## Ellora's Cave TWILIGHT

# N.J. WALTERS

# Out Shadows

#### **Out of Shadows**

#### N.J. Walters

Companion to "Shadows Stir" from Dreams of the Oasis IV anthology and Beyond Shadows

Dovina Horne has arrived in Sleepy Hollow to study the legend of the horseman. She believes it's only a myth until she's threatened by a horse and rider while walking on a deserted trail in the woods. Only the sudden appearance of a warrior saves her from the horseman's sword. She feels an instant connection, both sexual and emotional, to this protective stranger.

An immortal warrior of the Shadow Realm, Hadeon's mission is to protect Dovina at all costs. He knows the horseman is not what he seems, but something more powerful and sinister in disguise. The longer Hadeon spends with Dovina, the more he wants her. He finds his way into her bed and her heart, but their relationship is doomed. He is an immortal from the shadows and she is a human filled with light. But when the final battle comes, they must use all that is between them if they hope to survive.

#### An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Out of Shadows

ISBN 9781419929212 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED Out of Shadows Copyright © 2010 N.J. Walters

Edited by Shannon Combs Cover art by Darrell King

Electronic book publication August 2010

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

### **OUT OF SHADOWS**

N.J. Walters

#### Dedication

For all the readers who have come to love the Shadow Ryders as much as I have, this one is for you.

And for Gerard, who encourages me to dream and to reach further with each book I write.

#### **Prologue**

The Shadow Lord felt a shift in the air and grunted with satisfaction.

Another candle lit in the hall, lending its flickering light to push back the shadows. A human would not even notice the difference, but the inhabitants of the Shadow Realm did. He sensed his Shadow Ryders stirring in the gloom. He took their restlessness as a good sign. It meant the apathy that had gripped them for hundreds of years was lessening.

He had no idea how long he'd lived in this castle of shadows. Civilizations had risen and fallen, thousands of years had come and gone in the blink of an eye. Even his name was lost in time. He was the Shadow Lord, immortal and powerful. A leader of men who, like himself, had been powerful warriors in their own times. Men of unequalled skill, determination and conviction.

He had gathered his men to him over the long years. One at a time, he had gone to each of them as they lay dying and offered them a chance to right the particular wrong done to them. He did not promise vengeance, but justice. Many times he had met Death as that dark figure had come to claim a warrior, but always with the chosen few, Death had stepped back and allowed the Shadow Lord to make his offer. If the fallen warrior declined, then Death took them on their way to the other side. If they accepted, they became warriors of the Shadow Realm. Soldiers of justice.

At least that is what they had been. The shadows that had been their salvation had become their curse. Before Gideon's departure into the world of man, it had been several centuries since any of them had bestirred themselves from this realm or shown any concern for what was going on in the world from which they had all sprung. Now Blade, too, had gone forth on a mission and succeeded in his task, lighting another candle in their darkness and bringing hope to them all.

The Shadow Lord could feel the curiosity and interest growing among the men. That was good. It meant they were coming back from the brink of living death. But there was still a long way to go.

Once, they had trained daily, keeping their skills sharp so they were ready when they needed to face down evil. Now the greatest evil they faced was their own apathy. They could not die unless beheaded or exposed to complete daylight without shadow. But they could drift into this sea of never-ending gloom for eternity. And while the Shadow Lord was no longer concerned about himself, he did care about the men who had sworn allegiance to him.

His eyes pierced the darkness, seeing everything it sought to hide. For far too many years the men had lounged on benches and stared into nothingness. Seldom did they

eat, drink or laugh anymore. At one time, laughter had rung freely though the hall. Now if he listened, he could almost hear its mocking strains still echoing.

Many men were missing, lost in the cloak of darkness. Only a dozen had answered his original call. There were dozens more out there. He would search them out and haul them back, kicking and screaming if necessary. He did not know if they could be reclaimed, but he would not rest until he had fought for each and every one of them.

The atmosphere in the darkened chamber had changed these past days. There was an air of energy, of expectation, that warmed his soul and quelled the bitter regret burning in his gut. The warriors were waiting for his word. It was time to send another of his men out into the world.

His deep, fathomless eyes skimmed over them one at a time. No detail was too small or insignificant for him. One never knew where the key to salvation might lie.

All tall, all strong, all warriors. From different periods of time, from different cultures and countries, they had formed a brotherhood all their own. Bound by their word and their bond to one another, they had fought together, lived together, celebrated and mourned together for thousands of years.

Determination filled him anew as he stared out over the room, searching every dark nook and cranny. Eyes, dark and black, saw right though every man and straight to his very soul.

His gaze paused on one warrior and a sense of satisfaction flowed through him. He crooked his finger at his loyal Shadow Ryder.

Hadeon paused for the briefest of seconds before striding forward.

The Shadow Lord smiled inwardly at his warrior's slight rebellion. He leaned back in his massive chair at the head of the table and waited. Hadeon's blond hair gleamed in the dim light as he moved closer. His name meant destroyer, and in another time he'd been a warrior of great renown, a mercenary feared by all.

He was the perfect man for the job ahead.

#### **Chapter One**

Dovina Horne placed her hands lightly atop the grave marker. The stone, weathered by several centuries, was smooth beneath her fingertips. She smiled. She couldn't believe she was finally here. After years of yearning, she was finally in Sleepy Hollow, New York. She barely suppressed the urge to laugh and spin in a circle. But that wouldn't be dignified or respectful considering she was standing in the Old Dutch Burying Ground outside the church.

The wind gusted, spinning the dried leaves at her feet. The moon was a little more than half full, lending its light to the world below. A shiver skittered down her spine. Even though modern civilization surrounded her, it was easy to believe the legend of the headless horseman on an evening like tonight. Her colleagues at the university would scoff at her if they could read her thoughts. Thankfully, she was adept at hiding her childlike enthusiasm and love of legends behind a guise of academic scholarship.

Even this trip was being made on the pretext of doing research for an article—In the Shadow of Sleepy Hollow: Intertextuality and the Headless Horseman. Or at least that was the working title. It was based on the accepted idea that the meaning of an artistic work wasn't found in the book itself, but by the reader and the knowledge he or she brought from other books they read and films they'd seen.

Personally, Dovina didn't care about the validity of the concept one way or another. She was simply thrilled to be here. Her personal observations would go in her journal. She eventually planned to write a book on myths and legends and how similar ones sprang up all over the world. In the meantime, she'd write the occasional academic article in order to keep herself relevant to those who did the hiring at the university. It was all about publishing in the insular world in which she worked. She was currently on a one-year contract at the University of New York. That post had enabled her to finally travel to Sleepy Hollow.

As an army brat, she'd lived all over the world, going wherever her father had been posted. She'd attended eight different schools, finishing high school in Texas when her father had retired from the army and moved the family back to his hometown, a small town that was barely a speck on the map.

Dovina collected myths and legends from all over the world, but for some reason, she'd been drawn to the one about the headless horseman. Maybe it was because her family was from Texas. They had a legend of their own of a headless rider, a beheaded horse thief, which had an actual basis in fact. But like most legends, it had taken on a life of its own. Then there was Dullahan, a headless horseman from Irish mythology. It was a common theme in many cultures.

But it had always been the Washington Irving story — *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* — that had captured her imagination. She'd read it as a child and it had filled her head with visions of a wild black horse being ridden by a warrior, the Hessian soldier from the Revolutionary War who was decapitated by a cannonball, or so the story went.

It had led Dovina to get a degree in literature, focusing mainly on gothic literature. She'd minored in folklore and gone on to get her master's degree and finally her PhD. She was happy for the most part. A studious child, content with her books, she'd easily taken to studies at the university. She'd always been shy and had found it difficult to make friends when they'd moved so often. She'd eventually given up trying, burying herself in her books.

Wind tugged at her hair, pulling a lock of her unruly red curls from the clip that held it away from her face. Her hair was the bane of her existence. Long and red and wild, it tended to do whatever it wanted. She kept it long only because it was easier to pull back in a clip or scrunchie. When it was short, it was impossible to manage. She hooked the escaped curl over her ear and sighed.

She shouldn't have come here this late, but she hadn't been able to resist taking a quick peek at the famous church and cemetery. She'd come back tomorrow and read the names on the headstones and take pictures. Taking rubbings of the grave markers was forbidden. They were old and if everyone who visited tried to transfer their writing to paper, the names and dates would have disappeared years ago, worn away.

An owl hooted in the distance and Dovina glanced around. The few people who'd been here when she'd arrived were gone. She was alone in the cemetery. Most people might have been afraid, but not her. As her daddy always told her, "You have more to worry about from the living than the dead."

She smiled as she thought about him. He was so proud of her, even if he didn't quite understand her need for so much schooling. Every time he said as much, her mama would just smack him on the arm and tell him to hush up. Her parents had settled on a ranch that had belonged to her daddy's family for more than a hundred years. They were now happily raising horses and a few head of cattle and loving every minute of it. Her mama supplemented the family budget by working part-time at the local grocery store.

Dovina knew they'd want to know every detail of her trip the next time she called them. She took one last look around and promised herself she'd be back bright and early in the morning. She'd been unable to book a room at any of the local bed-andbreakfasts. October was a busy month for tourism here. Plus, they were pricey. Instead, she'd taken a room at one of the chain hotels a few miles from town. Not ideal, but close enough.

"It doesn't matter," she whispered. She was here and that was all she cared.

"Ma'am."

The voice startled Dovina and made her jump. She whirled away from the headstone and came face to face with a young woman with thick blonde hair captured

in a braid that fell almost to her waist. She was dressed in a long skirt, blouse and shawl, period clothing from the eighteen hundreds. Dovina blinked, unable to believe the apparition in front of her. Then the woman thrust a pamphlet toward her.

"Here's a list of some of the sights and the events upcoming over Halloween." On closer inspection, Dovina realized the woman was more girl. Probably a high school student earning some extra cash by participating in the town's tourism program.

"Thank you." Dovina took the pamphlet and stuffed it into her coat pocket. "I'll be sure and check out as much as I can."

The girl glanced nervously over her shoulder. "You shouldn't be here by yourself after dark."

She smiled inwardly at the girl's acting abilities. She really seemed frightened. "I wouldn't want the horseman to get me," she joked.

The girl shivered and took a step toward the gate. "Joke if you want. But I've heard him."

All humor fled and Dovina clicked back into academic mode. "Really." She thrust out her hand. "I'm Dr. Dovina Horne and I teach literature at the University of New York." She usually didn't use her title, but found it sometimes helped in situations like this. Made her seem more legitimate rather than just a kook. "I study legends such as the horseman. You say you've heard him?"

The girl shook her hand, looking impressed at first and then sheepish. "Anna Van Herk. I've heard something. Walking here after dark, I've heard the sound of a horse hooves pounding in the distance." The girl kept glancing into the dark, so Dovina took her by the arm and led her toward the entrance. The girl visibly relaxed.

"Once or more than once?" Dovina wanted as much detail as she could get. "And where exactly?"

"Only once, but that was enough. And it was over by the bridge. I know a few other folks who've heard him too. My granny said she saw him once when she was a girl. It was back in the late nineteen forties."

"Do you think she'd talk to me?" Dovina was thrilled with the possibility.

Anna bit her bottom lip, obviously thinking about it. She shrugged. "Maybe. I could ask her."

"Wonderful." She dug in her coat pocket and came up with a slightly tattered business card. "I'll be in town a few days. She can reach me on my cell phone."

Anna took the card and squinted in the dim light as she looked at it. "Okay. She might not do it," the girl warned.

"All I want is to ask her about her experience. Nothing more."

The girl shrugged again. "I'll ask."

Dovina knew she'd pushed hard enough. She smiled and pulled out the pamphlet and waved it in front of her. "Thanks for the information and for sharing your experience."

"You're welcome." A horn tooted and Anna glanced over her shoulder. "I have to go now. That's my dad." Before Dovina could say anything else, her new friend was gone.

She chewed on her lower lip as she looked off into the distance. The Headless Horseman Bridge wasn't too far from here. It wasn't the real bridge from the story, but a footbridge built in the most likely spot. It wouldn't hurt to take a quick peek at it.

"Then I'll walk back to the car and go to my hotel." She'd checked in earlier and dumped her bags and laptop, but she hadn't unpacked a thing. Her stomach growled, reminding her it had been hours since she'd eaten. "You could do without a meal," she told it. At only five-four, she had a tendency to put on weight around her hips and butt. Curvy, her daddy called her.

She snorted. "Curvy, my ass." She laughed again. Her ass was part of the problem. Still, she was twenty-eight years old and had long since accepted the fact that she was never going to be skinny. The walk to the bridge wouldn't hurt her in the least.

Decided, she started walking. She heard laughter in the distance and caught a glimpse of a group of people moving toward the parking lot. She was perfectly safe. It wasn't late. She glanced at her watch and confirmed it was only seven o'clock. But it was dark. Night closed in early this time of year.

She dug into the fanny pack she was wearing and pulled out her car keys. There was a small penlight attached to the key chain. She flicked it on. It wasn't much, but it was enough to keep her from tripping.

The night was alive around her. She took a deep breath, inhaling the cool, crisp autumn air. The branches of the trees danced and swayed in the wind as it whistled though them. Dovina followed the route she'd studied on the map she'd purchased online in anticipation of her trip. The walk wasn't difficult and she soon found herself on the path to the bridge. She could hear the gurgle of water not too far in the distance and knew she was close.

Something flew in front of her and she jumped back with a shriek. Her keys flew through the air as she thrust her hands in front of her. Dovina's heart raced and adrenaline pumped through her veins.

She slapped one hand over her pounding heart and gave a nervous laugh. "Ohmygod. I can't believe I just did that. It had to be a bat or a bird." Maybe coming here at night wasn't such a good idea. Thankfully, the flashlight hadn't gone out and she easily found her keys. Bending down, she scooped them up and shone the light on the path.

"I should go back." That would be the smart thing to do. The sensible thing. The last thing she needed to do was trip in the dark and maybe sprain her ankle or worse. Still, she couldn't make herself turn around and leave.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered. A bullfrog sent up a refrain a few feet away as if agreeing with her. She turned around and took two steps back toward her car.

Swearing, she spun around and stomped toward the bridge. "One quick peek," she promised herself. "Then it's back to the hotel for dinner."

She hurried as fast as she dared. The closer she got to the bridge, the more the fine hairs on the back of her neck rose. Something or someone was watching her. It was probably just an owl or a squirrel or some other form of wildlife, but still, it was creeping her out.

Her steps slowed until she was barely moving forward. The bridge came into view. It wasn't overly large or impressive. More a small footbridge.

The air around her suddenly changed. The crickets stopped singing and the frogs went quiet. She spun around. "Who's there?" Probably another tourist or maybe some local kid who thought it was fun to scare visitors like herself. "Very funny," she called out.

A feeling of dread crept over her. For the first time in her life, Dovina was afraid of the dark. She, who'd visited cemeteries around the world, who'd tromped through the Black Forest in Germany in search of a local legend, who'd even visited Bran Castle—what most folks thought of as Dracula's Castle—for heaven's sake, was afraid in a small stretch of woods in upstate New York.

A sound trickled into the air around her. It sounded like someone breathing heavily. Impossible. Even if she wasn't alone, she wouldn't be able to hear a person breathe unless they were right beside her. That thought unfroze her feet and she spun in a circle. This was no longer fun.

She hurried down the path, retracing her steps. "One foot in front of the other." She'd be back on the main road in no time. From there, it was a short walk back to her car.

A twig cracked, the sounds echoing through the air. She froze and listened. Nothing but the mournful sound of the wind whistling through the trees. She felt it in the soles of her feet first, a vibration that grew stronger with each passing second. Then she heard it, the hard clop of a horse's hooves on dirt. Living on the family ranch for several years, she was very familiar with the sound.

She looked behind her, pointing her flashlight into the impenetrable gloom. The horse trumpeted as the sound of his hooves got closer. She caught a glimpse of movement in the distance. Then her flashlight went dead.

"Oh shit." Stuffing her keys in her coat pocket, she whirled and started to run. No pretext at being anything other than terrified. If this was local kids trying to scare a solitary female tourist, they were doing a hell of a job. And what if it wasn't a kid? What if it was some crazy person? Or worse?

Heart pounding, legs and lungs pumping, she raced through the trees, branches slapping at her arms and face. The sound of her labored breathing drowned out the pounding of hooves, but she could still feel the vibration in the ground.

Something flew past her in the woods. She didn't stop, didn't pause. Dovina was running for her life. A dark mass appeared on the path ahead of her. She stumbled to a

stop. Tripping over a rock, she fell to her knees, barely catching herself on her hands. Gravel tore at her palms and she cried out.

She jerked her head up, unable to believe what was before her. A large black horse with reddish eyes and steam coming from its nose rose up on its hind legs. The rider, a huge black shadow, raised one arm. The moon caught a glint of metal. A sword? He was holding a sword. She blinked twice to be certain.

The horse came back down and the clouds moved away, letting the full light of the partial moon illuminate the specter before her. She shook her head in disbelief. It couldn't be. She'd seen him clearly for a brief second and he had no head.

*Impossible*. It couldn't be. Yet it was. She'd talked to people all around the world in person and via email, many of whom claimed to see vampires, ghosts, werewolves and other creatures of myth and lore. But never had she seen anything resembling the paranormal herself. Until now.

Her logical mind was scrambling to find a rational explanation, while her survival instincts were screaming at her to run. She ignored her brain, jumped to her feet and ran. She'd figure it out later, right now getting out of here alive was paramount.

Dovina whirled around and raced back toward the bridge. It was believed that the horseman couldn't cross water, so if she could get over the bridge she should be okay. At least she hoped she'd be okay. She really didn't have a choice, not with him blocking the path back to civilization.

Sweat coated her body as she ran faster than she'd ever run in her life. For once, she wished she were less of a bookworm and more of an athlete. The bridge got closer as pounding of the horse's hooves got louder. A maniacal laugh cut through the dark. She heard the swish of his blade as he brandished it through the air.

She was going to die.

Damned if she would. Dovina dug deep and pushed harder. The muscles in her legs cramped, her lungs screamed as she managed to quicken her pace. Her heart was pounding at a furious rate as she scrambled toward the bridge. She jumped onto the wooden structure, not stopping until she was on the other side.

Only then did she glance behind her.

As if he'd been waiting for her, the horseman appeared on the far side of the bridge. Again, laughter filled the air. "You cannot escape me. I will have you." His deep booming voice echoed through the woods, coming from nowhere, yet everywhere at the same time. The horse reared again and she took a step back.

The horseman reined in the horse and urged the great beast forward. Its foreleg stepped on the wooden structure. *Oh god*, the water and the bridge wasn't going to stop it. Real or ghost, it didn't matter. It was after her.

The horse had placed only one hoof on the bridge when a massive shadow appeared in front of her, blocking her view of the horse and rider. Dovina blinked and the shadow coalesced into the body of a man. She shrieked, certain the horseman had dismounted and was almost upon her.

It was then she saw his head. Whoever this man was, he at least had a head. "Run. He has a sword." For some reason, she felt compelled to warn this stranger who'd put himself between her and the deadly horseman.

"So do I," came his gruff reply. He didn't take his eyes off the horseman as he reached behind his neck. His hand disappeared beneath the long black duster he wore. The sound of metal against metal reverberated through the air as he drew his weapon from an unseen sheath. The stranger brandished a huge sword that glinted in the dim light trickling down from the moon.

Dovina backed away from the scene in front of her until she hit a tree. She clutched at the trunk for support, the bark digging into her already abused palms.

"She is mine, warrior." Dovina recognized the horseman's voice, filled with deadly intent. It was particularly menacing for a voice to be emanating from a man with no visible head.

"Then come and get her." Her rescuer's voice was deep and calm as if he'd issued an invitation to dinner instead of to a probable fight to the death.

The horse started toward him. Stopped. Pawed the air. The horseman swore and yanked the horse down and urged it forward. The horse would not cross the bridge. Maybe it was afraid of the man or maybe there was some truth to the myth that the horseman couldn't cross water.

Dovina held her breath. Waiting. The atmosphere was charged with barely suppressed violence. Seconds felt like hours. The horseman finally whirled his mount away. "Tell your Shadow Lord this isn't over, warrior. This one is mine."

She sensed the man's surprise. Just who the heck was he and who was this Shadow Lord? The horseman kicked the side of his horse with his heels. The animal gave a shrill neighing sound and took off down the path. The sound of his hoofs faded into the distance. Then they were gone.

The crickets started to chirp and the frogs began their nightly serenade. To them, the danger was past. Dovina wasn't so sure. The stranger returned his weapon to his hidden sheath and spun around to face her.

He was tall, maybe around six feet. But he seemed bigger as he got closer. He was wearing a long leather coat that brushed against his calves, dark pants and shirt. She couldn't tell if they were leather, not in this light. His boots made no sound as he strode toward her.

Belatedly, Dovina realized she should have run while the horseman and the stranger had been arguing over her. Her rescuer walked into a moonbeam and the light glinted off his long hair. It looked blond, but she couldn't be certain. Two thin braids framed his face and the rest of his hair flowed halfway down his back.

She took a step back, but he kept on coming. For some reason she wasn't afraid of him. Not like she'd been of the horseman. She didn't think a man who would rescue her would hurt her. Of course, her rational mind was beginning to kick in. Was this some

kind of historical reenactment? She knew they did that kind of thing here around Halloween. Maybe she'd stepped in the middle of some kind of rehearsal.

She opened her mouth to thank her rescuer and ask him some questions, but he spoke first.

"What the devil are you doing out here by yourself?" He caught her by the upper arm and started to drag her toward the bridge. She ignored the heat from his hand, which seeped into her skin. Her stomach gave a flutter, partly fear and partly something else. *Desire*. But that was crazy. She didn't even know the man.

Unaware of her growing turmoil, he continued to tow her behind him. His grip wasn't hurting her, but she didn't like it. She dug in her heels and pulled away.

The man shook his head, obviously exasperated with her. The clouds chose that moment to clear enough for her to see his face. His hair was indeed blond. There was a stubborn set to his jaw. His lips were pulled into a firm line of displeasure. He wasn't handsome, not in a classic sense, but there was no denying the raw, animal magnetism radiating from him. His nose was straight, his forehead high. But it was his eyes that captured her. They were as black and as deep as the night.

"Who are you?"

He stared at her and then one corner of his mouth kicked up in the slightest of grins. "I am Hadeon. And you are Dovina Horne."

She'd barely registered his unusual name when she realized he knew hers. How? She took a quick step away from him. They were totally isolated. He was an incredibly strong man with a sword and she was a short, plump woman, whose legs were already jelly after running for so long. Not good odds for her.

"How do you know my name?" She was proud of the fact there was no quaver in her voice.

"I know many things about you."

That didn't exactly ease her fears. Was he some kind of stalker? Was that how he'd managed to be here when she needed him. Her eyes narrowed. Or maybe he'd planned all of this.

"Did you ask that other guy to play the headless horseman to scare me?"

He jerked back as though she'd hit him. She could sense his indignation before he spoke. "I did not."

He offered no other explanation and she was left standing there, feeling a little foolish and a lot frightened. Her heart was still tripping along way too fast, her body still mainlining adrenaline. When the crash came it was going to hit hard.

"I don't understand." Her body was shaking and her knees buckled. She caught hold of a tree for support. Hadeon took a step toward her and she tensed, ready to run if she had to. He stopped dead in his tracks.

"I won't hurt you."

"I'm just supposed to take your word for that?" She was close enough to see the way the muscles in his jaw worked. He wasn't happy with her. That was fine by Dovina. Her evening hadn't exactly been a walk in the park.

"Then leave." He put out his arm and motioned her toward the bridge.

Relief hit her like a ton of bricks. He was going to let her go. If she could make it back to her car, she could go to the safety of her hotel and try to make sense of all this. She pushed away from the tree and made a wide circle around him.

Her head was throbbing, her lungs ached and her legs were weak. Each step was difficult. The night seemed to close in around her and she began to sway. Her knees buckled and she felt herself falling.

Strong arms caught her and she was swept up against a hard, masculine chest. Safe. She felt utterly and completely safe. Maybe she'd lost her mind, but at this moment she didn't care. Her eyelids fluttered shut and darkness claimed her.

#### **Chapter Two**

Hadeon held the woman in his arms. She was small, but she had curves in all the right places. His cock, which had been hard from the moment he'd laid eyes on her began to throb and push incessantly against the zipper of his leather pants. He was filled with the wild urge to strip her naked and take her on the hard ground.

He growled low in his chest. There was a time when he would have done just that. He was Thracian by birth, a horseman of the steppes of Eastern Europe and Asia, a rider and fighter without equal. A mercenary who took what he wanted without thought or hesitation.

But that was long ago. On the day he died a human death, he'd pledged himself to the service of the Shadow Lord and not once had he failed in that duty. And his task was to protect Dovina Horne, not claim her as a prize of battle and fuck her senseless.

He stalked into the shadows, shifted his sword out of the way and sat beneath an oak tree with his precious bundle cradled in his arms. It had been centuries since he'd been this close to a woman. The scent of warm skin and soap tickled his nostrils. She smelled of lavender. He buried his face in the curve of her neck and inhaled. His cock jerked. He ignored the growing pressure and simply enjoyed the feel of her soft curves nestled against his hard muscles.

The Shadow Lord had briefed him on his charge. The facts Hadeon had been given were correct, but there was so much more to Dovina than a physical description of who and what she was.

Hadeon fingered a lock of her hair, smiling at the way the strand curled around his finger, clinging to it. The Shadow Lord had told him she had red, curly hair. He did not tell him that her curls were alive with color or that they were so incredibly soft.

Nor did he tell him that her green eyes grew even darker when she was frightened. She reminded him of a frightened owl with her wire-rimmed glasses perched on her nose and her big eyes staring up at him.

