dannika's angry eyes. As soon as they met his, they filled with compassion. With their shadows

touching, she felt his betrayal. His anger. His need to protect her.

There would be no clan unification. There would be blood and violence.

He ran a hand down her back. “I will not adjust. I will join Ryder’s clan, the bear clan, until I establish my own, and I will take Dannika with me. Many of the current wolf clan members will join me. This isn’t the beginning of clan unification—it’s the end of the wolf clan as we know it.”

“You are a true alpha, Raine,” Maddock said. “I did not expect your compliance, but even an alpha must do what’s best for his clan. Of course, I can’t have you running off, and I don’t need Ryder complicating this transition.”

Raine’s chest rumbled with the displeasure of his alpha. “I wasn’t giving you a choice. I’m leaving, and I’m taking Dannika with me.”

Maddock motioned with two fingers. “I’m sure you think so.”

Shadow wrapped fingers reached inside his back, clutching his heart. He had never liked Ruger, but Raine had never believed Ruger would use his shadow power against one of his own. Raine’s shadow warrior shouted out in contempt, as Ruger paralyzed it within Raine’s body, unable to come to its host’s defense.

His human heart fluttered before it stopped beating.

CHAPTER 7



The birds scattered from the trees when Dannika screamed. The wind ceased as if holding its breath. Betrayal echoed in the breeze as Raine crumpled to the ground.

Behind him, Ruger retracted his hand. The smoky fingers coalesced into a human hand as he backed away. Ruger's eyes blazed with triumph and hatred as they focused on Dannika. Contempt laced his words as he spoke. "I warned him that no good would come from his fascination with you."

Dannika knelt beside Raine and shook his shoulder. No breath left his body. He was like a wooden statue: smooth to the touch, but devoid of life.

Her gaze snapped to Maddock. "What have you done?"

"Ruger possesses the ability to stop a shadow's heart," Maddock said. "He can also trap a warrior in his human form. Raine is in stasis. He will recover in a few hours."

She placed her hand over Raine's heart. "How could you do this to him? He loves you. Trusts you."

Maddock's lip curled. "His infatuation with you has clouded his judgment. His priority should be to the wolf clan, and it will be. He just needs time away from you. We need his abilities in the coming war."

Dannika swallowed hard, thankful Raine slept through Maddock's latest betrayal. She had never considered Maddock wanted Raine for his power. She assumed Maddock was ensuring the wolf clan had a new leader when he fell, but now

she doubted that assumption. “You don’t know what you’ve done. He won’t take this betrayal lying down.”

Maddock looked at Ruger. “Take Raine to the cell. He will need a cooling down period when he awakens.”

Ruger grabbed Raine by the shoulders and began dragging him away.

Dannika attempted to hold Raine to her, but Maddock unceremoniously ripped her away. He returned her to the ground with her head lowered and tears stinging her eyes.

She looked up at Maddock’s contemptuous face. “You say you care about the clan, but you don’t. You only care about power. I know you hate me, but what you did to your chosen son is a disgrace. You’re insane.”

Maddock’s blazed red. “You corrupted him. He was the perfect shadow. Loyal. Strong. A testament to this clan.”

“He still is. You’re the disgrace to the wolf clan.”

Maddock growled, but Colton stepped between them. He held out a hand to Dannika, helping her to her feet. He turned to Maddock once he had Dannika sheltered against his body.

“Your treatment of her is disgusting.” He glanced at Steele. “And you believe Maddock is the right choice to lead all our clans? You are as delusional as he is.”

Steele held a hand up to his son. “Just give it a chance. Please.”

Dannika’s eyes narrowed on Maddock. “You’re not a wolf. You’re a pig.”

Colton pulled away when Maddock lunged.

“You’re not good enough for my son. You’re a disrespectful tramp, intent on disrupting the natural order.” Maddock took a deep breath. “But I keep my word. You will go to the cougar clan.”

Steele’s eyes blazed with fire, but he kept his comments to himself.

Colton whispered in her ear, "Dannika, take a walk with me. I wish a private conversation."

She nodded but said nothing as he led her away from the shadow clan leaders, toward the caves.

She wiped a tear from her cheek when Colton stopped them in the clearing. The trees rose from the ground like outstretched arms. Branches sheltered the green oasis in a loving embrace. It was beautiful. A home that didn't belong to her.

"What did you want to tell me?" she asked.

Colton glanced back at the clan leaders. "There's more going on here. My father would never agree to give up leadership. Not even for a poly shifter. Maddock has gone insane with power. He must have something over Steele."

Dannika nibbled her thumbnail. "What do you propose we do?"

Colton took her hand. "Don't react. They are watching us. I wanted it to look as if you're considering my proposal. Come to the cougar clan. Help me discover what's going on. I vow my protection."

Dannika considered his words. The hand that held her was warm, inviting. It reminded her of when Carmen had taken her hand when they were shopping, pulling her into a coffee shop. Why did Colton invoke a feeling of familiarity? Friendship. Kindness.

"I don't know why, but I trust you. I'll go with you with the purpose of finding out Maddock's true intentions, and for the information on my twin sister."

He smiled. "Thank you. I don't know why, but I trust you as well."

She took his hands in hers, holding both of them. "I feel a connection to you. I think you remind me of someone I lost, but I need you to understand that I won't mate you. Raine is still my choice."

Colton nodded. "If I am incapable of convincing you to stay with the cougar clan, then you were never mine, and I don't deserve you."

He led her back to the leaders. "Dannika has agreed to come to the cougar clan for information and to consider my proposal. I will not force her to mate me, but she has agreed to give me time. A chance for her to get to know me."

Maddock huffed. "This wasn't a debate. She doesn't have a choice."

Steele stepped forward. "That is more than fair." He smiled warmly at Dannika. "Please consider the cougar clan your home."

Colton glanced at his father. "And where exactly is that? The wolves have the caves and we live in the mountains. How will the clans merge?"

"We have no plans to move the clan locations at this time. Raine was correct in his assumption that our animals would not tolerate such a situation. Each clan will have a leader, and Maddock will be the overseer. He will have the final say in all decisions," Steele said.

Colton arched an eyebrow. "Overseer?"

Steele nodded. "You will lead the cougars and Raine will lead the wolves."

"Ryder will never agree to this. How could you do this to him?" Colton snapped.

Steele pursed his lips. "There are things you don't understand. You will do as ordered by your clan leader."

Colton shrugged, but Dannika felt the tension in his body as she held his hand. He loved and respected his father, but he had no intention of allowing Maddock to become an overlord.

"I've already agreed to woo Dannika, but I think you will have your hands full with the bear clan. If we lose their support, the reapers will win. I hope you know what you are doing."

Steele rubbed his chin. “Ryder will fall in line. He has no choice.”

Colton huffed. “It’s concerning that you can dismiss Ryder so casually. He’s been a valued ally for years. A friend.”

Steele’s form rippled smoke. “I know who he is. If there was another way, I would’ve taken it.”

“Why do this to him, then? His clan territory borders ours on the west side of the mountain. This could incite a war.”

Steele waved his hand dismissively. “Let me deal with Ryder and the bear clan. Your job is to make Dannika feel welcome in our home.”

Maddock sneered as he met Dannika’s enraged stare. The wolf leader had gotten everything he wanted. Her gone. Leadership of two clans, possibly three, and complete control over Raine’s future.

“Was it worth it?” she asked.

“Losing you as a member of the wolf plan? Absolutely.”

“No. Fucking over your son. He respected you. Despite everything that happened, he’s been trying to convince me you are a good man. Your betrayal will crush him,” Dannika said.

Maddock flinched before his alpha shadow emerged. Black smoke rolled off his body in angry waves, licking the air around him like a snake’s tongue. “You will learn your place and so will he.”

Dannika turned to Steele. “This is what you want for the cougar clan? This power grabbing dickhead?”

She didn’t move as Maddock’s shadowy fingers wrapped around her neck. Ice formed in her blood as black marks seared her skin. Pain radiated in her chest, but she didn’t move. She didn’t back down.

Colton grabbed Maddock’s arm. “Release her.”

Maddock shoved her away from him. “Take her away.”

CHAPTER 8



Dannika ran through the forest in her wolf form, while Colton's cougar raced beside her. The freedom of bounding over trees and ducking between overgrown bushes was indescribable. Sometimes she wished she could stay in her animal form and leave her human life behind. To choose a simplistic life where lies didn't exist. To hunt or be hunted was a creed she understood. The need for power to control people around her would always elude her.

If it wasn't for Raine, she would've kept running. As she put more and more miles between them, her heart became heavy. Her shadow urged her to go back, as insistent as her wolf that she had left a piece of her soul behind.

As she began her ascent up the mountain, the trees grew denser, making it harder to keep pace. At length, she entered a circular clearing. A massive tree with sparse lower branches grew in the middle.

Colton shifted. "Welcome to my home."

Dannika resumed her human form, looking around the clearing. Other than the singular tree, only small shrubs and dense grass covered the ground. "This is your home? There's nothing here."

Colton pointed to the thick branches halfway up the tree. "That is."

Her gaze moved up the tree. It was obvious someone had pruned the lower branches, leaving a few handholds, but the middle was full of thick stocks and lush evergreen. His home

nestled amongst the branches, cleverly concealed by nature. Had he not pointed out the house, she would never have noticed.

“A tree house?”

“I’m a cougar. I like to climb. You will find all the clan members have similar homes.”

She pointed to the ground. “Building around the tree trunk is ingenious. Even a plane or helicopter flying over wouldn’t see it. Why did you remove the lower branches?”

“It’s a type of security.”

“Cougars can climb. The smaller branches would allow a human to climb up,” she said.

Colton nodded. “Our children cannot use the shadow pathways. Small branches act as handholds in the event they need them. While efficient in their cougar forms, the young cannot always hold their animal form for great lengths of time.”

She frowned. “I don’t understand why the sparse limbs would act as security.”

He cleared his throat. “It won’t on a cougar or a bear.”

She gave him a dirty look. “Wolves can’t climb, but a shadow wolf would use the pathways.”

“Yes, but a trained shadow can tell when his pathway is being used.”

“His pathway?”

He pointed to the single shadow produced by the lone tree. “The reason we remove the trees around our home is to remove the other pathways during the day. At night, the entire world is vulnerable, and so are we.”

“I understand the daytime security, but why were the cougars concerned about the wolves? Especially since you just aligned with them.”

Colton sighed. “That’s what you’re here to find out. We have never had a working relationship with the wolves. This

alliance makes no sense.”

Dannika pointed to the house hidden amongst the branches. “How are we getting up?”

Colton winked, then shifted to his cougar form. He bounded across the clearing and leaped to the base of the tree. His claws punctured the soft bark as his powerful muscles propelled him upward.

Tawny fur rippled along her arm before her cougar took shape, and she sprinted toward the tree. She followed him, reveling in her ability to scale the massive evergreen with ease. While the smell of freedom couldn’t erase the one of betrayal, she basked in the power her animal gave her. The reprieve from her heart wrenching reality.

She resumed her human form on the deck of his house. It wrapped around most of the structure. While the branches were dense at the rear of the house, the mountainside views were incredible.

Colton opened the door to his home, leading her inside. “I have a spare bedroom. We have already moved your things.”

She arched an eyebrow. “How?”

“Steele had one of our members retrieve your belongings from Raine’s room. There wasn’t much, so he used the shadow pathways.”

“Impressive. I can barely shift my clothes and my dagger, let alone other items.”

“That is the case for most warriors, but Jacob can shift anything into the shadows. It’s his talent,” Colton said.

The front room was open with large picture windows along the main wall. The decor was sparse but modern and neat, with white leather couches and a glossy pine coffee table. It took her a moment to realize what the house was missing.

“There’s no kitchen.”

Colton arched an eyebrow. “And what would I use it for?”

She blew out a breath. “Sorry. I’m not used to the not eating food thing. I should warn you—I’ve only hunted once.”

Colton frowned. “How is that possible?”

She shrugged. “Raine was concerned about that as well. I won’t wait till I’m starving again. I’ll tell you when I need to feed.”

“Please do.” He led her to a room opposite of his. “Your things are in here.”

The room was simple, with a bed, a nightstand, and a small closet. The cougars had hung her clothes inside.

“Thanks.” She moved past him in the doorway, feeling a connection when their shadows touched.

Colton grabbed her arm. “Do you feel that?”

She pulled her arm away. “Yes, but it feels different.”

“Than what?” Colton asked.

“When my shadow mixes with Raine’s.”

Colton rubbed his chin. “I don’t know what it feels like to have a mate, but I’ve never felt a pull towards a woman. The protective nature of my cat and my shadow is undeniable. They would die for you. Is that what it’s like to have a mate?”

“It’s hard to explain. I feel the need to protect you as well, but with Raine, it’s like our souls are one. I feel his emotions—his love, his anger, and his betrayal—as if they were my own. This is why I can’t be your mate.”

“But you acknowledge the connection between us?”

She nodded. “I felt it the moment I saw you, and there’s no explanation I can give you.”

His eyes glowed with blue fire, the unusual color distinct when he was in human form. His face flicked with indecision. He appeared unsure whether he should kiss her or run from her.

“It’s okay,” he said. “We will figure it out. That’s why we are here.”

It took Dannika a moment to control her shadow's reaction. Betrayal had a distinct odor, one she was becoming accustomed to. Despite Colton's words, he felt betrayed. By her.

Colton motioned to the door. "If you're ready, we will go meet Darwin."

"Who's Darwin?"

"He's the lead investigator on your case. His home is the closest to mine. He's waiting for me to signal him."

Dark mist rolled off her skin, a visible reaction to her excitement. She calmed her shadow. "Yes. I'm eager to find out what he knows about my sister."

Colton walked to the large window. He raised his hand. A minute later, a large cougar climbed over the deck railing.

Darwin shifted to his human form before entering the house. He had dark hair, eyes, and skin, giving the impression he spent most of his time in the Mediterranean. He tipped his head as he entered.

"It's a sincere pleasure to meet you, Dannika." His eyes roamed over her.

Colton growled. "Keep your interest focused on the case."

Darwin kept his eyes on Dannika. "I assure you I am."

"Stop looking at her like you're about to devour her."

Darwin smirked. "It's an interesting idea. Perhaps she should reconsider the trials. There are many shadows with extraordinary gifts. Perhaps she would consider another before committing to you."

Dannika rolled her eyes. "Colton isn't my mate, and neither are you. I don't care about shadow abilities. I just want information on my sister. What happened to her?"

Darwin nodded. "Fair enough. Your sister was abandoned at the hospital with you, but there's no reference to her after that point. I'm planning to infiltrate the Graydon County archive to see if there was an adoption that week by a different

name. We assumed that you were registered with the same last name, but I no longer believe that's the case.”

She walked toward the window. “If she has a different maiden name, how will you find her?”

Colton crossed his arms. “Darwin has a special talent for investigation. Whatever happened to her, he will find it.”

Dannika smiled. “Sounds like Darwin should've been a cop.”

Darwin winked. “I was, but that was seventy-five years ago.”

Dannika blinked rapidly. “You transitioned seventy-five years ago?”

His smile held a sadness that made her stomach squeeze. “I was investigating a murder. A young woman drained of blood. The reaper who killed her returned to the scene to clean up his mess. Steele saved me, but a reaper bite is irreversible, as you know.”

The front door burst open.

A muscular blond-haired man entered. He looked around wildly. “It can't be true.”

Darwin cleared his throat. “Settle down, Lamar.”

Black smoke rolled off his shoulders before he got himself under control. “Settle down? Are you kidding me? Steele is literally throwing us to the wolves. There is already talk of the cougar splinter group.” He pointed to Dannika. “All so he can breed a poly shifter. It's disgusting.”

Colton stepped towards Lamar. “Modify your tone or get out.”

Lamar looked Dannika over with disgust. “Raine vouched for you. Convinced us you were worth saving. You didn't deserve his trust. Do you even know what Maddock did to Raine after you left?”

CHAPTER 9



Dannika stepped back. Lamar's words stung as if he had slapped her. Mostly because they were true. She had put her needs above Raine's to discover what had happened to her sister, and to examine her connection with Colton. To help him find the truth behind this alliance. They had left Raine in the cold, in a cell, at the hands of a madman drunk on power.

Guilt left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Colton stepped in front of her, poking Lamar in the chest. "How dare you! Dannika is a member of our clan. Steele has requested that we make her feel comfortable. You barge in here accusing her of betrayal when she had no part in this agreement. She was discarded by the wolf clan like she was a piece of dirty laundry. Show some respect."

Colton was protecting her, but his words reminded her of her station in life. Every family had returned her. Why had she thought this one would be different? There was only one person she could rely on, and that person was her. Dannika knew how to play the game. Get along until she got what she needed and moved on. She had performed this dance her entire life.

Her shadow swirled within her body, its emotions as chaotic as hers. She walked to the corner of the picture window and gazed at the forest as the edges of her vision turned gray. She focused her thoughts inward.

We can do this. We can pretend until we get the information about our sister. They can't contain us. Their

overconfidence is their weakness.

Her shadow warrior didn't speak with words, but it coalesced inside her body, a hard shell beneath the surface. She had to concentrate to return her vision to normal. To appear like nothing was wrong. With her shadow encasing her heart, her emotions dulled, offering a reprieve from the betrayal and the heartache.

"It's fine, Colton. Lamar isn't wrong."

Lamar shook his head in disgust. "Maddock, at least put his clan first. He recognized the threat you pose. You will be the end of the cougar clan."

He slammed the door when he left.

Darwin raised his hand, intending to defend her, but shouts came from outside. Darwin bolted out the door and leapt over the railing, followed by Colton. Dannika was right on their heels. They landed on the ground below and sprinted toward the congregation of shadow clan members.

They ran to the edge of the clearing as Steele's alpha emerged to oppose Ryder. Black waves rolled off each man, licking the trees above them.

Colton put his arm in front of Dannika, barring her from going closer to the infuriated clan leaders. "What's going on?"

Ryder's massive form turned to him with glowing golden eyes. "How could you side with Maddock? He was given a gift, and he used it to gain power. If Dannika will choose someone other than Raine, then I insist the trials continue and that the bear clan has representation. If you refuse my request, then consider us at war."

Steele growled at Ryder. "These are our lands. She is now a member of our clan. I made a sacrifice; one you would never have made. If you try to take her, I will fight you."

"Then it's war."

Steele's claws sprang from his knuckles as he swiped at Ryder. The bear clan leader was big, but he was agile. He'd been head of his clan for centuries and his experience showed.

He shifted to mist, before coalescing behind Steele. His hand was around the cougar leader's throat before Steele dissolved.

Colton rushed at Ryder, but Tarik appeared before him. Dannika recognized him from the shelter. He had helped her and Raine dispose of the bodies by burning them. He fought Colton as efficiently as he did the reapers, though her cougar counterpart appeared just as skilled.

They shifted in and out of the shadows, appearing and disappearing in different locations beneath the trees. Fast. Efficient. Deadly. She could tell they were holding back though. None of the shadow warriors had pulled their reaper blades. They wanted to inflict pain, but not death.

When the two appeared under a tree limb close to her, she stepped between them. "Stop this."

She realized too late that Tarik was swinging his claws towards Colton's chest. She stepped into the blow as he connected with her shoulder.

Fire radiated through her chest as she fell to the ground. She clutched the crimson wound as blood dripped between her fingers.

The pain of her tissues melting together was a prolonged torture. She squeezed her eyes together, concentrating on her breathing.

Colton's shadow screamed its defiance before attacking Tarik. He shredded the bear clan member before Dannika realized Tarik wasn't fighting back. His arms spread wide as Colton ripped apart his insides.

Ryder resumed his human form, holding up his hands to Colton. "Please, stop. Tarik won't defend himself. He never meant for Dannika to be hurt and will allow you to kill him."

Dannika panted through the pain. "Colton, stop. I stepped into his attack. It wasn't his fault."

Colton resumed his human form, but his eyes remained black. "He is a senior. He should have pulled his punch before you stepped between us."

Tarik's form coalesced, but there was no skin left on his chest. Long strips of bloody flesh hung, exposing the muscle and tissue beneath. "I accept this punishment for the error of my actions."

Colton helped Dannika to her feet. While the smell of blood in the air was exciting, the sight of Tarik's wounds meshing together, and the crimson droplets hitting the ground beneath his feet, caused her to cover her mouth. She turned away, walking toward the forest. She put her hand on the rough bark of a nearby evergreen.

"Maybe Maddock was right. I've caused so much dissension between your clans. I'm wondering if it's worth it." There was no emotion in her voice. She could walk into the forest and never look back. Run in her animal forms. Live there until she took her last breath.

Oppressive anger leeches from the shadow warriors surrounding her.

Ryder approached her, his look both concerned and apologetic. "Dannika, I'm sorry. The dissension between clans has been brewing for hundreds of years. Your arrival has brought things to a head. We had no chance at a three-way alliance before you. The problem is not you. It's us."

"I'm tired of the fighting."

Ryder sighed. "Dannika, you're a singular jewel and we're not sure how to share you."

Her eyes met Ryder's. She let him see the betrayal. The anger. The instinct to run. "Forcing me to mate someone I don't want isn't helping. I would rather die than betray Raine."

Ryder's jaw ticked. "Raine, is still your choice?"

"He always will be. Maddock forced this transfer to the cougar clan. I'm here so I can find out what happened to my sister. Maddock has put Raine in the cell until he can become accustomed to my departure." Like the first time she had met Ryder, she felt she could trust him. "Colton is not forcing me to mate him. He is allowing me to make my choice, but he is helping me with the investigation."

Ryder motioned for Colton to join them. “You will stand by her choice, even if it is not a cougar?”

Colton nodded. “I must protect her. I can’t explain it, but my loyalty is to her.”

Ryder took a deep breath. “I agree. She must be protected. Let me talk to Maddock. I will see if he will release Raine.”

He disappeared into the shadows, taking Tarik with him.

Colton put his arm around Dannika. He ignored Steele’s angry stare and walked her to the base of his tree.

She put her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist, allowing him to carry her up to the tree house, her soul too battered to facilitate a shift. Colton had sensed her wariness and hadn’t asked. He simply took care of her as promised. Part of her felt like she was taking advantage of the protective cougar. A low whimper trapped in her throat.

Inside, he set her down and led her into the living room, halting when her wooden footsteps alarmed him. “What is it?”

“What if he doesn’t forgive me? Lamar was right. I betrayed him.”

Colton put his arms around her as she rested her head on his shoulder. “If he is your mate, nothing will keep him from you.”

She slid her arms around Colton’s waist before growls echoed in the room.

Her eyes snapped up as Raine’s alpha emerged from the shadows.

CHAPTER 10



Raine never held Dannika responsible for the arrangement made between Maddock and Steele, but finding her in Colton's arms eradicated every sane thought in his head. His human reasoning evaporated as his shadow emerged, snarling its single purpose to kill the cougar holding his mate.

Colton pulled out of Dannika's arms and moved away from her before his shadow emerged. His alpha was every bit as powerful and threatening as Raine's. "I will fight you, but you should know that Dannika is adamant that she is yours. I will tell you that I and many members of our clan will try to change her mind."

Black waves rolled off Raine's shoulders. The instinct to hunt, protect, and kill was as primal as it was insistent. His shadow warrior had no intention of backing down, nor did he want to. "I believe in her loyalty. You, however, forced her to leave our home while they locked me in a cell. She had no choice in this situation. You did. Taking advantage of her will not go unpunished."

Colton stilled. "Your anger is justified."

Dannika turned on Colton. "What are you talking about? You aren't responsible for this."

Colton nodded. "Raine isn't upset that I have shown an interest in you. He's upset that I didn't fight for you. Allowing him to be incarcerated so the cougar clan could court you goes against everything our shifter forefathers believed in. A mate

must be chosen, not coerced.” He moved farther from Dannika. “I accept your challenge.”

The shadow warriors attacked, colliding together in a haze of black oppression. Growls echoed as the bodies of darkness fought, moving at lightning speed from one side of the room to the other.

“Stop fighting now or I will never speak to either of you again!” Dannika yelled.

The shadows reformed at either corner of the room. They stood with heaving breaths, staring at one another.

Raine still warred with the instinct to rip his opposition apart, but he wouldn’t risk losing his mate. Those moments in the cell, when his body wouldn’t respond to his commands, had been a humbling torture. He was just as angry with himself as he was with the cougar opposing him. He had trusted Maddock, his clan, and they had betrayed him. Colton was honest about his intentions. It was obvious he was protecting Dannika, and for that, Raine was grateful.

