

Chapter 4 Dark Magic

"You can leave as well," Alaric said, looking at Silas.

"Actually, I asked for him to stay. He has some concerns, and this could be linked to them." Lenore watched as her grandfather shook his head.

"I understand, and we will speak after this. Right now, I need a moment alone with my family," he said. Ashton and Colton ran into the room, both looking a bit disheveled, running their hands through their hair to make themselves more presentable.

"What happened?" Colton asked.

"They said Elena hurt someone." Ashton looked over at Elena's wounded face. "Hey, I don't believe it, Laney. I believe in you. I was just relaying what I heard." He walked up to her, and Aba wrapped her tightly in his embrace.

"Who do you think you're protecting her from? She's our kin." Colton chuckled as he reached out to give her hand a reassuring squeeze. The overprotective bear wasn't about to let him get closer than that.

"The perimeter check came back all clear." Joel jogged into the room, his eyes watching as Silas left through the large double doors.

"Mira," Willa said, and the banshee manifested in front of them.

"It's all clear, Your Majesty. You are free to speak."

"We will move to the oce. Keep watch, Mira, and you know what to do if anyone comes too close," Alaric said, as she bowed.

"Of course."

The banshee vanished, and the group quietly followed Alaric and Willa through two sets of doors. Aba kept Elena tight against his side, with a feral look in his eyes. Only Lenore moved closer to her sister without fear of the beast ready to explode.

"Elena, are you alright?" Lenore whispered quietly next to her. She watched as her sister gave her a small nod, but she could see that she was shaken.

"Alright, now that we're alone, what happened?" Alaric's gaze landed on Elena, and her lips parted in shock. This was when the room began to shake. The tremble seemed to come from the earth, only it wasn't. It was from Aba's growl.

"How dare you!" Aba snarled between clenched teeth, stopping as Elena lifted her hand up to his chest.

"We already explained that I was outside when he was attacked. So why are you asking me what happened?" Elena's voice was firm and unwavering, though her insides were shattered.

"Elena, it isn't what you're thinking," Willa said gently. "We're willing to cover for you. We're your grandparents and we just want to protect you, but we need to know the truth."

"It's exactly how it sounds, then!" Colton growled, taking a stance near Elena. "It sounds like you don't believe her."

"Mira, check the inrmary. I want to know his status and their diagnosis." Alaric pinched his brows together with his fingers, then looked at Elena. "It isn't that I don't believe you. I just need the complete truth."

"You were already given that." Aba left no room for argument in his tone. He rubbed his hand over Elena's arm, gripping his fingers into her skin. After hearing how all the vampires immediately suspected her, it had him second guessing if this was the safest place for her. They all knew she wasn't the favorite, but she was still a vampire princess.

"I know you plan to speak to Silas later, but he informed me that they are worried about an uprising. A group of vampire purists who don't want to go to Elysium."

"We were never going to make the vampires move to Elysium," Alaric said simply, with a shrug. "Willa and I discussed it, and we have already decided our fate. Those who wish to go to Elysium can, and will be under Derek and Lucy's rule. However, those who wish to stay can as well. We are not leaving our home. No matter what this may mean for us in the future."

"The demon king will—" Lenore began, but Willa interrupted.

"We are well aware of everything. We know what our choice means. This is our decision. However, I think we need to make our decision public in light of what you're saying." Willa looked over at Alaric, who nodded his head.

Mira appeared in the room, hovering in the air. "Your majesties, the man is having difficulty maintaining his body temperature. They have stabilized him, but only with the help of magic. He will have to remain at the inrmary under constant care until a cure is found, unless it fades on its own."

"What do they think it is?" Willa asked, stepping closer to Alaric.

"With the mark and the residue tests, there is no doubt. This was done by shadow magic." Mira's voice was calm as she delivered the news.

"Shadowbenders are rare. Then there are those who can use shadows but aren't benders. Same with lightbenders and light users. They are practically unheard of. Can a difference be seen between someone who bends and someone who can use the shadows?" Alaric asked, with his brows knitted together.