No, not an owl. She was too plump to be an owl. She wasn't a dove either, as her name implied. That was too cold and his little bird was all fire. Maybe a partridge with her colorful plumage and curves. He chuckled. He didn't think she'd appreciate the comparison.

He supported her against one arm and cupped her face with his free hand. Her skin was like porcelain, her skin pale. He frowned as he rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip. It was full and ripe for the kissing.

One of his gifts as a Shadow Ryder was the ability to see perfectly in the dark. He could see her as well as if she were in full light. Her lashes fluttered beneath the frames of her glasses and her eyes opened.

She gasped and jerked. He tightened his grip on her, not ready to let her go just yet. The night was long and she was safe with him. Or at least as safe as she wanted to be.

A low whimper came from her parted lips and he eased her even closer, offering her his protection and the warmth of his body. "You are safe."

She licked her lips and Hadeon barely swallowed his groan of need. He didn't think she had any idea how sexy she was, how tempting. He wanted to lick her lips, to taste her unique flavor and claim it as his own.

"What happened?" She struggled to sit up. Reluctantly, he let her, still keeping her perched on his lap.

He shrugged. "You fainted."

"I did not."

Her indignation made him smile. "My mistake. Maybe you were just planning on falling to the ground and taking a quick nap."

Dovina buried her face in her hands. "I can't believe it. I actually fainted."

He rubbed his hand over her back, learning the curve of her spine as he moved it up and down. "You did well, considering."

She jerked her head up. "Considering what? You guys are just actors, right? This is all part of some October festivities?"

Hadeon shook his head. "No. I was sent to protect you." Something had been niggling at him since the entity had spoken. He didn't think the enemy he was dealing with was human. That bothered him. He needed more information. That meant returning to the Shadow Realm. But not now. Not until he was certain Dovina would be safe while he was gone.

"Protect me from what?" She tilted her chin up and he caught the stubborn jaw between his thumb and forefinger.

"From whatever that was. The horseman."

"But he can't be real. There's no such thing as a headless horseman. That's just legend." The color was returning to her face and her voice was steadying with each passing second. Intelligence shone in her eyes and determination imbued every word she spoke.

"What about me, am I real?" Hadeon brought her hip in tight to his body. His erection pressed against it.

Dovina stilled and swallowed, her throat rippling. The fear that had disappeared returned. He hated that, but he wanted her to know how much he wanted her.

"Umm, I think I should go back to my hotel now." She started to shove away, but he kept his arm around her waist, not quite ready to let her go. There was something about her that eased his loneliness, stilled the beast pacing restlessly within him.

He'd been restless his entire life, searching for something he'd never found. He'd been the same in the Shadow Realm. It was only now, with Dovina in his arms, that he'd gotten his first taste of peace and contentment.

But it went even further than that. It was as though she completed him in some way. His eyes narrowed as he glared out into the woods. Human or otherworldly, it didn't matter. He would not let anyone hurt her.

"Hadeon?"

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. The sound of his name on her lips moved him to the depths of his tortured soul. He made no claims to being a good man. In his time, might had been right. He'd lived by the sword and ultimately died by it. But Dovina made him want to be something better. Something more than what he was.

He jerked his eyes open when he felt her soft palm against his chin. She was chewing on her bottom lip. He reached up and used his thumb to smooth her lip away from her teeth. Leaning forward, he touched his mouth to hers.

Her breath hitched, but she didn't object. He stroked his tongue over her bottom lip and then her top one before testing the seam. She gasped and he slipped inside, teasing her tongue, tasting, learning what pleased her.

She went to his head faster than a skin of wine. He turned her body, angling her head so he could deepen the kiss. She tasted like sex—hot and spicy and inviting. He growled as he devoured her, unable to get enough.

He couldn't have her. Not yet. Not here. But that didn't mean he couldn't have a taste. He liked the idea of giving her pleasure, making her come. The physical and sexual link would help bind her to him.

He reluctantly broke the kiss. They were both breathing hard and Dovina looked slightly dazed. He skimmed his fingers through her hair, releasing it from the metal clip that held it prisoner. It sprang free, wild and alive. Just like the woman herself.

Hadeon buried his face in the soft, springy mass, breathing in the sweet scent of woman. "I'm very real," he murmured. He buried his face in the curve of her throat and nipped at the sensitive skin before soothing it with his tongue.

Her hands clenched his shoulders, neither pushing him away nor pulling him closer. Simply holding him. He could sense her confusion and sought to ease it with physical touching. She would learn to trust him, to understand that he would never hurt her.

He stoked his hand over her arm, across her collarbone and down to her breasts. He cupped one lush mound in his hand and squeezed. Dovina moaned and Hadeon felt his balls tighten.

Every muscle in his body tensed in anticipation. "Let me touch you," he whispered in her ear. Catching the tender lobe of her ear between his teeth, he tugged gently. Dovina moaned and squirmed in his lap. He swirled his tongue over the delicate whorls. "Let me taste you."

Dovina couldn't think, couldn't do much of anything except breathe, and even that was difficult. One minute she'd been leaving, the next everything went black. She'd come back to her senses to find herself ensconced in the stranger's lap.

No, not a stranger. His name was Hadeon. She wasn't certain if that was his first name or his last name. She only knew that she felt a connection to him unlike anything she'd ever experienced in her life.

The rational part of her mind whispered that this was all a setup. Frighten the female tourist, let the one guy play hero and maybe he'll get lucky. The instinctual part of her brain was urging her to grab on tight to Hadeon and never let go.

It didn't help matters that his kisses were intense and all-consuming. Like a powerful drug, she was afraid she was quickly becoming an addict. He kissed her with total concentration, as if there was nothing else in the world he'd rather do. It was heady for a woman who hadn't had much male attention in her life.

When his hand cupped her breast, she thought she'd come then and there. Her panties were already damp. The urge to clamp her legs together and squeeze was almost overwhelming. She resisted only because she didn't want him to know just how far gone she was.

She moaned when he tugged on her earlobe with his teeth, teased the sensitive skin beneath it with his tongue. And the things he said to her. The air might be chilly, but she was sweating.

Never in her life had she felt so alive, so sexy, so womanly.

There was something wild and untamed about Hadeon. Something primal that called to her on a primitive level. Whether it was his long hair, his strong features or the scar on his right cheek, she didn't know. Maybe it was the way he'd stepped in front of her, protecting her, ready to fight. Maybe it was the way he tempered his strength, holding her securely, yet gently. Whatever it was, she wanted him with a need that bordered on pain.

This wasn't like her at all. She'd had two serious relationships in her lifetime. The last one had fizzled out almost a year ago. There had been no big fights, just the realization of two people headed in different directions in their lives. Heck, she was still friends with both her ex-boyfriends.

But this man was different. She sensed, in some primitive part of her, that he had the ability to hurt her. Not physically. She truly believed he meant what he said when he'd told her he was there to protect her. But emotionally, he could devastate her. Whatever he felt for her at this moment wouldn't last.

He was wild and compelling and exciting. She was...well, ordinary. Still, it was a powerful feeling to have a man like this want her.

Hadeon was obviously through with waiting. He tugged at the zipper of her coat, pulling the tab downward. The noise sounded loud and unnatural in the quiet of the woods. The buttons of her blouse were next. He had them undone before she could decide if she should let him.

He cupped her breast through the thin fabric of her bra, his thumb teasing her engorged nipple. "You want me."

It wasn't a question.

Reality came crashing down on her. She was in the middle of the woods, allowing a stranger to touch her intimately. "No." She shook her head and pushed away.

Hadeon let her pull away slightly but kept his hand on her breast. He frowned down at her. "Why do you lie? Your body does not."

She shook her head and covered his hand with hers, tugging it away from her breast. "I might want you, but that doesn't mean I'm going to do anything about it."

"Why?"

She stared at him, unable to believe the ridiculousness of this conversation. "I don't know you, for one. I'm certainly not in the habit of letting strange men touch me."

His frowned deepened and his eyes narrowed. "I didn't think you did. And we're not strangers. Not here." He gently tugged his hand away from hers and placed it over her heart. "You know me."

He was confusing her totally. A part of her agreed with him. There was something about him that seemed almost familiar to her. Which was impossible considering they'd just met.

"Let me touch you," he coaxed. "Pleasure you." He stroked his hand over her bare belly. "You can tell me to stop at any time."

She chewed on her bottom lip. As enticing as the offer was, she wasn't a tease and she had no intention of sleeping with him. "That's not fair to you."

He shrugged. "It is for me to decide if it is fair to me or not and I say it is." He shifted his hand lower, burying it between her jean-clad thighs. The heat from his hand sank through the layers of fabric, heating her core. He pressed hard and the seam of her jeans and his fingers stimulated her clit, wringing a moan from her.

"So much passion," he murmured as he stroked his fingers over her. "Let me touch you."

Oh god, she was going to do this. She was crazy. She was... The thought disappeared when he captured her lips and kissed her again. This time there was no leisurely exploration. This was a claiming. He greedily ate at her lips and her mouth, delving, stroking, nipping.

Dovina clung to his shoulders for support. Her head was whirling, her body on fire. He didn't bother to undo her bra, simply shoved it up and out of his way. He tore his lips from hers and kissed a heated path down the curve of her throat, across her collarbone and lower.

His mouth hovered over her breast. Her nipple puckered from a combination of the chilly air and anticipation. Hadeon lowered his head, catching the tight bud between his lips and flicking it with his tongue.

She felt the caress between her thighs as though he'd licked her clit. Her hips arched upward, seeking relief. Hadeon tugged at the button of her jeans and then yanked down the zipper. His hand disappeared beneath the band of her lacy panties, delving into the hot cavern that waited for him.

Her pussy clenched in anticipation. Cream slid from her core as one thick finger pressed inside her. She made a low keening sound and arched her hips.

Hadeon lapped at her nipple, nuzzling her breast. "You're so hot. So wet and ready." He shoved a second finger in to join the first one, stretching her. It felt delicious. She squirmed, trying to get him deeper.

He stroked his thumb over her swollen clit and she saw stars. "Yesss," she groaned, bucking against his hand. Nothing had ever felt this good.

Hadeon swore and captured her mouth again in a searing kiss. His hand worked between her thighs. Fingers pumping, pressing upward on each withdrawal. He touched a magic spot inside her that made her scream. Her entire body clenched in anticipation. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't speak.

Her orgasm ripped through her. It had been a long time for her and never had she had one this intense. Heat flooded her veins as her pussy clamped down tight on his fingers. He pressed his thumb against her swollen clit and another wave of pleasure washed over her.

She trembled, her thighs quivering as he withdrew his hand from between her legs. She could hear him talking to her, words without meaning, meant to soothe. A bead of sweat rolled down her temple even as she shivered as a cool breeze touched her bare skin.

Hadeon must have felt her shiver, because he pulled the edges of her coat over her bare breasts and tugged her closer to his broad chest. His heart was pounding and his erection was pulsing against her thigh. He was still very aroused.

What had she done?

She'd let a stranger touch her. Had sex with him. Not intercourse, but he'd touched her as intimately as a man could. Even as sexual lethargy threatened to lull her into a sense of false security, her brain kicked in. She needed to get away from this man. His power over her was frightening. This wasn't like her. She didn't do things like this.

She jumped from his lap, stumbling as she yanked the zipper closed on her jeans. She pulled down her bra and zipped her coat, not bothering to button her blouse. Dovina was mortified even as her body hummed with the remnants of her blazing orgasm.

He rose to his feet in one lithe movement. He towered over her, reminding her once again just how large he was. "Dovina?"

She shook her head and took a step back. "I'm sorry. That shouldn't have happened." Anyone could have come along and seen them there. And what a scandal that would have been. She could see the headline now—Professor of English Lit Charged With Public Indecency. She shuddered to think about it.

His jaw tightened, but he said nothing. The hem of his long coat flapped in the breeze. She didn't dare look below his waist. She knew he was aroused. His erection had been digging into her side the entire time he'd been touching her.

"I need to go." She patted her coat pocket, thankful her keys were still safely inside. What did you say to a man who just had his hands down your pants? *Thanks for everything*. She was obviously losing what little was left of her mind. She needed to regroup and think about everything that had happened.

"I need to go," she said again, backing away from him.

"I will see you safely back to wherever you are staying."

Like that was going to happen. "No. That's okay."

He shook his head and stalked toward her. Dovina took several steps toward the bridge. "I know the way back to my car."

Anger radiated from his body. "It is my mission to protect you."

Better to give in and get moving. "Only to my car."

Hadeon didn't agree or disagree, he simply fell into step beside her. She glanced nervously at him several times, but he wasn't paying any attention to her. His gaze was focused on the surrounding woods.

They walked in silence, which grew deeper with each step. Dovina regretted the fact that she'd never see him again. But it was probably for the best. What had happened between them in the heat of the moment would probably seem awkward in the light of the day.

She saw a light coming down the path toward them and glanced back at Hadeon. He tensed, but put one large hand on the small of her back, urging her forward. As they got closer, a man took shape. When he saw them, he angled his light away as he came closer. "Evening, folks. I'm Officer Evans."

As she came alongside him, she noted his uniform. He was a member of the local police. "Officer." Dovina inclined her head. Hadeon was silent.

The policeman studied Hadeon, who loomed large and menacing beside her. "Everything all right, ma'am?"

She smiled, noting the way he addressed her, but kept his eyes on Hadeon. "Everything is fine. We were just checking out the bridge."

She hoped he couldn't see the sword Hadeon was carrying. It was probably illegal to have a concealed weapon like a sword. Dovina hoped they got out of this situation without Hadeon ending up in trouble with the law. And why should she even care what happened to him? They were virtually strangers. Yet they weren't. It was making her head hurt just thinking about it.

"Too dark to see much this time of evening," Officer Evans pointed out. He was a tall man with short, dark hair, broad shoulders and kind eyes. "You shouldn't be out here without a light."

Dovina was sick of men telling her what she should and shouldn't do tonight. As a result, her reply had a sharp edge. "I had a light, but it went dead."

Hadeon finally spoke up, his voice low and commanding. "I have excellent night vision. Dovina is safe with me."

"Glad to hear it," the officer replied, a warning tone in his. "Wouldn't want the lady to fall and hurt herself."

"I imagine that wouldn't be good for tourism," she quipped, to break the growing tension between the two men.

The officer gave her a quick grin, the mood easing slightly. "No, ma'am. The board of tourism tends to frown on such things."

She laughed in spite of her unsettled emotions or maybe because of them.

"Do you patrol the path often?" Hadeon inquired.

"Often enough. And we step up foot patrols this time of year at all the major points of interest. Lots of tourists in town."

When Hadeon stayed silent, Dovina hurried to fill the void. "Well, I can't wait to see everything. Starting tomorrow."

"I'm sure you'll enjoy yourselves. You folks have a good evening now." Officer Evans tipped his hat to her and then ambled off down the path, his light flashing in the darkness.

Hadeon urged her onward. The silence lengthened as they stepped out onto the sidewalk and went down the road. She heaved a sigh of relief when her car came into sight. There were no other vehicles around hers, but she'd parked under a streetlight for safety's sake. Hadeon was silent as she unlocked her car and climbed inside. He held the door, not letting her close it.

Suddenly, he leaned down and kissed her. "This isn't over, Dovina." With those cryptic words, he slammed the door shut. "Lock it." She heard his voice easily through the glass. She engaged the lock.

She felt guilty for leaving him out there. Did he have a ride home? Where was home? It was none of her business. He'd gotten to the woods in the first place. He could take care of himself.

Jamming the keys into the ignition, she started the car. She turned back to wave goodbye, but he was already gone. Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them back. Why she should feel bereft because he was gone, she didn't know. He wasn't anything to her.

*Liar*. Something inside her protested as she pulled away and headed back toward her hotel. The miles passed quickly and she was soon parking in the lot. She headed into the building, digging out her room key as she went. She kept feeling as if someone were watching her.

Dovina glanced over her shoulder several times, but saw nothing in the shadows. She kept a vigilant watch until she reached her room. When the door closed behind her, she locked it and slumped against it.

It had been a hell of a night.

#### **Chapter Three**

Hadeon stood in a dark alcove just beyond the door to Dovina's room. He'd ridden the shadows alongside her car and followed her to her room. There was no way he'd let her out of his sight until he was certain she was safe.

He scrubbed his hand over his jaw and groaned. He could smell her on his fingers. Her essence was hot and spicy, like the woman herself. It went against every instinct he had not to go to her. He wanted to touch her soft flesh, tracing every curve, every hollow with his fingers, then his tongue. A muscle jumped beneath his eye and he forced himself to relax his hands, which were clenched into tight fists. Slowly, he loosened them and shook them by his sides.

Knowing he shouldn't, but unable to resist, he rode the shadows again, going from the hallway into her bedroom in the blink of an eye. He stood in a far corner, invisible to human sight, and watched as Dovina sat on the edge of the bed and rested her head in her hands. The urge to go to her and wrap his arm around her waist pounded through him. He wanted to...comfort her.

That impulse was foreign to him. All throughout his life, he'd taken what he'd desired with little or no regard for what others wanted. It was just the way things worked back in those days. To show compassion was seen as a sign of weakness and the weak were always trampled into the dirt.

During his centuries as a Shadow Ryder, he'd done as the Shadow Lord had asked of him, which always meant killing someone. He was good at killing. Was comfortable with it. He had no experience with softer emotions. But Dovina made him want to reach out to her and offer more than just physical pleasure.

He scowled, unhappy with this turn of events. Emotions made a man vulnerable. Weak. He was neither.

When she sniffed and reached beneath her glasses to scrub at her eyes, he almost broke and went to her. Instead, he stiffened his resolve and watched. Every muscle in his body strained to move toward her. It took every ounce of discipline he contained to keep his distance.

What was so important about this woman that she needed to be protected at all costs? The Shadow Lord hadn't said and he hadn't asked. He usually didn't care to know anything about his missions other than who he had to kill. He even had his target now. The headless horseman.

He almost snorted aloud. That was a joke. There was no such thing as a headless ghost who could wield a deadly sword. No, whoever was masquerading as the horseman was *other*, like him. Some powerful, supernatural entity wanted Dovina.

A low growl rose from deep within him. Dovina's head shot up and she slowly stood, adjusting her glasses as she peered into the corner. Hadeon receded farther into the shadows, knowing he was invisible to her eyes.

"Must be the heating system." Dovina swiped her palms over her cheeks one final time and toed off her sneakers, kicking them aside. She padded into the bathroom and leaned on the counter, staring at herself in the mirror. "Maybe I'm going crazy."

Hadeon watched her looking at herself. She frowned, her brows furrowing. He wanted to smooth that worry away. His gut clenched as she leaned forward. The movement pushed her ass back. It was lush and curvy. He wanted to touch it, to mold it with his hands.

He could easily imagine stripping Dovina naked, bending her over the sink and fucking her from behind. She'd make the same soft, whimpering noises she made when he'd pleasured her with his fingers. His cock threatened to burst the zipper of his leather pants. At the very least, he'd have the metal teeth marks from it on his dick.

That's what he got for going commando. That was the term they used for going naked beneath pants. He shook his head at the strangeness of the word even as he gave thanks that every Shadow Ryder was gifted with the knowledge and clothing of the time in which they were sent. It allowed them to fit in and do their job more successfully. He could have worn boxers or briefs, but he'd never worn undergarments during his "real" life and he saw no reason to start now just because it was the norm in this time period.

She pushed away from the mirror and sighed. "Order some food, get a shower, then work out exactly what the heck happened tonight." She nodded at herself and hurried back to the phone perched on the tiny bedside table that was bolted into the wall.

Picking up the small menu sitting next to the phone, she perused her choices before picking up the receiver and pressing the number for room service. She chewed on her bottom lip while waiting for them to answer. Hadeon was quickly realizing it was an unconscious gesture on her part when she was thinking or nervous about something.

"I'd like a garden salad," she began. Then she stopped and muttered "screw that" under her breath. She paused, then continued. "No. No. Cancel that. I want a cheeseburger and fries with a side of coleslaw. I'll have an iced tea with that too." She picked up the small plastic-covered menu and flipped to the back page. "And one of those chocolate fudge brownies." She glanced at her watch. "How long will that take?" She nodded. "Half an hour is fine."

She hung up and went to her suitcase, which was sitting on the luggage rack. She quickly opened it and pulled out some clothing. Once she'd gathered all she needed, she padded to the bathroom and closed the door.

Hadeon exhaled slowly. His temples were pounding. His cock was throbbing. Every time she passed by the corner where he was standing, he could smell her, a

combination of woman and lavender that enticed him. The perfume of her arousal still clung to her skin, tempting him to reach for her.

He flexed his fingers and rolled his shoulders to try to release some of the growing sexual tension. It didn't work.

He should be returning to the Shadow Realm to get answers from the Shadow Lord. Hadeon had sensed evil emanating from the horseman he'd faced down. Not only was this enemy not human, his intentions toward Dovina were less than noble.

He snorted. Not this his were much better. All he could think about was sinking his rock-hard cock into her hot cunt and fucking her until they both found release. The difference between him and the horseman was that Hadeon would die to protect her. That was his mission. His honor demanded he do everything in his power to complete it.

And Hadeon didn't like failing. At anything. He needed information. He needed to understand just what it was he was fighting.

But he couldn't leave Dovina until room service had come and gone, until the sun was almost rising. Even then, he wouldn't be gone long. There were shadows to be found in most buildings and he didn't know if the horseman was confined to darkness and shadows as he was.

There was no way he wanted her alone with that other creature stalking her. It had nothing at all to do with the fact that he couldn't pull his mind away from wanting her.

He raked his fingers through his long hair, totally disgusted with himself. He was getting distracted from his duties by a sexy ass and a pair of solemn gray eyes.

He huffed out a breath. It was more than that. There was something about Dovina, something that went way beyond the physical, that drew him.

He'd seen more beautiful women over the long course of his long life, but never had one called to him on such an elemental level. Dovina was *his*. Belonged to him in a way he couldn't articulate. And furthermore, he didn't want to.

It was useless to even think about such things. He was an immortal warrior. She was human.

The water to the shower came on and Hadeon prowled toward the bathroom door as if pulled there by an invisible rope. He leaned his forehead against the wooden panel and closed his eyes. All too easily, he could imagine Dovina naked beneath the warm spray. Her body hot and ripe and wet.

The thick mass of red hair would be slicked back from her face, emphasizing its heart-like shape and delicate features. Hadeon thought he'd been damned during his lifetime and after, but he was now only beginning to understand the meaning of the word torture.

He ached. Not just his body, which was bad enough, but right down to the depths of his soul. After so many centuries of being alone, drifting in a never-ending, thick

gloom, he felt a spark of life igniting inside him. He knew that Dovina was the key and that light would die when he was forced to leave her, when his mission was done.

He could almost hate her for that. To offer hope and then snatch it away was far crueler than any torture he'd ever faced from his fellow man. But it wasn't her fault. She was innocent in all this.

Knowing he shouldn't, he eased the door open a crack and peered into the bathroom. The shower curtain was clear plastic and he could see the outline of Dovina's body as she washed. Hadeon almost swallowed his tongue.

Her hips were wide and lush. She was built to cradle a man between her thighs as he rode them both to ecstasy. He could easily imagine himself lying atop her body, slamming his cock in and out of her hot cunt until she screamed his name and clawed at his back. She would be magnificent in her passion. His balls clenched in agreement.

She raised her hands over her head, working shampoo into her hair. The motion pushed her breasts forward. Hadeon leaned closer for a better look, careful to make no sound and to block all the light from the outer room so she wouldn't realize the door had been opened.

Her breasts were full, more than enough to fill his hands. And he had large hands. He narrowed his gaze and could make out her nipples through the plastic shower curtain. They were pink and puckered. By the water or by arousal, he didn't know. He wanted to taste them again. He'd barely had a chance to enjoy her in the woods.

He could spend hours licking and sucking her breasts. He could almost hear her breathy sighs and passionate entreaties, begging him for more. He reached between his legs and adjusted his erection. Or at least tried to. There was no way for him to get comfortable.

That wasn't quite true. There was one way, but he couldn't take it. Not now. Not yet. When he finally had Dovina, he wanted to have her complete and enthusiastic cooperation and more time than he had now. He sensed her uneasy emotions and knew she needed time.

And wasn't he a sensitive modern male? He almost snorted aloud at the mere thought. He was more used to just taking what he wanted, when he wanted. Not that he'd ever forced a woman. He hadn't had to.

In his day, women wanted to be with the strongest men. That usually meant safety and wealth. And in uncertain times, that was everything. No, he'd never had trouble getting any woman he wanted. But he didn't want just any woman. He wanted Dovina.

He tried not to watch as her body swayed and enticed while she finished scrubbing her hair. It was no use. He couldn't make himself look away. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

She was humming as she ducked her head beneath the spray. She worked the soap from her hair, her breasts jiggling as she did so. Hadeon was so intent on her lush body, he almost forgot he shouldn't be standing there watching her.

The water suddenly went off and she reached her arm out from behind the curtain and grabbed a towel, rubbing it over her hair. She curled her fingers around the plastic to shove it back. Hadeon managed to step back and carefully close the door just as he heard the curtain being pushed aside.

Dovina frowned as a cool breeze hit her, making her shiver. She squinted toward the door, all the while cursing the fact she wasn't wearing her contact lenses. She fumbled for her glasses, which were resting on the toilet tank, hooking the wire frames over her ears. They fogged immediately and she swore in frustration. She squinted and stared at the door. It was closed.

"You're losing it." Now that she was safely in her hotel room, it was easy to dismiss what had happened in the woods. "The horseman was just a prank by locals. Nothing more." That didn't quite explain the instant connection she'd felt with Hadeon or the very real swords both men carried. But what else was she supposed to believe? That it was real?

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling someone was watching her. She'd had it during the entire drive back to the hotel, but it had disappeared when she entered her room, only to reappear a few seconds later.