Dannika glanced between the men. “Raine, Colton had nothing to do with the negotiation. You know that. I have told him you are my mate, and he has agreed to let me make my own decisions. In the meantime, I will help him find out what is going on. He doesn’t believe that Steele would give up the cougar clan for me.”

Raine’s human skin reformed on his body. “You think that Maddock coerced Steele’s compliance?”

Colton nodded as he resumed his human form. “This decision will rip our clan in two. There has to be more to this.”

Raine took a deep breath. Deception had a distinct tone, and there was none in Colton’s voice. It made sense for the Bears and the Cougars to have an alliance. Steele and Ryder had been friends for years. Nothing about Maddock’s rise in power appeared natural.

“I agree something is off. Maddock would never have put me in a cell, despite the situation. He is different.”

Dannika walked toward him and slid her arm around his waist. She didn't know how much he needed the contact. Craved it. "Ryder was on his way to the caves to get Maddock to release you. Looks like you didn't need any help."

"Incarcerating the alpha apparent caused dissension in the clan. Maddock was unprepared to deal with those consequences. Dayton released me and told Maddock if he continued to waste the wolf clan's resources, then many of the members were leaving with me as their new alpha."

Dannika ran a finger down his cheek. His body reacted to the caress, but now wasn't the time to sate his need for his mate.

"I'm glad you have friends in the wolf clan," she said. "There's a good chance we're going to need them."

Raine pulled her closer to his body. It was an act of possession, and Colton wouldn't miss the meaning. "I still don't know why Maddock wants control over the cougar clan. Was Steele more forthcoming?"

Colton shook his head. "His actions are irresponsible and out of character."

"Maddock's ambitions have changed in the last couple of years. He has changed."

Dannika put her hand on Raine's chest. "He never showed signs of wanting to be the clan's overlord?"

"What you're describing is called a clan king, a single individual that holds all the clans together. This person isn't elected. We cannot force this position on the shadow warriors. It's a universal decision by all the clan leaders. The king has to be someone the clans believe in. That person is not Maddock."

Dannika huffed. "That's for sure."

Colton walked to the picture window, staring out at the forest. "While that may explain Maddock's ambitions, it doesn't explain why Steele would agree to this. No clan wants a king and no sane shadow wants that position."

Dannika nibbled her lip. “Raine, will you help us investigate my heritage, and why Steele stepped down? Colton has friends here, and a lead investigator, but you have friends in the wolf clan, and we will need updates on Maddock’s behavior.”

He ran his hand down her back. “There is nothing I won’t do for you. This alliance risks both the cougar and the wolf clan. Innocent lives will be lost if we don’t work together.”

Colton motioned the coffee table with files scattered on the top. “Darwin left these for us. It’s everything he has so far. He’s tracking another lead and will update us on his progress when he returns.”

They sat down on the couches and began flipping through the files.

“Why is there a reference to Steele’s human family home?” Raine asked. “Is that the lead Darwin is following?”

Colton dropped the file he was reading. “I don’t know. He doesn’t divulge information until he’s sure about it.”

Dannika leaned against Raine so she could read the report. “What does Steele’s past have to do with me?”

“No idea. Maybe we should investigate Steele’s origins. Perhaps there’s a connection to you,” Raine said.

“How do we do that?” Dannika said.

The men spoke in unison. “Graydon County archive.”

“All information on Steele’s human past will be there,” Colton continued.

Dannika stood. “Let’s go.”

Raine led her to the corner of the room. “We will take the shadows. It’s faster and you need to practice.”

She didn’t protest. He took control of her shadow warrior, merging them together as they swirled in a tornado of darkness and decadent delight. He loved the connection. The raw human emotion. Lust. Love. Betrayal. He didn’t have time to dissect the last one, assuming it was aimed at Maddock. He

hated that the family he had promised Dannika had turned on her. They were no better than her human homes, discarding her at the first opportunity for personal gain.

Though he would never admit it to Dannika, the pain of entering the shadow pathways intensified when he guided her. His bones cracked in his ears as his skin ripped from his body. Still, he protected her, shrouding her in his power, absorbing her pain with his own.

They chose a quick stream, racing along the darkness with ease. He felt the moment Colton entered the pathway. It vibrated like a taut thread that had been flicked, causing the string to weave back and forth before it evened out.

They emerged in a dark corner of the archive and coalesced into their human forms after double-checking they were alone. The sensation of reforming skin, a sensual caress, reminded him his body needed its mate.

The room was large with few lights to illuminate the rows of filing cabinets and storage shelves. Dust particles bounced in the air as they maneuvered to the center of the room. Two microfilm machines sat beside a scratched oak table.

“This place isn’t spooky at all,” Dannika said.

Raine ran a finger through the dust on one shelf. “Most files are digitized now. I doubt they used this room much.”

Dannika opened one of the filing cabinets. “The files are in alphabetical order. Anyone know Steele’s last name?”

“It was Raymond, but it’s more likely any files pertaining to Steele and his family will be on the microfilm,” Colton said.

Dannika put her finger to the labels on each of the green metal drawers. “That’s a common last name. We will have to check every file labeled S. Raymond on both.” The drawer squeaked when she opened it and began flipping through the documents.

The men sat at the microfilm stations and searched through the files.

Colton snapped his fingers. “I found it.”

Dannika and Raine joined him as he pointed to the file displayed on his screen.

“I can’t see any connection to Dannika. It looks like Steele had an older brother in the human world named Reid. He was killed when the family home burnt down,” Colton said.

Raine raised an eyebrow. “Fire is the preferred way to cover a kill. I’m guessing they were both bitten. Since I’ve never heard of Reid, I’m guessing he didn’t survive the transition.”

Colton frowned. “Steele told me about the attack. Reapers bled his family dry. The former cougar leader saved him. The cougar clan set fire to the home to cover the reaper kills, but Steele never mentioned a brother, only his parents, wife, and children.”

Dannika frowned. “Steele lived with his parents? Must’ve been younger than I thought when he was attacked.”

“Not necessarily. It was a different time. It wasn’t uncommon for several generations to live under one roof.”

“Are the wife and family mentioned in the report?”

Colton scrolled through the black and white file. “No. It lists the owners of the house as Steele’s parents.”

He flipped to another report and came to an old photo. His eyes blazed with red fire.

“What is it?” Raine asked.

Colton pointed to the man standing behind Steele.

The edges of the picture were cracked and faded. The two men wore dark suits. Steele sat in a chair while his older brother stood behind him with his hand on Steele’s shoulder. The distorted nature of the photo on microfilm had Raine leaning closer. It took him a moment to realize what he was looking at. “Shit.”

Dannika peeked at the photo. “What’s wrong?”

Raine leaned back in his chair. “The reason we hadn’t heard of Reid is because he changed his name. He goes by

Killian now.”

CHAPTER 11



Dannika sucked in a breath. “What?”

Colton put his hand to his forehead. “He lied this whole time. His own brother is leading the reaper clan. This has nothing to do with Dannika. Steele is aiding his brother.”

Raine shook his head. “We don’t know that. Maddock may have used this information against Steele. Your clan has had strong leadership until now. Steele has attacked the reapers on multiple occasions. He has killed them. I find it unfathomable that he could lie to the entire clan unnoticed. Shadows detect lies. We need more information.”

Colton’s eyes blazed. “He will tell me or I will kill him and take over the clan. Like you, I am the next alpha. I won’t let his blood ties ruin us.”

Dannika shook her head. “We need more time. More information. Keep this between us until we are sure. If Darwin is investigating this, we need to convince him to keep it to himself. We need more information before we confront Steele.”

Waves of black rolled off Colton’s shoulders. “We have assumed that Maddock instigated this merge. What if Steele is trying to divide us? Make us weak before the reaper’s attack. Maddock’s thirst for power made it easy to divert suspicion.” He ran his hand through his hair. “How do I keep this quiet? Pretend that my entire life in the shadow shifter world wasn’t a lie? That the man I trusted above all others isn’t out to destroy us.”

Raine glanced at the photo. “Because if you don’t, your clan will rip itself apart.”

Dannika put her hand on Colton’s arm, ignoring Raine when he stiffened beside her. “We can’t jump to conclusions. I know this looks bad, but we should talk to Steele privately before we make any assumptions.”

Flickers of red sparked in Colton’s black eyes. “We need to do it soon. If he’s sacrificing the cougar clan to protect his brother, he must be put down. This can’t wait.”

Raine glanced at the black-and-white report. “Were missing something. This report is incomplete. All I can confirm is that Steele isn’t a reaper.”

Dannika glanced up at Raine. “You think Maddock found out about Steele’s connection to Killian, but why would Steele keep it a secret? From what I understand, many shadows turn reaper. Why is this different?”

Raine focused on Colton. “That’s the question. No one would hold Steele accountable for his brother turning reaper. Why protect Killian now?”

Colton shook his head. “You’re right. It makes no sense. Even though Killian’s the reaper leader, his turning would never have been blamed on Steele. There is more to this. Perhaps we will get some answers from Darwin.”

Misty black script appeared in the air in front of Colton, the cool air becoming a message board between one shadow to another.

Dannika pointed at the swirling black letters. “What is that?”

Colton used his finger to write in the air. Black smoke rose from his fingertips as his words appeared to float above them.

“Colton is a receiver. He can send and receive messages. It’s one of his gifts.”

“What does it say? I didn’t understand the writing,” Dannika asked.

Raine put his hand on the small of her back. Warmth radiated from his touch, and she cleared her throat. “It’s shadow script. We have our own language. You will learn it in time. There has been a reaper attack. More information will be sent shortly.”

Dannika leaned toward him. “Who is he talking to?”

“Another receiver in his clan,” Raine said.

“Does the wolf clan have receivers?”

Raine nodded. “We have a set of twins with the gift, but they’re young and work from the sanctuary. Ryder also has several receivers. There are a few receivers per generation in every clan.”

Dannika glanced at the swirling dark script. “Do the reapers have them?”

“Yes. Reapers keep all their shadow gifts as these extend from our demon soul, not our animals.”

“Why do the reapers have all the advantages?” she asked.

Raine winked at her. “They don’t have you.”

Not yet. The thought filtered through her mind before she could censure it.

She flashed Raine a reassuring smile, though her insides felt hollow. “You mentioned before that a reaper is strengthened by killing humans. What effect does it have on shadow abilities?”

Raine’s jaw ticked before he answered. “Reapers strengthen their demons by allowing their animal to perish. They lose their animal and their ability to reproduce, but their shadow demon is stronger as are their gifts.”

Her eyes widened. “Their abilities are stronger than ours?”

“Yes.”

She folded her arms. “Well, that sucks ass.”

“It’s comforting to know that your eloquence was unaffected by your transition.”

Her retort died on her lips as the black script reappeared in the air. “What does it say?”

Colton glanced at her with black eyes. “The reapers have killed a man in Graydon County. His apartment is a few blocks away from the shelter. The kill is fresh, so we need to investigate before the police arrive.”

Footsteps thudded on the floor above their head.

Raine looked up. “We’re about to have company. Colton, you have the location of the apartment. You lead, and Dannika and I will follow you.”

Colton moved to the corner of the room before his shadow emerged and he dissolved into the darkness.

Raine enveloped Dannika’s body with his shadow before she allowed hers to emerge, combining their essence. The jolt of lust, love, and pain was a wicked combination. The hollow shell she had created to protect her heart crumbled against Raine’s unfailing loyalty and protection. The sensation of her skin ripping from her body preceded the speed of moving through the dark pathway.

They zipped through the streams, intersecting one another before coming to an abrupt halt. The end of the pathway hit them like an invisible wall. They tumbled against Colton’s back, clutching the carpet while they orientated themselves.

“What just happened?” Dannika asked.

Raine stood before helping her to her feet. “Light trap.”

Dannika glanced around the living room. Black leather couches, a white coffee table, and tall silver lamps gave the impression the owner took pride in his home.

“What’s a light trap?”

Colton huffed. “Surrounding a shadow with light makes it impossible for him to travel in the pathways. We need to connect with the shadows, the darkness, in order to travel.”

She pointed at the lamps. “It’s well lit, but we aren’t surrounded.”

Raine walked over to the lamp aimed at the corner. “Someone put a timer on this lamp. It activated the light switch seconds before we exited the shadow pathway.”

“That explains why I ended up with carpet burn, but what’s the point?”

“It causes a disturbance in the pathway, alerting the reapers that we have arrived. It’s also painful and embarrassing when you land on your face. Taunting us is a reaper pastime.”

“Reapers are dicks. Got it,” Dannika said before she strolled to the bathroom and opened a top cabinet.

Raine checked the bedroom while Colton made his way to the kitchen.

Dannika grabbed the stack of mail sitting on a small, organized desk with a laptop and a phone.

“Victim is in here,” Colton called.

They joined Colton in the modern kitchen. An athletic dark-haired man in black dress pants and a white cotton shirt lay on the ground. His shirt collar absorbed blood from the wound at his neck. Ragged pieces of flesh hung from his esophagus.

Dannika turned away. It wasn’t the gruesome nature of the kill; it was the enticing aroma that hung in the air. The beautiful blood that crept along the white marble tile.

Raine knelt down, pulling back the man’s collar so he could access the wound. “The reaper attempted to hide this behind an animal attack. The throat is torn open, but the doors are locked. I will encourage the police that this relates to the terrorist attack at the soccer field.”

Colton knelt beside the dead man. “You possess the power of suggestion. That is a rare gift.”

“It’s useful for diverting the human authorities from our existence. I have never used it on my shadow brethren.”

Sirens blared closer. Dannika and the men turned towards the front door.

“We’ve run out of time. Check the apartment. Let’s see if we can determine why this man was targeted,” Raine said.

Dannika frowned. “Why do you suspect he was targeted?”

Colton glanced around the apartment. “It’s too well lit. There was only one shadow pathway available. The reaper didn’t have a simple task of accessing this prey. In fact, the apartment is too well lit. Perhaps the owner had a phobia. I’ve seen it in humans before.”

“Fear of the dark. It’s pretty common. Considering what I know about the shadows now, it’s more justified than ever.” Dannika read the first bill in the stack of mail. She shuffled to the next one, before turning to the men. “His name is Charles Raymond. What are the chances of him and Steele having the same last name?”

Raine stood, leaning over her shoulder to look at the mail. “I don’t believe in coincidences.”

Colton gently turned the man’s face toward him. “He has the same bone structure as Steele. Charles must be a relative of Steele’s. I would guess a grandson.”

Dannika flipped through the rest of the letters. “Why would the reapers kill Steele’s ancestors if he is working with them, or protecting Killian?”

Colton stood. “This raises more questions but doesn’t answer any. We don’t know if Steele knew about Charles.”

Raine took a letter from Dannika’s hand, then passed it to Colton. “Are you sure?”

Colton glanced at the letter. “Saffron Enterprises. It’s the name of Steele’s company. He works for Steele. There’s no way he didn’t know about Charles.”

Dannika glanced at the dead man. “Are you sure he isn’t a direct descendant of Killian when he was human? When he was Reid?”

“I don’t know anything about Killian’s human life. Either way, Steele was not only protecting him. He was supporting Charles.”

Dannika glanced at the shadow in the corner. The one they used to travel from the archive. “We had a hard time finding anything on Steele’s family. Do you think he removed the evidence from his family’s past? Like you said, it was a different time. He missed a couple of files, the ones that were added to the microfilm.”

Raine rubbed his chin. “That would explain why we can’t find anything on Reid. Does Steele have any other descendants? Could he be protecting them?”

Colton nodded. “Steele had a wife and six children. If they all survived, then he has many great-grandchildren. But why would Killian target them now?”

Dannika put the papers on the table as blue-and-red lights flickered through the window. “I have no idea, but I think it’s time we ask him.”

CHAPTER 12



Raine held onto Dannika as they exited the dark pathway. The stars twinkled through the branches of Steele's tree house, and this time, the transition from the shadows was smooth. Their footsteps creaked on the boards of his wraparound deck. The construction and design was similar to Colton's.

Steele opened the door with an inviting smile. "Come in."

His eyes dropped to Raine's arm as it circled Dannika's waist, but he said nothing.

They entered his living room, though none of them sat, the mood oppressive and strained. Colton stood like a statue, with his limbs tight and his fingers curled into fists.

Steele appraised his son. "You are angry. I understand the alliance is causing—"

"This has nothing to do with the alliance. You lied to the clan. To me."

Steele's jaw ticked. "It is impossible for me to lie to you. You are an alpha. I did not disclose the alliance until it was complete, but I never lied about it."

Colton stepped forward until he was nose to nose with Steele. "Killian is your brother."

Steele hissed as he stepped back. "How did you find out? I thought I removed all evidence of Killian's connection to me."

"You admit you lied then," Colton growled.

Dark waves rolled off Steele's shoulders before he brought himself under control. "No. I didn't lie to the clan members because they weren't aware of my family. I was simply protecting them and anyone connected to Killian. He would've killed our descendants if he knew about them. I convinced Killian they were dead."

Raine glanced at Colton. "He knows about the deception. They murdered Charles Raymond in his home. I've suggested to the lead investigator that his death is part of a terrorist attack, but Charles was killed by a reaper."

Steele's forehead creased with pain radiating in his eyes. "Does Killian know about all of them?"

"How many of them are there? How many did you save?" Raine asked.

Steele sat down on a tan suede couch. He placed his elbow on the arm and leaned into his hand, making him appear older. "Killian murdered my youngest son after he became a reaper. Jake was twenty then, so I arranged for my surviving family members to board a ship. It sank later that evening, but I had already moved my family to another. They weren't supposed to return, but the latest generation has forgotten about the past. I have many descendants and several have returned to their homeland. If Killian is aware of them, he will destroy them."

Dannika clutched the hem of Raine's shirt. "Is it normal for a reaper to go after his former family?"

"Yes," the men answered in unison.

"A blood relative gives a reaper a longer high. They covet their former family's blood," Raine said.

Steele looked up at Raine. "Is there any chance that killing Charles was a coincidence? That a reaper killed him, but they didn't know about his connection to me?"

Raine glanced down. "Charles kept his house well lit. The reaper used that to leave us a light trap."

Steele huffed. "Killian loved that prank. He used it when he was a shadow, now he does it just to prove he can hurt us."

Colton's lips thinned. "That means Killian was there. He wouldn't have allowed another reaper to drain a member of his human family."

Steele's eyes remained on the ground. "If you sprung a light trap, then Killian was there."

"How did you keep this quiet from all the clan members?" Colton asked. "From the other clans?"

Steele looked up at his son. "Not all the clans. Ryder knows. He helped me protect my family. We were both alpha apparent, not unlike you and Raine. We were young and idealistic, believing we could unite the clans. Maddock showed no interest in unification until now."

Dannika moved to the couch opposite Steele. "As mad as Ryder is with you, he never said a word? He still kept your confidence?"

Steele's smile was slight. "Ryder is a good man. He kept this secret and had many chances to remove me as clan leader. I am unworthy of his friendship, but my deal with Maddock ensures the death of the reaper clan. That my family will remain safe. This turn of events reinforces the need for unification against the reapers."

Dannika's eyes narrowed. "How will Maddock ensure the reapers fall?"

"I don't know, but he wasn't lying. He said that the reaper clan, as we know it, would fall. He is hiding something from his clan, but I don't know what."

Raine stepped forward. "How do you know he's hiding something from the wolf clan?"

Steele's sad eyes met Raine's. "He said his own clan would be as surprised as mine when the truth was revealed. He's more powerful than he lets on and he wants Dannika dead. I believe he's threatened by her. The union between her and Colton was my idea. I felt the instinct to protect her as if she were one of my own."

Colton glanced at Dannika. "I understand."

Dannika folded her hands in her lap. “Tell me about Maddock. Are you sure he hates the reapers?”

Raine sat on the couch beside her. “Yes, more than any of us.”

“He has gone to great lengths to gain power so he can annihilate the reaper clan, and it seems personal,” Dannika said.

Raine nodded. “It is. The reapers killed his wife and unborn child.”

CHAPTER 13



Dannika didn't want to feel sorry for Maddock. The power-hungry wolf clan leader had turned her world upside down. But she'd seen firsthand what the loss of a wife or child could cause. So many of the shelter patrons had suffered significant losses in their lives and had never recovered. A shadow shifter didn't have the option of walking away from their responsibilities. Their only option was to turn reaper. To escape the never-ending void of shadow life. To kill, creating a temporary high, and gain immortality.

"That's a pretty good reason to hate the reapers. Is it possible he is so focused on revenge he can't see the damage he is doing to himself and the clans?"

Raine put his hand on her thigh, the action both comforting and possessive. "I was young when it happened. Maddock felt the urge to reproduce. He found a human female and left the clan for two years. When he came back, he was different. He told us what happened and for a while, he focused on my training. I didn't know I was an alpha then, but Maddock must've known. Soon after his return, my training became more intense than the other fledglings."

Steele turned to look out his large picture window. The branches swayed in the wind. Moonlight flickered over the walls like a black and white movie.

"I realized Colton was an alpha when he reached his twenty-second birthday. Young by our standards. I don't doubt that Maddock realized he had a successor before you did."

Colton's eyes remained on Steele. "Having Raine would've eased Maddock's need to find his successor, and though I can't agree with his actions, I understand his motivation to unite the shadow clans and annihilate the reapers. I am still confused about yours."

Steele's head snapped up. "Are you questioning my loyalty to this clan?"

The air stilled as Dannika held her breath. She didn't know Steele well enough to feel betrayed, but the wrong answer would devastate Colton. The instinct to protect him continued to strengthen. She didn't look forward to the conversation she needed to have with Raine.

Colton appeared frozen in time. Dannika doubted he realized it, but for the first time since meeting him, he appeared vulnerable. "Tell me how you and Killian became shadows. The story I believe is obviously a lie."

Steele shook his head. "I would never lie to you, son. The story I told you is the truth. The reapers attacked our family home. My parents' home. Reid had never married and still lived with our parents. I owned a small home a few miles away, but I stayed at my parents' house that night."

Colton's face twitched. "The reapers attacked and killed your parents. You and Kilian—I mean Reid—were bitten before the shadow cougars arrived."

The pain of recalling those terrible memories played on Steele's face. "Yes. Reid and I were more than brothers. We were best friends. That night, we had one too many glasses of our father's moonshine. My decision to drink with my brother instead of returning to my family changed the course of my life and made my Theresa a widow. The reaper that attacked us that night was the former reaper leader, Lazarus. His blood was powerful, which is likely why we both survived the transition."

Colton glanced down. "I'm sorry for making you revisit these memories, but we need the truth. When did Reid turn reaper and change his name to Killian?"

“You deserve the truth, and I will give it to you. Reid was a good shadow, but I didn’t see him much in those first fifty years. He felt the urge to mate and entered the human world. After ten years, I searched for him but found no trace. Later, I discovered he had found a mate. He fell in love as many shadows do and refused to leave his wife.”

“Shit,” Colton said.

Dannika glanced at him. “Why do I have the feeling you know how this ends?”

“You were appalled when you found out about our mating habits, but you don’t understand the pain of leaving your mate and taking what she loves the most with you,” Steele told Dannika, before turning back to Colton. “Reid couldn’t do it. He hid from the reapers and the shadows for thirteen years. His wife was pregnant with their second child when Lazarus found them.”

She rubbed her eyes. “They died? How did Reid last with his mate for so long? I thought humans went crazy after a few years.”

“We investigated after the attack, but we never discovered how Reid kept his mate sane. Reid turned reaper that night and killed Lazarus. He changed his name to Killian and took over the clan, but his oldest son was twelve and survived the transition. His son never got a chance to be a shadow. Killian ensured he made his first human kill before his thirteenth birthday.”

She frowned. “If you were close, why didn’t you see Reid much the first fifty years? Do you segregate the fledglings in the cougar clan?”

Steele smiled sadly. “Reid wasn’t a cougar. He was a panther.”

Raine leaned forward. “What? There hasn’t been panther clan in hundreds of years.”

“That isn’t true. Several panthers have emerged, but Ryder and I hid them. The clan was small but growing. I hoped Reid would lead them one day. Like me, he was an alpha.”

Raine rubbed his forehead. “Does Maddock know about the Panthers?”

“No. We didn’t trust him. He is set in the old ways, and the resurgence of a lost species was unheard of.”

Raine growled. “The Panthers’ return was the first change in our evolution. Dannika was the second. Maddock may have been more accepting of her if you had informed him the Panthers existed again.”

“No point now. They are all dead.”

Dannika sucked in a breath. “What happened?”

“Killian returned to his clan as leader of the reapers. He orchestrated the destruction. A few turned reaper and joined him, but most died that day.”

Dannika rubbed her chest, attempting to ease the pain. “None survived?”