"There is no way for us to determine this." Mira's voice remained emotionless and detached. Her true thoughts were often a mystery. However, she was loyal and honest. And if she was asked for her opinion, she wouldn't hesitate to give it. A true, honest opinion that wouldn't be influenced by any biases.

"Can we avoid mentioning what caused this? Mira, I want your input on this matter," Willa said, forcing the banshee to respond.

"Unavoidable." Mira lowered herself to the ground. "There are already too many blaming Elena. Covering up that it was done by shadows will undoubtedly look like you are protecting her. It is too late for that. This news has already gotten out. The man's mate is hysterical, and has already conrmed to others that it was done by shadows. They will blame Elena, regardless."

"We need to announce that it was done by shadow magic, but insist it wasn't by Elena." Willa looked at Alaric, who was frowning.

"I want the guards on full alert. Mira, your focus is on guarding Elena and Lenore. Joel, use the elite guards, and put them on full alert as well. Ashton, I want you to be a constant escort wherever they go. I know Colton and Aba will be doing this as well. Should we contact Derek?" Alaric looked over at Willa for her answer.

"Please don't do that." Elena nally spoke up, making everyone look at her. "When have my parents ever taken time for themselves? When will they ever have the chance for something like this again?" She looked over at Lenore, who nodded with a smile.

"Calling them back now is premature. We don't know anything, and our parents will not have a chance like this again. Elena is right. Let them have a moment for themselves." Lenore backed her sister up with this decision. Their parents would rush home immediately, and it all might be for nothing.

"I'll wait to contact them for now. We do need to address the big issue. Elena didn't use her shadows. This means someone else did, and most likely is trying to have the blame pinned on Elena. Lenore, please bring Silas here for a talk. Elena, why don't you go to your room to rest. I can send Ashton with you—"

"No need. I'll be taking Elena to my room."

Elena's heart began to beat wildly. She would be sleeping with Aba? Inwardly, she squealed. Even if she was suspected of attacking one of her own, sleeping with Aba trumped everything.

"The obvious place to look for her would be her chambers. I think we can argue that not all the guards can be trusted. The girls can share my room until we have a better understanding of what's going on."

"We will bunk up in there too. Safety in numbers," Ashton said, nodding over at Colton.

Elena's heart fell to her toes, along with her dream of a romantic night with Aba. She couldn't believe how differently they thought. She had imagined a night full of whispers and kisses. It was obvious that there wasn't the slightest inkling of romance on his mind. His only concern was her well-being.

"Ashton, stay with Lenore. I would appreciate it if you would also stay with Lenore, Colton, but I have no authority to give you orders."

"You don't have to ask. I'm going to protect my family." Colton moved next to Lenore, who shook her head.

"I think it would be better for Elena to have the extra protection."

"Aba is a guardian, and he is more than capable of protecting Elena on his own," Alaric said thoughtfully, as he looked over at the brooding man. It was clear the guardian was agitated, and it wouldn't take much to provoke his anger.

"I have Misha."

"That you do, but she isn't quite the same. We don't know what's going on here. Because of that, you girls will have extra protection at all times. I won't budge on this."

Lenore and Elena both glanced at the other. Extra protection didn't just mean their family. It meant he was sending his personal elite guards to watch over them like hawks, ready to swoop in and ght at a moment's notice. All the royal families were given their own set of elite guards. They were vampires who were loyal to their assigned royal person above all others.

The elite guards were blended into the normal guards. That way they could pick up on treachery faster. They were well trained, and much harder to give the slip. Plus, while they knew most of the elite guards, there were a couple their grandfather kept secret, even from them. The rumor was that one of them lived in the vampire community as a normal citizen.

The group left the room, parting ways. Aba kept a firm, protective grip on Elena as he all but corralled her towards his room, something she had dreamed about but with different intentions in mind. As they walked across the banquet hall, she suddenly planted her feet.

She glanced to the side, where she had seen the man lying on the ground. She recalled the moment she felt the shadows retreat from her, as if they were being summoned by someone else.