Grabbing the towel she'd laid out, Dovina quickly dried herself. She felt vulnerable without her clothing on. As she pulled the thin cotton over her body, she ignored the echoes of pleasure that tightened her nipples.

"Enough," she muttered. "Bad enough you let a stranger touch you," she admonished herself. "But you had to go and have an orgasm too." And it had been a damn fine one. The best she'd had in a very long time.

She tossed the wet towel over the rod to dry, doing her best to ignore the low pulse between her thighs. Totally disgusted with herself, she tugged on a pair of greenstriped cotton fleece pants and a plain white T-shirt. She liked to be warm when she slept and a nightshirt just didn't cut it. Barefoot, she opened the door and stepped out into the alcove that contained a small counter and mirror. It also had a hairdryer.

She rummaged through the small bag she'd left on the counter earlier and found her brush and a can of styling product. Squeezing a large dollop into her palm, she worked it through the mass of her hair. If she didn't, her out-of-control curls would be a complete nightmare.

Grabbing the hairdryer and her brush, she turned it on low and went to work. Ten minutes later, she was satisfied her hair was tamed as much as possible. And just in time. A knock came on the door. "Just a second," she called.

She went to the door and cautiously put her eye to the peephole, breathing a sigh of relief when she saw a woman with a cart on the other side. She opened the door and the woman smiled. "Room service."

Dovina stepped back and motioned her in. "That smells good."

The waitress laughed. "Tastes even better."

Seconds later, the door was closed and locked tight and Dovina was sitting at the table in the room, her meal spread out before her and her laptop powering up beside her. She needed to do some research and write some notes while things were still fresh in her mind. She probably should have done that already, but she'd needed to get her equilibrium back. Luckily, her hands had finally stopped shaking.

The back of her neck tingled and she whirled her head around, staring into a shadowed corner of the room. "There's nothing there. It's just your imagination." Still, she couldn't shake the sensation she wasn't alone. She didn't feel threatened. Not in the least. She just sensed that someone else was with her. Not just someone, but Hadeon.

Feeling totally stupid, she stood up and took a step toward the dark corner. "Hadeon?"

She waited, knowing she would get no answer. "There's no one there. You're just spooked because of some prank a few local guys played on you." It was time to think about that and put her experience with the ruggedly appealing Hadeon out of her mind. "That probably wasn't even his real name."

Still, it was unusual enough for her to go and look it up online. She found it easily. "Destroyer," she whispered. She could easily believe that. Watching him heft the sword in front of him had been an amazing experience. Even though he was dressed in modern clothing, there was something about him that made her think of ancient times and warriors. "Now you're romanticizing things. So you let a man you didn't even know touch you. Get over it. It's not like you slept with him."

Determined to get her thoughts back on track, she pulled up the draft of the article she was working on. The dry text would ground her like nothing else. As she reread what she'd written, she picked up her burger and took a bite. The flavors exploded on her tongue and she moaned with pleasure. This was exactly what she needed.

Hadeon couldn't watch any longer. He still couldn't believe that Dovina had looked straight at him and called his name. Not that she'd seen him, of course. No Shadow Ryder could be seen in the shadows. But she had certainly sensed him there.

He frowned and scrubbed his hand over his face as he considered the implications. There was a connection between him and Dovina. There was no denying it. Maybe it was necessary for his mission, but he didn't think so. It went much deeper than that.

The Shadow Lord was holding out on him. It was time for answers.

Dovina moaned as she chewed her food. Her eyes closed as she swallowed. The ache in Hadeon's balls was excruciating. It was like watching her come all over again. She wore the same look of pleasure. Her cheeks were flush, her lips slightly parted.

Even covered from chin to ankles in clothing, there was no hiding Dovina's sexy curves. And when her tongue came out to lick her bottom lip, Hadeon couldn't take any more. She was safe for the moment.

He faded back into the deep shadows, not taking his gaze from Dovina until she'd disappeared from sight. He rode the familiar path to the Shadow Realm, losing himself

in the complete darkness void of all light, to the place he'd called home for more than several thousand years. It felt foreign to him now. Lacking.

Hadeon rubbed his hand over his chest, feeling the ache that permeated the area of his heart. He stopped cold. He missed Dovina. Wanted to be with her. This situation was impossible.

Anger roared through him and he welcomed it. It was familiar to him. He knew what to do with anger.

The darkness receded slightly and the walls of the castle coalesced around him. He strode through the dim room, feeling his fellow warriors stirring from the dark depths. He ignored them. The man he sought sat at the head of the table in a large carved chair that resembled a throne.

In spite of the dark, they could see one another clearly. The Shadow Lord wasn't pleased. Good. Neither was he.

Hadeon didn't stop until he stood in front of his leader. Hands on hips, Hadeon glared at him. "You left a few things out when you sent me on this mission."

The Shadow Lord rested his elbows on the arms of his chair and steepled his fingers together. "Did I?" His tone was mild. Almost uninterested.

Hadeon wasn't buying it for a second. He crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

"Do you not have knowledge of the world as it is now? Are you not able to function in this time and understand all the machinery and customs?"

Hadeon inclined his head. It was one of the gifts of the Shadow Ryders and came in handy as they'd all been to various parts of the world during different time periods. Hadeon had no knowledge of just how old the Shadow Lord was. He'd been here for about twenty-five hundred years himself and there were some Shadow Ryders much older. The Lord was older than all of them.

But that was not the issue. "The creature threatening the woman sent his regards. He said to tell you that this one belonged to him."

Warriors stirred in the shadows. The Shadow Lord pushed back his chair and rose to his great height, towering over Hadeon. "He called me by name?"

Hadeon nodded. "He did." The fact that it disturbed the Shadow Lord worried him and he wanted to get back to Dovina. "What am I fighting? How do I defeat it?"

"Tell me what happened?"

Hadeon rubbed his hand over the back of his neck, his fingers caressing the hilt of his sword that rested in the sheath against his back, as he gave an accounting of the encounter from start to finish. The Lord's eyes narrowed. "She is safe."

He nodded. "For now." He didn't know how else to put it so he gave the hard, unvarnished truth. "I feel connected to her somehow."

The Shadow Lord nodded, but said nothing. His eyes seemed to be peering inward rather than outward. Hadeon knew their leader had the gift of prophecy and could sometimes see things that others couldn't.

"What does it mean?" he demanded.

"It means you must go back and complete your mission. You must protect her at all costs." For the first time, irritation tinged the Shadow Lord's words.

"From what?"

"That is what I must find out." He crooked his finger and two men strode from the depths of the darkest corner. "Jarda. Aris. You must travel into the Otherworld and find out what you can. Be quick. If you sense danger, return immediately."

The entire room went still. None of them had ever been to the Otherworld. They'd briefly passed through it when they transitioned from their death to their rebirth as a Shadow Ryder. It was not a place one lingered, lest you be lost or your soul claimed by some other, more powerful entity.

Neither man hesitated. They thumped their fists to their hearts, bowed their heads and turned away. The Shadow Lord turned back to Hadeon. "You will have your answers when I have them."

Hadeon started to ask another question and stopped cold as a feeling of dread rose over him. He didn't question the knowledge. Didn't hesitate.

"Dovina's in trouble." He surged into the shadows, throwing himself into them. They closed around him like a thick blanket, almost fighting him rather than helping him, as he clawed his way back to her as quick as he could.

He emerged in her room, sword drawn, ready to fight and defend. The room was dark, except for the light coming from the bathroom. Dovina was lying in bed, covers kicked off, moaning softly. She was asleep and she was dreaming.

His heart pounded, adrenaline pumped through his veins. Worry and anger quickly turned to arousal when he realized she wasn't in any immediate danger.

He watched as she kicked out at some unseen adversary. Hadeon propped his sword next to the nightstand and shrugged out of his coat, draping it over the nearby chair.

He yanked off his T-shirt and tossed it aside. But he left his pants and boots on. To do otherwise would just be pure torture. Having her naked body against his might prove to be too much of a temptation.

Dovina moaned again, but she didn't wake as he eased down beside her and gathered her into his arms.

She felt right there, as though she had been made specifically to fit there. It was time to turn her nightmares into something much better.

Hadeon stilled as he heard his name being called. It was Dovina's voice. But that was impossible. She was asleep, lying right here in his arms. Suddenly, he felt himself being yanked into another realm.

#### **Chapter Four**

Dovina's lungs constricted as a black mass appeared on the path in front of her. *The horseman!* She turned and started to run. The horse's hooves pounded against the ground as he raced after her. The rider's laughter mocked her.

"You can't escape me, Dovina. You were meant to be mine."

She didn't waste breath trying to answer. She veered off the path and into the woods, hoping to lose him there. Maybe she could find somewhere to hide. Branches tore at her clothing and smacked her face, making her cheeks sting. She kept her arms up as she pushed her way through the thick brush.

She stumbled, falling heavily to the ground. A sharp pain went through her left leg and she cried out. Reaching down, she grabbed her ankle, sucking air into her lungs as the ache gradually lessened.

The world around her was silent. She struggled to sit upright, trying her best to control her breathing. Where was he?

Branches rustled off to her left. Dovina surged to her feet and started to run. It was more of a hop and skip, however, as her ankle throbbed with every step she took. She'd twisted it when she fell. Gritting her teeth, she ignored the growing agony and kept moving.

She heard a noise off to her right and paused. He was playing with her. Trying to herd her in a certain direction. She turned around and began to move back the way she'd come as quietly as possible. She held her breath as she put one foot in front of the other. It was just past dusk and there wasn't much light, which made it even more difficult. Night was closing in quickly. If she didn't get out of here soon, she'd be stuck here in the dark with *him*.

"Come to me, Dovina. Join with me. Give me your light. That's what your Shadow Ryder wants from you."

She didn't respond, but kept moving back in the direction of the path. What did he mean about her light? What light? And what was a Shadow Ryder? She had too many questions and no answers.

A horse nickered off to her left. He'd circled around and was coming back. Dovina began to run again, no longer even trying to be quiet. In her mind, she called out to Hadeon. He'd rescued her once, maybe he would do so again.

She broke through the woods, flinging herself down the path. Her ankle was in pure agony with each step she took, but she didn't stop. The horseman frightened her more than anything else in her life ever had. Somehow, she instinctively knew he was

dangerous and not just in some crazy getting-his-kicks-out-of-scaring-her way. Right now, a deep voice inside her was screaming at her to get away as fast as possible.

She frowned. How had she gotten back in the woods anyway? The last thing she remembered was being back in her hotel room. There was something definitely wrong. The moon was full and bright in the sky. That was wrong. Wasn't the moon waxing? It wouldn't be full for another week.

A loud noise from the thick woods made her hurry her pace. She limped along as fast as she could. Sweat had her clothing sticking to her. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw a huge black horse standing in the center of the bridge. She skidded to a halt. The horse shook his head and began to gallop toward her. There was no rider.

What should she do?

The sound of a horse and rider crashing through the woods behind her made up her mind. She had no idea where the second horse had come from, but she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. She would have laughed at her bad pun if she'd had enough breath to do so.

The black horse came to a halt beside her, his large hooves kicking up clumps of dirt. "Whoa, boy." She kept her voice low as she approached him. Not that there seemed to be any need to calm him. The horse stood still as stone. Waiting.

Dovina had spent several years on her parents' ranch before leaving home to attend college. She knew her way around horses. Grabbing a handful of the horse's mane, she jumped, pulling herself up on the creature's back. It wasn't a graceful leap by any means. Her arm muscles strained as she heaved herself up. This kind of thing always looked easier in the movies.

Through it all the horse remained steady. Thankfully, the beast had stopped next to a small incline, elevating her enough to allow her to mount him. She didn't think she'd have been able to make it otherwise.

Her knees squeezed around the horse's sides as she tightened her grip on his mane. "Let's get out of here." The animal needed no second urging. Whirling around, he began to run.

"She belongs to me." The horseman's voice broke across the stillness of the night. Dovina glanced over her shoulder. He was bearing down on them. She thought she could see the outline of a head this time, but she couldn't be sure with the wind whipping at her face. Her eyes began to water and she returned her attention to the path ahead.

As her horse veered off the road, she could see a low fence in the distance. This was so not good. Jumping was something she'd never done. She tried to get the creature to turn, but he had a mind of his own. Dovina leaned down and wrapped her arms around his thick neck and held on tight.

Her hair flew out behind her like a banner in the wind. She felt the horse's hindquarters bunch, muscles flexing as he prepared to jump. Then they were airborne,

flying through the night. The jolt when they landed almost sent her tumbling. She tipped to one side. The horse trumpeted his displeasure.

Dovina held on with every ounce of strength she possessed. The last thing she wanted was to be trampled by this huge beast. If she ended up on the ground that was a real possibility. Not to mention the fact there was a good chance she'd break her neck if she fell. And if none of those things happened, there was still the horseman to contend with.

Her horse slowed somewhat, but was still moving fast. She was finally able to push herself upright. The muscles in her thighs and arms quivered under the strain. She could hear the thunder of hooves behind her. She didn't look. She couldn't risk turning around, not with them moving so quickly.

Up ahead, the night seemed to grow darker, as though the shadows were closing in around them. Her horse quickened his pace, soaring through the night. The speed was incredible. If she wasn't so scared out of her mind, she might have actually enjoyed the ride.

The black stallion jumped suddenly, leaping into the dark. Like thick fog, the shadows closed in around her. Dovina's heart leapt, her throat constricted. She couldn't see a thing. It was as though she had her eyes closed even though they were still open.

The horseman yelled out something, but she couldn't make it out. His voice finally faded, lost in the thick haze. Dovina could hear her own breathing as she sucked air into her lungs, but she could hear nothing else, neither the sound of the horse's hooves on the ground nor his breath. It was as though they were insulated by the shadows, cut off from the rest of the world.

The only thing she could do was hang on to the horse beneath her. He was the only thing solid and stable in this strange landscape. She caught a glimpse of light in the distance and gave a sigh of relief as her mount hurried toward it. She felt the pull of the shadows as they left them behind. Dovina didn't look back. She was afraid she'd see disembodied hands reaching for her, trying to pull her into the thick, unending mass of darkness.

The moon reappeared and this time it looked normal. She heaved a sigh of relief. She had no idea where she was, but the horseman was nowhere in sight. That was all that mattered. Her horse came to a stop in the middle of a grassy field. In spite of the fact it was late October, the air was warm.

Dovina threw her leg over the side of the horse and slid to the ground. Only her hold on the stallion's mane kept her from crumpling into a heap. She took several deep breaths. When she was confident her knees wouldn't give out, she let go. The horse turned and stared at her before trotting off.

"Hey, where are you going?" She felt stupid as soon as she spoke. "Not like he's going to answer you back." She watched the magnificent black beast disappear into the woods. "And if he did, you'd have even bigger problems." When he was gone, she surveyed her surroundings. "How do I find my way home from here?"

"I can help you with that."

She shrieked and turned to face the newest threat. As she did so, her abused ankle finally gave out and she fell. Strong arms caught her before she hit the ground. A whiff of leather, man and horse assailed her. She knew that scent. Hadeon.

"Are you all right?" She could see the concern in his eyes as she sat on the grass cradled in his arms. This was a very familiar position.

"This is getting to be a habit."

A grin flashed across his face so fast she wasn't sure she actually saw it. "I don't mind," he rumbled. His voice was deep and low and sent goose bumps racing down her arms.

"Where are we?" If she could manage to situate herself, she could figure out where to go from there.

"You're safe." He ran his hands over her arms and down her legs. There was nothing sexual about his touch, but that didn't make any difference to her body. Her nipples puckered and when he touched her thighs, she creamed her panties.

Arousal fled when his finger lightly squeezed her ankle. "Ouch."

"How bad does it hurt?" Concern filled his black eyes.

She shrugged, trying to be brave. "It's not too bad. Probably just a slight sprain." It was throbbing and aching worse than a toothache, but she wasn't going to tell him that.

He stared at her for a long moment and then wrapped both hands around her ankle. Heat enveloped her skin through her jeans and socks. At first it soothed the ache, but then it got uncomfortable as the heat grew. Before long it was downright hot. She tired to pull her leg from his grip as the pain became unbearable.

Hadeon tightened his hold on her. "It will only hurt for a moment. I'm sorry." Excruciating pain shot through her and she cried out. Almost at once, the pain began to ease. She sucked in a deep breath and slowly let it out.

He released his hold on her and straightened. His gaze was solemn as he used the pad of his thumb to wipe away a lone tear streaking down her cheek.

Dovina cautiously rotated her ankle and frowned. She could still feel a twinge, but the pain was almost gone. "What did you do?"

He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her against his massive chest. "I healed you."

Well, duh. That much was obvious. "How?" Her enquiring mind wanted to know.

He gave his shoulders a negligent shrug. "It doesn't matter how. It only matters that you're feeling better."

She wanted to ask more questions, but he chose that moment to let his hand slide down her arm and over her stomach. The heat from his palm permeated her thin jacket and shirt. Immediately, her thoughts turned to the last time she'd sat in his lap. Her sex clenched in anticipation. What was wrong with her? She needed to get home. "I've got to go." She started to sit up, but Hadeon shifted, quickly rolling her so that her back was flat on the ground and he was looming over her.

"Stay." The words were torn from him. He knew this was nothing more than a dream, even if she didn't. Yet somehow, the horseman had invaded her dreams, threatening her. That had been real. Her injury was real. Thankfully, so was the healing.

However, it brought home to him just how vulnerable Dovina was. She wasn't safe in the night, even in her dreams.

If she awoke, she'd know he was in bed with her and that would lead to a whole other set of problems. The least of which was how he'd gotten into her room since the door was locked. Still was, for that matter.

Now that they'd traveled through the shadows and evaded the horseman, he wanted to hold Dovina in his arms and reassure himself that she was fine.

Who was he kidding? He wanted to strip her naked and sate himself with her body.

What would she think if she knew the horse she'd ridden was him? He wanted her to ride him again. Except this time he wouldn't be a horse, they'd both be naked and his cock would be buried inside her welcoming heat.

He'd felt every inch of her body where it had touched his. The horse knew that she was special, to be protected at all costs. But more than that, she'd calmed the restlessness that had plagued him his entire existence. With Dovina he wanted to lay down his sword and rest in her arms. Forever.

Her red hair was loose around her head as she lay on the soft grass and her gray eyes darkened as she watched him. She frowned. He could practically see the questions forming in her nimble brain. He rubbed his finger over the wrinkles between her brow, trying to dispel her growing anxiety.

"I don't understand this. How did I get here? I was in my hotel room. At least I think I was." She shook herself and started to sit up again.

"Stay," he repeated. Leaning down, he captured her mouth with his. She tasted soft and warm and welcoming as her lips parted. He teased the crease with his tongue before surging inside to explore. She whimpered and her hand came up to cup the back of his head, holding him to her.

He levered himself over her, letting her take some of his weight. Her firm breasts brushed against his chest. Even through all the layers of clothing he could feel the firm mounds, soft and welcoming.

Slanting his mouth over hers, he kissed her until they were both breathing heavy, until he couldn't think straight. He wanted her and he wanted her now.

He rolled off her and slowly removed his coat. His weapon harness came next. He carefully laid the sword next to them, at hand should he need it. Next came his T-shirt. He tossed it aside and waited, giving her time to object, to stop him.

Dovina stared at him and her throat rippled when she swallowed. "I don't understand any of this."

"I want you." He cupped her jaw in his hand, teasing her bottom lip with his thumb. "I want to strip you naked and taste every inch of your flesh. I want to suck your nipples, bury my face between your thighs until you scream with pleasure."

She swallowed again, her eyes growing darker and wider as he continued.

"Then I want to bury my cock in you and fuck you until both of us are sated."

She blinked but didn't run screaming. Hadeon counted that as a victory of sorts. He was a rough soldier, a mercenary, not a smooth knight errant. He took what he wanted. Except this time, he wanted her to give freely, simply because she wanted him.

Her gaze lowered until it hit his chest. She gasped, her fingers rising up to touch the tattoo that filled his entire torso.

"It's the black horse. Like the one I just rode."

Would she run screaming if he told her that he *was* the black horse she'd just rode? He was man and beast combined. In this form, he had all the best characteristics of the horse, its strength and speed, its intelligence. In his horse form, he was able to think and reason like a man.

"This is all just a dream. It has to be." She feathered her fingers over the tattoo, caressing the horse's mane. The muscles in his chest rippled.

She jerked her hand back, cradling it against her breasts. "It feels like a horse's mane." Looking up at him, she appeared confused. "But that's not possible. It's just a tattoo."

At this moment, Hadeon hated the kernel of honor that resided deep in his soul. He couldn't take her. Not like this. Not until she knew one hundred percent what he was. Sighing, he rested his forehead against hers. "It's a dream and it's more than a dream. And I hope I won't regret this."

He gathered his sword and coat and concentrated on the thickening shadows. Dovina sucked in a breath as the darkness enveloped them. He kept one arm anchored around her, knowing the shadows frightened her. To him, they were home, a refuge. Once again, their differences were in stark contrast. She was a creature of light. He was one of darkness.

Hadeon breathed in the shadows, drawing strength from them as he pulled them both out of her dream. He felt the mattress beneath them and knew they were back in her room at the hotel. They were alone. Safe. The horseman hadn't followed them here. Who and what he was exactly was still a mystery. Hopefully, the Shadow Lord would have some answers for him. And soon.

Knowing he had no choice, he released the thick, encompassing shadows that he'd ridden from the dream realm back to this one. The dim light from the bathroom cut through the dark, illuminating the hotel room. Not that he needed the light to see, but Dovina did.

She scooted to the edge of the mattress. He didn't stop her. The click of the light was loud in the room. She grabbed her wire-rimmed glasses from the nightstand and fumbled until she got them on. She stared at him, blinking several times.

"How the hell did you get in here?"

## **Chapter Five**

Dovina's heart was pounding. It had all been a dream—the horseman chasing her, riding the horse, the grassy field where Hadeon had held her in his arms. All of it. Her ankle gave a twinge, almost as though it remembered the pain of her injury. She frowned and jerked her leg out from beneath the covers. Her ankle looked a little red. She rotated it. It felt fine.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, Hadeon spoke. "Your ankle is fully healed."

She jerked her foot back beneath the cover and drew her knees to her chest, absently noting that she was wearing her pajamas, not her jeans as she had been in her dreams. She should be screaming her head off, but for some crazy reason she didn't feel threatened by him. Maybe it was because he'd rescued her in her dream.

That thought gave her an unpleasant jolt. "You were in my dream."

He inclined his head. "You drew me in. I sensed your fear and responded. The horseman was chasing you."

That didn't make sense. How could someone share her dream? It should be impossible. Yet, it had happened. At least she thought it had. At this point, she wasn't quite sure what was reality and what wasn't.

And that still didn't explain how he'd gotten into bed with her without her knowing it.

Her breath caught in her throat. She could feel a thin coat of perspiration cover her skin. "He was there too? The horseman?"

Hadeon nodded. "Somehow, he's made a connection to you on the mental or spiritual plane and was able to follow you into your dreams."

"What kind of drugs did you slip me?" she demanded. This couldn't be real. If it was, she was losing her mind. This stuff wasn't possible. A headless horseman stalking her in her dreams.

What was she supposed to do, stay awake 24/7? Maybe it was time to call the medical professionals. Problem was, she felt totally sane.

Hadeon rolled up until he was sitting on the edge of the bed. He rested his hand on the blankets just inches from her covered toes. She fought the urge to slide them close enough to him to touch through the blankets, wanting that physical connection with him. It was crazy how much his presence comforted her. He was an unknown factor. Just because he'd given her an orgasm didn't mean he could be trusted.

Her heart lurched, refusing to believe her brain's reasoning. For some inexplicable reason, she trusted Hadeon. Further proof that she was currently a sandwich shy of a picnic.

He raised his hand as though he might touch her and just as quickly dropped it back into his lap. It hadn't escaped her notice that he was naked from the waist up. His shoulders were impossibly wide, his biceps enormous. The man radiated strength and determination. And the tattoo was still there. A massive black stallion reared back on his chest, defiant and challenging all comers.

"No drugs, Dovina." He gave a half laugh. "But I'm not sure you'd believe me if I told you the truth."

"Try me." She was sick of not knowing what was going on. She needed answers. The intellectual side of her nature demanded them.

Hadeon nodded as though he'd expected no less from her. His long blond hair fell over one shoulder as he turned and curled one leg on the mattress so he was facing her. "I was born more than twenty-five hundred years ago."

She almost scoffed, but something in his demeanor stopped her. She'd hear him out first. Then she'd call for help if necessary.

"I was a Thracian mercenary, selling my sword to the highest bidder. I traveled the steppes of Europe and beyond, amassing a fortune with my bloody sword."

Her gaze darted to his sword, which was propped up against the nightstand and still in its sheath. She'd seen him wield it. It was about four feet long and totally without decoration. This was no ceremonial blade, but a real weapon.

"Destroyer, people called the blade and me. I cut a swath across the land, taking what I wanted. But there is always a price to be paid for such a life. I had no family, no friends. Only those who wanted my sword arm. They paid me, but none trusted me. I was betrayed by one such man and killed, not in combat, but by poison slipped into the drink he gave me. As I weakened, he attacked. When I finally fell, he thrust his sword in my black heart."

Dovina put her hand over her mouth to keep from gasping aloud. Hadeon's eyes were on her, but he wasn't seeing her. He was lost in memories of the past.

"I lay on the ground, dying. Death was coming for me and, truthfully, I welcomed him. I was tired of my life, but knew no other way."

Unable to bear his pain any longer, Dovina reached out and laid her hand on his knee. His entire body twitched and he jerked his gaze upward, totally focused on her, his black eyes burning with some inner fire. For a moment, she thought she saw actual flames in his eyes, but they quickly disappeared and she dismissed it as a trick of the light.