“We never retrieved all the bodies. Some may have escaped, but the reapers likely tracked them down. Without a clan, there was no one to protect them. The cougars and bears would’ve welcomed them, but their animals wouldn’t endure in such an environment. They likely took to the forest until the reapers found them.”

“And he has been trying to kill you ever since,” Dannika sent.

Steele nodded. “Killing me will make him even more powerful. He wants my blood more than anything and will destroy anybody to get it.”

CHAPTER 14



Raine stood. “What is our next move? If Killian is slaughtering your descendants, then we need to inform Maddock and Ryder.”

Steele crossed the room and stood in front of the window. “Let me talk to Ryder. He is already aware of my descendants. I will inform him Killian has found them and is murdering them. We based our original arrangement on protecting the Panthers.”

Raine detected the hitch in Steele’s voice. “Why did Ryder help you hide the Panthers?”

Steele glanced at Raine. “Ryder mated and had two children. Twin boys. One was a bear and as you know, he was killed by reapers ten years ago. His twin brother was a panther. Ryder faked his death, and we moved him to the panther clan.”

“What happened to him?” Raine asked.

“We never found his body after the panther clan was destroyed, but he never returned to his father, so we assume he perished in the attack.”

Dannika looked at the men. “Wouldn’t you have found his body?”

Raine shook his head. “Not necessarily. If a reaper is powerful enough, he can kill you in the shadow pathway. Killian has a knack for knowing when we exit a stream.”

She blinked several times. “There are dead shadows in the pathway?”

“Yes,” Steele said.

She shivered. “That’s not creepy at all.”

Steele sat down, placing his hands in his lap. He leaned forward, mimicking Dannika. “It’s rare to get caught in the shadows by another, but it’s possible. Raine will teach you to protect yourself.”

Raine glanced between Steele and Dannika. Their bodies mirrored one another, their stance and inflection identical. “Steele, do you know why Killian has taken an interest in Dannika? Does it have to do with your family?”

Steele shook his head. “I have been trying to figure that one out myself. I lost contact with some of my children. I considered that she could be a relation, but if that were true, he would want her dead. To drink her himself.”

“Are you sure he doesn’t? Just because he says he wants her doesn’t mean he plans to keep her alive.”

Steele’s eyes snapped to Raine’s. “She’s a unicorn among shadow shifters. By all rights, she shouldn’t exist. Killian wouldn’t kill her. He would bleed her to see if her blood is compatible. Normal shadow rules don’t seem to apply here.”

Dannika’s face paled. “Bleed me?”

Raine cleared his throat. “He wouldn’t bite you. He would drain your blood and drink it. When the madness hit him, he’d kill another.”

Dannika’s eyes widened. “Madness?”

“When you don’t make the kill, your demon goes insane. He would have to have another human available after drinking your blood.”

She shuddered. “This has happened before?”

“It has, with rare blood types. The reapers got their hands on a human with null blood. They bled him for years until Killian’s demon got the better of him, and he killed the man.”

His heart turned over when his eyes met hers. The anguish and denial made his wolf whimper. She wasn’t scared; she was

determined, and that terrified him.

“I’d rather die.”

“It won’t come to that. I would never let you fall into reaper hands,” Raine said.

Steele ran his hand through his hair. “We need more time to unite the clans, but we don’t have it. Killian is going to push for war while we are disorganized. His attacks on our home territories prove that.”

“The reapers have attacked you here?” Raine asked.

Steele nodded. “While not as overt as the attack on the wolf caves, the bears have had similar incursions. The reapers are testing our defenses. They want your cartographer. Maddock has moved Darren to the sanctuary. It’s the only place they can’t enter.”

Raine’s eyes narrowed on Steele. “Killian is your brother. I know how hard it is to accept when a clan member turns reaper. I can’t imagine what it’s like with a member of your family.”

Colton growled at Raine. “He has told you the truth. You would know if he lied.”

Steele held up his hand. “Raine has every right to question me. As a future alpha, it is his obligation to protect his clan. Killian is no longer the brother I knew and loved. Reid died with his mate. I want him dead more than anyone. While I protected my human family, I could not protect my shadow son.”

Dannika leaned forward. “You took a mate?”

Steele scratched his chest as if he could remove the pain of losing his child. “A hundred years after my human wife passed, my cougar urged me to take a mate. I entered the human world, and I met Renee.”

“What happened?” Dannika asked.

“Killian came looking for me. My son was only six months old and hadn’t weaned from the breast. I never had to leave

my mate, because Killian fed on her, then my son. I still have nightmares about his tiny, bloody body.”

Dannika placed her hand over her mouth, but her eyes welled with tears. “That’s horrible. I’m so sorry.”

Raine scratched his head. “We are losing too many. Killian continues to gain power. I’d like to know how he’s doing it.”

“As would I,” Steele said.

Raine glanced at Colton. “Why weren’t you at the trials Maddock forced on Dannika?”

Colton put his hand on Steele’s shoulder. “I disagreed with my clan leader a few years ago. I disobeyed a direct order and received a temporary banishment. The penalty was justified.”

Dannika frowned. “What is a temporary banishment?”

Colton’s face remained like stone. “I had to leave the clan for a designated time. It’s difficult for both the shadow warrior and our animal.”

Dannika’s jaw dropped. “You kicked him out of the clan?”

Steele leaned back in his chair. “It was necessary.”

“How long was he on his own?”

“Two years,” Steele said.

Dannika’s eyes turned black. “How could you do that to your son? Wait, because Colton isn’t your son, is he?” She glanced at the cougar. “What happened?”

CHAPTER 15



Raine turned to Dannika. “Like me, Colton transitioned.”

Colton patted Steele’s shoulder before he walked around his chair and faced Dannika. “Like you and Raine, a reaper bit me. They attacked my family when I was fourteen. My father was at work, but my mother and baby sister died. Steele saved me. Gave me his blood. He took me in as his adoptive son and later, when my alpha emerged, he began training me to be his successor.” He glanced at Steele. “I’m sorry I doubted you. I should’ve known better. You always put the welfare of this clan first.”

Steele waved his hand dismissively. “I should’ve told you about my descendants. I planned to before you took over the clan.” He glanced at Raine. “I never considered that the Panthers’ re-emergence was the first sign of a change in our evolutionary cycle. Honestly, I never considered that as a possibility, even when Dannika emerged. If I had, I would have told you.”

Raine nodded. “We have to be honest moving forward. Any reaper movements, changes in shadow behavior, or abilities need to be discussed. There is more going on, and Dannika is only part of it.”

“I agree. I will talk to Ryder and smooth things over with the bear clan. Perhaps we can come up with something that will appease Maddock and keep the clans aligned.”

Dannika turned to Colton. “Raine said that reapers rarely feed on the young. Were you large for your age?”

“No. It’s rare for reapers to bother with young teens or children. They provide little nourishment. They also avoid attacking women during the childbearing years as they operate with the humans as cattle mentality.

Her face softened. “What happened?”

Colton glanced at the forest. “He planned to kill me. His claws extended, and he was seconds from beheading me, then he sniffed me. Maybe I had some of my parents’ blood on me, I’m not sure, but he bit into my neck and fed. What I know of reapers, he shouldn’t have been attracted to my mother or sister, but Killian seemed drawn to us.”

Dannika followed Colton’s gaze. “That’s not all.”

Colton’s eyes met hers. “You are perceptive. I am curious what your shadow skill will be.”

She folded her arms. “So am I. Sometimes I think it would be cool to have a rare gift and become a specialist, and other times I want a common gift. Now, finish the story.”

“Impatient too.” He took a deep breath. “Killian told me he looked forward to my shadow emerging. It was as if he knew I would survive transition despite my young age.”

Steele winced. “I’m guessing that he did.”

“How?” Dannika asked.

“Killian’s ability is foreshadowing. It’s not always accurate, but he’s right more often than not.”

Dannika’s head cocked to the side. “He saw something in Colton?”

Steele nodded. “He must have. Likely the ability to survive transition. Remember, the reapers can’t reproduce. They rely on us to strengthen their numbers.”

“Then why do they attack the human women when they are pregnant? You said they usually avoid women during childbearing years, but Killian killed your mate.”

“A snake is still a snake. A woman carrying a shadow child is the human equivalent of a filet mignon. They track shadow movements, intending to turn us. The more reaper venom we’re injected with increases the chances of us turning. When they find a shadow with a mate, her pregnancy causes a change in her blood chemistry. It’s like waving alcohol in front of an alcoholic. Keep in mind, reapers have no desire to reform.”

“I understand. I am curious what Killian saw in Colton though,” Dannika said.

Raine huffed. “We will ask him right before we kill him.”

Dannika nibbled her lip as she looked at Colton.

Raine touched her arm. “I can hear the wheels in your mind turning. What is it?”

“What’s the difference between a shadow that is born and one that is turned? Is there a difference in their abilities?” she asked.

Raine rubbed his chin. “Nothing except a born shadow doesn’t go through the pain of transition. He knows only shadow life. He also learns to use his gifts at a much younger age. The shadow born are more adept with their abilities. The transitioned take more time to develop.”

“So once you’re trained and mature, there’s no difference.”

“Yes,” Raine said. “Why do you ask?”

“Just curious about shadow abilities once they turn reaper.”

Raine had to admire the way Dannika’s mind worked. She ferreted through a puzzle at lightning speed, taking them in directions they would never think of, reminding him of Darwin. As a fledgling, her abilities would take time to mature, but she was developing faster than any shadow before her. The cougars watching her had noticed as well.

“Once he turns reaper and begins feeding on human blood, he becomes immortal and his animal dies, strengthening his demon,” Raine said. “His shadow ability gets stronger.”

Her lips pursed. “I won’t comment on how sexist that last statement was, or do you question whether I will have shadow abilities?”

He cleared his throat. “I apologize. Like Colton, I’m looking forward to your shadow gifts emerging and the possibility of you having more than one. I am simply unaccustomed to the female aspect of shadow life.”

“Well, get accustomed. Do you have any idea what my shadow ability will be?”

He hated the uncertainty in her voice, as if she were somehow less than him. She didn’t understand the gift she was to the clan. To the shadow shifter world.

“I have no idea what your ability will be, but you are young in our community. It may not emerge for a few years. I can tell you that many of the transitioned have gifts that connect to their human world. Darwin, for example, was a police officer.”

She tapped her chin. “Well, that doesn’t help. There’s nothing special about me other than I can make a mean grilled cheese sandwich, and we all know how useful that skill is.”

Raine’s lip curled. Her wit, regardless of the situation, never ceased to surprise him. He hoped she would retain it in the years to come. “I have been thinking about this. There’s a chance it could be your blood.”

She frowned. “Why?”

“It hurts shadows, possibly reapers.”

“Is that a shadow thing?” she asked.

“No other shadow has had toxic blood. I’m not sure we can classify it as a gift or a result of you being female,” Raine said.

“How do we find out?”

“We won’t know for sure unless another female transitions or you develop an ability, but I am curious whether your blood affects reapers as it does us.”

“I hope so. We don’t seem to have any other advantages.”

The mystery around Dannika continued to elude him. Was she simply the next stage of evolution, or did her blood origins play a more important role? The questions continued to pile up while the answers remained elusive.

“Dannika, is there anything in your past that relates to Steele? Anything we uncovered at the archive that seems familiar?”

Dannika scrunched her face. “I’m an orphan. Why would anything look familiar to me?”

“Killian’s interest in you concerns me. I think it’s to do with your blood.”

Steele leaned forward, wariness in his eyes. “What are you suggesting?”

Raine pointed between Steele and Dannika. He was so focused on his mate he was missing the clues in front of him. “I should have seen it before.”

“They do have similar bone structure,” Colton said.

Raine nodded. “Look at her eyes. They are the same as Steele’s.”

Steele sucked in a breath. “If she is my descendent, and Killian knows, that would explain his interest in her. I wonder how he found her, and which of my children she’s related to?”

“That doesn’t explain why her blood is dangerous to us,” Colton said.

“Perhaps it is nature’s way of protecting her. An aberration because of her being female,” Steele said.

Dannika huffed. “Grandpa or not, you call me an aberration again and I’ll kick your ass. You are already in my bad books.”

Steele’s lip twitched. “I accept all responsibility for my actions, but this also explains my need to protect you. It is more than instinct. I would die for you.”

Colton nodded. “I feel the same, though I can’t explain it.”

Dannika's eyes widened as she looked at Colton. "If I'm related to Steele, how does that explain our connection?"

Colton shook his head. "I transitioned. While I am Steel's chosen son, I am not of his blood."

Raine's wolf growled as his shadow fought to emerge and attack the cougar it saw as competition. "What connection?"

CHAPTER 16



Dannika tasted danger in the air. It caressed her tongue every bit as sweet as chocolate. Her shadow rose in response to Raine's question. His anger.

"I can't explain it, and neither can Colton," she said. "We feel compelled to protect one another."

Black smoke rolled off Raine's shoulders before he got his shadow under control. "Is it like a mate? Like us?"

Dannika rubbed her chest, connecting with her shadow as she looked at Colton. "No, but it would devastate me if something happened to Colton. It's like he's part of me. I didn't feel that way about you right away. With Colton it was instant."

Raine moved away from her. As their shadows disconnected, she shivered from the jolt of betrayal. Then the feeling disappeared. Icy fingers wrapped around her heart as Raine's shadow withdrew from her.

"I'm sorry. I know it's not what you want to hear," she said.

His glacier blue eyes pulsed. "I appreciate your honesty. We need that if we're going to figure out what's happening between you and Colton."

Dannika wanted to reassure Raine that her feelings for him were just as strong as they ever were, but nothing she said would change her feelings toward Colton. She turned to Steele. "What about fledglings and children? Are your feelings towards them the same? Is it similar to what you feel for me?"

Steele studied her before he replied. “For the most part. You get a fledgling later in life, but Colton was young to survive the transition. Almost as young as Raine. The opportunity to train a teenager creates a deeper bond, as you raise them as well as train them.”

She imagined the young Colton, scared and confused, having lost a loving parent, a sister, and his entire world at such a young age. It must have been reassuring to have someone like Steele guide him. She fought the urge to comfort Colton.

“What happened to your family, Steele?” she asked. “I mean, after they left the ship? Did you ever see them again?”

Steele shook his head. “I couldn’t. My presence left them in danger. I had clan members checking on them from time to time. I advised them to separate for their own safety. I told them I was murdered because of a business deal. They did as I instructed them.”

Dannika blinked. “If they thought you were dead, how did you instruct them?”

Steele smiled. “I thought the idea was ingenious. I sent them letters postmarked before my death. They believed I knew the end was coming and arranged for their safety.”

Dannika’s heart stuttered. “Walking away from your wife and children must’ve been agonizing.”

Steele’s eyes swirled with black flames. “I wanted to die. If it wasn’t for our former leader, I’m not sure I would’ve made it, but surviving to ensure your children’s safety is a primal instinct, whether human or shadow.”

“You don’t know where your descendants settled?” Dannika asked.

“No. If I did, I would’ve eventually checked on them. My first years as a shadow were the darkest of my life.”

“What about Charles? You must’ve known he was a descendant?”

Steele nodded. “He kept our last name. Returning to Graydon was the beginning of the end for him. Of course, he didn’t know that. When he applied for a job at our company, I interviewed him. I knew he was my great grandson. If I didn’t hire him, he would’ve gone somewhere else, and I figured I could watch over him provided it was at arm’s length. I was wrong.”

“Have any other descendants returned to Graydon County?” Dannika asked.

“Yes. There’s a few, though I’ve had no interaction with them.”

She swallowed hard. “Then it’s possible that we’re related.”

His eyes met hers. “More than possible.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, attempting to thaw the ice in her blood. “So if we run with the theory that Killian wants me for my blood, why isn’t he abducting the other descendants? He killed Charles for the high his blood will provide.”

Steele frowned. “I’m not sure I agree with Raine’s theory that Killian can feed from you. Yes, everything about you breaks our rules, but you are a shadow, and reapers can’t drink shadow for sustenance. I’m not sure what effect your blood would have on a reaper. Killian doesn’t know it is like acid to us.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Reapers can’t drink from a shadow?”

“No. They bite shadow warriors to infect us with their venom, but they can’t feed on us.”

She ran a hand down the sheer curtain, letting the silky feel distract her from the vise on her heart. “The shadow wolves died from the poison in their blood.”

“Not exactly. The wolves were bitten, which impairs our ability to regenerate, but only because they were bitten over a dozen times. The stab wounds to the neck killed them, their heads were essentially severed,” Steele said.

She flicked the curtain away. “That doesn’t explain the differences in my blood.”

“While your blood may be different, and Killian may bleed you, I do not believe it is to drink your blood.”

She frowned. “Then why was that reaper watching me?”

“He may have planned to drain you himself. Perhaps the reaper he assigned to watch you let his instincts get the better of him. You understand that reapers are like rabid animals. While they possess cognitive thinking when their needs are sated, they have little control when they are hungry.”

“That sounds plausible, but that raises another question about reaper feeding. Why does human blood make reapers immortal when animal blood barely sates the shadow shifters?”

Steele sighed. “That is the will of mother nature. Killing an animal is not murder.”

“The wolf killing a rabbit thing again?” she asked.

“Yes. Do you recall a story about a plane crash where the humans were forced to eat their fallen brethren? Was that a sin?”

She shook her head. “They would’ve died, and the people they ate were dead from the crash.”

Steele nodded. “So, eating the humans wasn’t evil?”

She rolled her shoulders. “No. Gross, but not evil.”

“It is the same for shadow shifters. We must feed or we will die or turn reaper. The second is the worst. We hunt in our animal form as nature intended, whether blood or flesh. The result is the same and cannot be considered evil.”

She pursed her lips. “That doesn’t answer my question. I don’t understand how murdering a human, drinking their blood, makes reapers immortal.”

Raine cleared his throat. “It isn’t just human blood. It’s the fear. The adrenaline that pumps through their veins, knowing they will die. We inject our prey with the sedative. If they’re

not asleep when death comes for them, they feel little. We do not get an adrenaline rush from our kill.”

“What would happen if you didn’t inject your prey with the sedative?” Dannika asked.

“It has happened. Young ones forget to release the sedative, and an animal is caused unnecessary stress., but they view death differently than humans. They accept it as part of the natural order. Humans fight it to the bitter end, even knowing it’s unavoidable.”

Dannika paced around the living room. She felt the men watching her. Her mind rolled from one scenario to the next. “What if reapers stopped feeding on humans? What would happen to them?”

CHAPTER 17



Raine approached Dannika and put his hand on her back because he needed the contact. The moonlight filtered through the branches, highlighting her perfect skin: ivory satin that surrounded the green emeralds of her eyes.

His wolf growled in his ear as he fought his shadow, the demon intent on keeping what it had claimed. He was in dangerous territory. The urge to fight and kill Colton was overwhelming. His control teetered on the brink of detonation. One false move and he would be the catalyst for a clan war.

He looked down when Dannika put her hand on his stomach.

“Did you hear me?” she asked.

He nodded. “I was thinking. I suppose the reapers would become mortal, but it has never happened. Their animals are dead and can’t be resurrected. Honestly, a mortal reaper is unfathomable.”

She turned toward him, calming his animal. “If there’s a way to rehabilitate the reapers, we could avert a war.”

Raine searched her face. This was what her patrons at the shelter had seen. In their darkest hour, she had been a shining light. He found it ironic that light now belonged to the shadows.

“It’s never been tried. I can’t promise it would work.”

Dannika leaned toward him. “Is there some way to find out?”

Colton and Steele stared at one another.

“Did our forefather’s try this?” Colton asked.

Steele shook his head. “While we experimented with reversing the transition, we never tried to rehabilitate a reaper. No reaper would willingly give up human blood.”

Dannika tapped her lip with her finger. “We would have to trap a reaper and starve him. Feed him animal blood if he would drink it. If we could bag a reaper, how long before he becomes mortal?”

Steele shook his head. “While theoretically possible, there are no guarantees. Becoming mortal may kill a reaper not conform him.”

Colton’s eyes darted away from Steele as he rubbed his neck.

Raine focused on the cagey cougar. “What is it, Colton?”

Colton sighed. “We are entering territory that is best left alone.”

Raine’s arm tightened around Dannika when she attempted to move towards Colton. “What are you trying to say?”

Steele waved his hand. “Colton is right. Only a Bokor can answer your questions. It’s not something I would suggest lightly.”

Raine and Dannika shared a questioning glance. “Why?”

Steele’s face hardened. “They are not trustworthy. We’re better off experimenting on our own.”

“How can you say that?” Dannika hissed. “If a Bokor can answer our questions, then we should find out. Reapers were once shadows. We shouldn’t cause them unnecessary harm. If there’s a way to rehabilitate them, we should facilitate it as humanely as possible.”

Steele’s eyes flickered. “I admire your conviction and your compassion, but when you have experienced dozens of losses, and the carnage we have, you will have a different perspective.”

Her fingers clenched into a fist before she forced herself to relax. “Why are you unwilling to ask a few questions? It costs nothing and could save us time. It also increases our chances of success.”

Steele sighed. “I have had dealings with them in the past. It did not go well and is not an experience I wish to revisit. As for the cost, it’s higher than you think.”

Dannika frowned. “What happened?”

“It was a long time ago, and there’s no point in dredging up old wounds.” Steele folded his arms, signaling he would not be forthcoming about his past.

Raine rubbed Dannika’s back. “If it was a long time ago, we would not be dealing with the same Bokor, correct?”

Steele wet his lips. “No. The current Bokor in Graydon is his son. The man I dealt with died twenty years ago.”

“He’s a local then. Where is he located?”

Steele glanced between Dannika and Raine. “You are intent on this course of action?”

“Yes,” Dannika said.

“There is an occult shop on the outskirts of Graydon. It’s rundown. You can’t miss it. A shadow pathway will lead you to the outside of the building.”

Colton rolled his shoulders. “I know where the shop is. I will take you.”

Steele grabbed his son’s arm. “Do not negotiate with the Bokor and do not tell him you are a relation of mine. He will know what you are.”

“What aren’t you telling us?” Colton asked.

Steele dropped his hand. “I cannot say anything further. Heed my warning. The Bokor can answer any question, but the price is always too high.”

Dannika’s eyes widened. “Any question? Would he know if my sister is dead?”

Steele took on a pained expression. “Yes. He can call on the spirit world, talk to the dead, but there are no absolutes. Spirits answer on their own schedule and even if she’s passed over, she may not be ready for communion.”

“But there is a chance? He could try,” Dannika said. She looked up at Raine. “We have to try. If there’s any chance of finding my sister, I’m taking it.”

Raine growled. “You will not be trading anything. You can ask the questions, but if he is not forthcoming, you walk away.”

“No,” she said, with black mist swirling behind her green eyes.

Steele held up his hand. “Dannika, please listen to reason. You don’t understand the forces you are dealing with. The dangers of the underworld.”

Dannika paled. “What is the underworld?”

CHAPTER 18



Dannika rubbed her shoulders, as goosebumps formed on her skin. No one spoke. No one moved. The leaves rustled in the wind as branches creaked against one another. Shadows flickered through the window, offset by the brightness of the moon. The entire forest held its breath with her.

“You’re making me nervous,” she said.

Steele turned his head toward the window as an owl hooted in the distance. “The underworld is what we call the dimension that the demons originated from. In some ways, our shadow warrior longs for his home. We rarely tempt them with talk of their home.”

A ripple of darkness surrounded her before she got her own shadow under control. It was more than curious about the underworld and its origins.

“Are you talking about hell?” she asked.

“Not as you think of it. Their realm is not part of ours. It’s a parallel dimension that is only accessible through a portal. One that no longer exists.”

“Did anyone travel to the other dimension?” She couldn’t hide her shadow’s excitement. It bubbled from her skin with bursts of darkness and mist.

“A group of shadow warriors entered the demon dimension, but only one returned. He was so ravaged, he took weeks to recover, and ultimately, he left his clan. No one knows what became of him.”

Dannika missed being able to drink coffee. The dark roast smell helped calm her nerves and fear.

The demon soul inside her purred like a lost kitten returned to its mother. Had the shifters considered the long-term effects of keeping the demons from their home? Had they exchanged one problem for another?

“Tell me about the shadow warrior who returned from the demon dimension. Did he tell you about their home? What it was like?” Dannika asked.

Steele’s eyes narrowed on her. “Your demon is very excited about this topic. Be careful you don’t give him false hope. His home is here now.”

“What does that mean?”

“The portal is closed. The door that connects our world will never reopen. Make sure your demon soul understands that.”

Her shadow warrior growled and subsided, but the adversarial hiss echoing in her head made it clear the topic was far from over.

