

Chapter 9 Wild Cat

Elena stared at him as she contemplated her next move. "You found me faster than I anticipated. You better not have been too rough on Ashton and Colton. Didn't they look adorable?"

"Elena," he growled quietly.

"How long did it take you to figure out they were doubles?"

"Instantly." He moved to the ladder, staring up at her.

She grabbed a tablet, blowing the dust off of it, the tiny particles falling down on Aba. "Oops." She gave him a tight smile before looking over the contents.

"Come down!"

"I'm busy." She continued looking at the tablet, though her heart was slamming against her chest.

"Man, you have an attitude lately."

"I'm getting blamed for using my shadows, and I have a guardian who's never around. I can't imagine why I would have an attitude," she snapped,ipping her eyes down at him. For a moment, he looked wounded, but it didn't last long.

"You cut off our link! What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I don't know, Aba. What's wrong with me? Apparently, a lot, so why don't you tell me your problems with me." She looked at him pointedly.

"You're angry with me?" He raised his brows, a crease forming across his forehead as he took a step back and crossed his arms in front of his chest. She let out a short, sharp laugh before snatching another tablet. "No, Elena," he snarled, moving back to the ladder. "I am the one who's angry. How could you leave right now?"

"You left first. How could you leave me?" Elena closed her eyes for a brief moment before turning her gaze at him. "You left me," she whispered.

"It was important."

"So important that it had to be said in secret." She squeezed the tablet in her hands as she clenched her jaw.

"What exactly are you insinuating?" He gritted out the words between clenched teeth.

The shadows began to slowly retreat again like they did before. Only this time, Elena gripped them firmly. She pulled them to her in an invisible tug of war. "No." She whimpered as her body trembled in the fight.

"Elena!"

She had a wild idea. If she held onto the shadows, she could prevent whatever was happening. It was a battle she wasn't ready for. The force whipped against her fiercely. She squinted her eyes as she pushed harder. The shadows continued to slowly slide away. It was a force beyond her control. As she lost her grip on the shadows, it created a rubber band effect. Her body whipped back, but a firm grip prevented her from falling.

She wasn't sure when Aba had climbed up the ladder, but all of a sudden, he was beside her. He locked his strong arms around her body like a vice as he scaled the ladder with ease. His determined gaze never left hers, his eyes burning into her soul with passionate concern, until his feet firmly planted themselves on the ground. She felt safe and secure in his grasp as he slowly lowered her down to safety.

"I couldn't hold them," she muttered painfully. The shadows slinked back to her, but whatever damage they did had been done.

"Lena! Do you know how dangerous that is? That magic could have ricocheted back to you!"

"I should be able to control them. I'm a shadowbender!" she snapped angrily as his grip on her tightened.

"You have no idea how angry I am right now. Not only did you leave, but you blocked me out!"

"Well, I'm angry too! Go away. I have things to do." She tried to push away from him but his grip only tightened.

"Don't tell me to go away. You're provoking me, and you don't want that." His lethal tone reminded her of a panther readying itself to pounce. A sane person would have taken notice that he was losing control and backed off. However, Elena's emotions were heightened, and a fight was just what she wanted.

A menacing wall of shadows hovered between them, an immovable force ready to crash like a tsunami. Elena's heart raced as she took a step back, but he was unyielding, his gaze trapping her in place. A deep rumble of laughter awoke from the depths of his throat and echoed through the air like thunder, sending shivers up her spine. Yet, she wasn't afraid. She felt excited.

"Elena..." he whispered, his voice seeming to mock her.

Elena's heart raced as she stared back at him, feeling the weight of his gaze on her. She knew the danger of the situation, but she couldn't help the feeling of excitement that pulsed through her veins. It was like a ree that consumed her, leaving her dizzy and breathless.

She could feel the heat emanating from his body as he stepped closer, the shadows frantic to hold him back. Elena's eyes never left his, watching as he closed the distance between them. The shadows grew more frenzied, but his body seemed to effortlessly glide through them, as if they were mere illusions.

The shadows wrapped around Elena like a cloak, their dark tendrils snaking around her skin protectively. He reached out, his fingers brushing against the shadows. Elena shivered at the touch, her breath hitching in her throat. She could have fought back harder, but she didn't want to. Her emotions were confusing. She wanted to fight him, but she also wanted to be wrapped in his arms.

His hands trembled as he gripped her, the shadows vanishing completely. His breath was hard and ragged as his eyes burned into her. "I don't care what's going on. I don't care if you're angry. Never cut off our mental link."

Elena glared up at him angrily and scoffed. "You don't get to tell me what to do. It's okay for you and not for me?"

"What are you talking about, Elena?!" Aba let go of her, lifting his hands out in exasperation.

"When you go to Elysium, you might as well be turning our mental link off. I can't reach you when you're gone. The only one I could communicate with at that distance is Lenore."

"During times of peace, I have been out of contact with you at times. However, all of that is different now. There's an ongoing attack happening, and putting up a mental block puts you in danger. Damn it, Elena, it isn't the same thing. You need to come to this place—" he waved his hands around angrily, "then WE come to this place. I wouldn't have stopped you. I just want to be with you so I can protect you. I'm not the enemy. I'm never going to be YOUR enemy." He sighed loudly, shaking his head. "I can't read your mind. Gods, I wish I could, but I can't. You have to tell me what you're thinking. I don't know these things. What am I doing wrong? Why are you acting like this with me?"