"But a man appeared to me before Death claimed me. He offered me a chance at justice and redemption. All I had to do was give myself over to him, body and soul. I didn't care so much about justice at that point. But redemption," he paused and rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. "Redemption had appeal."

"What happened then?" It was like something out of a fantasy movie, but Dovina was no longer convinced this was a pack of lies or a drug-induced state.

"I was no longer living, but not dead. I became a member of the Shadow Lord's army of warriors. Immortal, but bound to the shadows. Sunlight will kill me. I must stay within reach of the shadows at all times. The night is my domain. Beheading will kill me. Other than that, nothing can destroy me. I've spent the past several thousand years wielding my sword in the name of justice. I am a Shadow Ryder."

Dovina's thoughts were spinning. *Shadow Lord*. The horseman had used that term when he'd confronted Hadeon. He's also used the term Shadow Ryder. Her mouth was dry when she tried to swallow. She licked her lips, noting the way Hadeon's eyes followed the slow movement.

"What does all of that have to do with me?" That was her biggest question. The one thing that didn't make sense in this whole thing. She was an ordinary woman. Bookish. A loner. Not an adventurer or one of the beautiful people who had extraordinary experiences. She was plain Dovina Horne.

One corner of Hadeon's mouth turned up in a roguish grin. "The Shadow Lord sent me to you. You are to be protected at all costs."

"I don't understand." She wondered how many more times she'd say those words before she got answers that made any kind of real sense. "Why me?" A horrible thought occurred to her. "Is that why you..." She broke off, not able to finish the thought aloud.

"Why I what?" Hadeon frowned. In the dim light the scar on his face seemed almost sinister.

"Why you touched me and made me come," she blurted out in one breath. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment and a touch of shame, but she had to know.

His hands shot out and captured her face, cradling it gently. He leaned so close their noses were touching. Her lungs sucked in air at a furious rate and she felt lightheaded.

"Breathe slower," he commanded. He took a deep breath and she found herself following him. In and out. In and out. Until they were breathing in sync. Dovina no longer felt faint, although her head was beginning to throb.

Hadeon caressed her cheeks with his thumbs. "Why did I touch you?" He nuzzled her nose with his. "Because I couldn't help myself. Because you are the most beautiful creature I've ever beheld."

Her head started spinning again. There was no doubting the sincerity of his words. "I don't understand." There were those words again. But she needed to know, needed to be able to comprehend Hadeon's actions, why he'd touched her so intimately.

"Neither do I." He brushed a kiss on her forehead and then her temple. "I only know that you call to my soul in a way I've never experienced. I want you more than I want my next breath."

His lips touched her jaw, working their way down to her chin. "I don't know why this horseman, this creature, wants you, but he will not have you. I will protect you with the last breath in my body. You belong to me."

His words started a low throbbing deep in her core. Her breasts felt uncomfortably full, her nipples tight. Did she dare to believe Hadeon? Madness. There was no such thing as Shadow Ryders and a Shadow Lord. It had to be a lie. All of it.

As if he sensed her unease and disbelief, he placed a gentle kiss on her lips and rose from the bed. "Watch, Dovina, and know my words are true." He stepped back into the shadows in the corner of the room. She blinked and he was gone.

She jumped out of bed and hurried to the corner. There was nothing there but solid wall. Scared out of her wits, she whirled around and looked in every other nook and cranny. There was no one there.

"Hadeon," she whispered his name.

Strong, familiar arms wrapped around her from behind. She shrieked and he covered her mouth with his hand, smothering most of the sound. His other hand rested low on her stomach, letting it glide upward until it rested just below her breasts.

He slowly lowered his hand from her mouth. Gripping her chin between his fingers, he tilted her face toward him. Then his face moved closer to hers. That first touch of their lips sent a blast of heat ricocheting from her breasts to her sex. Hadeon deepened the caress. She could feel his erection pressing against the small of her back.

Dovina made a small sound of pleasure. Hadeon swallowed it. His hand rubbed against the lower curve of her breasts. Back and forth. Teasing, but never quite touching them to give her any satisfaction.

She moaned and raised her hand to his face, cupping his rough cheek. A sound of masculine approval came from Hadeon as he kissed her like he never wanted to stop. Slowly, he devoured her, taking his time to taste every dark crevice of her mouth. She did the same. He tasted better than chocolate fudge, rich and satisfying.

When he finally lifted his head, she was breathless. The heat from his touch pulsed through her body. She wanted his hands on her breasts and on the slick folds of her pussy. The memory of last night's orgasm slammed through her. She wanted that same feeling again and again and again.

"The shadows are my domain," he whispered against her ear. "I can disappear into them, riding them to anywhere on Earth. They also take me into the Shadow Realm, which is my home."

As much as she might wish otherwise, there was no disputing what she'd seen, what she'd experienced. Hadeon was real. The horseman was real. Somehow she'd stumbled into the middle of a supernatural nightmare, much like the characters in the books she'd studied.

"Why has the horseman chosen me? And who, or what, is he?" She turned in his arms until she was facing him, snuggling up close to his impressive and very naked chest.

Hadeon tightened his hold on her, as if his embrace alone could protect her from the horseman. "The Shadow Lord is having some of the men look into this. I've never encountered an enemy like this before. Up until now, they've all been flesh and blood. But this horseman is *other*, like me, yet not like me."

Dovina shivered. "He was really in my dream?" Now that was a nightmare, like something out of a horror movie.

"Yes." Hadeon didn't try to sugarcoat the truth. For that she was grateful. Knowing he'd tell her the truth grounded her. "Where did the other horse come from?" Had she conjured up the beast in her dream or was he real too?

He captured her hand in his and laid it over his heart. Her fingers lightly feathered the tattoo on his chest. "All the Shadow Ryders have an affinity with a particular animal, taking on their strengths and abilities as our own. We wear that creature on our chests and can shapeshift into it if needed."

She blinked, trying to digest what he'd just told her. It was hard to think with her body pulsing with need and pure lust pounding through her veins. "You're the horse?" She felt silly saying it out loud.

Hadeon nodded and sighed. "I take it you'll need a demonstration."

He didn't give her time to answer, but released her and stepped away. As she watched, the air around him shimmered, darkness closing in around him. The light of the room seemed to be sucked away, leaving it in shadows. His shape changed between one heartbeat and the next. One moment Hadeon stood there strong and tall, the next a giant black stallion stood in his place.

"I'm not crazy. I'm not crazy," she repeated. Reaching out a trembling hand, she touched the horse's flanks, letting her palm slide over the soft hide, stroking the silky hair beneath her fingertips. She could feel the muscles flex and relax as she petted him. "Amazing."

She felt him changing again and took a step back. Before she could draw a breath, Hadeon was back, legs spread wide, arms crossed over his naked chest. His hair flowed over his broad shoulders and down his back, the two thin braids framing his rugged face. He looked wild. Untamed. And totally irresistible.

There was no mistaking the bulge in the front of his pants. He wanted her. She nibbled on her lower lip. She wanted him too. Why shouldn't she have him? He wouldn't be here for long. He freely admitted he was here on a mission. When it was done, he would go back to the Shadow Realm and she would be left here. Alone.

All the more reason not to start anything. His leaving was going to hurt. Somehow, without her having any choice in the matter, he'd snuck his way into her heart.

It was going to hurt anyway, she rationalized. So why shouldn't she make some memories? This was a once in a lifetime experience. This amazing man stood before her, ready to give his life for hers. He also thought she was beautiful. That in itself was precious. The rest was almost unbelievable. Almost. Dovina was beginning to believe all of it was very real. But all that mattered now was that Hadeon was standing in front of her and he was extremely aroused.

Blood rushed to her breasts, plumping them and making her nipples tighten, outlining them against the thin cotton of her top. It also surged between her legs, softening the folds of her pussy, making her ready to receive him.

His nostrils flared and he dropped his hands back by his sides. Taking a step closer, he paused. Waiting. His chest rose and dropped with every breath he took. His skin glistened with a thin layer of sweat. The muscles in his jaw flexed. "Dovina?"

There was so much longing in that one word. It was enough. He wanted her and she wanted him. Everything else could wait.

"Yes."

She barely had the word out of her mouth when he leapt into action. One second he was a few feet away, the next she found her back pinned against the wall, Hadeon surrounding her with his large body. He captured her hands in one of his and raised them over her head, anchoring them. The motion thrust her breasts forward. He leaned in, rubbing his chest against hers. Her nipples were incredibly sensitive and the light caress sent a bolt of lust surging through her. Cream slipped from her channel, dampening her pajama pants.

As though he couldn't bear to have anything between them, Hadeon grabbed the hem of her T-shirt and pushed it up. He released his grip on her wrists and dragged the shirt away, tossing it to the floor. He groaned and cupped her breasts. They filled his hands and then some.

"So soft. So perfect," he muttered as he thumbed her nipples. They were incredibly sensitive and each caress was more potent than the one before. She moaned and pressed her thighs together to try to ease the ache growing inside her.

His silky blond hair brushed the turgid tip of her breast as he lowered his head and lapped at the bud. Dovina sucked in a breath and buried her fingers in his hair, pulling him closer. He gave a low, very satisfied laugh as he took her nipple into his mouth and sucked. His clever fingers teased the other nipple, tugging gently.

Sweat popped out on her skin. She felt flushed, her skin overly sensitive. She hated the confining pajama pants and shoved at them, eager to have them gone. Hadeon's hands joined hers and he pushed them down her hips and thighs. They puddled at her feet.

"Step out." She did as he requested and he jerked the fabric away. Naked, she was at his mercy. He was so much stronger than she. So incredibly powerful. Yet, she had no fear of him. His strength made him want her even more. She wanted him to take her, to want her so much he would stop at nothing to claim her.

Her inner muscles clenched hard, dragging a soft moan from her lips.

Hadeon kissed a hot, wet trail down her torso, over her rib cage until he reached her bellybutton. His tongue dipped into the indentation, swirling around. He dropped to his knees in front of her, his palms shaping and caressing her hips. For the first time in her life, she didn't feel overweight. She felt lush and sexy and womanly.

He leaned in and nipped at her hipbones, slowly working his way lower. "Spread your legs," he ordered.

She didn't hesitate. There was no place for shyness, for modesty. Not between them. Not now. Maybe she'd feel differently in the light of day. But right this moment, in the middle of the night, she wanted him with a need that went beyond the physical. She *had* to feel his hands and mouth on her. *Had* to have his cock buried in her tight channel.

It was madness, but she didn't care.

She parted her legs, silently inviting him to take what he would.

Hadeon fought for control. His senses were keener than a human's and he could easily smell her arousal. It was sweet and sultry with a hint of spice. Mixed with the scent of her soap, it was intoxicating. A vein pulsed in his temple as studied the naked beauty in front of him.

After everything he'd told her, he'd expected her to order him out of her room. Not that he'd go. Not really. He'd have disappeared into the shadows where he could watch over her. No way was he leaving her alone until he'd destroyed the threat of the horseman or whoever he was.

Hadeon had a feeling the horseman was simply the form his enemy had chosen to present because of the folktale, not what it really was. If any of the residents caught a glimpse of the creature, one of two things would happen. Either no one would believe them. Or they'd think it was part of the local legend of the headless horseman.

Dovina had come to study the myth of the horseman so that is the form the creature had taken. Much better for frightening her, for making her feel vulnerable. Maybe the creature fed off her fear? It made sense in a twisted way.

For that alone, he would kill the horseman.

That would come later. Right now he had much better things to concentrate on, such as the delectable naked woman in front of him.

Dovina stood still, letting him look his fill. Her hands fisted at her sides, her fingers opening and closing reflexively. Hadeon was in awe that she'd open herself up to him in this manner, offer him such a gift. He would take care of her, no matter what.

But now, he was here with her and she wanted him. For the first time in his long existence, he felt joy and a sense of satisfaction radiating throughout him. He cupped her hips in his hands. They were full and soft. He couldn't wait to crawl between them and thrust his cock into her soft, welcoming heat.

First, he wanted to taste her. His fingers flexed, kneading the mounds of her ass as he nuzzled her pubic hair. It was darker than the hair on her head, but there was no denying she was a natural redhead.

He stroked his palms over her inner thighs, reveling in her softness. His hands were rough from his years of brandishing a sword. They were almost too harsh for her tender skin. But she didn't seem to mind. Her eyes were closed, her head tilted back. Her

breasts were swaying, tight pink nipples moving, with every breath she took through her parted lips. She reminded him of some ancient fertility goddess come to life.

Using his thumbs, he parted her slick folds. Her whimper told him she was more than ready for his cock, as did the thick cream that coated his fingers when he stroked her pussy. "Hot and wet." He caught a tender fold between his teeth and gently tugged on it before soothing it with his tongue. "Perfect," he praised her.

Her hips undulated, inviting him to deepen his caress. He gave thanks for his perfect night vision. He could see every inch of her pink, wet core. Her clit peeked out from its protective hood. Hadeon lapped at it with his tongue.

Dovina gave a breathy cry, arching her hips toward him. She responded as though she'd been fashioned by the gods specifically for him. Every touch brought a pleasing response. He circled her clit with his tongue before sucking on it.

Cream coated his fingers, easing his way as he pushed two of them into her snug channel. She groaned and her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer.

Satisfaction surged through him. He eased his fingers out of her sheath and pushed them in again.

He almost came in his pants when she whispered, "More." Her voice was little more than a sigh, but he heard her and gave her what she asked for.

A third finger joined the other two, stretching her cunt, making her ready to take him. His cock jerked and he could feel the wetness covering it. He gritted his teeth, determined not to come, not like this. It wasn't easy though, surrounded as he was by her heat, her scent, her desire.

Her hips rocked back and forth. Hadeon plunged his fingers in and out of her sheath, slowly at first, then faster. He lapped and sucked on her clit. Dovina's fingernails dug into his scalp. He moaned at the pleasure her caress gave him. He liked the fact that she wasn't afraid to let him know what she wanted, what pleased her.

"Yes," she gasped. Her leg muscles tightened. He felt her inner muscles grip his fingers. The first spasm struck, followed by another and another. She came fast and hard, her entire body shaking. He lapped at her pussy, wanting to capture every drop of her essence.

He removed his fingers when he felt her starting to slump. Hadeon caught her in his arms, lowering her to the floor in front of him, pillowing her lush breasts against his chest. It was agony to hold her like this, his cock pounding against his leather pants for release. Yet, there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

He smoothed her vibrant curls back from her face. She looked up at him and smiled.

Dovina had never felt this amazingly good in her life. Her orgasm had ripped through every cell in her body. Mini explosions of delight that even now echoed throughout her. The muscles in her body were like jelly, but she didn't care. A sense of contentment enveloped her.

She became aware of something very hard pushing against her stomach, pulsing almost like a heartbeat. Hadeon hadn't come. She'd yet to see his entire magnificent body. That had to change. So far she'd done all the taking. It was time to give. She leaned back and her fingers went to the button on his leather pants.

He put his hands over hers, staying them. "Are you sure?"

Even now, he was giving her the opportunity to say no. His generosity stunned her. She wanted to make him feel even a fraction of the pleasure he'd given her. She nodded. "I'm very sure."

Slowly, he removed her hands from him and stood. Towering over her, he flipped open the button and dragged down the zipper. His cock popped free, large and thick and ready. As she watched a pearly bead of fluid seeped from the slit, dampening the plum-shaped head. Veins pulsed down the hard shaft as it flexed toward her.

Hadeon bent down and yanked off his boots before peeling the leather down his legs. He stood there, hands on his hips and let her look her fill. She'd never seen anyone like him. His arms were thick with sinew and muscle, his biceps huge. Broad shoulders tapered down to a wide chest and trim waist. There wasn't an ounce of fat on the man. His torso was delineated with bands of muscle.

She swallowed as her gaze was drawn back to his cock and the heavy sac that hung below it. She reached out and touched him, running a finger from base to tip and down again. Hadeon groaned.

Her gaze flew to his face. She could see the strain there and knew he was close to coming. "Sit down."

His eyes narrowed, but he did as she asked, perching on the edge of the mattress. She scooted closer until she was kneeling between his spread thighs. This close, she could see the pulsing of each individual vein that spanned his shaft. She wrapped her hand around the base and squeezed gently.

His cock jerked in her hand and another pearl of precum leaked from the tip. Dovina leaned forward and lapped at it with her tongue. Hadeon bit back a curse and grabbed the side of the mattress.

"You like that?" Her voice was sultry, teasing. Where had the sexy vixen come from? Hadeon brought out a hidden side of her she hadn't known existed.

When he'd had his face buried between her thighs, licking and touching her, she'd felt everything—the hard wall at her back, the silkiness of his hair between her fingers as she held him, the lapping of his tongue against her clit and his thick fingers stretching her pussy to delicious limits. Now she wanted to give him the same kind of pleasure, to share with him some of the incredible sensations he'd given her.

Lowering her head, she stroked her tongue over the seeping slit, tasting him. He was salty and musky and all male. His finger tangled in her hair, tugging her closer. She laughed and circled his cock head with her tongue, running it around the sensitive ridge.

His grip tightened, making her scalp tingle. "Take me into your mouth," he demanded.

She blew gently on the wet tip. His shaft jerked and his groan sounded like he was in agony. It was a heady feeling to have a man like this want her. She felt voluptuous. Powerful. Her breasts ached so she rubbed them against his thighs, loving the way the coarse hair abraded them.

"Dovina." Her name was a prayer and a curse as he tugged her closer to his pulsing cock. Giving him what he wanted, she opened her mouth and lowered it over his thick shaft. He was large, but she took as much as she could.

She tightened her fingers around the base, pumping them up and down as she sucked the upper part. He thrust his hips forward. "More," he urged.

She used her tongue, her teeth to scrape gently over the sensitive sides of his shaft, pleasuring him as she moved her mouth up and down over his erection. He guided her head until he found a rhythm he liked.

His pleasure was having a definite effect on her. She squeezed her legs together as the inner muscles of her channel tightened and relaxed and cream coated her pussy. She wanted him. All of him. Inside her.

But first, she wanted to do this for him. She'd given oral sex several times in her life and, while it had been pleasant, it had never turned her on before.

"Harder." He gave the hoarse command and punctuated it by wrapping one of his hands around hers and tightening her hold on the base of his cock.

Dovina pumped harder, continuing to work her mouth and tongue over him. She could feel the tension growing at the base of his shaft. She cupped his testicles in her free hand and rolled them before giving them a light squeeze.

Hadeon roared his pleasure. She felt his balls tighten and the surge that shot through his shaft. She swallowed as he came. His hips shot forward as he plunged into her mouth. Dovina continued to stroke her hand up and down his shaft as she sucked him dry.

Finally, he sat back and she released him with a wet pop of her mouth. Her jaw felt tender with the unfamiliar activity. She could taste him on her lips and tongue. She swiped her tongue over her lower lip and shivered when it sent a surge of desire pulsing through her.

Large hands cupped her jaw, turning her face up to his. His skin was slick with sweat and several locks of his long hair clung to his broad shoulders. His eyes were fathomless pools of black as he studied her. She could feel the rising tension in him.

Suddenly she knew. He was no more finished with her than she was with him. She leaned into him, rubbing her breasts against his chest, whimpering as her tender nipples puckered tight.

"Fuck." Hadeon yanked her off the floor and tumbled them both onto the bed. He rolled until he was lying flat on his back with her sitting on his thighs. Even though he'd just come, his cock was still hard and ready.

She glanced at his face, unable to believe what she was seeing. Men needed recovery time, didn't they?

"I want to fuck you." He cupped her breasts, the rough skin of his palms and fingers stimulating her sensitive skin.

His words were raw, almost angry. "Yes," she gasped. She understood the clawing need that was almost painful. She felt empty. Incomplete.

She shifted so that her sex was riding the ridge of his cock. He rocked his hips, grinding his shaft against her pussy, rubbing her clit. She couldn't hold back the moan as her body reacted and cream coated his hard length.

"Ride me," he demanded.

She levered herself up on her knees and shifted her position until she was over his erection. Balancing one hand on his chest for support, she gripped his cock with her other one and guided the head to the opening of her channel.

"Put my cock inside you. I want to feel your cunt close around me and squeeze tight."

She swallowed hard, his raw words making her pussy clench. One slow inch at a time, she lowered herself, watching his cock sink into her hot depths. She was tight and he was large. Maybe he wouldn't fit, maybe she couldn't take all of him.

She whimpered with frustration.

Hadeon slid his hands down her stomach and over her hips. He buried one between her legs and found her clit with his finger. He rubbed the small bundle of nerves. Her inner muscles contracted and she felt him slip deeper.

"Rock on me."

She rose up, lifting herself several inches before lowering herself again. She did this over and over, all while he continued to tease her clit and the slick folds of her pussy. He went deeper and deeper each time she took him into her.

The tattoo under her hand seemed to ripple with life as his muscles shifted and his lungs expanded and contracted. The only sound in the room was their ragged panting, punctuated by breathy moans and sighs and finally a groan as he seated himself to the hilt.

They both froze. She stared down at him, gasping for air. She squirmed, feeling stretched to the max, filled with his cock.

He gripped her hips and arched upward, as though he couldn't get deep enough. She understood the feeling. Her inner muscles clasped his pulsing shaft, squeezing it with each contraction, coating it with her cream.

Hadeon brought his knees up behind her, supporting her back. The slight change seemed to push him even deeper inside her. Still it wasn't enough. She was poised on the brink, needing something more.

"I have to move."

In response, he rolled, flipping her onto her back. He shoved his arms beneath her thighs and planted his palms on the bed beside her. His massive shoulders held her thighs wide. His gaze never left her face as he began to thrust.

Dovina had no control over the depth or speed of his penetration. Hadeon was in total control of his pleasure and hers. He varied his strokes, going slow and deep and fast and shallow. He ground his pelvis against hers, exciting her clit. She moaned and rolled her hips, needing more of the mind-blowing contact.

Hadeon pounded into her, grunting as he drove harder and faster. She clung to his shoulders, digging her nails into his skin. He leaned down and captured her lips for a searing kiss as he swiveled his hips.

Heat flashed over her, like a wildfire out of control. She cried out, mindless to everything but the pleasure swamping her. He captured her cries of release as she came. Her thighs trembled and her body shook. Still, he drove his cock into her again and again. Finally, he gave a shout. Hot semen shot into her, setting off another round of spasms. She cried out his name and squeezed her eyes shut, losing herself in her orgasm.

Her legs were carefully lowered to the bed and Hadeon collapsed facedown in the pillows beside her. He shifted enough of his upper body to the side so she wasn't crushed, but he stayed buried inside her.

Dovina had no idea how long they stayed like that before sleep started to tug at her. She pulled off her glasses, absently surprised she was still wearing them, and set them on the beside table. Hadeon didn't move a muscle. She reached out, playing with a long strand of his hair that rested on her stomach.

Yawning, she snuggled closer to Hadeon. The heat from his body comforted her and she drifted off to sleep.

## **Chapter Six**

The cold woke her. She shivered and tugged at the covers. They were tucked around her, but they weren't enough to keep away the chill. She opened her eyes and blinked when she squinted at the clock radio on the nightstand. Eleven o'clock? She sat upright in bed, yelping when the covers fell to her waist and she realized she was naked.

Her activities of the night before came storming back. She'd had sex with Hadeon. Her nimble mind cleared and the facts lined up, leaving her groaning and dropping her head into her hands. She'd had unprotected sex with Hadeon.

What had she been thinking? Obviously, she hadn't been. She didn't mind the fact that she'd had sex with him. That had been the experience of a lifetime. But she never had unprotected sex. Ever.

Thankfully, she didn't have to worry about pregnancy. It wasn't the right time of the month. Still, that didn't leave out disease. She knew she was clean. Frowning, she raised her head and rubbed her forehead. Did an immortal warrior need to worry about such things?

"Coffee first. Worry after," she told herself. She flipped back the covers and climbed out of bed. Dragging the thin blanket off, she wrapped it around her. There was no sound from the bathroom and the mattress beside her was cold. Hadeon had obviously been gone for a while. Would she see him again?

He hadn't said and she hadn't asked. The threat of the horseman, or whatever it was, still existed. That meant Hadeon still had his mission. Now that was a depressing thought. Did she mean any more to him than that? Or was she simply a task to him? Something on his to-do list.

"Coffee," she reminded herself. "You don't think well before coffee." Thankfully, the room had a small four-cup coffeemaker. In under two minutes, she had the pot perking and was heading to the shower. She felt sticky and sweaty after last night. A hot shower and a fresh cup of coffee or two were just what she needed before she could even consider the tangle her life had become.

Twenty minutes later, she emerged from the bathroom clean from head to toe. She stopped in front of the mirror long enough to pop in her contact lenses. She didn't want to have to worry about glasses if she had to run from the horseman again.

She glanced at her reflection and sighed. She'd braided her hair to keep it out of her face, but had no faith that it would stay that way for long. Stray tendrils had a tendency to work their way out of whatever hairstyle she decided on. But there was nothing to be done about it.

The clip she'd been wearing the first night was gone. She didn't know if Hadeon had taken it or if it was lost in the woods around the bridge.

Dovina quickly dressed in a pair of comfortable jeans and a long-sleeved gray sweater. The wool was soft and warm against her skin. She was tender all over after last night's rigorous lovemaking. The coffeepot had long finished perking, so she poured a cup, walked to the window and pushed back the curtains.

Sunshine washed through the room. She closed her eyes and raised her face to the warmth. What must it be like to never be able to be in the sunshine, to bask in its glorious heat? She couldn't even begin to imagine.

Shoving the curtain wide, she turned and noticed something lying on the floor. She went to it and picked it up, holding it in front of her. Hadeon's T-shirt. Lifting it to her face, she inhaled. His scent washed over her, a combination of man, leather and earth. It stimulated her senses, making her body ache. Reluctantly, she folded it and set it on the bedside table. She needed to get to work.