“Understood. Now tell me about their world.”

“Their world has neither night nor day. Three suns hide behind thick clouds and fog, leaving them in eternal dusk. Perhaps that’s a hell in itself, but we don’t know the reasons behind the evolution of their world.”

“Does direct sunlight hurt them?”

“I don’t know. You can trap a reaper in a light circle, and our historical records indicate the same was true of a demon, but nothing is said about natural sunlight.”

Dannika tapped her cheek. “Our sunlight and theirs might be different, anyway. What about their culture? Do they run in clans or have religious beliefs?”

Steele rubbed his chin. “We have an extensive library devoted to our past. The scrolls from that time are detailed. There are different classes of demons. They migrate in roaming clans and are protective of the few females they have.

Demons fight to the death for mating rights, and only the strongest have their chance with a female.”

“Their chance?”

“Demon females are revered when they are young. With each breeding cycle, they mate with the winner of the fights. If the child is male, he leaves with his father. She only keeps her female children, training them to follow in her footsteps.”

Dannika grunted. “You make it sound like demon females are nothing more than glorified breeders.”

“They are. While they’re treated with respect and dignity in their childbearing years, when they age out, they become the property of the clan. They service the men who aren’t strong enough to procure a mate.”

She put her hand over her mouth. “That’s a horrible life.”

Steele nodded. “It is their culture. They’re more like animals than humans in their need to reproduce and fight. The hunting party saw no religious aspect to their beliefs.”

“And they are immortal?” she asked.

“By our standards, yes. They live thousands of years. The men die in battle and the women of exhaustion.”

Dannika frowned. “Exhaustion?”

“Once past her childbearing years, a female has many males to please. The shadow hunting party noted that a female died less than two years after being handed to the men of the clan.”

Dannika’s stomach rolled. “How long was the hunting party in the demon dimension?”

Steele sighed. “The first generation had no way of knowing time passed differently between our worlds. They were away from the clan for three months, but three years passed in the demon home world.”

“Were the demons all the same? Or were there different species?”

“Though they suspect there may be more, the hunting party cataloged three different species of demon. The largest were designated as soldiers. These soldiers led the incursion into our world. The second species designated are jackals. These demons would run from our warriors, but would attack and feed using cut and run tactics. The last are scavengers, the smallest of the three species. They fed on the dead or dying. There could be more species, but these were the underworld demons that the shadow warriors encountered. Keep in mind they remained in proximity to the portal, waiting for it to reopen.”

Dannika’s heart stuttered. “The portal closed while the warriors were in the demon dimension?”

“Our reports say that the portal was unstable. It opened and closed at uneven intervals. The hunting party could never ascertain the reason behind its existence, what caused it, or what controlled it.”

“You don’t know why they came here?”

Steele shook his head. “There were no shadow warriors prior to the portal opening. No reapers. While humans provide sustenance for demons, the hunting party noted that the demons were as surprised about the portal as we were. That didn’t stop them from taking full advantage of it. Once here our shifter forefathers were forced to become shadow warriors to fight them.”

Her mind raced through scenarios, traveling every thread of intel, retracing events to discern a pattern. A reason for the incursion. “Who was in charge? The soldiers?”

“While there was a hierarchy to the demons, they deferred to someone of power. A king. The hunting party never encountered him, but noticed the communications between clan heads and the castle.”

Her eyes widened. “There was a castle?”

“Their version of one. It was constructed from the dark stone that inhabits their world. Similar to granite, but less reflective.”

Her heart raced, making it difficult to stem her surging emotions. It took her a moment to realize her demon had risen, swaying beneath the confines of her skin, a serpent drunk on a snake charmer's song. "Do the demons speak?"

"They have their own dialect, but are intelligent. They learned our language in a matter of weeks," Steele said.

A black wave rippled along her skin before she locked her demon down. "How did they learn English?"

"They captured a shadow warrior. They tortured him for information on our world, including our language, before they killed him. I guarantee they learned more about us than we did about them. Closing the portal was our only option."

Dannika quelled the involuntary shudder. It shouldn't surprise her, but hearing about the underworld made her blood run cold and while her demon had backed down, she felt its excitement. Its interest. "What do demons eat?"

Steele took a deep breath. "In the demon dimension, the hunting party observed the soldiers feeding on the jackals. They believed the jackals fed on the scavengers. There are likely some lower born demons that the scavengers feed on, as the only other food source was a demon-like rat. Since they're feeding on their own, you can understand their eagerness to invade our world."

"When you say feed, you mean they drink blood. Demon blood," she said.

"Yes, though they preferred human blood. Humans fear death more than demons do. They became addicted to the adrenaline rush a human death provided."

She scratched her forehead. "You don't know how the portal opened or what controlled it, but it had a fixed location. One that the hunting party stayed close to."

"It was located in a cave, at the base of the mountain," Steele said.

"Raine told me about the war. That the demons came through the portal and began attacking the humans and killing the shifters."

Steele grunted. “Killing us would’ve been a mercy. Demon venom had a different effect on us than it did the humans. Those that couldn’t purge the venom lost their animal. They drank the blood of humans, became rabid insane versions of their former life. It was a cruel end to the pillars of the shifter community.”

“They were the first reapers?” Dannika asked.

Steele shook his head. “The infected shifters had no demon soul and no animal. Nothing to balance the madness. Reapers are capable of cohesive thinking, provided they’re not starving. The infected had no reason. There was only hunger, a gluttonous need to kill and feed.”

Dannika recalled the last movie she had watched with Carmen. She couldn’t remember the name, but it revolved around a zombie apocalypse. They had laughed at the cheesy effects and the ridiculous idea of undead creatures preying on the living. Now she couldn’t help but wonder if every fairy tale, every nightmare, started with a spark of truth.

“That’s when you contacted a Bokor. He suggested the merge between the shifters and the demon souls.”

“It became a blessing and a curse. At first, only selected unmated shifters merged with the demon souls and acquired the shadow warrior skills. Soon the founders realized that to win, every shifter would need to accept the shadow shifter way of life.”

“And the women agreed with the merge?” Dannika asked.

Steele’s eyes flickered with black smoke before he rubbed them with his fingers. “The female shifters were as aggressive and intelligent as their male counterparts. They fought alongside their mates to save the next generation.”

She couldn’t imagine the determination it took to accept the demon souls. Women and men united to save their children and humanity. “Then they died.”

“After winning the war and closing the portal, the women became ill. They died off one by one, leaving us cursed and alone.”

They were victims, but the mating habits of the shadow shifter world were atrocious. There was no circumstance that made it acceptable. “Then you turned to the humans.”

Steele took a deep breath. “Our cats needed a female. The men attempted to find mates in the human world. Eventually, they did.”

Her stomach flipped. “What happened?”

Steele picked at the armrest of his chair. “It took time to woo the women. They instinctively see the predator in us, but eventually a few shadows found happiness, and male children were born to us. That’s when we realized the full extent of the curse.”

She frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“The human women die. One way or another, we kill them.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “How?”

CHAPTER 19



Dannika wrapped her arms around herself as her shadow reached for Raine. The moment they connected, warmth seeped into her skin. Her soul. Despite his anger and the flicker of insecurity her revelation about Colton had caused, his instinct to protect her hadn't wavered. Even if she rejected him, Raine would still die for her.

Steele glanced at her with sad eyes. His hesitancy to answer created a chill in her heart. "The men tried to take human women as mates. Those first years went well, and they believed they had found a suitable solution. They lived with their women and visited the clan, unbeknown to their wives."

"Lying to their wife isn't ideal, but as long as they were happy."

Steele shook his head. "The women showed signs of insanity after prolonged exposure to us. Our demon affects the surrounding humans. It's not their fault. It's mother nature warning them we are a danger to them. You have already experienced the malevolence of the human world."

The morning she'd returned to the shelter was forever etched in her mind. Margo had been hostile, and the patrons she'd considered friends and decent people had been adversarial and mean. She had only returned for a couple of hours. What would have happened after months of exposure?

"I have, but the men would never hurt their wives. Would they?"

“No, but the demon would. Humans are food to the demon race. In time, the women saw us for what we are. They see the demon, and it drives them to insanity. It takes years, but the result is the same.”

“What happened to them?” she asked.

Steele rubbed his chin with his forefingers. “There is a scroll in our archive. It tells a story of the cougar shadow shifter who entered the human world and found a mate. Two years later, his child was born. He was happy. Content. He visited the shadow clan on the weekends when his mate visited her family. This reprieve extended their cohabitation. Their child was three years old when his mate showed signs of mental instability.”

Dannika swallowed hard. “What kind of instability?”

“She began taunting her shadow mate, cutting her wrists, forcing him to save her. This happened several times before she threatened to kill their child.”

Dannika put her hand to her mouth. “Dear God. What happened?”

“A shadow will do anything to protect his child. He killed his mate and returned to the shadow clan. As this wasn’t an isolated incident, mating protocols were put in place. Never stay with a woman for more than four years. Now, it’s been reduced to three.”

“Why? Are the women showing signs of instability earlier?”

Steele’s eyes flickered into the shadows of the room. “No. Once the shadows began to turn reaper, the mates and children were in danger. Reapers thrive on fear and pain. They incur an incredible high when they kill the bride of a former friend, destroying remnants of their former life.”

Dannika hissed. “I never considered that fact. The reapers were once your friends. Family. You know all of them.”

“Most of them. Lately, many have transitioned directly to reaper. This never happened in our past, and we aren’t sure what instigated the change.”

Dannika's eyes narrowed. "Are the reapers taking the victims before they transition?"

"No. We have had members survive a transition, but immediately kill a human. It's like the drive for human blood outweighs their reasoning. I can't explain it."

Dannika looked at the floor, unable to meet Steele's eyes. The picture he painted was too horrible to imagine. Her analytical brain could understand their mating protocols, but the woman in her could never condone it. "So your mating habits are the same as the wolves."

"Yes. We mate a female in the human world. Date them, possibly marry them. Six months after the child is born, we fake ours and the child's death."

Her hands fisted at her sides. "Those women. It's not fair."

"No, it's not." While his eyes held remorse, there was a hardness to them. He believed their ways were just under the circumstances. If he wasn't presented with a viable alternative, shadow mating practices would remain.

"I'm going to find another way. This can't continue." Her heart broke for those women, for the devastation losing their family must have caused. How many of those women ended up at the shelter?

Steele arched his eyebrow. "Why do you think your survival is so important? If you live, if you can bear shadow children, then you may produce a female child. Your existence represents the possibility of a new way of life."

Dannika shivered. "Geez, no pressure." She walked away from Raine, needing the cold. "I have to learn to be a shadow shifter before I can consider anything more."

The tension in the room was palpable. Metal cords wrapped around her neck, threatening to extinguish her existence. She inhaled to ease the lack of breath in her chest. The memories of her past resurfaced, of feeling trapped by circumstances beyond her control. The world turned on her at every step, never allowing her a foothold.

Then Raine's hands were on either side of her face. "Breathe, Dannika. You're having a panic attack."

For a moment, she was that little girl again, trapped in the closet while her world collapsed, listening to the screams, then dreading the silence that signaled her foster brother's death. She had failed her family time and time again. How could this be any different?

Raine's lips touched hers, and the dark thoughts evaporated. Heat coiled in her abdomen as lust raced through her veins. She clutched his shoulders, trying to get closer to the haven of his body before she remembered they weren't alone.

"Sorry. I haven't had an episode like that for years."

Raine touched his forehead to hers. "We both know why you reacted to Steele's comment that way. You are reeling from the reality of being the only female shadow, our last hope for the evolution of our species. I wish I could reassure you, but there is nothing I can say that alters the truth."

Dannika hated he was right, but Raine was also looking for reassurance that he was the man she chose. She wanted to give it to him, to tell them that her body came alive for him and him alone. While that was true, her connection to Colton was growing.

She turned to Steele, needing a distraction. "If you were all shadows, what sparked the reapers' existence? Who made the first kill?"

CHAPTER 20



Dannika turned toward Colton as he approached the door. “You don’t want to tell me?”

“I do. I think you should know everything about us and our history. Let’s go outside. My animal is feeling cagey. We don’t spend a lot of time inside our homes.”

Raine took her hand and led her outside onto the wide veranda.

The shadows cast by the branches blocking the moonlight caressed Raine’s skin, making him appear ethereal. She didn’t fight the urge to run her fingers over his cheek. A jolt of electric fire raced through her blood and pooled in her core.

She pulled her hand away, not wanting to be distracted by her sexy shadow mate. “Tell me about the first reaper.”

Steele had remained inside the house. Colton reached up and grabbed a branch, leaning against it as he gazed longingly at the forest. “It was fifty years after the war. Many shadows had taken mates and lost them. The mating protocols were in place and, for the most part, the shadow shifters were flourishing.”

“Something changed,” Dannika said.

“His name was Mikail. When his son was in his tenth year, Mikail went into a form of depression. We have no purpose. We existed and had children, but we had no mate and no destiny. The Bokor had warned us not to drink human blood. That we would become no better than the infected. He wasn’t wrong, but he glossed over the worst part.”

She swallowed hard. “What?”

“Mikail was desperate to feel... anything. The week before he turned, he killed two dozen animals. He searched for something to make him feel alive. When it didn’t work, he killed a human,” Colton said.

“And he turned reaper,” she whispered.

“The clan didn’t understand what a reaper was. Mikail returned excited and revived. He admitted to killing dozens of animals and the clan assumed it caused the red eyes. They learned the truth when he killed his son.”

Dannika sucked in a breath. “I thought reapers couldn’t drink from shadows.”

Colton dropped his hand from the branch. “His son was only ten. He was born human. His demon had yet to emerge.”

Dannika blinked. “But the sanctuary protects the children.”

“We had no sanctuary. No need to protect the children from our own clan members.”

“What happened to Mikail?” she whispered.

“The clan leader needed to know what happened to Mikail. He imprisoned him until he learned the truth. Mikail’s animal died when he killed the human and his shadow gifts became stronger, which is how he escaped.”

“How did he escape?” Dannika asked.

“Mikail’s shadow ability was the power of suggestion. He influenced a fledgling that wandered too close to his cell. He killed the youngling and escaped.”

Dannika glanced at Raine. “The power of suggestion. The same power you have.”

She tried to contain her fear, but the idea of a reaper with the power to control those around him was a nightmare beyond anything she had imagined.

“As a shadow, it’s one of the most coveted abilities, but if I turn reaper, it is a curse beyond any other. The clans would

have no choice but to destroy me, regardless of the casualties. This power cannot fall into reaper hands.”

Her eyes widened. “Mikail used his power to influence shadows, making them turn reaper.”

Raine nodded. “The older the shadow, the less likely he succumbs to suggestion, but the young had no mates and were untrained in avoiding reaper lures. Mikail built an army of reapers. They were stronger and faster than us. Humans were being slaughtered at an alarming rate. That’s when the leaders realized the reapers weren’t aging. A new war had started, and the reapers were winning.”

She glanced between the men, the pain of recalling those dark days etched on their faces. “What happened?”

“The more the reapers fed, the stronger they became. They healed faster and didn’t die unless they were beheaded. Despite their smaller numbers, we racked up body counts while they increased their numbers. As more of us died, more shadows lost hope and turned reaper.”

Dannika shook her head. “A Catch-22 kind of thing.”

“Yes.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What did the shadows do? Obviously, they didn’t lose.”

Raine nodded. “The founders went to a resident priestess. A deal was struck, and a sacrifice made.”

“What kind of sacrifice?” she asked.

“We don’t know. The founders didn’t record it in the scrolls, and never passed on the information. We only know what happened afterward.”

Dannika snuggled against him, allowing the warmth of his body to infuse hers. “What happened afterward?”

“The priestess entered the underworld at great peril to herself. She retrieved a mineral from the demon home world. We call it blessed steel.”

Dannika ran her finger over the hilt of Raine's reaper blade. He'd strapped the leather sheath to his belt, allowing the runes carved into the handle to act as an adornment, beautiful and deadly.

"The reaper blades. That's what they're made of."

"Yes. While a weapons master can create the daggers, and regift existing blades when called to the next generation, only a specialist can infuse a new blade with blessed steel, an extension of the original artifact retrieved from the underworld."

Dannika swallowed hard. "The priestess found something in their world that harms them and brought it back. What happened to her after?"

Raine took Dannika's other hand, placing it over his heart. "There's no record of what happened in the demon dimension, but she was never the same. Her husband had to care for her. Once she returned to her home, she continued to be a wife and mother, but she never left its walls again."

Her fingers slipped from Raine's reaper blade. "Where is the artifact now?"

"They split the mineral into three factions, one for each of the remaining shadow clans. The chalice that held the mineral was too dangerous to stay with any clan. The priestess kept it."

"Why?"

Raine took a deep breath. "The priestess used the chalice to create the portal between the human and the demon world. She feared in the wrong hands, they could reopen it."

Her heart stuttered as her demon purred in her mind. "Where is the chalice?"

CHAPTER 21



Raine fought the instinct to comfort his mate. He wanted Dannika to know about their history. She needed to, but when their shadows touched, her pain and compassion filtered through the bond, breaking his heart.

“We don’t know. The priestess hid it after she returned from the demon realm, and we never saw it again.”

Dannika ran her fingers along the deck railing, caressing the long thick scratches that were etched into the wood. The breeze caught the edges of her silky hair. It waffled in the air, accenting her beauty. “Are reaper blades the only thing that kills them?”

Colton nodded. “Except for removing their head, blessed steel is our only weapon. Provided we stabbed them in the heart, it impairs their ability to regenerate. Since they have no animal to aid them, they die.”

Dannika looked up. “A reaper blade won’t work on a shadow shifter?”

“No. Our animal has healing abilities. We can regenerate, provided the damage isn’t too severe. Again, beheading works as effectively on us as it does in the reapers.”

“Noted. You don’t know where the priestess got this artifact?” Dannika asked.

Colton glanced through the window at Steele, motioning his father to join them on the deck. “The scrolls don’t mention where she procured the artifact, only that she was severely traumatized and aged years in a short time. While time passes

differently in the demon realm, the priestess appeared to age a decade in the month she was gone.”

Steele joined them on the deck.

Dannika met his sad eyes. “That same artifact blesses all reaper blades? How is that possible?”

“A specialist is born to each clan with the ability to transfuse a specially crafted blade with its power. As you know, Lorne was that specialist. With him dead, Maddock will look to the cougar clan for assistance,” Raine said.

Steele hissed. “Lorne is dead? Maddock didn’t inform me he was a casualty of the reaper incursion.”

Dannika huffed. “I’m not surprised. Maddock needs you just as much as you need him. He wouldn’t want you to suspect you’re on even ground.”

Steele scratched his chin. “Perhaps I made a hasty decision when agreeing to Maddock’s terms.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Dannika said.

Raine grunted. “Steele was doing what he thought best. It’s obvious he has the clan’s best interest at heart. He would step down to ensure the shadow shifters survive. Maddock is using the war to gain power.”

“Are you in contact with the current priestess?” Dannika asked Steele.

“No. The priestesses haven’t interacted with the shadows shifters in centuries. The Bokor and shadow clans had an amicable relationship until twenty years ago.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you going to enlighten us about what severed that relationship?”

Steele’s eyes flickered. “No. It’s personal and has no relevance to this.”

Dannika turned to Raine. “We need to see the Bokor. Hopefully, he isn’t holding a grudge against us, especially if we say we’re from the wolf clan.”

Steele growled. “Are you sure you wish to pursue this? The danger is greater than you realize, regardless of my history.”

“Yes,” she said.

Steele slammed his hand down on the rail. A wisp of black smoke rolled off his back before receding. “He will not help you without an offering.”

Her brow furrowed. “What do we offer? What will he want?”

“I don’t know, but his advice comes at a price. One most people aren’t willing to pay.”

Steele leaned against the rail, tilting his face to the breeze. “Being indebted to a Bokor is no joke. Fifty years ago, a member of the bear clan went to them for help. His son went missing, and he was desperate to find him. The Bokor gave the bear the reaper camp’s location in exchange for his demon soul. The bear retrieved his son and brought him back to the clan.”

Ice formed in Dannika’s veins. The silence stretched and the whistling breeze reminded her of the music that played in that zombie horror movie. “What happened?”

“The son recovered, and the bear believed he’d made the right choice, but years later that same Bokor ran into some financial difficulty, so he used the bear to steal and frame his enemies. Even when he was rich and powerful, it wasn’t enough. After years of misuse, forced to be the Bokor’s puppet, the bear broke their bond the only way possible: he killed the Bokor and drank his blood. He then returned to the bear clan and murdered his own son.”

Dannika put her hand over her mouth. “That’s awful.”

“It is. The point is that the bear’s fate was worse than if his son had died by reaper hands.”

“How do we ensure we don’t end up like that bear?” she asked.

Steele's eyes flickered with black flames. His voice lowered, signifying his alpha was close. "Get the terms of your arrangement upfront. Do not agree unless you are sure what you have agreed to."

She clutched the rail. "Or..."

"The Bokor will enslave your shadow spirit."

Dannika frowned. "I don't understand what that means. How?"

"A Bokor's power resides in the spirit world. Both the demon and human world are connected to it. We have theorized that the portal uses this segue to connect our worlds. If a Bokor owns your shadow soul, he can control it for as long as he is alive, and if you kill him, you turn reaper."

She frowned. "Wouldn't the Bokor realize controlling a shadow shifter would end in his death?"

Steele nodded. "He knows."

"Then why would he control us?"

Steele glanced out of the forest. "Some wouldn't. But a Bokor is a man. A human. For some, that power corrupts."

His voice had a wistful tone as if he were speaking from experience. A personal loss to the temptation of power.

She ran her fingers over the rail. "It's like asking an alcoholic not to take another drink. Their power is addictive."

Steele nodded.

"Is there any way to tell if a Bokor is corrupted by his power?"

"His power allows him to enter a world we cannot. The spirit world. A purgatory that intersects our world and theirs. We have no way to confirm he will uphold his end of a deal. Just don't offer your demon soul."

"I won't."

Steele frowned. "Is there any way I can dissuade you from this course of action?"

Black smoke swirled in her eyes. “No. I’m going.”

Raine put his hand on her back. Any risk, he would take it. For her. “I’m going with you.”

Her eyes met his with answering heat. Love welled in her eyes. The insecurity that he might have turned her away melted his heart. His brave warrior woman wasn’t as tough as she led the world to believe.

Colton met his father’s angry eyes. “I am going as well.”

Black mist swirled around Dannika, blending into the shadows created by the tree. Raine’s shadow enveloped her, cocooning her in his embrace before they entered the dark pathway.

CHAPTER 22



Dannika's human form ripped from the shadow pathway. She stumbled forward as Raine caught her. Her stomach rolled before she got herself under control.

"That wasn't our best landing."

Raine pointed at the occult shop. They stood in a shadow cast off by the building, near a dark corner beside a grungy brick wall.

"There's a ward around the store and I didn't see it until it was too late. Someone diverted us. I'm guessing we tripped some kind of alarm. The Bokor knows we are here."

Colton formed behind Dannika. "That was a surprise."

Raine nodded. "Have you run into this kind of security before?"

"No, but Steele warned me that the Bokor takes measures against the reapers. We can only approach in human form."

Colton and Dannika followed Raine through the entrance. The door chimed as the smell of burning sage waffled in the air.

The Bokor had covered the walls in eclectic African art. Bright colors swirled in beautiful patterns of abstract dancers and unusual feasts. Tinted windows and dark lighting made it difficult to distinguish between one painting to the next.

Wooden shelves were packed with occult items ranging from hand-carved bowls and boxes to glass jars with handwritten labels. Though she couldn't read the writing, the

smells emitted as she approached the jars said she didn't want to. The bins with chicken feet and dried pigs' ears made her clear her throat.

A full-length mirror was mounted on the wall beside a rack of multicolored cloth ponchos. The dashikis were made of tightly woven high-quality fabric, but the shoulders remained dusty.

Dannika clutched the back of Raine's shirt.

"This place looks popular," she said.

Raine ran a finger over one of the packed shelves. Dust puffed in the air as he wiped his finger on his jeans. "He doesn't appear to have a booming business."

Laughter from a TV show clicked off before a short man in a bright orange robe exited the adjacent room. His yellow teeth accented his dark skin when he sneered. "Get out. I don't serve your kind."

His Haitian accent was perceptible, but Americanised.

Dannika stepped out from behind Raine. "Please, we mean you no harm. We need help and I'm willing to barter for it. We want to know if we can safely rehabilitate a reaper. Cure his craving for human blood. Return his mortality."