Aba pressed against her back, urging her to continue forward. When she refused, a low growl sounded in his chest. This enraged Elena.

"Who do you think you're growling at?"

"A stubborn princess who isn't going to safety."

"Oh? Hmm, that's right, I forgot. I take orders from you. No, wait a minute. I don't!"

A dark, rumbling chuckle lled the air as Aba put his hand on her shoulder. "My job is to protect you. Protecting you goes above your wants. We can talk in my room. It's safe in there, and soundproof."

"I'm not leaving yet."

"Elena, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. Either we walk to my room or I will drag you there."

Her cheeks ained with anger and excitement. There was a part of her that recognized his protectiveness and wanted to obey him. But there was the other part that refused to be ordered around. She wanted to investigate where this man was supposedly attacked. Instead of doing the sensible thing, she did the one thing she knew she shouldn't. She turned her shadows on Aba. The shadows slithered around him like a rope holding him in place. She took a step back as his dark eyes locked onto hers.

He rolled his shoulders back, tilting his head side to side. "The hard way it is, then. Good. I need to let out this frustration." The way his voice thundered sent a shiver deep inside of her—not one she was afraid of, but one that lled her with desire.

"I need to see something!" She snapped as she took a side step away from him. Her shadows wouldn't be able to hold him. She would need to act fast. Quickly, she ran to where the man had been lying, landing on her knees. The slit on dress rode up her side, exposing her bottom half. But she didn't have time to worry about that.

It was faint, but there was a residual energy that was left behind. Her fingertips felt the icy sting of something foreign, something mixed into the shadows that forced them to comply. It was dark magic, but from what? And by who?

The loud hiss of the shadows rang out only a moment before his strong hand bit into her arm. He lifted her up as if she were a feather. Floating her into the air and onto his shoulder.

"Aba! Put me down. I'll walk!"

"Too late for that." He stomped angrily across the room.

"If this is consensual foreplay, I'll turn my head in the other direction. Otherwise, I do not approve of the way you are handling her." Mira appeared in front of Aba, her eyes narrowed at him in a challenge.

"Mira, just let me do my job and keep her safe." They had a history together. They had both been soul servents to the job at one point. He knew that Aba had a short fuse when it came to the royal family, and it was best not to test it.

Elena felt her cheeks burning as Aba slowly slid her down to the oor, keeping a firm grip around her waist. He then pulled her along, almost dragging her feet, which struggled to keep up at his pace without running. He opened his door with force, roughly stepping inside with her before slamming it shut.

His chest heaved in anger as his dark eyes followed her into the room. "We have no idea who the enemy is, Elena, and—"

"And you think that it was appropriate for you to handle me that way?" She folded her arms across her chest angrily.

He snorted, "When you act like a child—"

"I was investigating before the evidence was gone! It wasn't a shadowbender." She interrupted him as she stared at her fingers. "It was magic that manipulated the shadows. I don't know what kind of magic, though. Maybe if you wouldn't have acted like a caveman, I could have traced it—"

"That's the problem, Elena! You want to find out who did this, and then what? What do they want? What if they want you to find them? This could all be a lure to lure you out. I won't let that happen. I won't have you in danger. The very thought—" His arms began to shake as he closed his eyes. His beast was ready to rampage. The demon in him demanded that he hunt and spill blood. "It's so hard to control. I'm not good for you."

Those words broke her heart. She walked up to him, wrapping her arms around him, and leaned her head against his chest.

"I won't have anyone else but you." She felt his cheek rest on the top of her head, the trembling of his body subsiding.

"I'm sorry, Elena."

"I'm sorry too. I didn't hurt you with the shadows, did I?" She looked up at him as he let out a genuine laugh.

"No," he smiled down at her. "Though I can't believe you actually used them against me." Her cheeks ained as she gave him a sheepish grin. She was still in his warm embrace, relishing in his heady scent and warmth. It was as if he suddenly realized it as well.

He cleared his throat and then stepped away from her, the blanket of comfort gone. "So the shadows were manipulated through magic?"