Padding back to the table where her laptop sat, she flicked a switch to power it up. She sipped her coffee and tapped a few keys to open her email, scanning the new messages. Her stomach growled. She had missed breakfast and needed to eat. But first, she needed to do some research. This time, it wasn't about myths or literature, but about the paranormal.

Hadeon existed. If she believed that he truly was an immortal warrior, a Shadow Ryder, that meant there were more of them. This wasn't the first time he, or someone like him, had interacted with this realm. She needed all the information she could get.

Knowledge was power and she was tired of feeling helpless when it came to facing this horseman. If there was one thing she was good at, it was research. She knew how to ferret out facts on even the most arcane subject.

Due to her unusual subject matter, she'd made some interesting contacts all over the world. Somebody had to know something. It was time to put her agile brain to use. Sitting in the chair, she pulled her laptop closer and began to send some queries.

An hour later, her stomach was rebelling. The loud noises it was making were distracting. "Fine," she told it as she shut down her computer. Her online searches had yielded nothing concrete. All she could do now was wait for her contacts to email her with some answers. It was time to get something to eat.

After she ate brunch, she planned on touring Sunnyside, the home of Washington Irving, the writer of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Then she wanted to explore the Old Dutch Church and a few other sites around town. Hadeon would show up at dusk or he wouldn't. Her time here was limited and she planned on making the most of it.

Packing up her knapsack, she checked to make sure she had her wallet. Hefting the oversized leather satchel over her shoulder, she left the room, locking it behind her and pocketing the key.

The first order of business was to find a diner that served an all-day breakfast. She was starving.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hadeon didn't want to leave Dovina. Last night had been the most amazing one of his entire life. She'd given herself to him without reservation, holding back nothing. She responded to his every touch, every caress. Just thinking about her was making him hard.

His fingers itched to touch her soft skin. He longed to bury his face in her curly red hair and inhale her essence. She smelled sweet and spicy. One moment she was shy, the next she was bold. Dovina had faced down the evil entity that was the horseman. She had more courage than most men.

He'd held her for hours while she'd slept, simply enjoying the feel of her in his arms, the puff of her breath against his skin. He knew if he had an eternity with her, he'd never get tired of touching her, uncovering what made her sigh with pleasure and scream with desire.

His shoulders bunched, his fists clenched. He didn't have eternity. Dovina was human and he wasn't. Their paths could cross but there could be nothing lasting between them.

Hadeon cursed the fates that had let them meet several thousand years too late. Dovina deserved more than he could give her, but he wasn't noble enough to walk away from what she offered.

He couldn't.

It was the first warmth, the first light he'd had in his life for so long. He hadn't realized how cold and empty he'd become until he'd met her and she began to fill all those places within him.

His resolve hardened. Whatever he had to do to protect her, he would. Deep in a heart that he would have denied even existed, a spark had been ignited. It grew with each passing second until it threatened to explode out of his chest.

Dovina was his heart. She might not know it, but she held it in her small, capable hands. For whatever time they had together, he wanted to bring her as much physical pleasure as possible. He would not speak of love. That would only make it worse for both of them. But he could no longer deny its existence.

He stepped out of the shadow and into the great hall, striding purposefully toward the Shadow Lord. "What have you learned?"

The Shadow Lord sat back in his chair and raised an eyebrow. Hadeon barely stifled a curse. This was no time to stand on ceremony and wait for his Lord to acknowledge him. He needed answers.

"Jarda and Aris are still searching the Otherworld."

"Whatever he is, the horseman entered her dreams."

The Shadow Lord sat forward, every line of his body rigid. "Tell me."

Hadeon explained about the dream Dovina had and how he'd been pulled into it. He left out what had happened after they'd escaped the horseman. The Shadow Lord

didn't need to know about that. Their physical relationship was between him and Dovina.

"Interesting." The Shadow Lord sat back, appearing lost in thought.

Frustration ate at Hadeon. Not understanding his enemy could be fatal. He wanted to howl his anger. Instead, he stood silently in front of the Shadow Lord, waiting, sensing there was more.

"The woman I have sent you to protect is special."

Hadeon leaned closer. He'd assumed she was special, otherwise he'd never have been assigned to her. He knew in his heart that there was something exceptional about her, but he wanted to know exactly why this creature was after Dovina.

The Shadow Lord leaned back in his chair and sighed. "There is a light about her, within her, that is powerful."

Some of the other warriors stirred in the dark corners, standing and moving closer.

"We have lost ourselves to the shadows for too many years." The Shadow Lord pushed out of his chair and stood, towering over all of them. "That is my fault. The shadows that protect and strengthen us have become our prison. I knew no way to reverse what had happened, until recently."

"It's lighter now." Araman spoke from the shadows.

"And why is that do you suppose?" the Shadow Lord questioned.

"The women." There was no hesitation. Hadeon knew it had something to do with the women his fellow warriors, Gideon and Blade, had been sent to protect.

"Correct. I had a vision. I saw the future and it was not a pleasant one. All of us would be locked in this realm forever, leaving those we'd sworn to protect without a shield against evil."

The men began to murmur, but the Shadow Lord held up his hand. Quiet soon reigned. "I also saw that there are a small group of women in the world who hold a light within them. A light that can strengthen us and help us find our way back to our true purpose. Almost too late, I learned that light is needed to make shadows. If there is no light, there is only darkness, which will swallow the shadows whole."

Hadeon nodded and knew the others did too. They'd all felt it. The growing apathy, the inability to care, to feel anything. Years had been lost simply sitting and staring into the darkness.

Shame washed over him. He was a warrior, sworn to protect those in the human realm, yet he'd given up without a fight, allowing the darkness to overtake him.

"We're all guilty of that, Hadeon."

His head jerked up and he stared at the Shadow Lord, knowing the man had read his thoughts.

"There is no shame. We are fighting now and that is all that matters." He stared off into the darkness, seeing things none of the rest of them could see. "Dovina can help us. The dark creature must want her light as well. Whereas we don't want to hurt her, he

would most definitely drain every ounce of her life essence to gain that light. It will strengthen him and kill her."

Hadeon growled low in his chest. His sword was in his hand without him having a memory of ever drawing it. "No one will harm her."

The Shadow Lord dipped his head in acknowledgement of Hadeon's vow. "Protect her well. Until we discover exactly who or what we're dealing with, we don't know for certain how to destroy him. And we must destroy him. A creature like that will not stop. If he does not get Dovina, he will find another."

Hadeon thumped his fist against his chest and bowed. "It will be done." He turned and hurried back to the shadows. Time passed differently in this realm. Sometimes a few minutes could be hours, even years. Or he could return seconds after he left. There was no knowing until he returned to the human world.

"Hadeon."

He paused and turned back to his Lord.

"I will send word as soon as Jarda and Aris return."

Hadeon nodded. He turned back to the shadows and plunged into them, riding them back to the hotel room. It was empty. He inhaled and caught a whiff of Dovina—the soap she used in the shower, the lotion she rubbed on her skin and the essence of the woman herself. With his keen senses, he could also smell the bitter coffee as well as the underlying scent of their lovemaking from the night before.

His balls pulled up tight and his cock stirred. He ignored his physical reaction as he closed his eyes and searched for her with his mind. There was a connection between them that had been strengthened by the physical but went far beyond it.

He picked through the tendrils of shadows, searching for her. Distance was no barrier. Walls ceased to exist. *There*. He sensed her life force and homed in on it. He felt the pull of the shadows, the brush of soundless air that enveloped him as his body was swiftly propelled down the dark corridor of nothingness. Opening his eyes, he found himself in a shady corner of a churchyard. Dovina was chatting with two women and gesturing to one of the headstones.

Her fiery hair glinted in the late afternoon sun. Her hands moved in an animated gesture. His muscles tensed and he groaned. He knew just how talented those hands were, could feel her fingernails digging into his shoulders as he fucked her hard and fast. Could remember how her fingers had circled his shaft, pumping up and down in an erotic rhythm.

His cock surged to life, pressing against the placket of his pants. Hadeon reached down to adjust himself. It was marginally better, but not much.

He saw her, he wanted her. It was that simple and that complicated.

She paused and glanced over her shoulder, staring right at him. Once again, she amazed him. There was no way she could see him. He was one with the shadows. But she sensed him there. Or at least sensed something.

That was a good thing. Hopefully, she would be able to sense the horseman too. That would give her another measure of protection against him.

Hadeon waited until the older of the two women touched her arm, reclaiming her attention, before checking out the rest of the graveyard. The shadows were growing longer. It was twenty-five minutes until the sun set for the evening. All Shadow Ryders had an innate sense of the position of the sun at all times. It was a defense mechanism. Lucky for them they had it or many of them would have perished years ago.

If he could be here, then so could the horseman. Hadeon smirked. Whoever the entity was, he was a theatrical bastard. Probably smart too. If anyone saw him, it would just lend to the local legend. Most folks, however, wouldn't believe they'd actually seen him and would write it off as a hallucination or the power of suggestion.

Hadeon would like to cap his head for real. If he were a creature much like the Shadow Ryders, then perhaps beheading him would kill him. Maybe that's why the shape he took showed him with no head. It was a layer of protection for him.

Once again, frustration ate at Hadeon. He needed to figure out how to kill this enemy or, at the very least, severely wound him. That would give the other Shadow Ryders time to discover more in the Otherworld.

He watched the graveyard as the sun slowly sank in the west. The two women said goodbye to Dovina and headed toward the parking lot. The younger one took the older woman's arm, helping her along the path. He narrowed his eyes as she stood alone watching the sun disappear.

Just as the last ray blinked out, she turned to where he was standing. "I know you're there." She held her hand out to him. He stepped out of the shadows and went to her.

Dovina held her breath as Hadeon materialized from the gray depths, his form taking shape with each step he took until he was solid. The man took her breath away. Tall and strong, and clad from head to toe in black leather, he was a force to be reckoned with. He wasn't wearing a shirt. Just his long duster over his bare chest.

He was also angry. She could see it in the hard set of his jaw and the way the scar on his right cheek appeared paler than usual.

Anyone in their right mind would be afraid of him. At the very least, cautious.

She was so glad to see him, she threw herself into his arms. They tightened around her and she was dragged against a hard male chest.

"Are you out of your mind?" His voice was gruff, yet tender.

She pushed away and tipped her head back so she could see him. "No. I knew you were there. If you hadn't shown, I would have gone to a café or something. I was half afraid to go back to my hotel room."

His hands flexed, tightening on her hips. "You've had no trouble today."

It wasn't a question, but she answered him anyway. "No." She shook her head. "It's been quiet. I did the tourist thing, took lots of pictures, and had a great brunch at a local

diner while I chatted up the waitress and a few of the locals. One man claimed to have seen the horseman near the cemetery just two weeks ago." That had both intrigued Dovina and frightened her. Was it the horseman of legend or the one stalking her? And where they one and the same or different?

"I also did one of the haunted hike tours and talked to the guide. Interviewed a couple of women about their personal experiences with the horseman legend." She motioned to the path the women had taken. Dovina had been thrilled when Anna had called her to set up a meeting here in the cemetery. She had Mrs. Van Herk's recollection of what happened all those years ago, along with Anna's more recent tale, safe on her digital recorder. "What did you do?"

She really wanted to know where he'd been and what he'd been doing in the hours since he left her. She knew she really had no right, no claim to him. They'd had sex. Great sex. Stupendous sex. But that didn't mean they were in a relationship.

Not that rationalizing things made them any different. She still wanted to know.

"I went to the Shadow Realm."

"Did you learn anything?"

He glanced around. "We'll talk later. First, I want to drop you off somewhere well lit and very public. I want to go back to the bridge in the forest and look for clues. Maybe learn more about the horseman."

She wasn't having any of it. "I'm going with you."

Oh, he didn't like that one bit. He tensed and she noticed a tic start beneath his right eye. "No."

She took a step back and put her hands on her hips. "I wasn't asking you. I was telling you." It might not be the smartest thing to do, but Dovina wanted to be with Hadeon. It was her life being threatened by this unknown entity. She wanted to help him discover exactly who or what they were up against.

"You need to be protected," he protested.

"I need to be with you," she whispered softly. And she did. All day long, she'd been looking over her shoulder, watching for the horseman. The only time she felt safe was when she was with Hadeon.

His sigh of masculine displeasure ruffled her hair. She knew she'd won and was careful not to smile. He grasped her shoulders, shaking her lightly. "You will do exactly as I tell you. This is not a game, Dovina. This is your life, possibly even your soul we are talking about."

Fear bubbled up inside her, but she beat it back. She had to keep her head about her or she'd never survive. "What did you learn?" Obviously, he knew something she didn't.

"Later." Without another word, he took her by the hand and tugged her behind him. She hurried to keep up, his legs being much longer than hers.

He stopped suddenly, swore and then spun around. Yanking her into his arms, he lifted her up onto her toes and slammed his mouth down on hers. His erection pressed against her stomach, sending a blast of pure lust rocketing from her breasts to her pussy. Oh god, she wanted him.

He ate at her mouth, tasting her, consuming her. Dovina forgot that they were in a public place where anyone could see them, a cemetery no less. Nothing mattered but Hadeon.

The brittle grass crackled beneath toes. The light fall breeze did little to cool her flushed cheeks or heated body. Leaves danced around their legs. The sound of people and traffic faded into the background. She thought she heard someone whistling in the distance.

The hot taste of his mouth, the feel of his hard hands caressing her shoulders and back aroused her to a fever pitch. She lifted one leg, wrapping it around his hip to get closer. Her breasts ached, so she rubbed them against his chest. He made a low rumbling sound of pleasure. His massive hands cupped her ass and pulled her closer into the notch of his thighs.

Suddenly, he thrust her away. "Later," he growled. She stumbled and he grabbed her hand again, pulling her behind him.

Dovina could barely think straight. Hadeon went from cold to hot and back to cold so fast it was making her head spin. She knew it was because he was focused on getting what information he could on the horseman and then taking her to safety.

The man pushed all her sexual buttons. No doubt about it. In under three minutes, she was primed and ready for him. Her panties were damp and her nipples hurt where they rubbed against her bra. Her lips felt swollen from his kiss.

She shook her head, grateful for the cool breeze. He was right. This wasn't the time or the place. But later...that was another thing altogether.

## **Chapter Seven**

Hadeon thought his cock would explode. Even the crisp evening air couldn't cool his ardor. He was very aware of Dovina hurrying to keep up with him. He didn't want her here. He wanted her somewhere safe. But he knew if he left her in a restaurant or coffee shop, she'd just leave and come looking for him.

Then she'd be totally unprotected. Better to have her with him where he could keep an eye on her. He still didn't like it. If he had his way, he'd put her on a plane for some tropical island where there was plenty of sunshine. Problem was, night always fell eventually. Plus the horseman had been adept at getting into her dreams. This entity, whatever it was, would be able to get to her no matter where Hadeon sent her. It was only a matter of time.

She was going to be the death of him. He wanted her with an unrelenting yearning that threatened to overwhelm him. He had to maintain control. Otherwise, he'd be no good to her.

He could still feel the imprint of her breasts against his chest and the heat of her jean-clad pussy pressed against his erection. He shook his head, trying to clear the memory from it. Taking a deep breath, he buried every emotion, every physical sensation. It took every ounce of discipline he possessed, but he did it. He was a warrior and he would not fail her.

She tripped and would have fallen if he hadn't been holding her so securely. He turned and noted her flushed face and fast breathing. She'd been almost running to keep up with him and he'd been so locked in his own thoughts, he hadn't noticed. He'd forgotten she couldn't see as well in the growing gloom as he could.

"I'm sorry." It was the first time in his long existence he'd ever apologized. For anything.

She smiled at him and shoved a lock of hair out of her face. "I'm fine. I know we need to get in and out of the woods quickly."

He nodded. Search for clues first, talk later. Hadeon pulled his sword from the sheath on his back as they entered the woods. He was careful to keep hold of Dovina with his left hand, keeping her close to his side and slightly behind him. "Keep your eyes open."

Her eyes widened and she nodded. Once again, she reminded him of a serious little owl. She wasn't wearing her glasses today. He frowned and the information he needed popped into his brain. She was probably wearing contact lenses. This modern world was filled with many amazing things, and just as many appalling ones.

They called his time barbaric. At least back then a man knew who his enemies were and could raise his sword to protect his family.

Dovina squared her shoulders and followed him toward the bridge. They didn't meet a single soul on the trail. That was unusual, but he wasn't surprised. There was a feeling of foreboding surrounding the area. Even the most insensitive human would sense it and leave.

"This isn't good, is it?" Dovina whispered.

He wasn't surprised she felt it too. "We should leave. I'll take you somewhere safe and come back."

Her fingers tightened around his. "No. We're in this together."

His chest ached and his heart thudded so hard it was almost painful. *Together*. That word had never been associated with him before. He'd always been alone, even when he'd joined the Shadow Ryders. They were all warriors and tended to be suspicious of others, keeping to themselves.

Maybe that's what had allowed the darkness to almost overwhelm them. They had no connection to anything, not even one another, beyond their sense of loyalty to the Shadow Lord. It was something to think about.

Even when they visited this realm, they were here to do a job and return to the Shadow Realm. It didn't pay to get close to people you'd have to leave. People who would die. Anger and despair threatened and he shoved them away. Dovina wasn't meant to be his. Not permanently. But she was his at this moment and he would protect her with his life.

They reached the wooden bridge. Water gurgled, rushing over the rocks and riverbed, crickets chirped and a frog sent up an early evening song. All was quiet. Hadeon kept all his senses open. His hearing and sense of smell were much keener than any human and they were telling him all was not as it seemed.

There was nothing specific, more of a feeling of something about to happen. Whether it was residual energy left behind by the horseman of legend or something more sinister, Hadeon didn't know. Keeping Dovina close, he studied the ground where he'd first confronted the horseman.

Taking his time, he walked the area. Back and forth, scanning the ground and the surrounding woods, he searched for some kind of sign. Anything that could tell him more about the entity he was facing.

They went across the bridge. He made no sound, but Dovina's sneakers thumped softly against the wooden planks. Hadeon's gaze was immediately drawn to the tree where he'd sat with her in his arms that first time. So little time had passed, yet it felt as though it was a lifetime ago. Then he hadn't really known her. Now she was the most important thing in his life.

He could hear Dovina breathing softly as she stayed close. He could sense her fear, but she said nothing as she walked beside him.

Her courage humbled him. She was trusting him with her life.

It was time to leave. They'd already been here too long. "Let's go."

"You didn't find anything?"

He shook his head. "No." He hurried her back over the bridge. "And I don't like the feel of things."

He felt her shiver. "I don't either." Her words were little more than a breath. "The woods have gone silent."

Hadeon had noticed that as well, but hadn't wanted to say anything to frighten her. But Dovina was intelligent and very astute and had missed nothing. "Stay close."

The air in front of them thickened, the shadows obscuring the path. Hadeon thrust her behind him. "He's coming."

Dovina barely stifled a shriek. One moment the path was clear, the next the horseman was thundering toward them. Steam puffed from the large horse's nostrils like smoke from a locomotive. The great beast charged toward them. They would be trampled.

Hadeon raised his sword to meet his adversary. She stumbled back, stepping onto the bridge. At the last second, the horseman reined in his horse. The beast's hooves flashed silver in the moonlight as he reared up.

Again, it was like something out of a movie. She half expected the director to yell "cut" at any second. Except this was no movie and the sword the horseman had drawn was very real.

"Step aside, warrior. Let me have the woman and you can live."

She blinked and realized that Hadeon had somehow shed his coat and was fighting bare-chested. When had that happened?

The horse tattoo seemed almost alive in the moonlight. Its forelegs rearing up and its mane flowing.

Hadeon laughed at the horseman. "If you leave immediately, I'll let you live. For now. But your days are numbered."

"You Shadow Ryders are loyal to a fault. Or rather, the stupid ones are." The horseman dismounted from his horse and glided closer to Hadeon. "Loyalty. Honor. What have those things ever gotten you?"

"More than you would ever know."

The horseman swung his sword. Hadeon countered, his arm and shoulder muscles bunching. The two blades met in a violent clash, skating along one another. Sparks flew. Dovina jumped back and glanced around for a stray branch or rock. Anything that she could use as a weapon to defend herself and Hadeon.

"I doubt that," the horseman taunted. "After all these centuries of loyal service, what do you have? Nothing."

"I have all that I need." Hadeon went on the attack, driving the horseman farther away from her. His skin glistened with sweat as he fought the horseman.

Taunting laughter filled the air. "Your Shadow Lord is weak. He's allowed some of his men to slip into darkness, their souls lost forever."

Dovina's heart hurt for Hadeon and his fellow warriors. She couldn't begin to understand the desperation and sheer nothingness that they'd lived in for so long. The horseman was partially right. Their leader never should have allowed that to happen. Of course, that was easy for her to say. She had no idea what he or his men had faced over the millennia of their existence.

"We are to blame for that," Hadeon countered. "Not him. We are warriors. It is our responsibility to take care of ourselves, to be ready when called to duty."

He believed that too. Dovina knew it, sensed it with every thrust and parry he made with his sword. Hadeon didn't blame the Shadow Lord at all. He blamed himself.

There was no more talking now as they fought, their swords swinging and swooping with deadly precision. It was like watching a ballet, she realized. Both men moved fluidly, their bodies barely avoiding being skewered by the sharp blades.

Dovina kept her eyes on the fight as she scurried back to the far side of the bridge. She glanced away, desperate to find a weapon of some kind. Anything she could use to defend herself.

She spied a branch just off to the side. It was about four feet in length. Not too big, but substantial. Dashing off the bridge, she grabbed it. It was thick, but not so thick as to make it too heavy. It wasn't much of a weapon against a sword, but it could do some damage. She gripped it with both hands and carried it back to the bridge.

The two warriors were still battling. The horseman was swinging for Hadeon's head. Immortal or not, beheading him would most likely kill him. It wasn't fair that the horseman had no head. Or did he? Maybe it was all an illusion.

Swords met. Clashed. Hadeon spun around and drove his blade deep in the horseman's chest area. He staggered back, but didn't falter.

The notion that the horseman's form was nothing more than a trick grew stronger. "Swing at his head," she yelled. "I think it's just an illusion. I think it's really there."

The horseman jerked around to face her and she could feel the evil, the pure fury rolling off of him. She shivered, wishing she were wearing something heavier than a sweater. Like maybe a suit of armor.

While his attention was on her, Hadeon swung his sword in a wide arc. His blade whistled through the air over the horseman's neck. The motion left him vulnerable and open to attack. But he believed her enough to take the chance.

Dovina prayed she was right.

A loud roar filled the night air. At the last possible second, the horseman jerked back, out of the path of the oncoming blade. But not before Hadeon's sword seemed to slow in midair as though it had hit something and a dark liquid sprayed into the air.

Blood? She wasn't certain either of the men could bleed in the conventional sense. But Hadeon had definitely injured him.

The horseman let out a shrill whistle and his horse thundered to his side. Hadeon went on the attack, but the horseman wasn't stupid. He danced out of reach. As the massive horse raced past him, the horseman grabbed the pommel and yanked himself on top. They leapt forward, disappearing into the shadows.

The night went quiet. She sensed Hadeon wanted to follow his enemy into the shadows. But that was what the horseman wanted. It would be a trap. "Don't go," she shouted as she dropped her makeshift weapon and raced toward him.

Hadeon frowned as she approached. He glanced toward the dark area where the horseman had disappeared. Already it was growing lighter as the shadows receded.

The end of his blade was dark with what appeared to be blood. He wiped it on the ground and then sheathed it in the carrier he wore on his back. "Are you all right?"

His words were stilted and she slowed as she reached him. He seemed closed off. Unreachable. Not the lover she'd shared her bed with the night before. This was the warrior, the mercenary who'd sold his sword to the highest bidder. "I'm fine."

"Good. We need to go." In a blink of an eye, he was wearing his long, leather duster, his sheathed weapon hidden from view. He took her by the hand and all but dragged her down the path toward the road.

They didn't speak on the walk back to her car. Nor did they talk on the ride back to the hotel. Dovina was getting more and more nervous with each passing second. The silence grew, becoming a living thing, surrounding them, enclosing them.

The closer they got to their destination, the more the suffocating silence changed into anger. What was his problem? None of this was her fault, yet he was freezing her out. The couple of times he'd look in her direction, it was to glare at her.

The tension grew as he followed her into the hotel, past the front desk clerk and down the long corridor to her room. Her hands were shaking by the time she unlocked the door and stepped inside, flipping on the overhead light. When he started to follow her, she put out her hand and stopped him. "Maybe you should leave."

Hadeon couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Leave?" he repeated, certain he'd heard her wrong.

The horseman had attacked them, had threatened her. He'd had the chance to kill him, to finish him and eliminate the threat, yet he'd failed. He'd come so close to taking the horseman's head. But the bastard was a remarkable swordsman. He'd managed to get out of the way of Hadeon's sword at the last possible second. Then he'd gotten the horse between them and managed to escape into the shadows.

If Dovina had been safe, he would have gone after his enemy, chasing him through the Otherworld, or Hell itself. Nothing mattered more than Dovina's safety. The moment the horseman was gone, he'd wanted to drag her into his arms and lose himself in her heat. To feel her alive and moaning with pleasure beneath him. He needed that physical and emotional connection. Only by maintaining the strictest hold over himself had he been able to keep from doing just that. He might not mind the cold ground and the public area, but he knew Dovina would. It was rigid discipline that had kept him from jumping her in the car on the ride back to her hotel. And now that they were here, she thought he should leave. He didn't think so.

Without a word, he put his hands on her hips and lifted her. Stepping into the room, he kicked the door shut behind him. It automatically locked. Not that locks would stop their enemy. But the wound he'd given him would keep him out of commission until tomorrow night at least. Hadeon was certain of that much.