The Bokor sniffed the air before his eyes narrowed on her. "You are one of them. The darkness surrounds you, but females do not exist in the shadows."

Dannika wet her lips. "I'm the first to survive the transition."

His eyes widened before he smiled. "That is unusual. I didn't think that was possible." He looked her over slowly, then held out his hand. "My name is Hakim. And you are?"

She shook his hand. "My name is Dannika." She motioned to the men. "This is Raine and Colton."

Hakim's finger trailed over her hand, making her demon recoil. It took all her willpower not to shiver.

“I admit, you interest me. I am unsure of your energy, though you travel with the cougar and the wolf,” Hakim said, releasing her hand.

She wanted to ask him how he knew which animal the shadows shifted into, but Steele’s warning remained forefront in her mind. Her demon’s uneasiness made her equally wary. It receded to a dark place within her, shuddering from Hakim’s touch. “Will you help us?”

His smile was reminiscent of a snake. “For a price. One to be paid at a later date.”

Raine shook his head. “We will negotiate, but we must determine the method of payment or we walk.”

Hakim laughed. “I wondered which one of you would approach me. You are free to go, but I will tell you this. If you do nothing, you will lose the war.”

Dannika’s heart fluttered. Hakim didn’t lie. His confidence in his power was absolute. It rolled off him in waves, making her wonder if they should heed Steele’s warning and walk away from the strange Bokor. “How do you know?”

Hakim grabbed a black candle from a store shelf and put it on the counter before lighting it. “A Bokor can enter the spirit world. We do this to ensure a balance is being maintained. The spirit world sees all, not just the secrets confined to this one. The balance of power has shifted, and it’s not in your favor.”

Raine grunted. “Typical cryptic bullshit. This is useless. A ten-dollar charlatan could give us more useful information. Steele warned us he would be of no help.”

Hakim hissed. His pupils reflected the candlelight, making him appear more demon than man. “That traitor still lives?”

Raine nodded. “He is the current leader of the cougar clan. I went to him for information, and he warned me not to come here. I prefer to give a man the benefit of the doubt, but it appears he was correct. Let’s go.”

He put his arm around Dannika.

Hakim's eyes bulged before he slammed his hand on the counter. "Wait. I will give you this insight for free. The reaper king has gained the knowledge to eradicate the shadow clans. He is gathering the elements he needs as we speak."

Raine stepped forward. "The reaper king?"

Hakim nodded. "That is Killian's plan. If he is successful in his mission to call the shadow shifters and turn them reaper, then he will become the king of all."

Dannika sucked in a breath. "We can't let that happen. He would massacre the human population, then enslave it."

The Bokor's eyes twinkled, his amusement childlike and scary. "Yes. That is his goal."

Though Dannika's demon huddled in the recesses of her heart, she understood the emotion for what it was: fear.

"Why would you want that?" she asked. "If he wins, then you too will be enslaved."

Hakim's eyes narrowed on Colton. "Your family destroyed the only thing that mattered to me. The shadow shifters are a disease, and they will not be able to moderate their hunger. They will slaughter humanity and starve themselves to death. It will cleanse the earth. The end of humanity will come to pass, one way or another. If it happens sooner, then I will be around to see it."

Dannika shivered because he believed every word he said. Whether it was true or not was an entirely different matter. "You hate the shadow shifters, but you know they protect humanity."

Hakim clutched the gold medallion around his neck. "They did not protect my family. My daughter died because of the shadows."

Her heart stuttered. "They killed her? Was it reapers?"

Hakim's eyes bored into Colton. "No. She mated with a shadow shifter, even knowing what he was. When he left, taking their child, she killed herself. Though she had the

means to protect herself from the reapers, Steele allowed her mate to return to the cougar clan.”

Dannika swallowed hard. “I’m sorry. We are trying to change the shadow mating habits. It’s an atrocity.”

Colton’s face hardened. “Who was the shadow that mated with your daughter?”

Hakim waved his hand through the smoke from the candle. “It doesn’t matter. That time has passed. My daughter resides in the spirit world. I wait for the chance to join her.”

Colton put his hand on the counter. His shadow melded with the candle before he ripped his hand away with a hiss. “Do you know who your daughter’s shadow mate was?”

Hakim’s dark eyes met Colton’s. “Oh yes, and I will see to his destruction one day.” He blew out the candle. “But not today.”

Dannika swallowed the lump in her throat. “Then you have a grandson. Don’t you care what happens to him?”

Hakim paused before he spoke. “I will have nothing to do with him as he is a shadow, despite my daughter’s pleading when I communicate with her.” His eyes flicked to Colton. “As a consensus to my daughter, I will give you one chance to save humanity. Agree to my terms or leave.”

CHAPTER 23



Dannika's heart thumped in tune with the African drums playing in the background. The music that was soothing when she'd arrived at the shop now thundered in her ears.

"Don't do this," Dannika pleaded.

Hakim's face was a mask of injustice and hatred. "You will pay the toll or your species shall perish. Those are your only options."

"How do we know you would keep your word?" she asked.

Hakim grabbed a leather-bound dagger from under the counter. "You can sense lies. You know what I say is true."

Raine shook his head. "We know you think you believe the truth. That doesn't necessarily make it so."

"I have traveled to the spirit world. The balance of power has shifted in favor of the reapers. You have already noticed the differences, or you would not be here. Agree to my terms or leave."

Raine pulled Dannika towards him when she was about to speak. "We can't trust him. He will demand your demon soul."

Hakim laughed. "Is that what Steele told you?"

Dannika nodded.

Hakim shook his head. "Fine. I will not take your demon soul. I omit it from this contract. In fact, I do not care which

one of you pays the toll.”

Dannika clutched Raine’s arms. “We need this information. I also need to know about my sister.”

“You have a sister? Another female shadow?” Hakim’s excitement spilled over like a child with a new toy.

“I don’t know. I found out I had a sister, but there’s a possibility she died when she was a baby.”

Hakim put his hands in the air, closing his eyes as he chanted words Dannika didn’t understand. His eyes snapped open when he lowered his arms. “You have a very specific energy about you. I have not sensed this in my travels to the spirit world. That does not guarantee she hasn’t left the human one. Spirits take time to pass through purgatory. I give you this information for free, as I cannot give you a definitive answer.”

“Thank you. Do you have a way to locate her if she’s alive?”

The Bokor grabbed a wooden bowl from a cabinet beneath the counter, with symbols carved around its base. “Do you have an item that belongs to her?”

“No.”

He placed the bowl on the counter. “I require a personal item to make a connection. You may return to me when you have an article of hers, provided you don’t die in the upcoming war.”

Raine touched her cheek. “This is a bad idea, Dannika.”

Hakim grabbed some herbs from an unmarked jar sitting on a store shelf. “I am losing patience. Leave my shop or I will ban you. Trust me, I have the means.”

Colton rubbed his neck. “I will make the deal.”

Dannika grabbed Colton’s hand. “This was my decision.”

Raine growled.

Hakim removed Dannika’s hand from Colton’s. “My deal is with the cougar.”

His smile raised the hairs on Dannika's skin.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

Hakim grabbed various jars from his shelves before putting pinches of each in the carved bowl. "You will need a reaper sedative."

Colton's eyebrows arched. "Even blessed steel doesn't render a reaper unconscious. How does the sedative work?"

Hakim ground the ingredients in the mortar bowl using a thick, rounded pestle. "I will give you the means to subdue a reaper for a short time. It may not render them unconscious, but it will render them immobile."

Dannika glanced at the powder inside the bowl. "How does a mixture of herbs affect a reaper?"

Hakim's eyes met hers. "This affects anything with a demon soul. Do not let it touch your skin."

Raine shook his head. "Reapers heal even faster than we do. How will this incapacitate them?"

The Bokor grabbed a small brown bottle and extracted the liquid with an eyedropper. "This potion has many components that effect the shadow soul and the human body. Be warned. For this to work on a reaper, the poison is potent. It will kill a human."

"No poison works on a shadow shifter, reaper are not."

Hakim continued to mix the ingredients in the bowl. "This will."

Dannika sniffed the sweet-smelling herbs. "What's in it?"

Hakim shook his head. "There is no point in giving you the recipe. You cannot re-create it. Only the blood of a Bokor or priestess will render a shadow immobile."

He grabbed a dagger from the counter before slicing his hand. He squeezed his fingers into a fist as blood dripped into the bowl. It sizzled as steam rose into the air.

Raine's eyes narrowed. "A thermogenic reaction? How does it work?"

The Bokor smiled. "Giving a reaper power-infused blood creates a temporary high, but when it's not followed by death, the demon soul will rage. My blood will consume his hunger, making him lethargic for a time. His aggression will be two-fold when the euphoria passes. I recommend you not use this on the same subject twice."

Colton stared at the bowl for a long time before he spoke. "You aren't interested in Dannika or Raine. You wanted me to agree to this deal. Do you seek my death? I will offer it to save my clan. To save Dannika."

"No!" Dannika hissed.

Raine grabbed Colton's arm. "This isn't the way to unite the clans."

Hakim wrapped his bloody hand in an orange cloth. "I have need of you and it does not require your death. One day, you shall do my bidding. You will complete a task and fulfil our agreement. If you do not, your animal will die and you will turn reaper."

Dannika sucked in a breath. "You took his animal as payment?"

Hakim shook his head. "I have taken nothing. Provided Colton completes the task I require of him, he will stay as he is."

Her eyes narrowed on the Bokor's hand. The sweet smell of blood permeated the air. "Do you know what the task is?"

Darkness crept to the edge of her vision as Hakim backed away from her. "No. It is yet to be determined."

He turned and opened a velvet box on a shelf behind the counter before grabbing several syringes from inside.

Colton arched an eyebrow. "That's a modern delivery system."

Hakim inserted a needle into the bowl, sucking the liquid into the syringe before replacing the cap. He repeated the process six times, then put the syringes into a leather bag with a long strap.

He placed the pouch on the counter. “Colton, you must cut your hand and make a blood pact, or the sedative will not leave this store.”

Colton took the dagger and cut his hand, then held it up to the Bokor. “I don’t go back on my word.”

Hakim unwrapped his bloody hand and grasped Colton’s. “You owe me a task of my choosing. You will obey, or your animal dies.”

Colton nodded. “I will not hurt Dannika.”

“No, you will not.” Hakim released Colton’s hand and passed Dannika the leather pouch. “Our deal is complete. You can sedate your reaper now. I hope it gives you what you need. Colton has paid a very high price.”

Dannika’s eyes narrowed on Hakim. “I thought you didn’t know what task you wanted?”

“I don’t. The stars have not aligned yet. This is not his time.” He waved his hand. “You have a world to save first. I suggest you get at it.”

Dannika glanced between the men. “How do we revert a reaper?”

“You must return them to their mortal form. Though they will remain reaper, with no animal form, they can eat as shadows, age, and die,” Hakim said.

She leaned forward. “How?”

Hakim’s eyes twinkled in the unnatural light. “Reapers result from gluttony. Simply do the opposite to reverse the condition.”

Dannika swallowed hard. “We have to starve them.” Could she inflict that kind of torture on another living being? Could she live with the deaths if she was wrong? If she inflicted this kind of pain, was she any better than a reaper?

CHAPTER 24



Dannika exited Hakim's occult shop with Colton and Raine. The silence was oppressive as they made their way to the edge of the brick building, where the shadows brought comfort and the means of escape.

"That wasn't what I expected."

Raine ran his hand through his hair. "My demon is excited. It's looking forward to a fight. My wolf is uneasy."

Dannika glanced at the blue and orange paint peeling from the building. "Gluttony. Starvation. Why does this remind me of the Ten Commandments?"

"These are not the demons of our hell. They're from a different world, but the means to win this war is reaching biblical proportions," Raine said.

Dannika nibbled on her thumbnail. "Hakim said a reaper has never been reverted before."

Raine nodded. "I'm not surprised. I never conceived such a thing would be possible."

Colton shrugged. "It may not be. The process may kill him. I doubt this was tried in the past."

Raine glanced at the shop. "I'm eager to find out."

"As am I," Colton said.

"If they could be vindicated, it will change everything," Raine said wistfully.

“I agree. How are we going to trap one? I have always had a kill now, ask questions later kind of motto,” Colton said.

Dannika tapped her finger on her lip. “We need a remote area to lure the reaper. Somewhere where we won’t be interrupted.”

Raine glanced toward the city. “The park is remote and frequented by the reapers at night. The homeless make excellent victims.”

Dannika’s shoulders slumped. “There were many transient people at the shelter. I had assumed they’d moved on to a new city. Found a home or a new shelter. How many of them disappeared in the park?”

Raine rubbed her back. “Your compassion is a gift, but it won’t be an asset in this endeavor. Starving a reaper will not be pretty. You have to prepare yourself for the consequences. The reaper may die.”

Her back stiffened. “You’re right. I need to get my head in the game. Once we pick a location, I will step into a shadow pathway.” Her eyes flicked up when Raine growled. “I won’t leave, just alert them to my presence. Hopefully, the reapers are still looking for me.”

“I will not use you as bait,” Raine snapped.

The hairs on her skin raised. “Thankfully, this isn’t your decision.”

Black smoke swirled off Raine’s shoulders before Colton chuckled.

“While I find your conversation amusing, perhaps you could save the foreplay for later,” he said, before he winked at Dannika.

Raine’s eyes narrowed on Colton. “You keep this up, and I’m going to skin you and mount your carcass on my wall.”

Colton’s eyes flickered. “I would like to see you try.”

Dannika stepped between the men, putting her hand on each of their chests. “Stop it now. You’re both acting like teenagers. Focus on the reaper or I’ll go after him alone.”

Both men backed away.

“No,” Colton said.

“Then get your heads out of your asses and help me,” she snapped.

Colton’s lips twitched. “I love her warm and fuzzy side.”

Dannika gave him the finger but cracked a smile. “We ready to do this now?”

Raine nodded. “There are lampposts along the walkway. I recommend we jump to a location deep within the park. If we don’t find any reapers lurking, we can work our way toward the exit.”

Dannika took Raine’s hand. “I’ll step in and out of the shadows, creating a ripple in the stream. You and Colton can hide in the pathway. When the reaper comes for me, slip behind him and inject him with the serum. I’m not looking forward to getting bitten again, so I would appreciate you being quick about it.”

Raine’s eyes flickered with blue fire. “I will not let you down.”

Dannika allowed Raine’s shadow to envelop her as they raced through the dark pathway. The wrenching of bone and flayed skin had become an expected, even welcome pain. One she could become addicted to. This time, Raine controlled their speed and ascent. They glided from the darkness, coalescing in the shadow of an old lamppost.

The cultured bushes and large evergreens shimmered in the breeze as the light reflected the rustling leaves. The echo of the night created a deadly lullaby. Nothing moved in the darkness, danger hung on every breath.

She glanced in every direction. Though her eyesight was impeccable at night thanks to her shadow, she couldn’t detect anything out of the ordinary. Still, her wolf paced within the confines of her skin, growling its uneasiness. “Should we move closer to the exit?”

Colton dissolved, moving into the shadows.

Raine followed him. “Stand at the edge of the shadow. Allow your essence to seep in, but don’t leave the park. If a reaper is close, he won’t be able to ignore your lure.”

He dissolved into the night, but she could feel him. His hunger. His anger. His lust. He hated what they were doing, using her as bait, but he would go against his protective instincts for her.

Dannika placed a foot inside the dark pathway. It reached up her leg, with tendrils of blackness that wrapped around her limb. Her sneaker disappeared as the pull of the shadows increased, lulling her into a false sense of security. That was the shadows. They embraced you like a loving mother, making you believe nothing could touch you, until ripping you apart from the inside out.

She teetered the precipice of oblivion. The instinct to run through the shadows like a fish through a rushing stream seeped into her adrenaline-laced blood. The pain of holding herself in a partially corporeal form took its toll. She hissed, moving further into the shadows.

Though she couldn’t see him, Raine’s molecules whispered along her skin. She closed her eyes and imagined they were alone and in each other’s arms, a decadent fantasy to keep her grounded and in control; a prize if they were successful in their hunt.

“Do you think the Bokor tricked us? I mean, why would he? He hates them. I guess he hates us too.” She was aware she was talking to herself. The men could hear her, but they couldn’t answer her from the shadows.

Colton emerged from the mouth of the shadow. “I believe the Bokor wants something specific from me.”

Dannika nodded. “Me too. Steele is going to freak out when he discovers your deal with Hakim.”

Colton shook his head. “Don’t tell him. This is my decision. Whatever the consequences are, I will pay them. If there’s a way to revert the reapers, then my death is worth the price.”

Dannika stepped from the shadows. “No, it’s not.”

Raine emerged behind her. “I hate to admit this, but Colton is right. This opportunity is unprecedented. If we could bring the reapers back, it would change everything.”

Dannika glanced between the men. “How?”

Colton took a deep breath. “No reapers means no new attacks. No unsanctioned transitions. The shadows wouldn’t turn if there was no reaper clan to turn to. Feeding on a human would mean solitude. Even reapers need a clan.”

Growls echoed in the night.

Dannika turned, looking towards the dark forest.

“A reaper,” she whispered.

Colton and Raine dissolved into the shadows without a word.

She swallowed her fear and excitement, putting her hand to the edge of her mouth. “Simon says come out of the dark.”

He did as she asked, his red eyes and black leather jacket identical to the day they met. “I was hoping I would see you again.”

Her heart stuttered. This wasn’t any reaper. This was the one who attacked her at the shelter. The man that took her human life.

The one reaper she wanted to kill.

CHAPTER 25



A drenaline-laced blood raced through her veins. Her wolf and her shadow bucked at the constraints, attempting to break free. Raine and Colton were counting on her, so she plastered a confused look on her face, sniffing the air as if she were trying to discern if her attacker was alone.

“I assure you, the feeling isn’t mutual. You ruined my life.”

The reaper glanced around. “I wasn’t supposed to bite you, but your transition has redeemed me in the eyes of my leader.”

She waved her hand. “Whatever. I’m of no use to you now. Move along before my friends arrive.”

The reaper’s eyes sparked with red fire. “Human friends?”

She put her hand on her hip, rolling her eyes. “None of your business. Screw off.”

He took several steps toward her. “Why are you alone, little girl? Where is your mentor?”

“Raine is not my mentor. God, I hate that word. He will be back soon though, so I suggest you run back to the pit that spawned you.”

The reaper smiled. “No, I don’t think so. The king has many of his subjects looking for you. He will reward me for returning his prize.”

Dannika doubled over when she laughed, her movements loud and exaggerated. “Are you kidding me right now? The king? Killian needs to be more inventive with his delusions of

grandeur.” She waved her hand as if she was trying to eradicate the laughter. “That’s sad, really. I guess you don’t have reaper psychologists.”

The reaper hissed, shuffling toward her. “You won’t be laughing when you’re bleeding at his feet.”

She tapped her finger to her lips with mock concentration. “Yeah, I think I will. Killian leaves a lot to be desired. You should rethink the whole reaper thing. Unless, of course, you like being his bitch.” She flicked her hair. “I hear some men are into that.”

The reaper growled. “You ungrateful wench. You come from an elite bloodline and have no concept of your true power. Killian will help you unlock your destiny.” His lips curled. “But he will break you first.”

Dannika pretended to yawn. “It appears that delusions are commonplace in your species.”

“Enough! Time for you to come with me.” Spittle formed at the reaper’s mouth.

The hair on her arms bristled as Raine exited the shadow pathway. The mist was so thin; it blended into the night fog, dimming the light cast from the walkway lamp.

The reaper lunged at her as Raine materialized behind him. He grabbed the reaper by the neck, bending him backwards. “This is Gavil. He’s a former member of the bear clan. Ryder was quite disappointed when he turned, especially since Gavil here is only fifty years old.”

Gavil hissed, grappling with the arm around his neck. His eyes darted, looking to connect with a shadow to escape, but Raine held him beneath the light. “Ryder is a false leader. Killian is the true king.”

Raine huffed. “Typical reaper bullshit. Tell me, Gavil, why did you turn so young? You were full of life.”

Gavil went limp in Raine’s grasp. “I will talk to you, Raine. I always liked you, even when your own leader didn’t.”

Colton materialized in front of Gavil. “The reaper lies.”

Raine nodded. “They always do. Stupid since they know we can detect them.”

Gavil smiled savagely before he threw a handkerchief in the air. The shadow it created was all Gavil needed. He dissolved from Raine’s grasp and materialized beside Dannika. He grabbed her, cutting into her skin with his claws before his fangs punctured her neck.

Her shadow erupted, growling, before her claws shot from her knuckles and slashed at Gavil’s shoulder. He screamed as blood welled from the cut. The blackened skin and torn tissue were far worse than the wounds she inflicted on Maddock. Gavil clutched the tattered flesh.

“What have you done?” Pain laced his words before his form wavered, only to remain human. He sat hard on the ground, clutching his wound.

Raine grabbed the wounded reaper. “He can’t shift to the shadows. Dannika’s blood has trapped him in his corporeal form.”

Colton inspected Gavil’s wound. “Steele told me about the effect her blood had on Maddock. It appears more severe for the reapers. His healing ability is severely limited.”

“Her blood is more potent on the reapers,” Raine said, “but he will shift soon. Get the sedative.”

Colton took a syringe from the leather bag as a man approached from inside the park.

Gavil screamed in a voice younger than his years, a frightened teen being wronged by those around him. “Please. Help me!”

The man ran over and grabbed Raine. Though Raine never released his hold on the reaper, Gavil’s clawed hand slashed out, connecting with the human’s neck. Black blood sprayed across Raine and Gavil before saturating the ground.

The reaper lost all his human reasoning. He growled, clutching at the fallen human, desperate to get to the source of the sweet nectar flowing from his neck.

“Shit!” Colton dropped to the ground, placing his hand over the man’s neck to stay the crimson river.

Dannika grabbed a syringe from the leather bag. She ripped off the cap with her teeth, then stabbed the syringe into Gavil’s neck. He swayed on his feet, moving to music only he could hear. He looked at her in shock as his eyes turned black and his body went slack in Raine’s arms.

Raine dropped Gavil before they huddled around the muscular man in a green T-shirt.

Dannika put her hand on the man’s stomach as Colton continued to stay the bleeding. “What do we do?”

Raine picked up the silver dog tags attached to the man’s neck. “His name is Stern. He’s military. Judging by his tattoo, I’d say Navy seal.”

“How bad is it?” Dannika asked Colton.

Colton met her gaze. “Gavil injected him with reaper venom. He will die or transition. You know the odds of a successful transition aren’t good.”

Dannika grabbed Colton’s arm. “He’s dying. Please help him. Give him your blood.”

Raine pointed at Dannika’s arm as her flesh knit together. “Did your blood mix with Gavil’s?”

She nodded. “I think so. Why?”

Colton kept his hands around Stern’s neck. “Then you’re the only one who can donate blood. A second donor will kill him before he enters transition.”

Dannika grabbed her reaper blade and sliced open her palm before she closed her fist and squeezed hard.

Crimson blood dripped from her hand into Stern’s mouth. He fought Colton’s grasp until the dark nectar reached the back of his throat. Then he began licking his lips, looking for more liquid life.

Stern groaned before his chocolate, pain-filled eyes locked on Dannika. “Who are you?”

CHAPTER 26



Raine carried the unconscious reaper as Colton did the same for Stern. The human groaned as they sprinted home. Dannika ran to keep up with them, as they couldn't enter the shadows with the mortally wounded man. Her face was a mask of pain and betrayal as her eyes remained on Stern. He wished there was some way he could calm her fears, but her actions had ended in an innocent man's death. There was no coming back from this, and she knew it. Even if Stern transitioned, his human life was over.

Gavil groaned as he slapped Raine's back, but he didn't wake.

Raine adjusted the large man on his shoulder before continuing up the mountainside. "He won't be unconscious much longer. We need to get him to a secure location."

While Gavil had been slung over Raine's shoulder like a sack of potatoes, Colton cradled Stern in a secure embrace. "The cave entrance is behind the cluster of bushes. There's a light box inside."

They navigated the carefully planted shrubs and entered the man-made cave. Inside was a single large room with a generator and a shelf. In the middle of the room was a metal box with fluorescent lights embedded beneath thick sheets of glass.

Raine dropped the reaper in the middle of the box before closing the door.

Colton nodded. "Let me get Stern situated. I will have Steele watch him until we can return to my home."

He sprinted out of the cave mouth with Stern.

Dannika walked around the cell as Raine fired up the generator. The box ignited with white fluorescent light. She held up her hand, blocking her eyes as she peered between the beams. "I thought this would be similar to a light circle. This isn't what I was expecting. How does this keep a reaper trapped?"

