

Mated to the Werewolf King

Meeting with Shadows

My claws tore into the snow, sending waves of icy air swirling in my wake.

I had shifted into my werewolf form after passing through a portal into this cold, miserable world.

The coven had prepared me as best they could for the journey. If I would have chosen Tannon, it would have to be alone.

My men would be cared for, but it was not them I worried about.

Tessa had given me an old scroll that Tannon had gifted her. It contained recipes of spells that mattered far less than this mission.

I kept it in the pocket of my pants, which now hung from my mouth. Its scent would carry me to the warlock.

Daisy had placed the portal as close to Tannon as she could. Not that it had helped ease any of my tension.

After all, it was my weakness for her that pushed Belle away in the first place.

Now, she was lost, and it was up to me to save her.

I couldn't help but continue to think about what Belle had showed us. Her dormant powers had literally lifted her off the ground.

In the end, who will really need saving?

I tried to shake the thought from my mind as I pushed forward.

The mountain peaks ambled around me like jagged knives. A smattering of covered by spruce and pine allowed me to run hard without fear of being seen.

Not that there was anyone here. Especially not her, whose image in my mind was the only thing that kept me going...

Wind howled in my ears.

My thick fur kept me warm as I galloped across the vast plains of snow and ice.

I stopped to look around at the desolate landscape. This cold beauty was breathtaking. I would have to visit again during more peaceful times.

Then, the wind shifted, and with it came a familiar scent. Its odor resembled the throwaway scroll they had given me to help find him.

Only, this time, the scent was much stronger.

Tannon must be nearby!

After bounding over a few large hills, I found myself stopped again at a wide clearing.

Three cabins, identical in appearance, sat in a row. It was as if they were waiting for my arrival.

Phasing into my human form, I put on my clothes to prepare for our meeting. I began to move forward before forcing myself to stop. What had they warned me back at the coven?

Tannon was someone who did not want to be found.

Looking at my present location, I could verify that that was true.

They also told me to be aware of illusions.

I looked closer at the three cabins. Even though they were identical in every form, there must be something more.

I crept forward.

My nostrils took in massive amounts of air, but the scent was mixing, leading me to many places.

I thought of Belle in the cavern and how she had stopped the nightmares from consuming me and my men. She used her gut feeling and heightened senses.

This would take more than brawn—of that, I was sure.

Crunch.

I took another step toward the cabins. My nostrils inhaled again, filling my lungs.

Crunch.

My large feet smashed the ice crystals. Luckily, the howling wind covered my approach. Or, so I thought.

As if on cue, the wind died down to a slight whisper.

One last inhale, and...

There it was!

The middle cabin was my destination. I was sure of it. The smell emanating from that direction was unmistakable.

My hypothesis was confirmed when I saw the door open. A tall, slender figure stood in the doorway, backlit so I could not see his face.

It was Tannon.

He's been waiting for me.

The inside was not unlike the coven I had just left. It was rustic and lived-in while still void of any frivolities.

We sat in a large living room surrounded by ancient scrolls and tomes.

Tannon sipped on a cup of tea. A large statue decorated in Lapiz Lazuli stood erect next to him like a dog sitting beside its master.

There had been another warning from the coven...

Everything in its own time.

I tried my best not to rush him, but the anxious energy inside bubbled out of my body and into the cabin.

"Do you enjoy this moment? Forcing the Werewolf King to wait as you sip your tea, wasting time?" I blurted out.

Tannon raised his eyebrows but said nothing in return. Finally, after one last gulp had emptied the cup, he set it down and drew a breath.

"I can feel them stirring below," he said, without offering anything more.

I looked at the wood floor beneath my feet. My eyebrows raised in a questioning arch.

As if on cue, the cabin shook lightly. It was almost imperceptible, but my heightened senses felt the disturbance.

"My sister did not give you many details," he said with a smile.

"You really are a wise old warlock," I said with spite in my voice.

Tannon's smile made my blood boil. It was getting harder and harder to hold back my growing desperation.

"We are a tight-knit family. But it seems as though you are in need of some explanations." He crossed one leg over the other as he watched me.

I clenched the chair I sat in, holding back my urgency.

"Yes, warlock. I fear I am in need of a great many," I said through clenched teeth.

He nodded his approval.

"My sole duty on this earth is to guard the barrier between our world and the one below. What can only be referred to as the Underworld," he replied.

Another tremor shook the cabin, this one a bit larger.

"You can feel it. The demons are stirring. I believe the Demon Lord has found your Annabelle."