That meant he had tonight with Dovina without having to worry about an attack. He could take his time and sate himself with her. He could taste every inch of her body, explore every curve and valley. He was almost lightheaded at the possibilities as he lowered her until her feet were touching the floor.

His rigid control deserted him. Lust poured through his veins, invading every cell in his body. His cock swelled, his muscles thickened. Her hands were on his chest, holding him away from her. He frowned down at her.

He could see the confusion in her face. They needed to talk. But right now, he needed her.

The urge to strip her, mount her and fuck her beat at his brain. But she needed more from him than that. She needed to know how much she meant to him. How much he cherished her.

He cupped her face in his hands. She was precious to him. So beautiful. He loved the flush that came to her face as he lowered his mouth to hers. He traced her cheeks with his thumbs as he outlined her lips with his tongue.

He found a discipline he didn't know he had. Hadeon put aside his own wants and desires and focused solely on Dovina. She came first. Now and always. His chest ached with how much he wanted her. But more than that, he wanted her to want him back.

She stood rigid in his embrace, not pushing him away, but not pulling him closer either. He kissed the corner of her mouth and then across her plump lower lip. "I need you so much."

He slid his hands down the curve of her neck and over her shoulders. He locked his arms around her, urging her closer. "Please," he murmured as he continued to nibble at her lips.

She sighed and her body softened, swaying toward his. Triumph flowed through him. She was his.

Still, he waited, wanting her to come to him fully.

Tentatively, she parted her lips, her tongue coming out to caress his.

His control broke. He pulled her into the curve of his hard body, his hands anchored on her ass. His mouth took hers, stealing her breath as he kissed her.

Tongues tangled, teeth clinked. He couldn't get close enough to her.

Her hands slid over his chest and shoulders before tangling in his long hair. He loved the way she touched him. Felt every caress in his groin. His cock pulsed. His balls were heavy and tight.

"I need you now," he ground out.

She peppered his throat, his jaw with hot kisses. "Yes."

Dovina didn't know what had happened in the past few seconds. They'd gone from stilted silence to out-of-control passion in the blink of an eye. His hands stroked over the curves of her ass, pulling her tighter into the cradle of his pelvis. His erection strained against his pants, pressing against her stomach.

Her clothes felt too tight. Confining. She wanted to feel his skin beneath her palms, trace the muscles of his huge biceps and ripped torso. But more than that, she needed to feel the sense of closeness between them. This was more than simply two healthy adults having sex. There was a connection between them that demanded she touch him and strengthen their growing bond.

She wasn't stupid. In many cultures, sex was used in magic and various powerful ceremonies. That's what this felt like. She knew that tonight would change her irrevocably. It was frightening and exciting at the same time.

Hadeon slipped his hand beneath her sweater, caressing the small of her back. She shoved open his leather duster, placing her palms on his naked chest. Heat radiated from him. He captured her mouth, sliding his tongue inside. Her toes curled in her sneakers and she squirmed to get closer to him.

"Too many clothes," he muttered. He shrugged out of his coat. It fell to the ground beside them. He shoved her sweater over her torso and kept going. She raised her hands and he whisked the garment away, leaving her in her bra and jeans.

His fingers traced the lace edge of the lacy garment. "Pretty." His black eyes grew even darker and his nostrils flared as he traced one distended nipple through the silky material. She felt his touch throughout her body, like an echo of pleasure.

A low whimper escaped her when he lowered his head and captured a puckered nipple between his teeth, tugging gently. "Hadeon." She yanked at his hair, wanting, no needing him closer. She felt empty inside and needed him to fill her. Only he could drive back the fear, the darkness, the sheer loneliness that threatened to engulf her.

"I know," he muttered as he nuzzled her breast. His fingers found the back clasp and unhooked her bra. He lowered the straps slowly down her arms, revealing her naked flesh. "Absolutely perfect."

Her breasts swelled under his regard. She clenched her thighs together to ease the growing ache in her sex. Her panties were damp. The folds of her pussy slick and plump.

Hadeon went down on one knee and pressed his face against her stomach. She could feel the roughness of his cheek as he rubbed it over her skin. Reaching down, he lifted one of her feet and slipped off her sneaker. Then the other. He didn't stand, but

went to work on her jeans and panties. She helped him, shoving the material over her thighs and finally off.

The air was warm as it drifted over her naked body, heightening her already aroused senses. Hadeon stood and never took his eyes off her as he divested himself of his clothing. Then they were both naked.

His cock was at full attention, the head flushed red and slick with evidence of his growing need. She reached out and ran a single finger over his erection. The skin was so soft, but he was incredibly hard.

Both of them were breathing heavily. The horse tattoo on Hadeon's chest rippled and shifted with each breath he drew. His light hair fell over his shoulders and his jaw was clenched. He looked rough and fierce and very aroused.

The heater in the room cut in with a whoosh, sending a blast of warm air over them. Dovina shivered and licked her lips as she stroked up and down his shaft.

Hadeon caught her hand in his and raised it to his mouth. She gasped when he sucked her index finger between his lips, laving at it with his tongue and nipping at it with his teeth. Shivers raced down her spine and goose bumps broke out all over. She whispered his name, wanting more.

He slowly pulled her finger from her mouth and led her into the bathroom. His shoulder muscles bunched and flowed as he turned on the water and adjusted the temperature before flipping the switch to turn on the shower.

Her chest was heaving with each breath she took, her breasts swaying as he clasped her hips in his hands and lifted her into the tub. He didn't bother to pull the curtain as he set her down in front of him. The spray hit his back and cascaded down around them.

The intensity in his eyes was almost too much. She started to glance away, but he caught her chin in his hand and turned it toward him. "You are mine."

Such a proclamation from a man would normally have ignited her temper. She belonged to no one but herself. Yet, when Hadeon said it, something deep within her rejoiced. Not waiting for a reply from her, he slid his hands down her neck and over her shoulders.

"Your skin is so soft." He leaned down and kissed her slick shoulder. She gripped his forearms for support. Laughing, he continued his downward journey. He cupped both breasts in his hands and thumbed her nipples. Her pussy spasmed in delight and she moaned softly.

"Like that, do you?"

"Very much." Her voice was low and sultry. Two could play this game.

Reaching down, she wrapped her fingers around his cock and pumped from base to tip. Hadeon sucked in a breath and tipped back his head, his damp hair flowing down his back. "Like that, do you?" she taunted.

"Too much," he gritted out, but he didn't stop her. "Harder," he demanded.

She tightened her grip around the sensitive cock head and dragged her thumb over the slit. His hips jerked toward her.

Dovina leaned inward, brushing her lips over his pectoral muscles, then lower. She kissed and nipped at his tattoo. When she touched the animal's neck, Hadeon jerked his head to one side, exposing his neck. When she lapped at the horse's back, his spine arched. Man and beast were tied to each other. What one felt, so did the other.

She worked her way downward as she went to her knees in front of him. His body blocked the bulk of the spray from the water. Steam billowed from the shower, but the door was open, keeping the room from filling up.

Slowly, she circled the crown of his cock with her tongue. Hadeon tangled his fingers in her hair, pulling her closer. "Look at us." He turned her head so she could see the mirror. It extended beyond the vanity, going floor to ceiling. It was lightly fogged, but she could still see the outline of their bodies.

She was very glad she was wearing her contacts. Wet and naked, Hadeon was a sight to behold. Like something out of an erotic fantasy. His skin was slick and his muscles rippling whenever he moved.

He looked huge as he towered above her. She knelt at his feet, yet she was the one with the power. She kept one eye on the image in the mirror as she parted her lips and sucked the head of his shaft into her mouth. As she watched, the dark tip disappeared past her lips. It was the most erotic thing she'd ever seen and it turned her on. Her nipples ached for his touch and her body swayed toward him, needing to be closer.

Hadeon shoved his hips forward, sliding more of his shaft inward. She circled the ridge of his cock head with her tongue, teasing the sensitive area.

His groan of pleasure turned to a growl when she pulled back. His cock came out of her mouth with a wet pop. His fingers tightened in her scalp. She sensed his growing need for her. She loved watching herself pleasure him and seeing him respond to her every touch, every stroke.

With her free hand, she cupped his balls. She nuzzled them, gently pulling one of them into her mouth and sucking. Hadeon's hand slapped against the wall for support as the water continued to rain down around them.

Dovina released his balls and kissed her way from the base of his cock to the tip before taking him in again. This time, she gripped his shaft with her hand and pumped as she worked him with her mouth and tongue. He tasty earthy and spicy. All man. Hadeon.

Hollowing her cheeks, she sucked hard as she raised and lowered her mouth over his thick erection. His hips were rocking now, forward and back, keeping time with her strokes.

She felt the swelling in the base of his shaft. His legs stiffened and he bit back a curse, jerking his cock from her mouth.

"What..." She didn't get time to finish her question. He yanked her into his arms and turned her until she was facing the far wall. She slapped her hands against the tile for balance.

Hadeon shoved her legs apart. She felt the broad head of his cock against her slit. Then he was pushing inward. Her core was swollen and he stretched the sensitive muscles as he forged a path into her.

Dovina was panting hard. He seemed to swell, growing larger with each passing second. The muscles of her sex tightened around him, squeezing.

His arms encircled her, his hands cupping her breasts. "I love the way your cunt holds my cock. So hard. So tight. So fucking perfect." He began to move. Short, hard thrusts that made her gasp with pleasure.

"Watch us," he commanded. He must have adjusted the water at some point because it was cooler now and most of the steam had abated. She could clearly see their reflection in the mirror. Her hair had long ago escaped the braid she'd put it in this morning and was in tangles around her head. Her eyes were wide, her lips swollen and parted. His hands were large and dark on her much paler skin as they held her breasts. His spine undulated, his buttocks flexing and clenching as he pumped into her.

He surrounded her completely.

As he slid his cock almost all the way out, she saw it. Slick and shiny with her essence coating it. He drove back in, hard and fast. Filling her to overflowing.

It verged on painful, but stopped just shy of actually hurting. Her body accepted him, stretched to accommodate his width and length. After a few strokes, she began to move with him, urging him deeper, needing even more.

The wet slap of their skin was an erotic sound that combined with the sight of them in the mirror to push her arousal almost to the breaking point.

Her body ached for release. So many pent-up emotions—fear, lust, caring—threatened to explode. Her inner muscles clenched hard and she cried out. Hadeon slid one of his hands from her breasts to between her legs. He parted her slick folds and found her clit, rubbing his thumb over it.

Lights exploded in her head. She cried his name as her orgasm washed over her. He slammed into her several more times, lifting her feet from the tub. His arms supported her, held her in a bruising grip as he yelled. She felt the hot jets of his cum inside her and cried out again.

Her arms crumpled and she leaned against the wall. The tiles were cool against her cheek. Her heart was racing and she took several deep breaths. She wanted to touch Hadeon. See him. Not just a reflection of him in the mirror.

He pulled out slowly and she whimpered at the loss of his warmth at her back. He turned her and cradled her against his chest, letting the warm water coast over their bodies. She shivered and he swore. "You are getting chilled."

He lifted her from the tub and turned off the taps. The quiet after the rush of the water seemed unnatural. Hadeon grabbed a wet facecloth from the shower and began to clean between her legs, washing away the evidence of their sexual encounter. It was stupid to feel awkward and shy after what they'd just done, but she could feel her cheeks heating.

"I can do it." She tried to pull the cloth away, but he resisted.

"Let me."

She sighed and stopped fighting. In a battle of strength, there was no way she could win. When he was done, he cleaned himself and tossed the cloth aside. He grabbed one of the bath towels and gently dried her. It was torture as he rubbed her arms, torso and legs, leaving her breasts and between her legs damp.

He dragged the towel over himself. She couldn't take her eyes off him. The muscles in his arms flexed and rippled as he dried himself. His legs were thick with muscle and incredibly long. The hair around his groin was slightly darker than the hair on his head. He oozed power and confidence.

As though he felt her eyes on him, he glanced at her and smiled. His cock, which had gone slightly flaccid, stirred to life again. As she watched, it thickened and elongated. Her breathing grew rapid and she was surprised steam didn't radiate from her skin she was so hot.

He dumped the towel on the floor, scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom.

Still holding her, he managed to turn back the covers before setting her down on the mattress. He followed her, stretching out beside her.

His gaze was deadly serious. "Now, we talk."

## **Chapter Eight**

Hadeon was finding it difficult to gather his thoughts after the mind-blowing sex he'd just had in the shower with Dovina. Even though he just had her, he wanted her again. Just the memory of her slick skin, her small hands rubbing his body and her lush mouth sucking his cock was making his entire body throb.

She was feeling shy again, tugging the covers tight to her chin. Intelligent, erotic, confident, shy—all these things described Dovina. She fascinated him with her many moods.

He propped himself up on one arm and stared down at her. Her hair was damp as it spread out in curly locks over the white pillowcase. He fingered one red strand. It looked like pure molten fire. Her gray eyes were wary as she stared up at him.

"What are you thinking?"

She shrugged.

He sighed, knowing he was going to have to take the lead. "I visited the Shadow Realm."

She nodded. "You told me earlier."

Unable to resist touching her, he caressed one satiny cheek and her stubborn chin with his finger. "The Shadow Lord is still trying to discover who or what the entity really is."

She shivered. He tucked the cover tighter around her, not liking the flash of fear in her eyes. "He didn't know how the horseman got into my dreams?"

"No."

Dovina started to slide out of bed. He banded his arm around her, stopping her from leaving. "Where are you going?"

She rested her hand on his. "I need to check my email. I sent out some queries this morning."

Hadeon's shoulders tensed. He didn't like the idea of Dovina telling others about him, about what was happening to her.

"I had to," she continued. "This isn't the first time one of you have visited earth. Maybe it's the same with the horseman. I asked several experts in the field of occult studies and mythology about the evil shadowy figure and if there was an entity that could take any form it wanted."

He frowned when she lumped him in with the rest of the Shadow Ryders. He didn't want to be "one of you". He wanted to be special to her.

She chewed on her bottom lip. "Did I do something wrong? I phrased it as a general request for information for something I'm working on. None of them will think anything of it. I've used them as sources before in my research."

He leaned down and dropped a quick kiss on her abused bottom lip. "No. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Let me check my email." When she pulled away this time, he let her go. It almost made him chuckle aloud when she reached the edge of the bed and froze. She wasn't dressed and it seemed that Dovina was self-conscious about being naked around him. He didn't mind at all. He loved her curvy figure. His dick jerked in agreement.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. He stacked his hands behind his head and stared back, trying to look totally unconcerned. Still, a smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

Dovina grabbed the top blanket and dragged it around her body. Hadeon sighed in disappointment as she covered herself and padded to the table and opened her computer. Rolling out of bed, he walked over to join her.

Her gaze went straight to his groin, which predictably caused his cock to thicken and grow. She shot a glance at his face. He shrugged, totally unconcerned by either his nudity or his erection.

She cleared her throat as she turned back to her computer and began tapping keys. "I've had several replies. Let me see." She scrolled down through the messages in her inbox and clicked on one. "Professor DeAngelo is an expert in the occult." She read silently for a moment. "He knows of the shadow warriors from myth and legend, who appear and rescue some person or kill a bad guy before they disappear as quickly as they appeared."

Hadeon nodded. "That would be us." It was almost impossible to keep every hint of the Shadow Ryders out of history. It would be worse now in the computer age. They would have to be much more cautious.

"He says that he's never heard of an evil entity that was both a shadow man and able to enter dreams. There are the shadow warriors and dream demons, but I seem to be searching for an entity that can move freely in both realms. He hypothesizes that it may be a hybrid of two creatures. Or perhaps a new one entirely."

"Hmmm," Hadeon hummed under his breath as he digested that. He didn't believe the horseman was a new entity, but a very old one. He had too much power, too much control to be anything but ancient.

Dovina opened the rest of her emails, scanning them. They were all much the same. Speculation without any fact. She shut down her computer and sighed. "I'm sorry. I'd hoped to be able to get more information."

He cupped her shoulders and gave them a squeeze. "You're trying. That's all any of us can do." Hadeon cocked his head to one side as he sensed the calling from the shadows.

"What is it?" It still surprised him how attuned Dovina was to his every mood.

"I have to go to the Shadow Realm. There has been some word."

"Oh." There was so much emotion in that small word. A combination of fear, longing and sadness.

"Come with me." It was against all the rules. Might not even be possible. But Hadeon didn't care. He didn't want to leave Dovina alone and unprotected, even if the horseman was injured and probably out of commission for the rest of the night. Logically, he could send her to an all-night diner. She'd be perfectly safe surrounded by light and people, but he didn't want to trust her safety to anyone but himself.

"Really?" He felt her shock and her pleasure.

He felt the pull of the shadows again. "Yes. But hurry and get dressed."

She dropped the blanket and lunged for her suitcase, her nudity forgotten in the face of this new adventure. Hadeon groaned as she bent over, giving him a perfect view of her rounded ass, and sorted through her clothing, grabbing several pieces before scurrying to the bathroom and slamming the door shut.

Swearing, he raked a hand through his hair and took a deep breath. His chest expanded and then contracted as he released it. He didn't feel any calmer. He was still horny, his cock still throbbing.

He stomped over to the other side of the room and grabbed his pants off the floor. It wasn't easy to get them zipped up, but he managed. The fit was incredibly tight. Ignoring the discomfort, he yanked on his boots before strapping on his sword. He covered all of it with his leather coat and waited.

Before he could call out a reminder to hurry, the bathroom door opened and Dovina stepped out, fully clothed in jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt. She'd pulled her hair back in a loose ponytail. Already tendrils were escaping.

Hadeon reached into his jacket pocket and fingered the hairclip he'd taken from her the first night. It was a simple thing. Just a faux tortoiseshell buckle. But he couldn't give it up. It was something of hers. Most likely all he'd have to remember her by when this was over. That, and his memories of their time together.

She yanked on her sneakers and grabbed a fleece hoodie, shoving her arms into it. "I'm ready."

He held out his hand and she took it. "Whatever happens, don't let go. It will be something like what happened in the dream, only more so. The darkness will be thick and unending, but I have you. I won't let anything happen to you." It was a vow, a promise, and one he planned on keeping.

"I know." She went up on her toes and planted a kiss on his cheek, just below his scar.

He turned to the corner of the room, calling the shadows to him. He heard her indrawn breath as the room disappeared from view and the shadows thickened. "Don't let go," he cautioned. Not that it was really an option. Not with his hand manacled

around her wrist. Still, he breathed a sigh of relief when she wrapped her arm around his and shuffled in closer.

Dovina held her breath as the hotel room faded, replaced by a dense fog. This should be impossible. But she'd learned in the past few days that many things she'd thought impossible were real.

She was grateful for the almost bruising hold Hadeon had on her wrist. She gripped his arm tight, the leather of his coat creaking beneath her fingers. No way did she want to get lost in this.

She was totally blind. The shadows seemed almost alive, to have substance and form. She squinted and then opened her eyes wide, trying to see something. Anything.

"Can you see?" Fear crept into her voice.

"Yes." He didn't say anything else as he continued to lead her through the corridor of darkness.

This must be what it would be like to be in a mine deep under the earth with no light source. It was totally disorienting. Dovina had no sense of time or space. It was hard to keep walking straight as she had no references to guide her.

She shivered as she felt something pass them on their left. She knew she was right when Hadeon pulled her closer. She didn't speak, almost afraid to attract attention to them.

Dovina didn't know if they'd been walking for five minutes or five hours when she thought she saw a light up ahead. It seemed to waver. At first she assumed it was a trick of her eyes, but then it seemed to settle.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she hurried her step. Butterflies began to flutter in her stomach. This was the Shadow Realm, Hadeon's home. She swallowed the lump in her throat.

Trepidation warred with excitement. She was about to boldly go where no woman had gone before. Or at least none that she knew of. This was truly a brave new world.

The dense fog-like substance seemed to dissipate and Dovina could see the outline of a wall ahead. She reached out as they passed it, running her fingers over the structure. It was stone and very cool to the touch.

She felt Hadeon glance down at her. She looked up and smiled at him. She might not be able to see him, but was certain he could see her. That was one of his gifts.

Dovina sensed movement in the shadows. She wondered if it was more warriors like Hadeon, lost and without hope. Her heart ached for them. She raised her hand and waved to the dark corners, feeling slightly foolish, but unable to shake the feeling that they needed something to stir them from the shadows.

"You have brought a visitor." The powerful male voice seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

Dovina froze. The human response of fight-or-flight was strong and it was telling her to run. It was difficult, but she forced herself to keep moving when Hadeon tugged on her arm. She was here on a mission. Hadeon might think they were here to save her. And that was true. But she was looking for a way to help the Shadow Ryders.

Hadeon stopped in front of an enormous throne-like chair. There was barely enough light to cut the gloom, but after the complete darkness of moments before, she was able to see a little. She squinted, making out the outline of a huge man sitting in the chair. This must be the Shadow Lord.

"You are correct, Dovina Horne."

She startled, realizing he'd read her thoughts. She didn't like that at all. This place needed more light. She needed to see who was talking to her. As if her very thoughts conjured it, a lone candle on the table ignited, spilling its warmth a small distance. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

She heard several gasps and some male muttering from the various corners of the room. She ignored them and tugged her hand away from Hadeon and held it out to the figure sitting in the chair. "You must be the Shadow Lord."

He pushed out of his seat and stood. Good lord, the man was gigantic. He would have to be close to seven feet tall, if not more. He dwarfed her, yet his grasp was gentle when he closed his large hand around hers.

"I could not leave her behind." Dovina heard the challenge in Hadeon's voice. She wanted to kick him. He might be a mighty warrior, but this Shadow Lord was beyond powerful. She could feel the energy emanating from him.

"It is done." He motioned for her to sit in the chair next to his. Not exactly a warm welcome, but at least he wasn't kicking her out. She slid into it, grateful to be sitting. After the walk through the complete dark and meeting such an imposing figure, her legs were a bit shaky.

Hadeon stood behind her, his hands resting lightly on her shoulders. She reached up and patted one hand, to reassure him that she was fine. The Shadow Lord watched their every move. She had a feeling he knew exactly what both of them were thinking.

"You summoned me, my lord." Hadeon wanted to get down to business and get Dovina out of here. She didn't belong here. She was light and this place was born of darkness. Yet, her mere presence had shed new light into the realm. The fact that one of the candles on the table had lit of its own accord was significant. She might not realize it, but Dovina had great power within her.

The Shadow Lord crooked his finger and several men coalesced from the dark and strode toward the table. They made a quick bow to their lord before turning their attention to Dovina. Neither bothered to disguise their interest in her. They stared at her and Hadeon glared at them. His fingers itched to draw his sword against his fellow warriors. She belonged to him.

"Jarda and Aris have returned from the Otherworld with disturbing news."

Hadeon looked away from the two warriors and glanced briefly at the Shadow Lord, sensing the graveness of the situation. Whatever they had to tell him wasn't good. What surprised him was the sense of sadness he felt rolling off them both in waves.

Dovina reached up and captured one of his hands with hers, holding on tight. This was the news they'd been hoping for. Hadeon only hoped they knew of some way to defeat this creature that was hunting her.

"We searched the Otherworld," Jarda, an enormous Viking with long blond hair, began. "It wasn't easy to find any information on the horseman."

Hadeon wanted to shake them and tell them to hurry. He couldn't rid himself of the sensation that time was running out. For all of them.

Aris, who was dark-haired, of average height, but just as deadly as his companion, continued. "We heard rumors of Shadow Ryders who have crossed over into the Otherworld and made it their home."

Hadeon sucked in a breath. What desperation could have driven them to do that? At least here they were safe. In the Otherworld, they would constantly be facing all manner of evil entities who wished to leash their powers and use it for their own gain.

As though he'd asked his question aloud, the Shadow Lord answered him. "They were searching for some reason for existing. They felt that anything, even something evil was better than the absolute nothingness they lived in."

"That's the act of a coward," Hadeon retorted. "We are warriors, sworn to your service. To leave is an act of desertion."

The Shadow Lord shook his head. "I must take some responsibility for their defection." He waved off Hadeon before he could mount an argument. "Continue, Jarda."

"It seems that one of them has joined with a dream demon. The demon has given the Ryder the ability to enter dreams. That is, along with the abilities he already had."

So it was a hybrid creature as Dovina's professor friend suspected. "Who?" Hadeon needed to know.

"Faran," Aris all but spat the name.

Hadeon didn't know the warrior at all, but it was obvious that Aris did. "How can he shift into a headless horseman? We can only shift into the animals tattooed on our chests."

Jarda nodded. "We asked the same question. The only answer we have is that whatever power the dream demon has given him allows him to take another form."

"Why a headless horseman?" Hadeon was still trying to make sense of all this, while dealing with the fact that one of his own was after Dovina.

"To lure and frighten Dovina." The Shadow Lord stirred in his chair. "It's all about her. She went to Sleepy Hollow to study the legend. He probably pulled the image from a dream she had before he made a deeper connection with her that enabled him to fully enter her dreams. Once he saw her in person and was able to track her to her hotel, he could get into her dreams. Before that, she was simply a light out there in the world. One he wants."

"What does he want?" Dovina spoke softly, but everyone in the room heard her.

"Your light. Your very essence," Aris continued. "The demon believes that if Faran takes your light, it will allow him to be in dim light as well as shadows. That would make Faran even more powerful and allow him to do more of the demon's bidding in your realm, thus making the demon more powerful. It's a win-win situation for both of them."

"But why me?"

It was the Shadow Lord that answered her question. "There are only a handful of women on the Earth with your light, your ability to drive back the consuming darkness. You have a combination of empathy, kindness and a generosity of spirit that makes you shine like a beacon of hope. You also have some psychic ability and believe in the possibility that there is more out there than you can see or understand."

"But I'm not psychic," she insisted.