Raine grabbed a red plastic container from a wall mounted shelf before unscrewing the cap. "A shadow can't travel in the light."

Her eyes roamed over the light box. "We have traveled during the day. I didn't realize florescent light could trap a shadow. How does this work?"

He affixed the nozzle before pouring gas into the generator's tank. "Even in the day, there are shadows. A single blade of grass creates a small pathway. We pull from the darkness to create momentum when we enter a stream. If there's no darkness, no shadow, then the door is closed. There's no pathway for us to travel."

She touched the exterior of the metal box. "He's stuck in there. He can't dematerialize."

Raine replaced the cap on the gas container. "He can shift to a shadow form, but there's nowhere for him to go. No pathway to enter. He will bounce around within the light cell."

"That's impressive," she whispered.

Though her curiosity was genuine, her sadness cut through his soul deeper than any reaper blade. "It's a shadow version of a Faraday cage. A human invention."

She wrapped her arms around herself, making her petite frame appear even smaller. "I saw one once. At the Science Center when I was a kid. Our school had a field trip. I remember looking at all the kids at various stations, watching experiments take place and feeling for one moment that I was normal."

His heart stuttered. “Dannika.”

She shook her head. “Soon after, my foster parents died, and it reminded me that field trips were for other children. Not the ones that destroyed everyone around them.”

Raine walked up to her and tipped up her chin. “Nothing that happened in the past was your fault.”

Tears dusted her lashes. “Maybe not the past, but today is on me.”

He kissed her, his lips dominating hers as he poured his love and conviction down her throat. Their shadows intertwined, allowing him to feel her sorrow for allowing Stern’s attack. A man who had survived fighting for his country, only to die in a public park.

She pulled away when her shadow reached for his, her lust as real and insatiable as his own. She wasn’t pulling away from him. She reached for the icy darkness as a punishment. One bestowed on those who betrayed their own.

“What type of lights are in the box? Are they special in some way?” she asked.

Raine allowed her retreat. “No, just high-level white LED lights, but the absence of darkness means no way of escape. We construct the cell with titanium, so the human part of him can’t break free. The demon becomes weaker the longer it goes without darkness. In theory, you could kill a reaper this way, but it would take years and be extremely painful. No shadow will condone such an action.” He didn’t add that starvation wouldn’t take as long but would be just as torturous.

Gavil rolled onto his back, coughing up black blood. His eyes remained closed as his chest wheezed. Each breath he took struggled more than the one before.

Dannika put her hands on the box. “What’s happening to him? He can’t die. I need answers.”

Raine peered through the slats. “I’m not sure. I’ve never seen a reaper do that.”

Dannika yanked open the door to the cage and rushed toward the wheezing reaper.

Gavil's eyes snapped open as he grabbed her. He bit Dannika's hand and darted for the door.

Raine punched Gavil in the face. His jaw cracked before he screamed and fell to the floor, curling into the fetal position.

Raine grabbed Dannika's hand and pulled her from the cell before locking it. "Let me see your hand."

Dannika held it up, but the wound was already healing. "It's fine."

Raine moved her hand back and forth, looking at the wound from both angles. "It isn't infected. There are no black veins. I'm not sure if it's because you are immune or if it's because he's so weak."

She glanced up at Gavil. "You're right. He lacked the strength of a shadow shifter, and I think you broke his jaw."

"Gavil can't shift yet and has the strength of a human." He ran his finger over her perfect skin. Not even a red streak remained.

Colton entered the cave. "Well, that was unusual."

Dannika huffed. "Story of my life."

Colton motioned toward the reaper. "Don't let him trick you. They are inventive when trying to escape. Gavil has mimicking skills. He can reproduce any sound."

Dannika pulled her hand from Raine's. "How is Stern? Why was he in the park?"

Colton rubbed his chin. "He was just discharged from the military. He's resting, but it's too soon to determine how he will fare during transition."

Dannika's face hardened. "He's in excellent physical shape. Surely that helps."

Colton and Raine shared a glance before Raine touched her back. "Honey, that isn't the only factor for a successful

transition.”

Her eyes welled, her desperation as apparent as her pain. “He has to make it. I can’t be responsible for another death.”

“You understand the success rate is low,” he whispered.

Dannika walked away with her arms crossed. “But this was my idea. It’s my fault. I’m the reason he is sick.”

This was the bitter truth of being a shadow shifter. It would be a hard lesson, one of many to come.

He hated what he had to do; he had to make her face an irrevocable fact. “He’s dying, Dannika. Stern’s life is about to end.”

CHAPTER 27



Dannika turned away from the sounds of Gavil's pleading. The walls of the cave wavered as she reached for her shadow. There was nowhere to run. This fiasco was all on her.

"I need a minute." She exited the cave with Raine trailing behind her.

He put his hand on her shoulder, halting her from entering the trees. "Are you all right?"

She sniffed, holding back the tears.

"No. I just got an innocent man killed." She looked toward the forest. "I just wanted a minute away from the craziness. Being a shadow is no picnic."

Raine put his arm around her. "I'm sorry if I upset you. That wasn't my intention."

She gazed into his iridescent blue eyes. He held nothing back from her. His love. His conviction. His passion. He was a gift she no longer deserved.

"Why? For telling me the truth? Stern is dying, and I got him killed. There's no softening the truth."

Raine kissed her temple. "While your decisions may have led to his death, this is a war. There will be innocent casualties. If it's any consolation, I hope he survives. You have to remember that transitioning to the shadow world means dying first. His human life is over."

She nodded. “I know. Even if he survives the transition, I took away his choices. I still killed him.”

“Most transitioned shadows accept their new life in time. We don’t know the circumstances of Stern’s human life. Colton has men checking into his background. We’re researching his military career, but so far, there’s no evidence of a wife. We take one step at a time.” He touched her face. “Something else is bothering you. It isn’t just Stern. What is it?”

Dannika put her hand on his side. “With the attack, we didn’t get to discuss it, but Gavil told me I have an elite bloodline and don’t know my true power. That Killian will unlock my destiny.”

Raine searched her face. “While it appears Killian has some background information about you, Gavil is a foot soldier in the reaper army. I doubt he has accurate intel.”

She clutched his shirt. “I thought of that. I don’t think Killian ordered Gavil to attack me. Killian would have wanted to drain me himself. I think Gavil lost control at the shelter.”

Raine pulled her against his body. The warmth seeped into her soul, bringing light where there was darkness. “Killian should know better than to send a fledgling reaper. They have little control at the best of times. If your human blood was special, there was no way Gavil would possess the willpower to resist.”

The wind moved her hair across her shoulders as if mother nature caressed her skin. The breeze, light and soothing, was in complete contrast to the train wreck in her heart.

“My blood was more toxic to the reaper, but it had no effect when I was human,” she whispered.

“I know. It suggests that Killian is correct about your lineage, but it wasn’t activated till you transitioned. We have to discover what it is.”

“I’m human. I mean, I was human. How could my lineage mean anything in the shadow world? Even if I’m related to

Steele, what difference would it make? How would that explain my blood?"

Raine pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "It wouldn't. There's more to this than who you're related to. But having the blood of a Raymond would explain Killian's fixation with you."

Dannika's eyes widened. "My last name is Ray. It's a short form for Raymond."

Raine shook his head. "That was pretty obvious, and we missed it. You're definitely a relation. We must unearth your relation in the family tree and why your blood is so unique."

He pulled her with him as he walked. "Colton assigned me a small house close to his in a grove of trees. It's just over the rise."

She took his hand, content to pretend they were a normal couple walking through woods. "I like their homes. They remind me of when I was a kid, making secret forts amongst the branches of our maple tree."

He laughed. "I imagine you were quite inventive. It's just up here."

The tree house was similar in construction to Colton's, though smaller and nestled beside other trees. Dannika relaxed into Raine's shadow as it enveloped her, whisking her up the tree through a quick pathway. The wrenching of her bones was so brief she didn't become disoriented as the open living room turned from grey to a mint green. With tan couches and simple artwork, it reminded her of a summer cottage. A tiny retreat where a loving couple could have a weekend getaway.

Raine inspected the single bedroom. "Your stuff isn't here? Where are you staying?"

She glanced out the window. "I have a room at Colton's."

Raine's eyes flickered with blue fire as he stalked toward her. "You are mine, Dannika. I will not tolerate this arrangement. Maddock had no right to trade you to the cougar clan."

She held up her hands. “It’s not like that. I’m in a different room. I told you I feel the need to protect him, and he feels the same about me. Maybe it’s because we’re both connected to Steele. If you plan to fight about this, I’m going back to Colton’s.”

Raine grabbed her arm when she turned away. “You are mine and it’s about time I proved it to you.”

His mouth crushed hers, scattering any sane thoughts from her head. She recognized the low mewling sound, shocked it came from her own throat. Her cat was every bit as enthralled with her sexy shadow mate as she was. Despite the fear, the uncertainty, the pain her actions had caused, she couldn’t stop touching him. His kisses were like a drug, invading her soul, binding her to him with each masterful caress. The simple cotton top she wore felt like sandpaper against her skin, chafing her nipples.

“Get it off,” she panted.

His hands moved to the bottom of her shirt, pulling it above her head in one motion, setting her free. Her breasts bounced into his waiting hands, seeking his fiery touch. She moaned as his thumbs rubbed over her sensitive nipples, and arched toward him.

She attempted to push closer. To share the same skin. Anything to relieve the mounting pressure in her core, but he backed her up against the wall. He cupped her breasts as he massaged the creamy globes while continuing his assault on her mouth. Nothing had prepared her for Raine’s desire. For his all-encompassing arousal. This was a takeover, and she was giving ground.

She cried out when he bent down and sucked her nipple into his mouth. The rush of liquid between her legs had her unfastening her pants and slipping them down her hips. The trickle of excitement that ran down her thigh alerted her mate that his control was absolute. She was concerned she had sold her soul to the devil, but if that demon was Raine, she was willing to accept her punishment. His torture was delicious, decadent.

Raine slipped his hand under her lace thong, cupping her mound. His finger slipped through the slick lips of her pussy to rest on her clit. The intense craving proved too much for her to ignore. Every sensation, every nerve ending in her body, belonged to Raine.

He circled the tiny bud, ramping up her arousal one torturous notch at a time. She became insane with need, clutching at him, attempting to relieve the mounting pressure. Nothing mattered except the need to reach that apex. The fulfillment only he could provide. His shadow swirled around them in a tornado of dark ecstasy, shrouding them from the outside world.

She thought him a dark magician. A creature from another world sent to punish her. Enslave her. A man she would crave for eternity and never get enough of. She cried out as he pushed a finger into her tight channel, rocketing the fiery desire.

Reflex had her clamping down on him. She gasped when he inserted the second finger, setting a slow rhythm as he worked her breasts and pussy at the same time.

The sane part of her reached for the independence she had always possessed. Her wit and temper were useless weapons against his magical fingers. He could make her a slave to his erotic torture. To the sensations coursing through her body. He could own her, and she would succumb willingly.

She gasped when he dropped to his knees and thrust his tongue into the most sensitive part of her. He hooked one of her legs over his shoulder as he stabbed deep into her pussy, each thrust of his tongue pulling more of the cream from her body. The room darkened as the edges of her vision turned grey, the dark shadows between them so absolute she knew they could never break. One soul. One darkness. One demon. They were the same.

She was mindless when she came, clutching his shoulders as the insurmountable pleasure rocked her body, jolts of erotic fire pulsing from her core to pool between her legs. Her strength waned, and she grabbed the wall to support herself.

He stood, unbuttoning the fly of his pants, and grabbed her ass, locking her against the wall. “Put your legs around me.”

His eyes held blue fire and retribution. She didn't dare deny him. Her legs locked behind his waist. His body shuddered as his muscles tensed, as if he'd waited an eternity for this moment.

He kissed Dannika with the taste of her on his lips. “Every second without you was torture.”

She gasped when he thrust into her, his hard cock parting the soft flesh of her intimate channel. Her fingers clawed the wall, raking the mint paint. She moaned as he slammed into her tight pussy at a brutal rate, pulling her pelvis toward each thrust to increase the erotic pleasure. He was so deep inside her she would never get him out.

Her fingers went to his back, scratching his perfect skin, forcing a low growl of approval from him. His shadow deepened, barricading the room to outsiders. She wanted to think about the implications of that, but he altered his stance, taking himself deeper within her. The tiny muscles gave way to his long hard shaft as he slammed into her over and over, causing lightning to sing through her blood and her demon to respond with shadowy fingers trailing over his skin.

The sane part of her begged to let go. To run. The dark soul beneath the surface craved the erotic fury that hammered her body. She screamed when she came, clamping down on him like a vise, throwing him over the apex as violently as he had her.

She clutched the man she wasn't supposed to mate, afraid of the implications of her actions. “Dear God. What have I done?”

Raine looked at her with iridescent blue eyes. “No God, no demon, will keep you from me.”

“I didn't want to leave you.” Dannika laid her head on his chest.

He tipped up her chin. “Say you're mine. For all time. I will deal with Maddock.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I can’t explain my connection to Colton. I need to understand it first. There’s a good chance it’s because of Steele. I’m only asking that you wait until we find out.”

“I don’t like it, but I understand.” Raine kissed her shoulder. He eased out of her and grabbed her shirt from the floor, handing it to her. “Just remember that I love you.”

Dannika put on her clothes. “I love you too.”

Raine motion to the door. “Let’s go check on your fledgling.”

“I forgot about that. What do I do?” She fidgeted with her shirt.

Raine frowned. “About what?”

Dannika pointed at her chest. “I don’t know how to be a shadow myself, let alone train one.”

“Honey, you are not the first novice to attempt to save an infected human. If his transition is pure, we’ll test him. Stern would enter the clan of his animal. A senior will train him.”

She took a deep breath. “Okay, that’s somewhat comforting. I’m glad this has happened before.”

Raine’s jaw ticked. “I said a novice had tried. Not that they were successful.”

“Way to burst that bubble,” she snapped.

He put his arm around her. “I don’t want to get your hopes up. Let’s go see if he’s still alive.”

CHAPTER 28



Dannika entered Colton's home, thankful when she learned Colton had given Stern her room. Steele sat on the couch, leaning on his knees, his face grave and his eyes hard. She would pay for her actions, but not until she confirmed Stern was safe.

Stern lay on the bed, taking deep breaths as the smell of iron permeated the room.

She turned to Raine and Colton. "Can you give me some time with him, please? I'll call you if I need anything."

They nodded and left as she grabbed a simple wooden chair from the corner and sat beside the bed.

"My name is Dannika. Like you, I was once human, but I was attacked by a reaper and transitioned to a shadow shifter."

Stern struggled to swallow. "A shadow shifter?"

"They can move through the shadows using the shadow pathways, slipstreams that move from one dark stream to another. They also possess a totem animal. Raine is a wolf, and Colton is a cougar."

Stern's eyebrow arched. "Skin walkers?"

She studied Stern's face. His dark skin and black hair accented his athletic frame. "I've never heard that term before."

He took a deep breath, wheezing as he released it. "That's what my mother's tribe called shifters. Men that could turn into an animal. I thought them extinct."

Dannika leaned forward. “The shifters sacrificed themselves to save humanity. They merged with demon souls to fight a demon incursion. Though they won the war, the repercussions were massive. They lost their women, and some men turned reaper. That’s what attacked you.”

Stern’s eyes narrowed on Dannika. “The man that bit me was a reaper. You and the other two are soldiers.”

“Yes.”

He took a ragged breath. “I’m dying.”

His words gutted her. There was no remorse. No regret. Just a simple acceptance of the end of his life.

Stern’s lip twitched into a painful smile. “I thought it would be a bullet. Two tours and too many injuries to mention, and I’m killed by one man in a park.”

“He wasn’t a man. He was a reaper and they possess the strength of three men. You never had a chance.”

His bloodshot eyes met hers. “I’m sorry I attacked the other soldier. Tell him to continue to fight.”

His acceptance was a dagger in her heart. Her guilt smothered her soul, bringing tears to her eyes. It was easy to accept casualties of war when you didn’t meet them. Didn’t know they were good men. She had caused his death. Was she any better than a reaper?

He grunted, clutching his chest. “It burns like lava in the blood. I’ve been shot four times and never experienced pain like this.”

“I know. I was sure I would die. You’ll feel nauseous soon, but you won’t throw up. The surrounding sounds will become more distinct. Louder.”

He glanced around the room as if looking for something she couldn’t see. “You’re right. I can hear animals moving in the forest. The wind whispering to the trees.”

If these were Stern’s last moments on earth, she was determined to make the most of them. She touched his arm. “We saw your dog tags. How long were you in the military?”

He closed his eyes. “I enlisted when I was eighteen.”

“Are you married?”

“No. Just the Corp. My mom passed three weeks ago. They released me a week early to see her before her spirit moved on.” He clamped his teeth together before he hissed.

The skin on his chest knit together as his body shook. Sweat beaded on his brow as he shivered. Muscles tensed beneath his dark skin.

“Your physical injuries will heal. For a while, you’ll feel better. It will give us a small reprieve from the transition. Tell me about your mother.”

Stern grimaced. “We lived on the reserve when I was younger, but my father passed when I was three. My mother took a waitressing job in Seattle. We lived there until I joined the Corp. She returned home when she got sick.” He took a deep breath. “She was a fighter and deserved a better son. One that saw her more.”

His guilt was another dagger in Dannika’s heart. “She knows you loved her. That’s all that matters.”

His eyes closed. “The reaper had fangs.”

“They prey on humanity. Drink human blood.”

His eyebrows arched, though it ended in a grimace. “Vampires?”

“They aren’t undead, but their venom is deadly. It starts the transition, and while I gave you my blood to increase your chances, few males survive.”

His muscles seized. “What’s happening?”

“Your body has entered the transition. You’re converting to a shadow shifter. I wish I had something to offer you other than pain and death, but that’s the reality of the shadow clans.” She echoed Raine’s words. She remembered every one, but hadn’t experienced the pain of saying them. She wasn’t sure which was worse: experiencing it or inducing it.

Stern's body twitched, moving incongruently as every limb worked against one another. He attempted to speak, but the muscles in his face would no longer comply. He stared at his chest in horror. She recalled the moment her shadow had entered her soul.

"The demon soul is merging with yours. It infuses every cell of your body, like a virus. Your body continues to burn, making you pray for death. Beg for it. And when you think it's finally over, the shadows slide into your flesh, your bones, saturating the tissue with dark agony."

"The room is going dark. The colors of the world are being leached from my eyes," he panted.

"Yes. You are seeing our world. Now we wait to see if you stay in it."

Black mist rolled off Stern's body, swirling in the air, turning it into a grey haze.

"This is the world we live-in."

He leaned to the side, vomiting black blood. "I'm being burned alive from the inside out."

She pushed the emotion from her voice. "I know."

He flopped back onto the bed, taking an even breath. "The pain is easing."

"You call it the calm before the storm. We call it hope before oblivion."

Stern never had time to reply. His body arced in the air as his shoulders dug into the mattress. His jaw locked in an unshed scream before the bones in his back broke. His eyes glazed over when his heart stopped beating. Blood trickled from his mouth and stained the white sheet red.

Her demon scented the air with excitement, the smell of death and blood too intoxicating to ignore. Her shame had it backing down, returning to the confines of her soul.

His first heartbeat thundered as if it were her own. It thumped once, twice before raging out of control.

His arms broke, followed by his legs, leaving him like a human pretzel as the shadows raced along his body, consuming his flesh.

When the shadow finished its feast, it slithered into his heart to begin the repairs on his body, consuming his humanity along with his blood.

It took only minutes for his skin tone and shape to return to normal, but when his eyes opened, there was only rage and madness.

His claws erupted from his knuckles before he attacked.

CHAPTER 29



Dannika's back slammed against the wall from the momentum of Stern's attack. A small potted plant, the singular item on her nightstand, smashed on the floor, shattering the pottery and sending dark soil across the pine floor.

Stern's eyes were black as his hands circled her throat. As he squeezed, she let her shadow emerge, removing the need for breath.

His shadow shrouded the room in darkness, a multitude of hues in grey and black. No colour. No hope. It appeared like death to those who wouldn't understand, but Stern was a shadow shifter. Her responsibility. She would use every tactic she knew to reason with him.

"I know you're angry. You have every right to be, but if you don't control your shadow, it will force you to hunt. If you kill a human, you turn into the thing that ruined your life."

Stern growled as he snapped at her face. While he was large, he was a fledgling, and for now, she was stronger.

"Listen to me, Stern. Reach for your peace. I don't know what that is for you. A memory of your mother. Your family on the reserve. The men you called friends in the military."

His struggles intensified, along with his growls. It was like a rabid animal, intent on her destruction. There was no rational thought. If there was, he'd have used his military training. The instinct to kill was overpowering. Maddening. She remembered those moments. How had Raine reached her?

How did you reach a man in pain? One who would never show it?

“Life is unfair. I know that, but if you continue to fight me, I’ll have to put you down. I won’t risk you turning reaper and preying on the people you used to protect. A true soldier knows when to walk away from a fight. When to stop and regroup.”

Stern’s body continued to roll with black mist, but he backed away, a look of confusion and contempt plastered on his face. “What am I?”

Disorientation. Confusion. Denial. The transition was a trifecta of negative emotion. It bombarded you until you questioned your own existence. Maybe that was the only way to make a man accept his new life.

Stern looked at his shadowy hands, translucent and powerful, as waves of black mist rolled off his body. “This can’t be.”

His denial cut her to the core, as if he was some kind of monster, worse than anything he had imagined. More gruesome than anything he’d fought in his years of service to his country.

She took her reaper blade and placed it on the bed. “It was my fault you lost your human life. You are now a shadow shifter, and a protector of all humanity. Your anger is justified, but don’t aim it at yourself. The only person you can hurt is me.” She motioned to the blade on the bed. “This kills me if you remove my head. If my life will appease you, then take it. Seek your revenge.”

Stern’s body rippled with black shadows. The fight for control mirrored in his eyes. The darkness in his pupils wavered between black and chocolate before the warm brown won out.

He moved away from Dannika until his back touched the opposite wall. “I won’t hurt you. Put the knife away.”

Raine materialized as he exited the shadow beneath the door. “You took a ridiculous chance, Dannika, with a newly

turned. I almost killed him when he put his hands around your neck. He does it again, and he's dead."

Dannika narrowed her eyes on Raine. "He just had his life ripped away from him. Give him the same courtesy you gave me."

She would've said more, but she realized how hard it would have been for Raine to wait. To give her time to get Stern under control. Trust was the ultimate gift, and she had no intention of wasting it.

Colton materialized beside Raine. "I'm surprised Raine didn't kill him. I would not have hesitated. He so much as looks at you sideways and he's dead."

"Bring it on asshole," Stern growled.

Dannika shook her head. "Ignore them Stern. Alpha ego's are the size of Texas."

Raine's eyes turned black. "She had it under control. Impressive for a fledgling."

Colton's eyes hardened on Raine. "You shouldn't have taken a chance. Stern is weak from transition, but he is military trained."

"You had your chance to interfere," Raine said.

Colton shrugged. "Had she been in any real danger, I would have."

Dannika rolled her eyes. "Are you two done measuring your dicks?" She pointed at Stern. "He is my responsibility. If either of you touch him, you will deal with me."

Stern glanced between them, with wariness in his eyes. "Is she always like this?"

"Yes," they said in unison.

"Lucky me," Stern said.

Colton and Raine growled.

Dannika grabbed the blade from the mattress. While she understood Raine and Colton's need to protect her, Stern was

her responsibility. Nobody would hurt her fledgling. Threatening him pushed her past reason. She would rather try her luck with the bear clan. “That’s it. I’m leaving, and I’m taking Stern with me.”

CHAPTER 30



Jealousy was a vicious emotion. It cut through your soul more deadly than any reaper blade. Worse, because Raine had no experience with it. He'd never spent more than a night with a woman. It took all of his considerable control to stop his shadow from ripping the fledgling apart. His only consolation, the cougar next to him was contemplating the same thing.

Dannika, however, wasn't lying. Her instinct to protect Stern was every bit as real as his to protect her. If he wasn't careful, he would lose his mate. "Dannika, we have no intention of harming Stern. He doesn't understand our rules and will be given time to learn."

Her eyes hardened on him. "Then why are you guys growling at him?"

Raine glanced at Stern's slack expression. "He needs to learn the hierarchy within the clan. We were warning him."

"Of what?"

Raine's eyes flickered with blue fire. "That you are mine."

Dannika rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Just don't threaten him again."

