

### Chapter 3 Mark of Shadows

"Would you do me the honors?" Silas bowed, extending his hand to Lenore. She lifted her head and looked around, trying to find her sister.

"Weren't you dancing with my sister?"

Silas chuckled as he grabbed her hand, pulling her into him. "I did. And she's a fantastic dance partner. I don't see why everyone fears her. She seems too kind."

Lenore felt him slowly begin to sway with her to the melodic, slow music. "Then why are you here with me now?" She watched as he looked at her questioningly.

"I didn't realize that I was selecting a partner for the night. It was just a dance, not a proposal." He chuckled, tilting his head to the side. "I don't see you still attached to Luther." He shrugged, and the immediate disgust on her lips made him smirk. "I want to get to know you both. Something tells me you're not as sweet and kind as they say."

She shrugged with a small smile as she scanned over everyone. What he said made sense, but she wasn't sure if dancing with him would bother Elena. She used her connection to locate her. She was walking out to the garden with Aba. Inwardly, she relaxed. No one else existed when Aba was around, and she was in good hands. She could now enjoy herself as well.

"Well, something tells me there's a reason you haven't been to any of our events before." She watched as his eyes twinkled at her.

"Do you trust everyone in your kingdom?" He asked casually. He noticed her confused face right before he twirled her around. "Because I don't. I'm quite certain there is a mole here. Someone who is working against the kingdom."

"What would they gain from that?" Lenore couldn't even imagine someone betraying her grandfather. He was the most just and fair king the vampires had ever had. Why would someone rise against him?

"The forest sometimes whispers its secrets. The war of the apocalypse is coming. The vampires have a choice to make—to side with the demon king, or side with the fairy queen. Basically, choose to live on earth under the demon king, or go to Elysium and be ruled by fairies." He pulled Lenore close. His hot breath tickled her neck as his lips brushed over her ear. "There are some purists that are against Elysium. Your grandfather has not made his stance public yet."

"Even if my grandparents decided to stay here, they wouldn't fall under the demon king's rule. They would fight for their kingdom."

"A battle they wouldn't win. Those who remain will have to hide in the shadows."

Lenore nodded her head. "This is true, but it wouldn't be for eternity. The world won't be lost forever. I have faith, and I believe that, in the end, the demon king will fall."

"So do I." He smiled at her. "But not everyone does. And some of them live right beneath your nose. Why don't my people visit? Because we are not purists by any means. My great grandfather was a specter hound who belonged to the unseelie court. A dark fairy who fell in love with my grandmother. Many of the vampires in my clan are not pure blood. We don't feel comfortable exposing ourselves to the kingdom." His eyes softened as he pulled back to look at her.

"I didn't come here to see the vampire princesses. I came here to see the fairy princesses. I don't fear Elena, because I feel her, just like I feel you. Our loyalties are to the fairies. We know of your fate, and we've decided to stay behind in the shadows. We will support the princess that stays on earth and help keep her safe. Warn your grandfather. He needs to be prepared, and—" He paused, his eyes pinned to hers. "I think you and Elena are needed to leave this place. Especially Elena. I can see the way they look at her. She will be targeted."

"We are the vampire princesses, Silas. We might also be fairy royalty, but there is also Kendra. There is no one else for the vampires. However, I have to admit, I do worry about Elena's safety here. My parents are gone. I need to wait until they return—"

"That is the problem. With your parents gone, you two are more vulnerable. Especially Elena, because her guardian isn't always present. Perhaps she needs a new guardian."

There was a slight growl in his voice as his lips curled up.

"That is Elena's decision. She loves her guardian, and their relationship is their business. It's up to her to put an end to it, or correct her guardian." Lenore planned on speaking to Aba later in private. He needed to hear what Silas had told her. Would they try to hurt their princesses? They knew Elena was often alone. If they wanted to rise against them, she would be their first target. She pursed her lips together as she stared at Silas. What he said made sense, but this man was a stranger to her. She also had to remember that he was the one trying to get them out of the kingdom. Maybe he was the potential threat.

So many thoughts and questions now raced through her mind. Inside, her light began to burn with anger. If anyone tried to harm her sister, she would eviscerate them.

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"How are all of my cousins and family doing? Are they having a hard time with all of Justice's kids?" Elena giggled, knowing how much of a handful they were.

"Cody and Tristan have put them to work. They put them into a training camp. Micah's children are there for it as well. Except for Fiona." Fiona was Micah's daughter and Kendra's guardian. Not that Kendra needed a guardian. Both Micah and Justice had six children. So there were ten rambunctious kids under Tristan and Cody's care.

"I want to spend more time with all of them before I'm not able to." A soft smile rested on her lips as she looked up at the moon.

"We don't know when everything is going to happen. It could be one hundred years from now, or longer. Besides, we don't know which one of you will be going to Elysium."

She shot Aba a side gaze as she tilted her head. "I think we all know who it will be. But you're right. We don't know when. It could even happen tomorrow." She pursed her lips together. "I'm sorry that your fate is connected to mine. If you want to be freed from it—"

"Elena!" His voice thundered at her.

"You'll be locked away from everyone, Aba. You visit Elysium a lot, and you wouldn't be able to anymore." There were times Elena felt she would be better off alone. She could hide in the shadows that always welcomed her. But she was lying to herself. She needed Aba on a level she couldn't understand. It felt like it was so much more than him being her guardian.

His face looked emotionless as his dark eyes studied her. "Elena." There was a softness in his tone as he placed his hand on her head, a gesture that ate her up inside. This wasn't one of a lover, but one of a friend. Something family or a big brother would do. So this was how her Great Aunt Rhea felt when she was first around Uncle Levi. "You're forgetting something very important. I could never be locked away from you. There is no one who is more important to me than you. No one in Elysium. No one in the universe."