"Are you not?" the Shadow Lord countered. "You draw people to you with ease and they find themselves confessing all manner of things they'd rather keep to themselves, you are able to enter this realm, which few can, and you have always sensed other creatures in the world. That is why you study myth and legends. Whether you accept it or not, you are special and, now that he's found you, Faran will not stop until he has you."

He felt Dovina shiver with fear. Ignoring the men around him, Hadeon pulled her from the chair and wrapped his arms around her, snuggling her against his chest. Her arms slipped around his waist.

"Leave us," the Shadow Lord commanded.

Hadeon sensed all the other men leaving the great hall. Jarda and Aris were the last to leave. "Thank you for everything you've done." They'd risked their very souls by trekking into Otherworld. He wanted them to know how much he appreciated their sacrifice.

"It is worth it." Jarda took one final look at Dovina and disappeared. Aris inclined his head and followed.

Only the three of them remained. "You must destroy Faran."

Hadeon nodded at the Shadow Lord. "It will be done."

"Beheading and sunlight will kill him. If he is in her dream, it will work there just as effectively. But I think you already figured that out. But be careful, if Faran can die in her dream then both of you can as well. There is no safety to be found anywhere for either of you until he is taken care of. Or you can destroy his demon master, which will be next to impossible."

Dovina stirred in his arms and turned to face the Shadow Lord. "What about you? What about these men? What can I do to help?"

Hadeon was stunned by her compassion, her generosity. Here she was being hunted by an evil entity and she wanted to help them.

The Shadow Lord didn't smile at her, but Hadeon felt the softening of the man toward her. "You cannot help them all, but you can help Hadeon."

Hadeon stiffened. "It is my job to protect her."

She elbowed him in the ribs. It didn't hurt him, but it sure as heck shocked him. "I want to hear this. Go on," she prompted. "Please."

"Hadeon is darkness, but you, Dovina, are light. You can anchor him, giving him a reason to live, to fight the darkness. He would still die if exposed to full sunlight or if he was beheaded. But he would still be immortal. With your light being shared by Hadeon, Faran or others like him would no longer be able to access it. Your light essence would be lost to them forever and you would be safe."

"That's wonderful," she began, but Hadeon cut her off.

"What about Dovina? What happens to her if we do this?"

"She would share your immortality, but also your limitation. The sun would most likely be lost to her. There is a slim possibility she might be able to venture out in sunlight, but there is no way to know until it is done."

The truth struck Hadeon with the force of a battle axe. "Gideon and Blade. Their women have anchored them. That's why our realm has lightened and more warriors are stirring from the dark."

"Yes."

"What do I have to do?" Dovina's voice was strong, no sign of doubt in it. If he hadn't already loved her, he would have fallen hard at that moment. He tightened his arms around her wanting to object, but needing to hear what his lord had to say.

"When you make love face to face, place your hands on each other's hearts and concentrate only on one another and the deep connection you share. You will feel the transfer of power, a melding of light and shadows." He turned his black gaze on Hadeon. "Normally, I would give the woman a chance to refuse, have all her memories of knowing you removed and return her to her normal life. That is not an option for Dovina. Not with Faran hunting her."

"But what if I killed Faran?" Dovina gave a cry of distress, but Hadeon had to know. He didn't want her to sacrifice herself for him, not just to gain protection. "Would she be able to get her life back then?"

The Shadow Lord took in both of them and nodded. "Yes."

# **Chapter Nine**

The long, dark walk back from the Shadow Realm passed in silence. Dovina was still shocked by what she'd learned and by Hadeon's reaction to the Shadow Lord's solution. She'd been fooling herself to even imagine that Hadeon would want to permanently bind himself to her. She was obviously fine for a few nights of fun, but not for the long haul.

She was trying to understand. Honestly, she was. But right now, she wanted to kick him in the shins. After everything they'd been through, she'd thought he felt something for her beyond the physical. The way he'd touched her, the fact that he'd saved her life several times. Heck, he'd even taken her to the forbidden Shadow Realm.

She was so caught up in her thoughts that the darkness didn't even bother her quite as much this time. Maybe she was getting used to it. Her hotel room came back into view, the walls reforming around her. The same generic bedspread was tumbled across the mattress, her suitcase was sitting on the rack. The light she'd left on in the bathroom still gave off its dim glow. Nothing had changed. Yet everything was different. She'd changed.

"Dovina," Hadeon began. She tugged away from his hand, which was gripping hers tight and whirled around.

"Not now. I don't want to talk about it."

He caught her shoulders and rubbed his thumbs up and down her neck. "We have to talk. I can get your life back for you."

She closed her eyes as pain shot straight to her heart. There was no mistaking he wanted to be rid of her. "Fine. Whatever. I'm going to bed now." She waved her hand toward the corner. "You can take the chair if you plan on staying."

He was frowning now. Good. She was glad he was upset. He should be upset.

And she was feeling totally irrational. Hadeon was risking his life to save hers. She should be grateful. Was grateful. But she wanted to be more than just a mission to him. Hurrying into the bathroom, she shut the door and swiped at the tears in her eyes.

"You can do this." She stared at herself in the mirror and straightened her shoulders. "Hadeon might not want you for eternity, but you can save him from the darkness in repayment for everything he's done for you." Not to mention the fact that she loved him and couldn't bear to think of him lost in the darkness, sucked into the nothingness void forever. She couldn't let that happen. She needed to think.

A loud thump came on the door. "You okay?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm fine. I'll be out in a minute."

Figuring he might not give her much time, she used the bathroom and ran a washcloth over her face. Her pajamas were hanging on the back of the door, so she changed into them. She didn't think she'd get much sleep, but she figured she could at least be comfortable. Her brain simply couldn't process anything else tonight.

She yawned as she pulled open the door. Hadeon was stretched out across her mattress. His coat was tossed across the chair and his sword was propped up next to the bed.

Ignoring him, she padded across the room and crawled into bed, turning away from him as she tugged the covers around her.

"Dovina."

"Not right now. I need to think and I need some sleep." She yawned again, suddenly exhausted by the day's events.

"We *will* talk about this when you wake." She heard the frustration in his voice. Imagine that. A man who wanted to talk.

His arm came around her and he pulled her tight to his body. Even through the blankets, his heat surrounded her. His earthy, male scent tantalized her nostrils. Huffing out a breath, she ignored the way her nipples immediately perked up. Honestly, the girls had no shame whatsoever when it came to Hadeon.

His lips caressed her temple, his breath teasing her skin. "Sleep. I will protect you."

She felt like the most ungrateful woman in the world. He was trying desperately to get rid of the threat and return her to her everyday life. And what was she doing? Pouting because he didn't love her the way she loved him.

She covered the hand at her waist. He turned his wrist and captured her fingers, squeezing softly. Dovina sighed again. Tomorrow. Tomorrow, she'd talk to him about this claiming business. She could anchor him from the darkness. That didn't mean he had to stay with her.

She'd be immortal then and no longer go out in light, although that wasn't a given, according to the Shadow Lord. Maybe she could work for him. Talk to the two other couples that were out there, maybe identify other women who might be able to help other warriors. She could teach at night if she had to. There was always a shortage of professors willing to teach night classes.

Snuggling closer to Hadeon, she felt his erection rub against the curve of her butt. She obviously wasn't the only one who was hot and bothered by their closeness. Looked like he was in for a long, hard night. Pun intended. Dovina barely stifled a giggle and fell asleep with a tiny smile on her face.

She'd figure it all out in the morning.

\* \* \* \*

The dream started slowly. She was aware it was a dream but she couldn't make herself wake up no matter how hard she tried. Frowning, she turned in a circle, trying

to get her bearings. She was barefoot, wearing her pajama bottoms and T-shirt that she'd worn to bed. The ground beneath her feet changed, becoming cooler and slightly softer. Moss. She was standing on moss and dirt.

She squinted into the darkness, wishing she could see in the dark as well as Hadeon. Someone was watching her. She could sense their gaze on her. "Who's there?" she demanded.

This was her dream. Damned if she'd let someone else have control of it. "Faran. Is that you, you coward?" Maybe it wasn't wise to insult him, but she was sick to death of all of this.

She could sense she'd startled him. The world around her lightened perceptibly. She was standing just off the path near the bridge in the woods. Predictable, but fitting.

Dovina crept off to the right, searching for a weapon. She'd dropped a large branch somewhere around here the last time Hadeon and the horseman had fought. It should still be here. Her big toe hit it first and she swore.

The horseman laughed. He came toward her then, the horse he was riding slowly plodded along the trail, its hooves striking the packed ground hard. He was taunting her.

Angry, she bent down and grabbed the branch, hefting it in her hands. The wood was rough beneath her palms. The weight was satisfying in her hands. She wasn't totally defenseless.

"You're a coward," she accused again. "Chasing down an unarmed woman in her dreams. It's a wonder the Shadow Lord ever bothered with you."

"You know nothing of it." Fury layered the horseman's voice.

"I know plenty," she retorted. "You weren't warrior enough to do your duty. You gave away your honor for a second's pleasure and now you've lost your soul to a demon."

"Untrue." The horseman's roar split the night. She could see him perfectly now. He sat atop his horse no more than ten feet away. He squared his shoulders. "You have no idea what the darkness is like. It's like a blanket, warm and comforting at first. Then it threatens to choke you, strangling the very life from your body."

Pity stirred deep in her belly. She felt sorry for Faran. That didn't mean she was going to let him kill her though. He'd made his choices. No one forced him over to the dark side.

"Why didn't you talk to the other warriors? Maybe one of them could have helped you deal with it." She was surprised by how separate they all seemed. They needed to form deeper bonds of friendship, to help pull one another from the darkness. She was going to talk to the Shadow Lord if she got out of this alive. Or, at the very least, have Hadeon talk to him for her.

"Weaklings, all of them," he spat. "Willing to spend eternity at the beck and call of a powerless lord who cares nothing about them."

"You're angry at yourself because you were weak. You gave in to the darkness and now a demon owns your soul." She knew she was right.

The horseman dismounted, spurs jingling as he started toward her. "You will give me back my soul. With your light, I will have enough power to wrest it back from the demon. Then, I will be free."

Dovina shook her head sadly. "You will never be free, Faran. If you do this, the demon will have a greater hold on your soul. He'll ask you to do more and more obscene things like this until there is nothing left of the man you were. Don't you see? The demon is draining your essence to strengthen himself. The more you do his bidding, the more he is able to steal from you."

The horseman shook his head. "You are wrong, woman. I will take what I need to be strong."

He was too far gone. He'd bought into the demon's promise because he had no choice. He'd already forfeited his soul and he knew it. It was like a person with a gambling addiction trying to pay off his debts by betting on the horses or playing cards. You might win the occasional time, but you just kept digging your way deeper into debt until there was no way out.

Dovina raised the branch to her waist, holding it securely with two hands. The horseman drew his sword. The metallic swish sent a shiver of fear down her spine. Now would be a good time for Hadeon to appear. He couldn't enter her dreams at will as Faran could. The Shadow Lord said she was psychic, had untapped power. It was time for her to use it. She'd pulled Hadeon into her dream once before, using the deep connection between them to do so. Could she do it again?

She had to try. If she didn't, she was as good as dead. There was no escaping the horseman this time.

Mentally, she screamed his name.

As though he'd been waiting for the call, Hadeon appeared in front of her, sword drawn and ready to fight to the death to protect her.

The horseman gave a battle cry and surged forward. His shape flickered and the outline of his head appeared on his shoulders. Hadeon met him with a bloodcurdling cry of his own. Metal clashed. Sparks flew. There was no backing down by either man. Not this time.

Hadeon fought like a man possessed, his weapon an extension of his body. His shoulder muscles bulged and rippled as he swung at his opponent. His blond hair hung down his back like a banner. His strong legs were spread, feet planted on the ground. His movements were fluid. There was no hesitation. No thought. Swordplay was as instinctual to him as breathing.

The horseman was just as skilled to her untrained eye. He matched Hadeon stroke for stroke with his sword. Both men were sweating. She could see the horseman now, his image coming into clearer view as he fought. He had wavy black hair, black eyes and his thin lips were curled in a menacing sneer. He was handsome in a cruel way.

Faran was determined to destroy her and steal her life essence. Hadeon was just as resolute in his vow to protect her.

Dovina felt a shift in the air around her. Evil. It coated her skin and tasted like oil on her tongue. She pulled her gaze away from the fight. The larger threat was out there. Watching. Waiting to pounce.

The dream demon.

If his minion could get into her dreams, so could the dream demon. With the combined power of Faran and the demon, they could get past her normal reserves and invade her dreams, attacking her when she was asleep and most vulnerable. It was a terrible ability and one they were only too happy to wield to strengthen themselves.

A blinding pain sent Dovina to her knees. She grabbed hold of her head and her stick rolled down her thighs and thudded to the ground in front of her. Something was trying to get into her mind.

Hadeon.

She screamed his name in her head. She heard him yell her name as a blast of excruciating pain lashed through her. Her body jerked, snapping backward. Sweat rolled down her temples. She felt as though someone were trying to pull the very life out of her.

Oh god. The demon was trying to steal her life essence for himself while both warriors were distracted.

She could feel Hadeon reaching for her with his mind. The connection between them was strong. His strength allowed her to push the pain away enough for her to fight back.

A stick wasn't going to stop the demon. Dovina fought back with the only weapon she had. Her mind. It was hard to think. Almost impossible to focus. The pain was crushing her. She fell onto the ground, spine arching, fingers digging into her head. She was blind, unable to see past the excruciating agony beating at her.

The sound of male grunts and metal clanging faded into the background, but she felt Hadeon in her mind, steadying her, offering her anything she needed to survive.

Dovina concentrated on her breathing. In and out. In and out. In her mind, she built a wall. Not of stone or darkness, but of light. She was light. The Shadow Lord had told her she had a special light within her. One able to pull a warrior back from the darkness. Maybe she could harness it to keep the darkness out.

The flip side of any power was that it could be used as a weapon. Dovina mentally flicked a switch in her mind, pretending the light inside her was like a lamp waiting to spring to life, and lit up the barrier she'd erected. It flared like a supernova.

The horrible roar of the demon blasted her eardrums. She also heard the horseman cry out and felt Hadeon's shock. She tried to push him out of her dream to protect him. The light was as real in this realm as they were and could severely injure him, possibly even kill him.

Pain lanced her brain as the demon tried to weaken her enough so she'd lose her focus. Dovina gritted her teeth and held on. Reaching deep into her core, she fed the light into the barrier in the mind.

Then she went beyond a mere barrier. She formed a ray of light in her mind, refining it until it was like a laser beam, and sent it flaring out, searching for the demon. The creature bellowed and snorted and counterattacked.

Dovina felt her entire body jerk off the ground and go flying through the air. It crashed back down, her bones rattling with the jarring force. She briefly lost the light as the wind was knocked out of her. The demon gave a trumpet of triumph as he sped toward her.

Hadeon gave a yell. She sensed him moving in her direction. There was no time to warn him to stay away. No time to protect him from what she was about to do.

She played possum until the last second. The moment she sensed the demon next to her, she gave it everything she had, pushing the light outward. She wanted to fry his demon ass.

The light blasted the demon back. She heard an unholy shriek and then the pressure in her head, the unrelenting pain was gone. Dovina lay in the dirt gasping for breath. She whispered Hadeon's name.

She felt him tugging her toward him. Her eyelids fluttered open. The area looked like a war zone. Trees were down, the ground was churned up. The stench of burned flesh filled the air. Although there was no moon or stars, nothing but darkness, she could see well enough. Hadeon was sprawled out on the ground next to her. He still gripped his sword in his hand. His face, chest and hands were red, burned from the light she'd sent out to protect herself.

Dovina gave a cry of distress. She was afraid to touch him. Didn't want to hurt him any more than she already had. Her head swiveled, searching the darkness.

Where was the horseman?

"He's gone." Hadeon's voice was hoarse. "The light was too much for him. When you blasted the demon, the horseman lost his ability to stay in your dream."

"We've got to get out of here." Dovina struggled to stand and wondered how she was going to be able to move Hadeon.

Before she could figure out how to help him, he gritted his teeth, rolled to his side and knelt up. From there, he struggled to his feet. Dovina put her hands on his waist to steady him. "What can I do?"

She was on the verge of tears. She couldn't bear for Hadeon to be hurt. Closing her eyes, she pictured them back in the hotel room, lying on the bed. The world shifted. The battered woods faded and she felt the firm mattress beneath her.

Opening her eyes, she flipped over and got her first really good glimpse of Hadeon. She'd left the bathroom light on and it was more than enough to let her know just how injured he was.

Blisters were already forming on his arms and chest. His sword was still gripped tight in his hand, not because he wouldn't put his weapon down, but because he couldn't. The metal and skin had welded together.

Her breathing was coming fast and she forced herself to take long, slow ones. It wouldn't do him any good if she started to hyperventilate. His eyes fluttered open. She could see the pain in their black depths.

"What can I do? You're immortal. Can't we fix this?"

Hadeon tried to give her a smile of reassurance that threatened to break her heart. "I need to return to the Shadow Realm. I will heal there."

She wanted to scream at him not to leave her. She wanted to ask how long he'd be gone for and if she'd ever see him again. Instead, she climbed off the bed and helped him sit up. Thankfully, his back was unharmed.

Hadeon pushed off the bed and shuffled to the corner of the room. He reached up and cupped the side of her face. "You'll be safe. The horseman went toward his demon master to help him and took the full brunt of the light blast. If he's not destroyed, he's wishing he was."

Dovina bit her lower lip and nodded.

Hadeon began to fade before her very eyes. She couldn't even kiss him goodbye because his lips were burned and peeling. He stepped back into the shadows and disappeared from sight.

Dovina gave a cry and fell to her knees. Bowing forward, she finally gave in to tears, crying as though her heart were breaking.

### **Chapter Ten**

Dovina's long weekend ended, but she didn't go home. She did something she'd never done before in her life. She called the head of her department and lied, claiming a family matter needed her attention. She didn't want to leave, afraid if she did, she might never see Hadeon again.

She'd spent the last few days working between bouts of crying and self-pity. She was alive. She was grateful for that, but she wanted more. She wanted Hadeon. His leaving had left a huge hole in her heart.

She'd called her parents, telling them nothing of her ordeal. She'd finished her article and written several more. Enough to keep the head of her department more than happy. She'd even emailed some of the literary and paranormal journals she regularly contributed to and had found homes for her work.

On a purely professional level, life had never been better. On a personal level, her life sucked. She'd written in her journal about her experience and then deleted the entire file from her computer. No one would ever believe her. But on the off chance someone might, she didn't want to risk the information about the Shadow Ryders falling into the wrong hands.

It was Halloween tomorrow night. She should be thrilled beyond anything to be in Sleepy Hollow for the holiday. She couldn't bring herself to care. She'd walked back to the graveyard and the bridge at dusk every day, hoping Hadeon would be there. Each evening, disappointment hit her anew.

The nights were the worst. She was dreaming, but these were dreams purely of her own creation. Each one featured her and Hadeon making love in various positions. He'd taken her outside by the bridge where they'd met, they'd had steaming sex in the shower again and, in one heated encounter, he'd leaned her over her desk at work, pounding into her until she came.

Each morning, she'd awake totally naked, her clothing kicked away. Her nipples would be tight, aching buds and she'd be wet between her legs, throbbing, waiting for Hadeon's thick cock to fill her. Sweat slicked her body and her skin would be almost too sensitive to touch.

This morning had been even worse. For a moment when she was waking, she swore she could feel Hadeon's arms wrapped around her.

"Stop it," she scolded herself. She closed her laptop and shoved away from the table. Her stomach growled but she wasn't hungry. Not really. Maybe she'd order something from room service later. It was almost time for her to leave to drive to the cemetery for her nightly vigil.

She wasn't sure she had the heart to do it. She couldn't bear another disappointment. Sitting on the side of the bed, she lifted his pillow and brought it to her face. She hadn't allowed housekeeping to change the linens, but Hadeon's scent was beginning to fade.

"Come back to me," she whispered.

The air around her pulsed and thickened. She dropped the pillow and surged to her feet, calling her lover's name. "Hadeon."

One corner of the room disappeared, the wallpaper fading from view, the air turning black and thick. She reached out her hand, barely daring to breathe. He stepped out of the dark mist, strong and tall and handsome. He had a few new scars on his face and arms, but she didn't care. To her, he was absolutely perfect.

She gave a glad cry and flung herself at him, hugging him to her. He was here and he was fine. Dovina was so caught up in her happiness, it took her a moment to realize he wasn't hugging her back. His arms were stiff at his sides and the muscles in his chest and shoulders were rigid.

Slowly, she pulled back and stared at him. His black fathomless eyes gave away nothing of what he was thinking or feeling. There was no sign of her lustful lover, only the immortal warrior.

Feeling awkward, she stepped back and self-consciously tucked a stray lock of hair into her lopsided bun. "Umm, it's good to see you. You're healed." That sounded totally lame, but she didn't know what else to say. *I love you* somehow didn't seem appropriate given Hadeon's aloofness.

He inclined his head. "I told you I'd heal in the Shadow Realm."

She nodded and wrapped her arms around her waist, feeling very cold inside and out. "So you did. I'm glad." It was obvious to her that their affair was over now that the horseman and demon were no longer a threat. At least she thought they were no longer a threat. "What about the horseman?"

"Gone." Hadeon hung his head and rubbed the back of his neck. "The demon tried to save itself, but didn't escape in time. Faran is now a soulless shade wandering the Otherworld. A ghostly apparition with no true form or power. He is truly lost in the shadows forever."

Dovina shivered, not able to imagine such a fate. She swallowed hard, feeling pity for Faran in spite of what he'd tried to do to her. "I guess your job here is done." That's what he'd come back to tell her. He was finished. They were finished.

"Thanks for saving my life." She'd almost killed him in the process, but he hadn't left her to save himself. For that, she was eternally grateful.

Hadeon gave a growl of frustration and took a step toward her. Menace and anger rolled off him in waves, battering her like a windstorm. What was his problem? What did he want from her? His job was done. He was free to go.

Pain tore through her, worse than when she was fighting the demon. She caught her breath and held it in, not wanting him to see how deeply she was hurting. Hadeon might not know it, but when he left, he'd be taking a part of her. Her heart would always belong to him.

She stared at him, wanting to absorb every last detail about him before he faded into the shadows, leaving her for good. She frowned as she noticed the deep lines at the corner of his eyes, the tense set of his shoulders, the way his hands fisted at his sides. His mouth was pulled tight with pain.

"Are you fully healed?" Maybe his injuries were still hurting him.

"I'm as healed as I ever will be. The scars are permanent."

She ached for him, wishing things could have been different. "I'm sorry for that."

His lips pressed together in a thin line and a muscle twitched in his jaw. "You have nothing to feel sorry for. You saved yourself from the demon."

"I could never have done it without you. I felt you in my mind, sharing your energy, encouraging me." She'd given that night a lot of thought and was convinced it was Hadeon's extra power that he'd so generously given her that had enabled her to defeat the demon and, ultimately, the horseman.

"The Shadow Lord has sent me here with an offer. Now that there is no longer any threat to you, he can erase your memories. Your life can go back to the way it was."

Her stomach twisted. Lose her memories of Hadeon. Her heart cried out and she took a step away from him. His jaw tightened and the new scars on his face turned white.

"What do you want?" She had to know.

Hadeon shrugged his stiff shoulders. "It matters not what I want. You are all that is important. You can have your life back."

The fist of pain inside her loosened slightly. *She* was all that was important. That meant he felt something for her. Didn't it?

"Isn't that dangerous, though." Her nimble mind started picking holes in the idea. "After all, if one former Shadow Ryder found me, another one could."

"The possibility is slim, but does exist," he agreed.

"Well then."

One corner of Hadeon's mouth kicked up slightly. It wasn't really a smile, but it loosened some of the darkness surrounding him. "You don't need to worry about that. The Shadow Lord has assigned a Ryder to keep watch over you."

Hadeon. She knew it as surely as she was standing her. He was the one who would be watching over her. Why? Why was he doing this? Duty and honor, certainly, but was there more to it than that?

This stubborn man had proven over and over that he was honorable, no matter what he said about his past. *Redemption*. That's what he said the Shadow Lord offered him while he lay dying. A chance at justice and redemption. Hadeon was trying to do

the right thing—to erase the nasty memories of the horseman and the demon, and give her life back to her. But that meant she'd have to give up all memories of him too. That just wasn't acceptable. She'd rather feel the pain of losing him than to erase the memories of their time together.

She stared closely at him, the set of his shoulders, the way he refused to look her in the eye. He cared about her. She was certain of it.

Dovina prayed she was right or she was about to make a complete idiot out of herself. On the upside, if the Shadow Lord ended up wiping out her memories, she wouldn't remember what she was about to do.

She took a deep fortifying breath. "There is another option. I could join with you, anchor you from the darkness. With my light joined to you, I'd no longer be a target for rogue Shadow Ryders or demons."

Having stated her case, she began to pull off her clothing. She kicked off her shoes and shimmied out of her jeans, tugging off her socks in the process. Her sweater was next, leaving her clad only in a pale green lacy bra and matching panties.

Brazening it out, she cocked her eyebrow at him and waited. The room was warm, but a chill snaked down her spine. She felt more naked than if she were wearing nothing. But she didn't care. She was fighting for them, for the love she felt for him. He would have to walk away from her if he didn't want her. She'd laid her proposal on the table. Now it was up to him to reject it or accept it.

Hadeon almost swallowed his tongue when Dovina made her generous offer and then proceeded to strip off most of her clothing. Her pale skin was luminous, her lips lush and inviting. Her nipples puckered, pressing against the silky fabric of her bra. Arousal or cold, he couldn't be certain.

She was offering him everything. *Everything*. A chance to be anchored away from the darkness forever, the chance that he might eventually be able to be out in early morning or late evening light. For that alone, he owed her more than he could ever repay.

But she was offering more than that. He could see it in her eyes. She cared about him. He'd failed her, almost allowed the demon to destroy her and still she was willing to sacrifice herself to help him.