Stern scratched his head. "What do I do next? How do I explain this to my teammates?"

Colton flicked a glance at Dannika. "Obviously, you didn't get to the part where you explain he isn't returning to the human world."

Stern's eyes widened. "Pardon me? I understand I have to abide by your rules, and never show my shadow warrior, but why would I give up my job? If anything, these new abilities will help me overseas. I'm slated for a new tour in two months."

Dannika's head dropped. With their shadows connected, Raine could feel her sorrow. Her pain. Her guilt.

"You won't be returning to the human world, Stern," she said.

Stern's eyes turned black. "I'd like to know how you're going to stop me."

She kept her eyes on the ground. "Raine and Colton will stop you. If you try to leave, they will put you in a cell until they can test you. They need to confirm you have an animal." She raised her head. "I want to protect you, Stern. I need to, but you have to understand the rules. The venom in your claws can infect a human. Would you put your military friends at that kind of risk? If they have families, children, they'd have to join the shadow clan."

Stern frowned. "No, I won't put anybody at risk until I understand what I am. How this works."

She gave him a reassuring smile. "I appreciate that. You're far more understanding about this than I was."

Stern glanced at the men. "I haven't agreed to anything. I'm just getting all the facts. What happens next?"

Colton motioned to the door. "The other clans will arrive later. They were already en route. We will test you to see if we can get your animal to emerge. You will need some rest first. I have arranged a room at the visitor's lodge. Its standard procedure for any fledgling within the cougar clan. You will live there while you learn."

Stern nodded. "Hate to admit it, but I'm exhausted. I can barely keep my eyes open."

Colton stepped through the door. "That's normal. Follow me."

Stern followed Colton while Raine appraised his mate. Her hands jerked at her sides as she pursed her lips.

“What is it? I can practically hear the wheels in your mind turning,” Raine said.

“I’m just worried. What if he doesn’t have an animal? Worse, what if he is a wolf? Maddock would have a field day with him.”

Rain put his arm around her. “Don’t worry about it. If he turns out to be a wolf, I will claim him as my fledgling. I’m capable of training two.”

Her arms circled his waist. It was rare for her to seek comfort. He loved these vulnerable moments that she only shared with him.

“Thank you. What do we do while we wait for the clans to arrive?” she asked.

Raine’s shadow rose, engulfing his mate, sending her waves of reassurance and love before he entered the dark pathway. They raced through the slipstream, weaving their way to his assigned tree house. They coalesced in his living room.

“I have a few ideas.”

Her eyes roamed over his body. “Why do I have the feeling those ideas are perverted?”

Raine’s lips descended on her so fast she had to grab onto him to stop from falling. His iridescent eyes pulsed with fire and arousal. She opened her mouth, accepting his desire. He needed to focus on the clan issues. Their newest arrival. Anything but her. She moaned when he slammed his mouth onto hers. His tongue swept through her lips, demanding she acknowledge him. Her mate.

Her body responded at once. The smoldering fire beneath the surface erupted into a volcano of heat and desire. Adrenaline raced through his blood, connecting with her shadow. A primal reaction to the man who held her body captive. He knew the moment her indecision turned to raking

need. She grabbed his neck, holding him against her as she returned his fiery kisses, each one more addictive than the last.

Dannika was beautiful. She would have disagreed because her looks didn't matter to her. The strands of dark satin that wrapped around his arms as he held her were as perfect as her skin. Only duty to him and the people she continued to watch over mattered. This made her more attractive to him. She was everything. An erotic dream come to life. The ones he pretended not to remember.

She gasped when he pulled her shirt over her head and threw it to the floor. It wasn't fear. It was anticipation. He loved that about her, too.

He kissed her again, then knelt before her, undoing her pants. There was something sensual about undressing her while he remained clothed. Raine didn't break her gaze. He let her see his eyes dilate in triumph as he removed her shoes and pants.

He smiled, then he pulled her down and laid her out on the carpet. His fingers played over her skin as if she were a fine instrument, the rarest violin that would reveal its song only for him. Raine's hands roamed her body with expertise, weaving a spell of desire and beauty. His hands were powerful, and her breathy moans added to the magic. His caress roamed from her breasts, down her stomach and between her inner thighs.

Dannika sucked in an unsteady breath. It hitched as his fingers traveled higher up her legs, caressing over the hottest part of her. She tried to turn away, to pry her eyes from the intensity of his gaze, but he trapped her in a web of hunger and need—a hold he had no intention of relinquishing.

Raine placed his hands on her upper thighs as he wedged his shoulders between them.

“Don't move. I can't get enough of you,” he said with a growl.

Her legs moved restlessly as his breath heated her thighs, the whisper a promise, one of seduction and pleasure. She

cried out when he nipped her skin in warning, then eased the sting with a gentle kiss.

“Dammit, do something,” she hissed.

He loved making her impatient. “We are just getting started, baby.”

He swept his tongue through her folds. She arched up as the sensation rocked her. His hand pressed against her stomach, holding her in place as his tongue pursued its erotic massage. Her breath hitched as her nipples peaked, begging for his touch. Her stomach muscles bunched, looking for an escape from the excruciating pleasure his mouth was creating. He didn't lick her; he devoured her like a starving animal. Warm honey rushed between her legs, but he wanted more. Craved it.

His growls of pleasure vibrated against her skin, elevating her arousal. Her body was aflame with lust. He tested her shadow, combining their essence. She didn't want to escape. She wanted to lock herself with him, consuming one another in darkness and desire.

Her orgasm ripped through her in a tsunami of pleasure, rippling waves of ecstasy that washed through their connection. She scratched his back, shredding his skin beneath her fingernails.

She sucked in a breath. “I'm sorry. I lost control.”

He spoke with her juices on his lips. “You are mine.”

Raine whispered the words, but he might as well have shouted them. They branded her soul. She fought him, but her shadow didn't. It made its presence known, darkening the room as it reached for him, reassuring him they were one.

He didn't wait. His thick cock nudged her entrance. “Do you understand what I am telling you? I will never give you up. I will allow nothing or anyone to come between us.”

The craving need escalated to the point of pain. She could fight him, but not the connection they shared. Her lust was his, her desire a nectar he would get drunk on for eternity. At that moment, she would have agreed to anything to get him inside

her. To ease the burning between her legs. While her mind still had reservations, her body had given in.

He thrust into her, allowing his long, hard shaft to rip through her heated flesh. The tight channel clamped on to him like a vise. Every moment with her felt like the first. Her body made him feel so alive. So free. Fire burned through his blood. Lightning forked over his skin, electrifying everything in its wake. He held her hips, angling them so he could go deeper with each stroke, building the heat into a raging inferno nothing could tame.

He couldn't slow his pace. Her lips parted, perched on the edge of an endless scream. Time stopped as ecstasy swamped him, her body too small as his hard cock battered into her, growing thicker, stretching her. When the torturous pleasure seemed too much, causing her to scratch his back, he pumped harder. Over and over into her slick, soft flesh, an erotic fury fueled by anger, love, and acceptance. Each stroke branded her, screaming at the heavens she was his.

Tension and lust burned between them, a living inferno of want and need. His muscles tightened. His cock swelled, as did the urgency of his pace. She screamed his name as he erupted inside her. Hot jets seared her from the inside out as his animal growled in satisfaction.

Raine rolled to his back so Dannika could lay her head on his chest. He wrote his name in lazy circles on her back as they caught their breath.

She caressed the hair on his chest. "I know it was hard for you to let me handle Stern. He's a good man, and he'll make an amazing addition to any of the clans."

"I agree." Raine turned his head to the side. "Get dressed. We have company."

Dannika scrambled to get her clothes on. "Who is it?"

Raine attempted to keep the irritation from his voice, but doubted he was successful. "Colton is waiting for you to dress before he leaves the shadows."

Dannika pulled her T-shirt over her pants. "Embarrassing."

Colton coalesced in the corner of the room. His eyes burned with dark fire before he got his emotions under control. He shot Raine an irritated glare. He was well aware of what had happened, and though he didn't appear jealous, he wasn't happy.

"It's time to test Stern. Steele would like the trial to happen before the other clans arrive. If he's a cougar, we would like to know first."

Raine nodded. "That's understandable. We will meet you at the ring."

Colton dissolved, gone as quickly as he had come.

Raine allowed his shadow to form around him, intending to shelter Dannika, but she held up her hand.

"I'd like to try on my own. Can we travel in the same pathway? With you close to me, but not touching?"

He had hoped to have more time with her under his wing, but that wasn't her personality. She pushed the boundaries of their shadows every time they traveled, her need for independence as strong as her will.

"Of course. I will go first. Reach for me inside the pathway if you require help. The ring is only a half-mile away." He entered the pathway with her trailing behind him.

The trip was brief, and she coalesced beside him at the base of an oak tree. Her smile was as bright and beautiful as she was.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this whole shadow stream thing," she said.

"You're remarkable. It's as if you were born to be a shadow."

She glanced at the men forming a circle in the clearing. "No one's born to give up chocolate."

He took her hand. "Understood."

He led her to the cluster of cougar clan members. Steele waved them to come closer. Stern stood in the middle of the

man-made ring.

“Dannika, you may enter the ring with your fledgling. A senior will train him in his animal’s clan.”

Colton turned to his father. “She is not getting in the ring with him. If he has no animal, he will turn reaper and go looking for his first kill. I will test him.”

Dannika dropped Raine’s hand, growling at Colton. “Since when are you the boss of me? If Steele trusts me to fight Stern, then I will do it.”

Raine took her hand, bringing her under his shoulder. “While I hate to agree with Colton, he is correct in this case. You’re new at being a shadow. Give me more time to train you before you test the others.”

Her eyes focused on Colton. “You promise not to hurt him?”

“Of course. A new shadow shifter is something to celebrate. I will simply encourage his animal to emerge.”

Dannika winked at Stern. “Just between you and me, I hope you bruise his pride a little.”

Stern and Raine grinned as Colton rolled his eyes.

Colton positioned Stern in the ring before shifting to his cougar form. The cat attacked, swiping at Stern’s midsection.

Stern moved quickly, turning to avoid the razors that would have disemboweled him. He growled as his shadow emerged. Dark waves of smoke rolled off his shoulders as he waited for the cougar to circle him. When Colton lunged again, Stern shifted into a massive snarling bear.

Colton resumed his human form. “Get Ryder here, now.”

Dannika tugged on Raine’s arm. “What’s going on? Aren’t we glad he has an animal?”

Raine focused on the bear swatting the grass in front of him. “The problem isn’t that he’s a bear. It’s that he’s almost as big as Ryder. Ryder may be threatened by him.”

“And if he is?” Dannika asked.

Raine couldn't look at her. Couldn't reassure her. He had only the truth. "If Stern's bear doesn't acknowledge Ryder as his alpha, then Ryder will kill him."

CHAPTER 31



Dannika put her hand to her chest. The blood rushed from her face and when she moved a silky strand of her hair from her eyes, her hands were clammy. “Ryder is a good man. Why would he kill Stern?”

Raine rubbed the back of his neck. “Ryder has been the bear alpha for centuries. Judging by the size of Stern, he’s going to have an alpha shadow. If Ryder feels threatened by Stern, he will kill him now.”

She grabbed Raine’s arm. “We have to protect him.”

Raine ran a finger over her cheek, compassion and sorrow in his eyes. “Stern is a bear. His fate rests with his clan. Ryder is over two hundred years old. Let’s hope he is open to training a potential successor.”

Dannika blinked. “I thought you weren’t immortal?”

“We’re not, but a demon soul is. The combination allows us to age much slower than humans and the Bears are quite sturdy. Their previous leader was over four hundred when he passed.”

She touched her stomach, hoping to quell its uneasiness. “Did Ryder kill him?”

Raine glanced away. “Not right away. The previous leader was Ryder’s father. Ryder killed anyone who challenged his father. It’s the main reason he lasted as leader for such a long time.”

Her heart stuttered. “But he killed him, didn’t he?”

“Not by choice. His father forced Ryder to take his place.”

Her eyebrows arched. “How?”

“He threatened to turn reaper. A reaper alpha would be a nightmare. It forced Ryder to kill him and take over the clan,” Raine said.

Dannika couldn't imagine being forced to kill someone she loved out of duty. How did you recover from that kind of trauma? Colton and Raine shared an uneasy glance. She had the feeling they were less concerned about Stern's fate than how she would react if Ryder killed him. They had every right to worry.

“That's awful.”

“That's our way,” Raine said.

Her eyes darkened. “Maybe it's time for a change.”

Stern resumed his human form, turning to Dannika. “I'm willing to fight the bear clan leader.”

Colton huffed. “You don't know what you're doing. You've been a bear for thirty seconds. Why would you agree to that?”

Stern rolled his shoulders. “I'm a soldier. I won't go down without a fight.”

Ryder strode up to the clearing. The cougar clan parted to allow him to pass. “Well, I wouldn't want to disappoint you.”

Dannika stepped in front of Ryder, putting her hand on his chest. “You hurt him and I will attack you myself. Stern is my responsibility.”

Ryder's smile was mischievous but it didn't reach his eyes. “I would never fight you, Dannika, under any circumstance. You represent the future to our species that no shadow thought possible. I would die before I raised a hand to you.”

She crossed her arms. “Because you want to breed me.”

Ryder's eyes darkened. “I want you to have children, Dannika.”

“But you wanted the trials to resume,” she said.

Ryder nodded. “Of course. Only the strongest deserves a prize such as you. Someone strong enough to protect both you and your offspring.”

Colton scratched his head. “I can’t disagree with your logic.”

Raine growled. “I can. She’s mine, and I will destroy anyone who attempts to take her from me.”

Dannika held up both hands. “This isn’t about me. It’s about Stern and whether I should be training him.”

Ryder’s eyes flashed. “You are a fledgling. You have not earned your right to train a new shadow. As Stern is a bear, his training falls to me.”

Raine rubbed his chin. “I am Dannika’s mentor. I’m willing to train both of them, and clan law states I may challenge for him.”

“If Stern were a wolf, then it would be your right. Had anyone but Dannika aided in his transition, you would have handed him over to the clan of his animal.”

Raine nodded. “True, but if you wish Dannika to change the rules, to be the catalyst for our evolution, then you have to take her concerns under advisement. You can’t choose these changes to your liking.”

Ryder waved his hand dismissively. “Enough. We are here to assess the bear newling.”

Stern turned to Raine, pointing at Ryder. “Did that asshole just call me a greenhorn?”

“Yes. Our version of one.”

Stern turned to Ryder. “Fuck you.”

He shifted to his bear form. The roar echoed against the mountains as birds squawked, fleeing the nearby trees. Stern rose on his hind legs.

Ryder’s smile was that of the devil. He shifted into a bear the size of a small elephant, his fur thick and luxurious as his

muscles flexed beneath the chocolate coat. He rose on his hind legs, dwarfing Stern as he roared.

Stern didn't hesitate. His claws shot out, swiping at Ryder's chest. Though large, Ryder possessed the agility and skills of an alpha. He evaded the attack before lunging at the newest member of his clan.

The attack knocked Stern to the ground, but he recovered quickly, circling the larger bear. He lunged to the left, then dodged to the right and swiped Ryder's side. The thick fleshy gash welled with black blood as Ryder growled. The maneuver wasn't that of Stern's bear. It was that of a trained soldier.

Stern used similar tactics to score several hits on Ryder. It wasn't until Ryder's form rippled that Dannika realized he was testing Stern. The soldier made his next attack, but Ryder dissolved and reformed behind him, shifting to a shadow warrior and wrapping his arm around the bear's neck.

Stern squirmed, attempting to use his powerful back legs to dislodge his attacker, but Ryder was much stronger. He held the bear as if it were a family pet.

Ryder dropped his lips to Stern's furry ear. "I commend you. That was an invigorating fight. What is it you humans say? All good things must come to an end. Say goodbye, greenhorn."

The growling echoed before Stern roared.

CHAPTER 32



Dannika rushed to Stern's body, attempting to dislodge Ryder's grip from his throat. "Let him go!"

Her shadow burst from her body. Black waves rolled off her shoulders as her claws erupted from her knuckles. She had trusted Ryder, believed him a better man than Maddock, but his actions proved he was just as power-hungry as the wolf leader.

Ryder hissed as her claws slashed his shoulder, and he dropped Stern.

Stern shifted to his human form, gasping for breath. "That fucker hits like a freight train."

Dannika crouched beside Stern, putting her hand over his shoulder. Her eyes rested accusingly on Ryder as she resumed her human form. "I thought you were better than this. Killing a fledgling is beneath you."

Ryder held up his arm, watching the silver leech from his wound before it healed. "That stings like a bitch. Almost as bad as a reaper blade."

"Well, you deserved it. Stern is my responsibility." She glanced at the men. "This is what the reapers want. They already have the means for our destruction. If you're going to fight amongst yourselves, you might as well hand the clans over to Killian now."

Ryder dropped his arm when his skin healed over. "What is she talking about?"

Dannika hissed. “The end of the shadow clans. We’re trying to stop it, but you’re more interested in killing each other than uniting against a common enemy.”

Raine cleared his throat. “Dannika, honey, Ryder wasn’t trying to kill Stern.”

She glanced between Ryder and Colton. The cougar was clearing his throat as Ryder smirked. “He told Stern to say goodbye.”

Raine nodded. “He used the term greenhorn. A human term. He was telling Stern to say goodbye to his human life. Ryder never unsheathed his reaper blade. He never bit Stern. Choking him, breaking his bones is training. Nothing Ryder did would do permanent damage to Stern. He was in complete control, even when he was allowing Stern to score him.”

Stern fell back onto the grass. “I haven’t been this whipped since I was in training.”

“That’s because you’re in training again. Everything you learned in the military will aid you when you fight for the shadow clans, but the reapers are stronger and venomous. You have much to learn about your abilities and how to defend against a stronger enemy.”

Dannika sat on her knees. “Now I feel like a total ass hat.”

Ryder looked her over. “It takes a bigger man, or woman, to admit when they are wrong. Now tell me about Killian. Why do you think he can destroy us?”

Dannika stood up and held her hand out to Stern, helping him to his feet. “We went to see a Bokor.”

Ryder growled, turning toward Steele. “You knew about this?”

Steele shook his head. “I explained the duplicity of the Bokor, but they were adamant. They had more luck than I expected.”

Ryder’s eyes flashed. “What did that little turncoat say?”

Dannika gave them all the information the Bokor shared with them, except for Colton’s deal. She finished the story by

adding Killian's ambition to be king of all the clans.

Ryder blinked as if in shock. "That's impossible. What could he have that would destroy us?"

Dannika shook her head. "The Bokor didn't reveal what it was. Only that Killian had the knowledge and was collecting the items he needed."

The clan members parted, allowing Maddock to approach. "What is going on here?"

Raine filled Maddock in on Killian's ambitions.

Maddock huffed. "Killian always had an exaggerated sense of self. He will never lead all the clans. Any artifact used by the shadow clans cannot be activated by reaper."

Dannika swallowed. "What if it's not a shadow plan artifact?"

Maddock's eyes narrowed on Dannika. "I see some things never change. You're causing as much havoc in the cougar clan as you did in mine." He looked at Raine. "It's time for you to return the disruptive princess to the cougar clan. She can stay with the traitor."

Raine growled. "She is mine. You release her from the wolf clan, then you release me as well."

Maddock's eyes flashed before he got himself under control. "No shadow makes a deal with the Bokor. She led you and Colton to the enemy of our species, even after Steele warned her against it."

Dannika's heart squeezed. The betrayal was bitter but expected. Steele had told Maddock about them visiting the Bokor, but he'd been honest about his concerns. The cougar clan leader didn't respect her any more than the wolf clan leader.

"I take full responsibility," she said, "but I would do it again."

Colton shook his head. "No. You didn't make the deal with the Bokor. You didn't promise them anything."

Steele rubbed his chin. “You may believe that, but anyone who gets information from the Bokor is tied to him. You may believe you don’t have a deal, but I guarantee you do. She could turn any minute.”

Raine stepped in front of Dannika. “I don’t care about the Bokor or his gibberish. Dannika is mine and I will protect her with my life.”

Maddock sneered at Raine. His eyes swirled with anger. “She is a cougar and will remain here, even when we merge the clans.”

Waves of black rolled off Raine’s shoulders. His claws extended as he fought for control. “You’re insane. I renounce the wolf clan.”

CHAPTER 33



Only the leaves rustling in the breeze moved. Raine allowed the heavy silence to stretch out as the shadow shifters surrounding him recovered from their shock. He was an alpha. The next in line for the shadow wolf clan. Renouncing them could set them adrift. Ruin them.

He surveyed the wary faces around him. Raine had cultivated his friendships in the opposing clans on purpose, planning to unite them when his time as leader began. He would have the support of the other clans, but he would have to kill Maddock. That was a monumental task. One no sane shadow took lightly.

Maddock sneered. “You will die on your own. The cougar clan will not accept a traitor.”

Raine punched Maddock. Blood spurted from Maddock’s nose before he covered it with both hands, halting the crimson flow.

“You misunderstand. I renounce the wolf clan with its current leader—not the people within it.”

Maddock’s eyes widened with realization. He launched at Raine. The men punched and scratched one another, but neither allowed their alpha to emerge. The fight raged as the other clans held their breath.

Raine pushed Maddock away from him. Maddock stumbled back but caught his balance.

“It is you who will perish,” Raine said, “with your archaic ways and pettiness. You’re on the road to destruction and will

take the wolf clan with you. Your problem with Dannika isn't because she's a woman. It's because she threatens your leadership. That's the only thing that would make you act like such a coward."

Maddock roared as black waves rolled off him like storm clouds. "You insignificant child. I saved you. I made you. You would have been the next leader of the wolf clan. Perhaps the leader of multiple clans, but you continued to think with your dick. How pathetic. I thought you had put your human weakness behind you, but that's where I was mistaken. Not about Dannika—about you."

Raine's eyes narrowed. "The other clans see Dannika as a hope for the future. You would throw her away like yesterday's garbage."

Maddock's eyes turned black, but he brought his shadow warrior under control. "She is garbage. A mutation. When an animal in the wild is born blind or without a limb, its mother doesn't coddle it. She kills it because it is weak and will pass that weakness onto the next generation. That is the will of mother nature. Only the strong survive. You will learn that lesson the hard way."

"And who is going to teach it to me?" Raine sneered.

Maddock waved an erratic hand in the air. "Look at you. You're just as weak as Killian." He glanced at Steele. "I should've known he would be as weak as his brother."

Raine growled. "You knew about Killian and Steele. You blackmailed him into this merger. Steele's motives were genuine. He wanted to protect his clan and Dannika. He will die to give us a future. You seek only power. Your lack of ethics is surprising and disgusting. I wonder how long you have before you turn reaper?"

Maddock's maniacal laugh echoed over the clearing. "I took down a very satisfying four-point buck this morning. I am quite satisfied." He inclined his head toward Dannika. "She, on the other hand, barely eats, and her kills are days away from death. Targeting the weak, drinking stale blood. How long do you think it will be before she turns reaper?"

Raine's eyes darkened. "She has principles. That doesn't make her a reaper."

Maddock huffed. "I'm not sure I want to bother merging the clans. Steele couldn't handle one tiny female."

"You couldn't either, so you passed her off. At least Steele wasn't afraid of her. You are a coward," Raine said.

Black waves rolled off Maddock's shoulders. They licked the air with fury, seeking vengeance and death. "I should kill you."

Raine's eyes turned black as his alpha pushed to emerge, to annihilate the aggressor he once called a friend. Once called Father. "I challenge for leadership."

Maddock stepped back, smiling, his alpha under control. "I was hoping you would say that."

Raine had played into Maddock's hands. And out of everybody, Raine should've known better. Maddock couldn't attack Raine without losing face with the clan, but he had every right to kill Raine now.

"I guess you always get what you want."

Maddock shrugged. "It's a gift."

Dannika put her hand on Raine's back. It was meant as a comfort, but her shadow connected with his, infusing him with her will. Her faith. "Raine?"

Maddock held up his hand. "Raine has challenged for leadership. I accept. We will return to the wolf clan for a trial by combat." He looked at Dannika. "She will return with you. I want her present when you die."

CHAPTER 34



Dannika walked down the barely perceptible path in the woods. The air felt heavy and oppressive as the small party traversed the mountains. She treated her fear as she would any other discomfort she'd overcome in the past, pushing it out of her head and moving forward. She would leave dissecting it for another day. Raine needed her focused.