My Annabelle.

The very words sounded so enticing I almost lost focus of what was being said.

"She is currently in the world between worlds. Where the shadow children dwell. But she will not remain for long."

I was too late!

I stood up to leave, but Tannon held out a hand.

"We have to get her," I said. The urgency was unmistakable.

"His minions have already moved. They are close to catching her."

I slammed my foot onto the wooden floor. Even with my great force, the cabin didn't shake.

Either I was losing my strength, or the rumblings from below must be very, very strong.

"Please! I do not do this for anyone...but I beg of you. Use your powers and bring her back. We must save her!"

The warlock contemplated this in silence. Finally, his eyes met mine.

"It is possible, yes. But it will not be easy."

Run.

Just run, and...

Don't.

Look.

Back.

The words had barely crossed my mind before I disobeyed my own advice and looked behind me.

Trying not to stumble as I ran forward, I turned my head.

The horror nearly stopped me in my tracks.

Swarms of shadow children were swirling all around me, blotting out all signs of light. A few swooped down, aiming for my head. I managed to duck and dodge the first volley.

When the next wave came, I wasn't so lucky.

I was swept off my feet and could feel my body spin.

The lake passed quickly below me. The shadow child in the center seemed to be looking up, watching me float away.

Upside down, carried by my feet, we continued our ascent. One of the shadow children attached itself to my face, blinding me from everything.

It seemed only one thing was certain. There would be no escape this time.

CRACK.

POP.

The smell of the burning wood reassured me I was in no dungeon. And if I was, at least there was warmth.

Suddenly, the shadow was lifted from my eyes.

I could finally see!

Flames burned in a deep stone fireplace, chattering away as sparks and smoke rose from the logs.

I was in a large room surrounded by books, carved busts, and opulent paintings. In the middle of the room, only feet from me, stood a large throne.

Then, I saw someone sitting on it.

The figure rose and moved closer.

"They didn't hurt you, did they?" asked the figure. His voice was kinder than I expected for a Demon Lord.

"Well, my head hurts from all the blood it accumulated while I was being thrown upside down, but other than that, I'm just peachy."

I wanted my sarcasm to bite deep, but in my current position, it could only graze the surface.

"For that, I am truly sorry," he said.

The person standing before me had a square jaw, high forehead, and long, curly brown hair that gently brushed his shoulders.

This was not who I expected to kidnap young women with a swarm of shadows.

"You must be the Demon Lord," I said, making sure he could hear the hate in my words.

His face flushed and anger moved across his brows.

"No. Thank the Sun Goddess. I will never be him. Never!" The bark in his voice assured me, he was telling the truth.

"My name is Derek, and I am the leader of the shadow children. The ones who brought you to my lair," he said.

I took another look at the room. This was nice for a so-called lair.

"Why did you kidnap me?" I asked.

Derek slumped his shoulders and turned away, staring into the fire as he spoke. "I did not kidnap you. At least, they were not my orders."

"Yours or not, last time I checked, taking someone against their will is still kidnapping," I said.

He gave no response, so I continued. "Do you work for the Demon Lord?"

"Not by choice," he said, before looking away from the fire and directly at me.

I tried to see the look in his eyes, but they were masked by shadows.

"The Demon Lord has taken my kid brother hostage. He was only a child."

I should have been grateful this was not the Demon Lord taking me as his mate. But to know he would take a child hostage...

The anger I felt was only overshadowed by fear. A deeper fear than I could ever remember.

"I'm so sorry." My voice cracked as I tried to relay my sympathy.

It was not every day two beings could come together over the realization kings in this dark world loved to kidnap. I was living proof.

Derek pressed on.

"He threatened torture if I didn't deliver you. At first, I refused. My men have endured similar threats and lived to tell the tale. But after you hear the screams of a child..."

Derek wiped away the tears forming in his eyes.

"He left me no choice."

I balled my hands into fists. My fingers were clasped so tightly I could see my knuckles turn white.

Who could do such a thing to a child? I supposed someone who called himself the Demon Lord, sure. But even then...

What reasons could he have for wanting me so badly he would do such a thing?

A loud clang tore us from our conversation.

Heavy footsteps echoed across the tile on the other side of the door. Someone was coming. And they were moving quickly.

The door to the throne room burst open. Then, he walked in.

My so-called mate. The one who decreed I must be his, turning my world upside down.

He stepped closer, raising his arms as if presenting himself to me.

"My love," the Demon Lord said. "Finally, we meet. It has been absolute torture not having you by my side."