He wasn't worthy.

He'd stayed in the Shadow Realm longer than he'd needed, only leaving when ordered by his Lord. He, fearless warrior and scourge of the steppes of Europe, was afraid to face one small woman. He'd failed her. In the end, she'd saved herself from the demon and the horseman.

He should leave and return to the shadows. He belonged in the darkness, not in the presence of her glorious light. But he was weak. He wanted to stay with her for eternity, guarding her from any who would seek to harm her.

But his duty was to his fellow Shadow Ryders. There were too many lost and many on the cusp. He needed to go back to help them. For too long, they'd been solitary.

Alone. That allowed creatures like the dream demon to lure them to the Otherworld, where they were lost forever.

"Hadeon?" She wrapped her arms around her waist and gave a small laugh. "Guess that means you don't want me."

Her pain became his. He should walk away. That was the honorable thing to do. But he could not make himself take one single step. He could not allow her to think he did not want her.

When he did finally move, it was toward her. Her lips trembled as she smiled at him. That tiny gesture broke him. Hadeon fell to his knees in front of her, lowered his head and bared his soul.

"I am not worthy of you. I failed to save you from the demon."

Her fingers stroked lightly through his hair. He jerked his head up and she looked at him with some deep emotion shining from her eyes. He would not even begin to hope it was love.

"You were busy with the horseman. And, as I told you before, you did help me. When you could have escaped the dream to save yourself, you stayed, putting your life on the line for me."

Dovina shifted closer, bringing her breasts closer to his face. Hadeon was immediately distracted by the smooth curves and the taut nipples. Her scent wafted around him, a combination of lavender and aroused woman. His cock stirred, quickly coming to life.

"I know you probably don't want to join yourself to me for eternity."

That statement jerked his attention away from her lush breasts and back to her face. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

She gave a self-conscious shrug. "That's okay. I still want to help you, though. You wouldn't have to stay with me if you didn't want to. I know you've got duties for the Shadow Lord and..." She waved her hand in the air. "Other stuff."

Hadeon wrapped his arms around her and buried his face against her warm stomach. "I do not deserve you," he whispered. But he would. He would do everything in his power to someday be worthy of this incredible woman.

She tangled her fingers in his hair and tugged until he was looking up at her. "I'm going to say something. Not because I expect anything from you, but because it's true. And, if I make a total idiot out of myself, I won't remember it anyway." She gave him a lopsided smile, but he could see the nervousness, the fear lurking in her gray eyes.

"You can tell me anything."

She squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. "I love you."

Hadeon couldn't have been more stunned if she'd hit him upside his head with the flat of his sword. She loved him. Hadeon had done many things in his life he wasn't proud of. He'd sold his sword to the highest bidder, killing men who were not his enemies. He'd amassed great wealth, but had left no family, no legacy, no friends when

he'd died, alone and unmourned. He'd spent more than two thousand years trying to atone for those actions.

Redemption. That was what the Shadow Lord had offered him.

Maybe Dovina was his shot at redemption? If she loved him, he must be doing something right. If he was anchored by her light, it would add to the light of the Shadow Realm. He could go back there and help the Shadow Lord pull other Ryders from their apathy and despair. He and Dovina could search the world for other special women who might be able to anchor his fellow warriors to the light. He could also perform his duties for the Shadow Lord, protecting the innocent from evil.

All he had to do was reach out and take what Dovina offered.

"Umm, say something."

He pulled himself back from his thoughts, decision made. He stood and scooped Dovina off her feet. Her arms went around his neck and she clung to him as he laid her on the bed, following her down.

He cupped her face with his hands, memorizing every precious line and curve. "I am not worthy of your love." He placed two fingers over her lips when she started to speak. "Shh. I am right. I am not worthy," he repeated. "But I will be. No man will ever love you as I do. I have no idea what our lives will hold from this day forward. There is so much work to be done."

"You love me?" Her voice was barely a whisper and a single tear slipped from the corner of her eye. "You mean it?"

He swiped the wetness away with his thumb and caught the next tear that fell. "You cannot know how much I love you." There was nothing he wouldn't do to protect her and keep her safe. A sense of fierceness, of belonging swelled within him. Dovina was what he'd longed for his whole life. A sense of home, of place.

"Then let me anchor you. Make love to me."

And it was love. The sex between them had always been mind-blowing. He knew now the reason was because of what he'd felt for her. He hadn't labeled it love, but from the moment he'd laid eyes on her, he'd known Dovina belonged to him.

He sat up and cupped her breasts, rubbing his thumbs over the soft fabric. He traced the lacy trim that followed her lush curves. "Let's get this off." He twisted the front hook and gave a deep moan of appreciation as the fabric pulled back, revealing her lush breasts. He'd thought he'd never see her like this again.

Her hands tugged at the hem of his T-shirt, pulling it away from the waistband of his leather pants. He paused, savoring the sensation of her hands on his chest, her fingers teasing his flat nipples and stroking the horse tattoo. A shiver raced down his spine and his balls clenched tight.

There was no time to waste.

He surged off the bed and ripped open the zipper of his pants. Dovina didn't take her eyes off him as he yanked off his boots and pulled off the rest of his clothing. His cock jutted forward, long and thick and ready to claim her.

She licked her lips and smiled, a siren's promise.

He swore under his breath and slipped his fingers under the band of her panties, dragging them over her thighs and whisking them away. While he was doing that, she shrugged out of her bra and tossed it aside.

He came down on top of her, supporting most of his weight on his forearms. He made a place for himself between her legs, his body cushioned by her ample hips. The hairs on his thighs brushed against her smooth ones. His cock nestled against her belly, her nipples teased the skin on his chest.

Leaning down, Hadeon touched his lips to hers. She made a whimper of pleasure and tangled her fingers in his hair, pulling him closer. Hadeon took what she offered, plunging his tongue into the moist cavern of her mouth. Tasting, teasing, plundering.

He couldn't get enough of her. She tasted sweet and welcoming. But there was such strength in her. It was almost frightening how much power she carried in her small body. She had courage enough to rival most men. The way she'd fought the demon would give him nightmares the rest of his life.

But now, there was only Dovina, warm and open and giving beneath him. He prolonged the kiss, shifting his chest from side to side to tease her nipples. Finally, she'd had enough. She tore her mouth from his and cried out his name.

"More. I need more," she gasped.

He traced the delicate whorls of her ear before nipping at the lobe. She shivered and dug her fingernails into his ass. He arched up, driving his cock downward. Dovina squirmed around until his hard length was pressed against the slick folds of her pussy.

He growled as he flexed his hips, rubbing his shaft over her swollen clit, drawing a moan from her sweet lips. He worked his way down her neck, alternating between soft kisses and hard nips, some of which would probably leave a mark. He wanted to mark her, brand her as his.

Her breasts beckoned to him as he continued his downward journey. He cupped the mounds in his hands and lapped at a tight, pink nipple. The tip was red as a berry and just as tasty. He worked from one breast to the other and back again.

Dovina clutched at his shoulders, his back, his butt. Whatever she could reach. She rubbed her toes against his calves, lifting her hips and rubbing her sex against his erection.

Hadeon sat back on his haunches. His hands followed the slope of her breasts over her torso and into the dip of her waist before flaring out over her hips. He adored her curves, the slight rise of her belly.

She was breathing hard now. Her lips parted, her breasts swaying. He tucked his hands beneath her bottom and lifted, bringing her lush, wet pussy to his mouth.

"Mine." He didn't wait for her agreement. Instead, he laid claim to her. He sucked and licked at her swollen folds, his tongue lapping at each one.

Her clit was peeking out from beneath its protective hood. He gently tongued it before drawing on it with his mouth. She cried out and tried to hook her legs around his shoulders, pulling him closer.

He breathed in her spicy essence, tasted it as he slid his tongue into her cleft. He wanted to bring her to orgasm like this, but now was not the time. They needed to build the power within both of them.

Hadeon allowed himself one final taste before he untangled their bodies and lay flat on the bed, lifting her over him. His fingers dug into her sides as he gave her one last chance to walk away from what would be a long life filled with potential danger and return to her normal life. "You're sure you want to do this?"

Dovina was surprised her body hadn't spontaneously combusted. Heat surrounded her, filled her. Hadeon had driven her to the point of madness and then stopped. Once again he was being honorable. She loved him for that even as she wanted to smack him silly for leaving her aching and trembling for release.

In answer to his question, she raised herself over him, gripped his cock in her hand and guided him into her. His cock head was already wet and slid in easily, stretching her entrance. She waited for him to push the rest of the way in, but he shook his head. "You have to do it. This is your choice, your decision."

His eyes weren't cold anymore. Who knew that black could be so warm, so tender? His skin was slick with perspiration, the muscles in his chest and shoulders taut. His fingers flexed almost imperceptibly on her hips. Other than that, he was as still as stone.

Dovina smiled at him. "I love you." She made her declaration as she lowered herself onto his cock. It pushed inward, stretching her inner muscles as they shifted to accommodate his thick length.

She loved being connected to him like this, feeling him fill her.

"Take all of me," he whispered, his voice hoarse.

She lifted up slightly and came down harder. Felt him go even deeper. Placing her hands on his abs, she squirmed until his cock was buried as far as it could go. All of him was inside her. They were joined as close as a man and woman could get.

Hadeon lifted one of her hands off his stomach, bringing it to his lips. He kissed each knuckle and finally her palm before placing it against his heart. Then he raised his hand and placed it over her heart.

She could feel the heavy, solid thud against her hand, feel the heat of his body soaking into her palm. Her heartbeat slowed, synchronizing with his.

"Move, Dovina." A bead of sweat rolled down his temple. She could see he was hurting.

There was a sense of anticipation in the air as she began to lift and fall on his cock. Her pussy was slick. Heat built up inside and outside. Their heart rates sped up, still in sync. She could feel the rough hair of his body against her inner thighs, hear the damp sucking sound of their bodies as she rose and fell on top of him. His cock forged inward each time she lowered herself, filling her to overflowing.

Every cell in her body seemed to quiver. Her limbs trembled. She wanted to close her eyes, but couldn't take her gaze from Hadeon's dark eyes. He was drawing her in.

"Finish it," he gritted out.

The muscles of her cunt squeezed his cock involuntarily. They both cried out. Dovina could feel his shaft swelling, growing even larger. There was a hot surge and she knew he was coming. The light within her swelled and seem to explode outward, encompassing them both.

Hadeon's darkness fell over her like a net, capturing her and holding her. If it had been anyone but Hadeon, she would have panicked and pulled away. There was absolutely no light to be seen. Dovina was blind. But she could still feel.

Hadeon's hands were wrapped securely around her waist, his cock was hard inside her as he jerked and filled her with his seed. A blast of heat shot through her as he angled her slightly, allowing her clit to rub against him.

Dovina forgot about the darkness and the light as she came, giving herself over to Hadeon, knowing he would keep her safe. She trusted him. She loved him.

Hadeon thought his eyelids had been singed, blinding him. Dovina's light washed over him like a wave. It filled him, surrounded him. Unlike the last time, it didn't burn his skin. Instead it felt warm. Welcoming.

Making love to her had been an exquisite torture. He'd been unable to move, which had heightened each and every sensation. Feeling her cunt tighten around his cock had almost blown his head off. The intensity of their mating was elemental, powerful and, to his way of thinking, pure magic.

She continued to pour her light into him, not shrinking away from his darkness, which was deeper than even he had known. Dovina's light filled every dark corner of his mind and spirit. The hair on his arms and legs stood on end as he felt something shift within him.

Gradually, he felt her light receding. Not withdrawing, not totally. She was a part of him now as he was part of her. No other rogue Shadow Ryder or demon could steal her light now, not with him a part of her, protecting her.

She slumped forward and he caught her, easing her down onto his chest. He cradled her carefully, and pushed a damp lock of hair out of her face. He loved the way the red curl tried to wrap around his fingers. It was as alive as she was.

Her felt her sigh against his chest and knew she must be exhausted. He was energized and wiped out at the same time. Dovina rubbed her hand over his heart and a warmth stole into him. She was his now. For eternity. What that meant and how their joining would affect both of them remained to be seen. They'd deal with that later.

For now, Hadeon gave a prayer of thanks to the Shadow Lord for rescuing him all those years ago and giving him a second chance. Everything he'd been through over the past several thousand years had been worth it because all of it had brought him to this moment.

He grabbed a corner of the covers and tugged part of it over them. He didn't want Dovina to get cold. He'd get up in a minute and tuck her under the covers.

Dovina snuggled closer, burrowing her face into the curve of his neck. Hadeon smiled and held her through the rest of the night.

### **Chapter Eleven**

"You sure you want to do this?"

Dovina smiled up at Hadeon as they stood at the top of the path that led to the bridge. "I'm sure." Everything had started here, so it was fitting it ended here. Well, not really ended. She and Hadeon were making plans for their future together.

His large hand pressed against the small of her back. "Stay close."

She fought a grin. Her man was as protective as ever. His sword was strapped to his back, hidden by his long leather duster. His eyes never stopped scanning the area, making certain she was safe.

He was certainly energetic too. He'd kept her in bed all day, making love to her over and over. There wasn't a spot in the hotel room where he hadn't taken her. She was going to be sorry to leave the place, but was looking forward to showing him her tiny apartment in New York.

That situation would have to change. As soon as her contract was done for the year, they were moving. Where, they weren't quite sure yet, but somewhere less populated. For now, it was technically still Halloween night and she was walking around Sleepy Hollow with her own immortal warrior. It was weird to think of herself as immortal as well. That was definitely going to take some getting used to.

She didn't feel any different inside. Not really. Of course, Hadeon had kept her busy since they'd made the exchange and she'd become his anchor. In time, she was sure she'd start to notice many small changes. One thing she had observed was that she was more aware of the energy swirling around inside her, more able to tap into it and use it. It was a combination of her light and Hadeon's darkness, more powerful now that it was joined in both of them.

"Are you okay?" Hadeon didn't like the idea of them being out here. But she'd had to come.

She gave him a quick smile. "I'm fine."

The night was almost done, the dawn close. Dovina wanted to know if sunlight would affect her adversely now. She hoped it wouldn't, but was prepared for the worst possible outcome. Hadeon, she knew, wanted to see if he could actually greet the dawn for the first time in thousands of years.

"Over here." She tugged his hand and he followed. It was so late, or early depending on how you looked at it, they hadn't run into another person. Dovina was glad they had the trail to themselves. A sudden thought occurred to her. She bit her bottom lip, not certain she should ask.

Hadeon brushed back a lock of hair and smiled down at her. It made her heart turn over and she reached up and traced several of the new scars that marred his skin. She thought they made him look even more ruggedly handsome and had told him so earlier when they'd still been in bed.

He grinned, a wholly satisfied male grin. "You can kiss them and make them better again, if you'd like."

Dovina felt her cheeks heating. Her earlier kisses had led her to the scars on his face, his chest and then lower, where there were no scars at all, but something infinitely more interesting. "Maybe I will," she teased, her voice low and sultry.

Hadeon growled and swooped down to kiss her. She lost all sense of time when he drew her into his arms. When he pulled back, they were both breathing heavily. How could she want him yet again? She was going to be sore for a week as it was, they'd made love so many times.

"What do you want? I can sense something is on your mind."

No point trying to hide anything from him. They were eerily in sync with one another, able to sense each other's moods.

"I want to go for a ride."

A wolfish grin split his face. "I can take you for a ride any time you want, baby."

She playfully smacked his chest. "Not that kind of ride. On your horse."

His smile faded and he glanced around the woods.

"No one is here. Faran and the demon are destroyed. What's the harm?" Dovina wanted to gallop through the woods and over the bridge, riding a gigantic black stallion, the cool autumn wind brushing her skin. It was the perfect way to celebrate the end of Halloween night.

Hadeon sighed and rubbed his thumb over her cheek. "Only for a short time. Dawn is close."

She could feel it, the fading of the darkness, in a way she'd never been able to before. Was it because of her connection to Hadeon? She didn't know. It was just one of many new skills. Like her ability to see in the dark. Which was very cool! It might not be as good as his night vision, but it was a heck of a lot better than she'd had. She knew Hadeon was afraid that sunlight would now harm her and was ready to whisk her away on the shadows if that happened.

He stepped back and began to change. One minute he was there, the next the shadows swallowed him whole. Even with her enhanced night vision, he disappeared from view. She heard a clop of hooves on the ground and the black stallion stepped out of the darkness.

"Awesome." She hadn't been able to fully appreciate this aspect of him before now. Too many other things, like being chased by a headless horseman who wanted to kill her, had taken her attention from Hadeon.

She reached out and touched his massive head. He ducked it toward her, rubbing his sleek face against hers. She laughed and looked around until she found what she was looking for. Practically dancing to a large rock, she clambered up on top.

The horse followed her, standing patiently while she mounted. Her fingers gripped his long, silky mane. "Giddy up."

Hadeon turned his head and glared at her. She laughed again. Even as a horse, he didn't like taking orders. What was it he'd said? They were part of one another. Two forms with one soul. He and the horse were one.

"How about 'ready when you are'?"

He gave a whinny and started down the trail at an even trot. Dovina let the excitement of the moment wash over her. The moon was bright, the stars twinkling in the sky. A cool breeze tugged at her hair, pulling it free from the pins anchoring it. On impulse, she reached up and pulled them free, letting her curly, red hair fly in the wind.

Hadeon picked up the pace, forcing her to cling tighter. She could feel the muscles of the horse bunching and stretching beneath her as he moved. It was magic.

He headed for the bridge, thundering over it. She closed her eyes, imagining what someone walking the path would hear or see. They could easily become part of the legend if someone caught a glimpse.

They rode through the woods for another ten minutes. It was amazing to feel unafraid after living through so much terror. It was almost a way to reclaim the beauty of the night.

They ended up back on the far side of the bridge. Dovina reluctantly slid from Hadeon's back and he disappeared into the shadows. When he reappeared, he was her ancient warrior once again.

"That was incredible."

Hadeon leaned down and stole a quick kiss. "We'll do it again some night when there is more time and more room to run."

Dovina was only half listening to him. She thought she heard something on the trail. Last thing she wanted was for someone to be out there, maybe taking pictures of them that would end up on the Internet.

Hadeon tensed beside her. "It's a horse." He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close to his left side, keeping his sword arm free.

"I thought you said Faran was destroyed?"

"He is." Hadeon's voice was grim as he shoved her behind him. "We should leave. Now."

"No." Something was telling her to stay. To see this through to the end.

The sound of a horse galloping through the woods got closer and closer. "Ohmygod." She could see it now, horse and rider flying through the night, fleeing the coming dawn.

Black cape flying, the horseman rode like he was born in the saddle. He was dressed all in black, the only color a flaming pumpkin he held on his lap and the red glow of the horse's eyes. He was also headless.

"Not again," she muttered. Enthralled, she could simply watch as the horse and rider drew closer. Hadeon reached behind his back and drew his sword, ready to protect her if she was bound to stay.

It might be crazy, but she wasn't afraid of this horseman. She sensed a difference about him. He wasn't a demon or some other dark creature from the Otherworld. He was more of a ghost, a myth, a memory.

Bone-chilling laughter rang out through the night. The horse thundered toward the bridge, the rider pulling him up at the last possible second. Dirt flew from the horse's hooves. The rider stared at Hadeon, ignoring her totally.

"You will not find a head this night, Hessian." Hadeon's deep voice sent a shiver over her. This was the warrior, not the lover.

The horseman gave a short bow and urged his horse forward. The beast jumped, light flared and the two of them disappeared into the darkness. There was no sound of hooves, no laughter. Just complete silence. He was here one minute and gone the next.

"I think I'm hallucinating," she muttered. Had she really seen that?

"No. He was here." Hadeon used the tip of his sword to point the way to the end of the bridge. The remains of a shattered pumpkin lay scattered there, the orange shell smashed beyond repair. It hadn't been there when they'd crossed it earlier.

"Okay. That's freaky. Even after all we've been through."

Hadeon tipped back his head and laughed. Deep and rich, it rumbled from deep within him. It was so unrestrained, so real, that she couldn't help smiling. He shook his head and rubbed his hand over his face, trying to control himself. "After everything you've seen, you think seeing the *real* headless horseman is freaky?"

Put like that, it did seem a little odd. She shrugged. "What can I say?"

Hadeon pulled her into his arms and turned her to face the east. "It's time."

They stood in silence as the sun broke over the horizon. Dull rays spread lazily across the land, creeping through the woods until it found them. Dovina tensed and Hadeon tightened his grip, ready to pull her into the shadows.

She was more concerned about him than about herself. She knew he was desperate to stare at the sun, to be able to feel it against his skin. Thin rays started at the toe of her sneaker and slowly crept up the front of her jeans. Gaining speed, it flowed over her torso and kissed her face. Dovina breathed a sigh of relief when it hit her full force and she felt nothing but its warmth.

Hadeon stilled behind her. She tilted her head back and waited. The sun's rays caressed his chin, his cheeks, his lips and nose and forehead. He closed his eyes and released a slow breath.

"How do you feel?" She almost didn't ask, loathed to break the almost reverent silence.

"Warm. It tingles, but it doesn't quite burn. I'm not sure I could stand strong rays. But this..." His words trailed off as he closed his eyes and raised his face to the sun. "Twenty-five hundred years," he murmured.

Dovina turned in his arms, rested her face against his chest and held him.

Long minutes past before he finally stirred. "We need to leave. The glare is hard on my eyes."

She nodded. "We'll get you some sunglasses. Some nifty designer ones that will make you look like a badass."

Hadeon quirked an eyebrow as he sheathed his sword.

Dovina giggled. Her man already looked like a badass with his leather and long hair. They had tons of things to do and a future to plan. "Take us back."

He tightened his hold on her and leaned down, capturing her mouth with his. She returned his ardor and felt her body stirring to life again. He lifted her and stepped back into the shadows. The disorienting sensation didn't bother her at all. She was too busy kissing Hadeon.

The world dipped and she found herself flat on her back in her hotel room with Hadeon looming above her. He slid his hands beneath her sweater and cupped her breasts, teasing her nipples into taut peaks.

Dovina smiled up at him as she reached down to cup his growing erection.

Checkout wasn't until noon. They had plenty of time.

# **Epilogue**

The Shadow Lord breathed a sigh of relief when a candle on the table flared to life, adding its warmth and light to the otherwise dark and chilly chamber. That was three permanent lights now, three women joined with three of his immortal warriors.

But one was lost. Faran. The man had made his choice, but the Shadow Lord felt he had failed him. His own apathy had led to this situation. There were more of them out there. Ryders on the edge of slipping into the darkness forever. Some were already lost. For that, he would be eternally sorry.

He felt the restlessness in his men. That was good. Curiosity alone would drag them forward, loosen the grip of the darkness tugging at them.

There was still much work to be done. They had let their mission, their reason for existing slide for too many centuries. Perhaps the encroaching darkness was their punishment for such dereliction of duty. They'd all been warriors. They all had forgotten their oaths to serve the greater good.

But that time was now behind them. The future was before them. And for the first time in centuries, there was hope, a promise of something better.

The Shadow Lord scanned the shadows, searching. He let his mind go blank and simply studied each man. He found the one he was looking for. He was farthest away, almost consumed by the darkness. Even the Shadow Lord could barely see him. But he knew he was there.

Would he answer the summons?

The Shadow Lord crooked his finger and waited.

#### About the Author

N.J. Walters worked at a bookstore for several years and one day had the idea that she would like to quit her job, sell everything she owned, leave her hometown and write romance novels in a place where no one knew her. And she did. Two years later, she went back to the same bookstore and settled in for another seven years.

Although she was still fairly young, that was when the mid-life crisis set in. Happily married to the love of her life, with his encouragement (more like, "For God's sake, quit the job and just write!") she gave notice at her job on a Friday morning. On Sunday afternoon, she received a tentative acceptance for her first erotic romance novel, *Annabelle Lee*, and life would never be the same.

N.J. has always been a voracious reader of romance novels, and now she spends her days writing novels of her own. Vampires, dragons, time-travelers, seductive handymen and next-door neighbors with smoldering good looks all vie for her attention. And she doesn't mind a bit. It's a tough life, but someone's got to live it.

N.J. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

#### Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at <a href="mailto:Comments@EllorasCave.com">Comments@EllorasCave.com</a>.

# Also by N.J. Walters

**Amethyst Dreams** 

**Amethyst Moon** 

Anastasia's Style

Awakening Desires: Capturing Carly

Awakening Desires: Craving Candy

Awakening Desires: Erin's Fancy

Awakening Desires: Jackson's Jewel

Awakening Desires: Katie's Art of Seduction

Beyond Shadows

Dalakis Passion 1: Harker's Journey

Dalakis Passion 2: Lucian's Delight

Dalakis Passion 3: Stefan's Salvation

<u>Dalakis Passion 4: Eternal Brothers</u>

Dalakis Passion 5: Endless Chase

<u>Drakon's Treasure</u>

Ellora's Cavemen: Dreams of the Oasis IV anthology

Ellora's Cavemen: Jewels of the Nile IV anthology

Ellora's Cavemen: Legendary Tails IV anthology

Ellora's Cavemen: Seasons of Seduction III anthology

Jessamyn's Christmas Gift

Lassoing Lara

Project Alpha 1: Embracing Silence

Project Alpha 2: Have Mercy

Project Alpha 3: Sweet Charity

Seeking Charlotte

Summersville Secrets 1: Annabelle Lee

Summersville Secrets 2: Heat Wave

Summersville Secrets 3: Lily Blossoms

Tapestries 1: Christina's Tapestry

Tapestries 2: Bakra Bride

Tapestries 3: Woven Dreams

Tapestries 4: Threads of Destiny
Tapestries 5: Embroidered Fantasies
Tempting Tori
Three Swords, One Heart
Unmasking Kelly



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com