They moved through the forest, keeping to the shadows of the trees. While in human form, she continued to reach for the comfort of the darkness. She didn't want to think about Raine and the terrible fight ahead. One where he would die or kill the man he considered a father. A decision based on keeping her safe. Guilt had taken up permanent residence in her heart. Even here, she destroyed everything around her. When did she conclude that the shadow shifters were better off without her? That Maddock had been right all along.

She knew the answer. If Raine died, her heart would die with him. She'd asked him to wait to figure out her connection with Colton, but as they traveled toward the wolf clan, she realized it didn't matter. She loved Raine, body and soul. He was her choice, and he always would be. Her feelings for Colton were the love of a brother. A family member. Not a mate.

They were well into the woods when her shadow alerted her, a peculiar feeling that they were not alone. She halted. Raine and Colton stopped with her.

"Someone is coming," she whispered.

Raine smiled at her. "Very good."

Ryder coalesced from a shadow beside a large evergreen. He nodded to Dannika. "Your training is going well. You sensed me long before I arrived."

Her eyes dropped to a scuff mark on a boulder. "Maddock and Steele have come this way. Why are we traveling in human form?"

Ryder turned to Raine. "It is customary to avoid the shadows before a death match. Maddock and Raine will retain their human forms today until the fight."

Raine glanced at the swaying branches above their head. "You have come to advise me."

Ryder nodded. "Steele will do the same for Maddock. Though it's doubtful he will heed the advice. He has always sought power. He was the lesser of two evils when it came to leadership, but his aspirations are out of control. We can't leave him unchecked."

Raine rubbed his chin. "Making him feel weak, removing some of his power would be the most advantageous in a fight."

Ryder put a hand on Raine's shoulder. "Absolutely. He has a very inflated ego. If others were to see him as weak, he might make mistakes. The trouble is that perception. Maddock is a mirror. He can create many doppelgangers. Even though the replicas can't hurt you, they distract you from your goal. He will hit you numerous times before you realize which shadow is truly him."

"I will endeavour to make him doubt his power. That will be no easy feat." Raine's eyes narrowed on Ryder. "You wanted this death match. Your bear is even more excited than your shadow."

Ryder dropped his hand. "I admit, I've wanted to see a change of leadership for some time. Maddock's instability has escalated in the past couple years."

"Why didn't you deal with this sooner?" Raine asked.

“He never broke the shadow rules, so we had no reason to interfere, but his thirst for power has escalated and appears to be getting worse. It’s only a matter of time before he turns reaper.”

Dannika sucked in a breath. “You believe that?”

Ryder nodded. “We already had a plan in place for his... departure. When you transitioned, Steele and I had to alter our original plan. We wanted you out of wolf territory, but you were set on Raine.” He winked. “Raine’s impulsiveness has given us the opportunity to proceed. Provided he doesn’t die.”

Raine took Dannika’s hand, leading her down the trail. “Yeah, that would suck.”

Dannika smiled despite the situation. That was the beauty of Raine. He could make her smile. Laugh. Love. He was a miracle she wasn’t sure she could keep. While Ryder hummed, his excitement igniting the air, she prayed this wasn’t her last day with her mate.

They wound their way through the trees, a calm reprieve before the coming storm. When she believed she had her emotions under control, the forest gave way to the clearing.

The wolf clan members clustered around the ring. A physical representation of triumph or death.

Maddock’s gaze moved to them as they exited the trees. The clan members parted like a diverted river, allowing them to approach the clearing’s center. Their leader smirked, but his eyes were not on his opponent. They fixated on Dannika. He had declared that first fateful day he would kill her, and he hadn’t lied. His hatred rolled off him like droplets of gray smoke.

Raine let go of her hand and entered the ring alone. The clan members closed ranks, creating a human ring that allowed no escape.

He nodded to the man he once admired. “I take no pleasure in what will happen today.”

Maddock sneered. “That is your human weakness. I will revel in the death of a traitor to this clan.”

He unsheathed his reaper blade. Smoke swirled around the hilt, slithering up the steel. The runes imbued within the blade glowed before it turned black.

Dannika leaned toward Ryder. “Why did Maddock’s reaper blade turn black?”

“Maddock intends to kill Raine. He has signified this as a death match. Raine must accept the challenge.”

Raine unsheathed his blade. His shadow swarmed over the steel, turning it black.

Ryder let out a sigh of relief. “There’s no turning back for either of them now. One must die. Or both will.”

Her eyes flashed. “I love how you leave out these little details until it’s too late.”

Ryder’s jaw ticked, but he said nothing.

Maddock’s alpha shadow emerged, snarling, before Raine’s rose, assessing his prey. They circled one another, matching each other’s steps in a deadly ballet.

Maddock switched his reaper blade from his right hand to the left.

Dannika grabbed Ryder’s arm. “Don’t tell me Maddock is ambidextrous.”

Ryder frowned. “He is. It’s one advantage he has over Raine. That and the fact that he trained Raine himself and knows his weakness.” He looked her over. “Now that Raine has you, that weakness no longer applies.”

She swallowed. “What was Raine’s weakness?”

“He respected Maddock and wouldn’t oppose him. You changed everything, and that’s why Maddock hates you.”

Ice formed in her heart, but she didn’t let the feeling of betrayal show on her face. Raine needed to focus on the shadow trying to kill him.

Maddock moved without warning. He swung his blade toward Raine’s face.

Raine ducked, but not fast enough. The edge of the blade slid across his cheekbone, causing a crimson line to form. Red droplets streamed towards his chin. He jerked his head, evading Maddock's fist, and kicked hard, aiming for Maddock's kneecap. The resulting crack had Maddock howling before he dissolved and reformed at the edge of the ring.

Dannika turned her head. "I can't watch this."

Ryder turned her head back towards the fight. "This is our world, Dannika. Hunter or hunted. Every day is a new challenge. If you win, you live. If you lose, you're dead."

Maddock smiled in triumph before six identical Maddock shadows formed. They moved around, circling one another until it was impossible to tell which one was real. They whirled around Raine, leaving him in the center of certain death.

Raine's eyes flared before he whispered. "True self."

Five of the doppelgangers wavered before disappearing. Maddock roared in anger and disbelief.

Ryder leaned toward Dannika. "What is Raine's power?"

"The power of suggestion, but I thought you knew that. He's been using it to alter human memories for years."

Ryder smiled wickedly. "Maddock believed that was his secondary power. Raine is also a receiver. We believed that was his primary power."

Her eyes widened. "I didn't know Raine was a receiver. That he could send and receive messages in the shadows."

"He told you about his true power because you're his mate."

Dannika frowned. "I still don't understand how that destroyed the doppelgangers."

Ryder's eyes met hers. "Raine is a true alpha. He told Maddock to show his true self, and Maddock was powerless to stop it. Raine would never test this power on another shadow.

We don't experiment on one another. He couldn't know if it would work."

"So, no doppelgangers."

Ryder nodded. "Maddock is in for a fair fight for the first time in his life."

"But Maddock knew Raine had the power of suggestion."

"Yes, but a secondary power wouldn't be able to overpower an alpha. Maddock never considered that Raine downplayed his primary ability."

She shivered as a realization hit her. Raine could make anybody do as he wished. He could control her. "If he ever uses it on me, he's in for one hell of a fight."

"Dannika, he would never lie to you, and his power won't work on you. Mates are equal. Just remember, that goes both ways."

The men continued to circle one another. Maddock was fast. Faster than Raine. His blade bit into Raine's arm before Raine growled and evaded the next attack. Blood dripped to the ground, coating the grass.

She realized the cut on his face wasn't healing, neither was the wound on his arm. "Why isn't Raine healing? There's something different about the blades."

Ryder nodded. "The death match blades are cursed, a warning from the first priestess. The shadow that turns them black unleashes a spell. Once invoked, one challenger must die. Neither Raine nor Maddock will heal during the match."

She swallowed hard. "This is why you never wanted to challenge your father."

Ryder flinched. "Yes. Perhaps the day will come when a leader isn't required to kill his predecessor. When we can delegate our successor without death."

"God, I hope so," she whispered.

Raine swung his dagger in an upward motion, catching Maddock's cheek. Crimson rivulets streamed down his chin

before his blade punctured Raine's shoulder.

CHAPTER 35



Ryder's fingers bit into Dannika's arm as he restrained her, halting her attempt to enter the ring.

"Let me go!" she hissed.

"You can't enter the ring. It's a death sentence. Raine cannot stop Maddock from killing you."

Maddock shot her a contemptuous sneer before he launched at Raine. They growled and grappled one another before Raine sliced Maddock's thigh, wiping the snide smile from his face.

"They're evenly matched. This could take hours," she snapped.

Ryder glanced at the hundreds of clan members surrounding the ring. Every clan was represented, most of them in the clearing.

"No, Dannika. This could take days, even months. We're not human. Our demon souls are invigorated by fighting. They will even forgo feeding for a trial by combat."

Dannika blinked. "Months?"

Her eyes remained on the shadow alphas as they assessed one another for weakness. Maddock was larger and more experienced. He moved like water in a stream, flowing from one attack to the next. Raine was just as fluid, but he held a hesitancy that Maddock lacked. She couldn't help but wonder if there was a part of Raine that still respected and loved his

adopted father. Was Ryder wrong? Would Raine's reluctance end in his death?

"We shouldn't fight each other," she said. "There has to be another way."

Ryder shook his head. "There's no way out for either of them now, and there are no reapers to fight while a death match is underway."

Her eyes narrowed on Ryder. "Reapers don't attack during a death match?"

"They don't attack us. All clan members are here protecting the trial. The human world will take considerable losses during combat. It's unavoidable."

Dannika didn't bother to reply. Ryder had been a clan leader for centuries, and nothing she said would change his mind. She pushed her way through the crowd, leaving her mate. She trusted him. She had to. While the shadow shifters were willing to leave the human world to its own defenses, she wasn't.

She ran toward the tunnels, flicking the rune on her wrist to activate the map. It glowed in front of her, moving as she did, perfect and pristine. She would've kissed Darren had the shy cartographer been there. Like everyone else, he was watching the trials, leaving the caves empty. That worked for her, considering what she was about to do.

The room, surrounded by gray rock, looked like the rest, but according to the map, the dark pathway had a direct route to the cell in cougar clan territory. She studied the map before merging with her shadow. She'd promised Raine she wouldn't travel the pathways alone, not yet, but that was a promise she couldn't keep.

Her body dissolved, bones cracking, tissue ripping as she entered the shadow slipstream. The dark mass that had once been her body moved at incredible speed, making her feel as if her skin was being peeled away layer by layer. It was difficult to focus on the intricate curves and connections of the shadow pathway, but in seconds, she emerged inside the cave.

The light cell illuminated the room, leaving only one corner with a shadow for her to enter. She coalesced within the darkness, letting the light burn her with its purity.

Gavil stood up when she stepped from the shadows. "Hello, little girl."

She huffed. "I'm not a girl. I'm a woman who would kick your ass given the chance."

Gavil laughed. "You have no idea who or what you are. You will weep at the feet of our king before your life ends in pain and misery. But not before you watch the humans from your former life die, screaming your name for the destruction you have caused them."

Her head cocked to the side. "You seem to know a lot about me, considering you're just a pawn in Killian's game."

Gavil's eyes flared red. "I am not a pawn. I will be a lieutenant in the king's new army, feeding on the blood of the innocent. Soldiers will fear me, and virgins will beg for my favour."

Dannika burst out laughing. "Oh, my God. I thought Killian was deluded. You could start your own reaper version of Looney Tunes. They make special jackets for people like you. They're white and have really long arms."

Gavil punched the wall of the light cell. His blood streaked the glass as he hissed at her. "You deceitful wench. I will laugh when the king kills you and reaps his revenge on the human world."

Dannika pretended to yawn. "Boring and unimaginative. I seriously doubt you know anything about Killian's plans."

"I know he wants you and will do anything to acquire you," Gavil said.

Detecting no lie, she put her finger on the exterior of the cell, tracing it as she circled the structure. Gavil's eyes remained locked on her.

"What is Killian's interest in me?"

Gavil's lip twitched. "You will find out soon enough."

Her smile was fake, and Gavil knew it. “Do you want out of that cell?”

His lip curled, exposing his fangs. “Of course, but I assume my freedom comes at a price.”

She closed her hand over the door handle. “It does.”

His eyes flickered with the red fire. “How do you know I won’t just kill you when you release me?”

“Because you didn’t lie. Killian wants me alive, and if you don’t do as I say, then I will die, and Killian will torture you in every way imaginable.”

The reaper stepped back with wariness in his eyes. “You would never trust me free of this cell. I would kill every shadow around you.”

Her eyes darkened. “But not me.”

Gavil’s jaw ticked. “Not you. The king has plans for you. I would whip you, beat you, within an inch of your life, but I will bring you to the king. You will be his lapdog. A pretty pet licking his feet, where you belong.”

She huffed. “You’re pathetic and unimaginative, but I need you to deliver a message.”

Gavil’s eyes widened. “I can do that. Is it for Killian?”

“Yes.”

Venom dripped from his lengthened fangs. “I promise to deliver your message if you set me free.”

“Your promises don’t mean shit, but you won’t risk Killian’s wrath if you don’t deliver this message.”

Gavil growled, but he nodded.

Dannika opened the door, deactivating the lights.

Her back slammed against the ground when Gavil attacked, evicting the breath from her lungs. He snapped at her with venom-laced fangs. His hands circled her neck, restricting her airways.

As hard as she found shadow life, she would never give up on Raine. She would die to protect him, but her will was breaking. Her body was weak, with her repeated attempts to stall feeding. She couldn't hold out much longer, but she could do this.

She kneed him in the balls, jumping back when he rolled off her. "Raine and Maddock are in a death match. I'm going to interrupt the fight. Invite Kilian to watch me die."

Her body dissolved as she entered the shadow pathway, the wrenching pain welcoming as her skin flayed.

CHAPTER 36



Shadows had an eidetic memory. Each time Dannika navigated the dark pathway, it became easier. She'd made the trip between the cougar clan's territory and the caves that were home to the wolves several times. As she approached the mouth of the shadow, she slowed, controlling her exit.

She hovered in the darkness as her skin reformed and her hair sprouted from her scalp. She ran her hand through her hair before stepping from the shadow pathway. The pride in her newfound ability was interrupted.

Pain crushed her skull as she fell forward, clutching the dirt. She'd purposely taken a pathway that led her to the exterior of the caves. The shouts and growls from the combat ring echoed in the air, drowning out the snarls behind her.

She rolled onto her back as Gavil coalesced behind her. "Aren't you supposed to be delivering a message?"

Gavil's lips curled. "I did. Killian will be along shortly to collect you."

Her hands clawed into the soft dirt at the base of the rocks. "You're a receiver."

Ryder had told her shadows could possess multiple abilities. She didn't ask if Gavil had more than one. She cursed under her breath.

Venom dripped from Gavil's fangs when he smiled. "I didn't lie. I delivered your message and now we can have a little fun before the king arrives."

He lunged at her.

Dannika grasped the dirt and flung it in his face. He grabbed her ankle as she scrambled to get away.

He was on her, blanketing her body with his as she attempted to get traction on the soft earth. Her elbow whipped back, catching him in the chin. The crack echoed in her ear as he screamed. The momentum forced him to roll off her back.

She stood looking down at Gavil while his cheekbone realigned. “You’re still weak from the light cell. Coming here was a stupid mistake.”

Gavil held his chin, slurring his words as he spoke. “Killian will come for you, and he will drain you until you beg for mercy. You will wish for death, but he won’t give it to you.”

He was up so quickly, Dannika didn’t have time to defend herself. Ryder coalesced behind the distracted reaper, stabbing him in the heart with his reaper blade.

Dannika covered her ears as the high-pitched scream echoed through the air. Members of every clan appeared around them, their eyes focused on Gavil as he withered and died.

She watched in fascination as Gavil’s color returned. His red eyes were a pale blue. Beautiful. Restored. But still dead.

“Is that normal? I didn’t see the reaper’s body after I killed that first time. His screech rendered me unconscious.”

Ryder nodded. “A reaper blade kills the demon soul, leaving only the human. We are purified in death.”

Growls echoed around them before red eyes coalesced out of the darkness.

Dannika spun around as more and more reapers appeared, attacking the closest shadow shifter to them. “We’re surrounded.”

Two reapers threw Ryder back twenty feet before they launched at him. His shadow warrior emerged, snarling and biting his adversaries.

An icy chill skated down her back, making the hairs on her skin stand up. He was there. The only reaper she feared.

Killian coalesced in front of her, his smile highlighted by glowing red eyes. “I had planned a more palatable reunion, Dannika.”

She backed away. “You don’t even know me. I never met you before becoming a shadow. Why the stalker behaviour?”

He glanced at the reapers attacking the shadow clan members. He appeared bored, as if war around him was an everyday event. “That’s true, but I know you. I had planned to introduce you to the reaper clan myself, but you fell into Maddock’s hands.” His eyes blazed. “I gave Maddock immortality and he still couldn’t control one tiny female. He deserves his fate.”

Dannika sucked in a stunted breath. “Maddock is a reaper?”

Killian turned back to her. “Almost. I gave him my blood, strengthening him, giving him the ability to kill Raine, but he hasn’t made his first human kill.”

Her lips pursed. “Then he’s not immortal. Raine can kill him.”

Killian’s eyes flickered with red fire. “Your wolf mate will die.”

With her attention on Killian, she hadn’t realized Ryder had disposed of the reapers fighting him. The piercing screams surrounding the caves all blended together. He charged Killian in his massive bear form, snarling as he took the reaper to the ground.

Killian’s shadow warrior burst forth with his claws extended. He punctured Ryder’s chest. The bear howled in pain before jumping back and assessing his attacker.

The second bear erupted from the melee of fights in the clearing. He was almost as big as Ryder as he positioned himself by his leader. Her heart did a little flip, and she recognized it for what it was: pride. Stern was born to be a soldier, and he continued that quest regardless of his form.

Killian glanced between the two bears and the reapers dying around him before his eyes locked with hers. “This isn’t over. You belong to me.”

He dissolved, entering the shadow pathway.

Around her, every living reaper disappeared, following their king.

Ryder resumed his human form, followed by Stern. He guided Dannika to the ring, now surrounded by the shadow warriors.

Every shadow knew the truth: Maddock was a traitor. The members of every clan positioned themselves at the pathway entrances. There was no escape.

Maddock’s eyes flickered red. “It’s much better when I don’t have to hide the truth. We will all be reapers. We will rule the humans.”

Raine hissed. “You traitor. How could you do this to humanity? Your mate was one of them.”

Maddock growled. “Like every human, she was weak. We will breed them. Feed on them. They are at the bottom of the food chain and must learn their place.”

Raine huffed. “You may have the blood of a reaper, but you haven’t made your first kill, or you would’ve lost your wolf. It’s dying, but it’s still there. And now that it knows that you betrayed it, it will aid in your destruction.”

“No!”

Raine’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Submit to me.”

Dannika’s heart squeezed. Raine wasn’t talking to Maddock’s shadow. He was talking to the dying wolf within Maddock’s body, the single thread of decency left in the leader. The one tossed away as if it had been worth nothing.

Maddock’s form rippled as his shadow forged an inner battle. He went to his knees as smoke and fur fought beneath his skin.

Raine held up his black reaper blade. “To the wolf, that was once my leader. My friend. My father. I release you.”

He stabbed the blade down into Maddock’s heart, pulling it out quickly.

The high-pitched scream mixed with the howl of an angry wolf. A single red tear dripped down Raine’s cheek as Maddock’s eyes changed from red to gold. The wolf looked up to the future alpha. “Be a strong leader. You made me proud.”

Raine arced his blade, slicing through Maddock’s neck. Maddock’s head bounced on the ground before his dead eyes focused on his former home.

The wolf clan members dropped to their knees with their heads bowed.

Dannika leaned towards Ryder. “What is going on?”

“The wolf clan is recognizing Raine’s authority as clan leader,” Ryder said.

Raine resumed his human form and held out his hand to her.

She glanced around the kneeling clan. “Am I supposed to kneel?”

Sweat beaded on her brow and she recognized the emotion: fear. Not that he would hurt her; that he would rule her.

Raine’s lips twitched. “As much as I wish it were otherwise, you would never follow my orders. You are, however, quite reasonable and will do anything for your family. That’s what this clan is. Our family. We will run our clan together, and when the time is right, we will pass it down to our children without a death match. You are my partner. My mate.”

She swallowed hard. The wolf clan members looked at her. With hope. With anticipation. They longed for a new way of life, and she was the only one who could give it to them.

“How do we plan to accomplish those goals?”

Raine shook his head. "I don't know. There are no guarantees, but if the clans work together, we can find a way."

She made her way to Raine's side and took his hand. "I like the idea of working together."

Ryder looked at Stern as he resumed his human form. "You are an exceptional fighter for a newling."

Stern growled at him. "You call me that again and I will challenge you."

Ryder's smile brightened. "I like him, Dannika. You have given my clan a tremendous gift. Stern will be my second. My chosen son. His alpha is unformed, but I am confident he will develop quickly with my guidance. The bear clan has an official alliance with the wolf clan."

Dannika wasn't sure who was more shocked, her or Stern. "You'll take good care of him, right?"

Raine whispered in her ear, "Ryder just made Stern the heir apparent for the bear clan and ousted Stern's alpha. No one will mess with him. That you turned him also works to his advantage."

Steele nodded to Ryder. "You have made a good choice. The cougar clan also voices its alliance with both the wolf and the bear clans. We will unite to fight the reaper incursion. Killian is much more powerful than we expected. It will take all the clans to depose him."

The grunts of derision were from cougar clan members only.

Colton stepped in front of his father. "I will continue the investigation into Killian's past. Our connection to the reaper leader will not make our clan weak."

The cougar clan bowed its head in silence. While Steele had lost some confidence with his clan, Colton had not. They would follow the next alpha.

At the leaders' request, the clan members dispersed back to their own clans.

Colton joined Raine and Dannika in the center of the clearing.

He ran his hand through his hair. “We need to find a solution to the death match soon. Steele raised me in the old traditions. Our clan knows no other way. Some of our clan has lost faith in him. He will ask me to replace him. He’s a loyal leader, despite everything that has happened.”

Dannika put her hand on Colton’s arm. “We’ll find a way to make you leader without a death match.”

Colton gave a curt nod. “I hope so.”

He was about to turn away when Raine held out his hand.

“Thank you for your help in protecting Dannika. She is my world, and she’s fond of you. Don’t make any rash decisions, and if the Bokor contacts you, come to us before you answer his call.”

Colton shook his hand. “Be good to her.”

“I will protect my mate with my life.”

Colton dissolved into the shadows.

Dannika nibbled her thumbnail before Raine guided it away from her lip. “I’ve been thinking about Colton and my feelings toward him.”

Raine’s body stiffened. “Your feelings?”

She smiled. “He feels like a brother. Is that weird?”

Raine arched an eyebrow. “No. I like him as a brother.”

They both laughed as Raine took her hand and led her to their room.

He made love to her slowly, conveying without words what she meant to him. There were no lies between them. When the shadows connected, it was as if they were one soul. One being. Dannika and Raine against the world, united in the singular purpose of protecting humanity.

She lay her head on his chest as they caught their breath, drawing tiny circles on his stomach.

He kissed the back of her head. “I want to have a mating ceremony. Like the one our ancestors had before the demon invasion.”

Dannika tipped her head up. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

He smiled like a schoolboy. “Yes. I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you. That never changed.”

Her eyes searched his face, but with their shadows connected, there was nothing there she couldn’t feel. His adoration was absolute.

“I will mate you, Raine. I will be your wife, and we will bring the clans together. Killian is planning something. I can feel it. We need our allies.”

Raine slipped his hand behind her neck and kissed her, tender strokes of his tongue against the seam of her lips. “You’re right, but for now, I wish to savor this miracle.”

EPILOGUE



*K*illian coalesced beside a large evergreen. The wolf clan removed the dead from the clearing and buried them in the forest, returning them to the land. How pathetic. They went through the motions with no clue their world was about to change.

He turned when he felt the shadow pathway open and his son emerge. “Did you get it?”

His son nodded. “Yes. It was where Maddock said it would be.”

Killian returned his gaze to the clearing. “Maddock was weak, an unfortunate, but necessary sacrifice. We are ready.”

“We have everything except Dannika’s blood.”

Killian’s eyes flickered. Venom dripped from his incisors as he smiled. “Leave that to me. The time of the shadows is coming to an end.”

The End



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Tia Didmon writes exotic paranormal romance and is happily married with three kids and one fur baby. While she calls Vancouver Island, Canada home. She loves to travel and can usually find a zipline along the way. She loves to connect with her readers as well as share her favorite meme's. You can check those out on her Facebook page or Instagram.

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