She opened her mouth to yell at him and stopped. Why was she acting like this? Because she was so jealous she couldn't take it. Because she never wanted him to leave her side and she didn't know what to do about it. And the thought of him being with Beryl was like driving a nail under her skin. It was torture. He was right. He couldn't read her mind. She never told him how she felt, so maybe he didn't know. In either case, this was hardly the place for a love confession. However, there was still something that needed to be said.

"My head was a mess, Aba. I needed you there with me. You needed to talk about something important with Beryl? Okay. Was it more important than me? Because you walking out right then made it seem like it was. And if that's the case—"

"Nothing is more important than you. Ever. Nothing will ever be more important than you. It was important, but not more important than you. I'm sorry. In my mind, you were safe, so I could handle something else." A soft smile reached his lips as he lifted his hand to her face. He tucked a stray strand behind her ear, resting his hand there for a moment. "You keep a poker face, and it can be a challenge to read you. I should have known better than to leave your side. I messed up. Don't be mad at me. My emotions can't take it. I'm going to end up doing something stupid."

He pulled her in closer so that her head rested against his chest. He ran his fingers through her hair and leaned his nose in, inhaling her scent. "Lena, if something happens to you, it's over for me. The demon will rampage, and I won't be able to fight it. All of my emotions are tied to you. My anger... my fears—" He took in a shaky breath. "I was so scared when you cut me off. I've never been that afraid before. I felt like falling to my knees and sobbing like a baby. Please don't do that to me again."

Elena's heart softened as she heard the desperation in his voice. She knew that he had always been protective of her, but this was different. He was baring his soul to her, showing her a side of himself that he had always kept hidden.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, burying her nose in his shirt. "I didn't mean to scare you like that."

His grip tightened on her, and she could feel the strength in his arms. "I can't lose you," he whispered, his breath tickling her hair. "I won't survive it. I need you, Elena. More than you can ever imagine."

Elena felt her chest tighten as her eyes misted. These were words she understood more than he knew because it was how she felt. She couldn't lose him either. He had become her whole world. She pulled away from him, her hand cupping his cheek as she looked into his eyes. "You're not going to lose me."

He leaned into her touch, his eyes closing at the warmth of her hand on his cheek. When he opened them, he looked at her with an intensity that made her heart race. He smiled at her, patting her head softly before stepping away from her. "So, why are you here?"

Why did he keep doing that? Why did he always back away from her when they were getting close? Was it because he felt as if he was betraying Beryl? She swallowed down the lump and looked back at the books and tablets.

"I'm hoping I can find something about shadow curses or shadow plagues. Something to clear my name, so I'm not the main suspect." Her eyes then widened as she remembered Lenore and her mate. "Also, Nora found her mate here."

"Wait, the only person here is—"

"You knew about Taric?!" Elena furrowed her brows at him as he chuckled.

"Will you settle down, wild cat? Yes, I knew about Taric being here. That's why this area is off limits. So... Lenore is his mate. I can't say I'm shocked by this. It makes sense. Is she going to accept him?"

Elena shrugged. "That's something the two of them need to work out. Nora knows I'll support her no matter what. Even if that means she has to stay underground here. My parents would live underground forever and wouldn't care, as long as they had each other." She looked at his wrinkled forehead full of concern. "Lenore is capable of making this decision."

"What about the vampires? If your sister chooses to stay with Taric, then that will mean..."

Elena looked down at the ground, slowly shaking her head. "They don't want me, Aba. I'm sure my grandfather will figure something else out. In either case, my parents are next in line." She shrugged her shoulders, looking up at him. His eyes softened as the crease of his lips pulled down.

"You said you were trying to grip the shadows again. Most likely another person is affected. This doesn't sound like a plague. That would spread from person to person. Someone is manipulating the shadows, and that prancing water pony didn't feel anyone cross the border, so they must be doing this from a distance." Aba rubbed his forehead as he tried to tie it together.

"What if the shadow plague from before wasn't a plague either? What if it was also an attack, and they thought it was a plague? I can feel the shadows and know they're at work, but they didn't have someone like that then. Could this be an old enemy returning?"

"No, I don't think so. But it could be someone who had a similar power who wanted to weaken the vampires."

Elena eyed him, tilting her head to the side. "You have a suspicion, don't you?"

"Yes. Beryl thinks this might be Meryl's doing. Meryl has been trying to reach out to Beryl. She's trying to force her to join her side. This might be a way to lure Beryl out of Elysium. Meryl bound Beryl's life to a crystal, and if Beryl doesn't eventually go to Meryl's side, she will kill her. If Meryl is finally showing her face, then I can destroy her. The only way to save Beryl is to kill the nycrops."

He knew a lot about Beryl, more than she did. Beryl was very dear to her, but she never opened up to her. It was obvious that she and Aba had had deep conversations. He knew a lot about her, and she could hear the protectiveness in his voice. It was stupid to feel jealous, because she wanted to protect her too. But she could feel the closeness he had with Beryl. She saw it first hand.

"The nycrops isn't after Beryl."

They turned their heads to see Taric with Lenore by his side. They looked wet and were holding several tablets in their hands.

"And what makes you say that?" Aba snorted, turning to look at Taric.

"Because she's after Elena."