"Well, I call bullshit on that," a smug voice said, as a tall, muscular man stepped out of the bushes. "If I was her guardian, I would never leave her side. We'd even share the same bed, plus bodily fluids."

Aba growled, turning confrontationally to the man. "Bernard, don't test my patience."

"Lena, darling, you know I want to possess you in every way possible. No one is more important to me than you. See?" He looked at Aba smugly. "Now, mine is believable."

"You are about to become glue." Aba growled as he pulled Elena to his side. He began to raise his aura, making the kelpie grimace, taking a step back.

"You're such a damn bully. You see her as your charge. Well, I see her as a woman. You don't have a claim over her!" Bernard planted his feet, holding his stance.

"You've made your feelings clear. She knows how you feel. Clearly she isn't interested."

"She just needs more time. Don't you, beautiful? I'll be everything you need and more. You'll never share a cold bed with me. I'll bring you to new highs—"

Aba let out a roar, raising his fairy barrier, which made Bernard smirk.

"I told you before, I can endure something like this. I am a kelpie, part of the high dark fairy court. And you are a bear! You are not a fairy. I have more right to be around her than you!"

"I am her guardian!"

"Not her mate! Her mate will have more rights to her than you, so step aside."

This time the lethal snarl that left Aba's throat was more vicious. His eyes narrowed on Bernie, and Elena decided she needed to stop their bickering.

"Enough! Bernie, we are just friends. Aba, let's not kill one of the few friends I actually have." She smiled, nudging Aba with her shoulder.

"Baby, you don't need anyone else but me. I'll be here for you around the clock."

"Maybe we should move to the desert," Aba smirked, as he looked down at Elena.

"I'd follow her wherever she goes. Even if it means torture for me—which I'm into." He winked at Elena as Aba let out a loud, agitated sigh. Bernie glared at Aba, straightening his composure. "You're her guardian, and she's the most important thing to you, right?"

"That's right." There was cool crispness in Aba's voice.

"I've never heard of a guardian leaving his charge so much. The most important person in the world to you, and yet you leave her. We're not the same, bear. I would never leave her. I'm always around."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Or maybe I know exactly what I am talking about. Remember, I have connections in Elysium too. I know who you're seen with. I know of the long walks through the forest and around the lake—"

"Like I said, you don't know what you're talking about."

Hearing what Bernard was saying made a wave of nausea hit Elena. She felt like her chest was being squeezed in a vice. Because she wanted him. Aba was her guardian, but he wasn't hers. No matter how many times she told herself that, it didn't matter. She already knew who Aba was with. Bernard didn't need to say. It was Beryl. The exotic beauty could captivate any man's attention. It wasn't fair. She could have anyone!

Elena felt a strange ripple in the shadows. Her veins felt like ice as the shadows retreated from her momentarily, only to return a few seconds later. Then, silence. As if the shadows held a secret they couldn't tell her.

A loud scream was heard, followed by a commotion from the banquet hall. She turned and ran towards the sound, with Aba right next to her. There was a crowd circling something. People moved swiftly as panicked voices filled the air.

"What happened?" The Vampire King asked, moving forward.

"Stand back, Sire!" One of the guards yelled, standing protectively in front of the king.

"Keep your distance until we know what this is."

As Elena made her way closer, she could see a man lying on the ground. He was shivering wildly, with his eyes closed. There was a strange, dark patch on his arm, like a shadow resting on him.

"We were just dancing, and a shadow crawled up his arm. Then he dropped to the ground." A woman cried hysterically as people began to move away from Elena.

Shit. All eyes were now moving to Elena, looking at her as if she was the plague.

"Elena?" Alaric turned to look at her as she shook her head.

"I didn't do this."

"It was a shadow! Who else controls the shadows?!" The woman cried as she knelt next to the man, who was being wrapped in blankets.

"Take him to the infirmary and have the medical team evaluate him," he said to the guards.

Elena watched as the man was lifted and carried away. She felt Aba's presence behind her. The icy glares she was receiving from her own people had her stepping back into his protection.

"Why are you attacking your own people?" Luther asked, as his poisonous eyes almost smirked at her. The crowd began to whisper in agreement, quickly becoming hostile.

"I didn't," Elena whispered, looking around at everyone in shock.

"I was with her the whole time. We've been outside." Aba's voice commanded the room with an authority that wasn't his.

"You would say anything to protect her," A voice spoke out.

"I don't have to. I can easily protect her from every single person in this room." Aba gripped onto Elena's shoulder pulling her into his chest, all but challenging anyone to try to harm her.

"What happened?!" Lenore rushed to her sister's side with Silas.

"Lord Trave was attacked by shadows!" A woman whimpered out. "There is a shadow mark on him."

"He was minding his own business dancing with his mate when your sister attacked him." Luther's voice dripped with disgust.

"My sister would never attack anyone for no reason." Lenore moved in front of Elena.

I didn't touch him, Elena whispered through their mind link.

"Furthermore, whatever happened wasn't because of my sister. Be careful with your accusations. All of you. I won't tolerate anyone falsely accusing my sister." As Lenore's voice rose in volume, the light in the room began to restore. Bands of neon colors spun in a tight circle on the ceiling, as an intimidating display unfolded amidst the chaos.

"That's enough." King Alaric's voice was powerful but controlled. "This matter will be looked into. The party is over. Everyone please return to your homes while we investigate this further."

Not another word was uttered after the king's words. The vampires all made their way out, though their side glances and glares did not go unnoticed by Elena. They would all go and talk in private and discuss how horrible she is. She had always felt like an outsider, but tonight proved she really was one. This was where she lived—but it was not her home.