

Chapter One

Skye Knightly was knee deep in shit. In fact it was way past her knees and sitting up near her ass. And *that* was putting it mildly.

Only an idiot would be caught at night, alone in the jungle so far from base camp. What the hell had she been thinking?

She inhaled a ragged breath as she melted deeper into the thick stand of trees. Her heart was banging against her chest like a freaking jackhammer and Skye rested her forehead against a tall pine tree, her skin slick with the humid jungle air.

She was tired, hungry and now she could add scared as hell to the list. Bitterly she peered out into the thickening gloom, back toward where she just came from.

She was pissed, but had no one to blame but herself. She knew how dangerous things were. *Especially now.* But the damn cave had been incredible and she'd been so caught up in exploring and recording that she'd lost all track of time.

If Finn was here, he'd kick her ass. Hell, she'd kick her own ass if she could. *Number one rule: always return before dark.*

When Skye heard a snap echo from the dense grouping of trees, across the small clearing to her right, she stilled. Her breaths shot out in small staccato bursts as the fear inside of her burrowed its way deep into her heart.

She gritted her teeth as another sound followed the first. Bastards weren't even trying to hide their presence and she might very well pay the ultimate price for her stupidity.

She'd become aware that she was being followed soon after exiting the cave. Usually she didn't have a problem losing trackers but these men had proven ruthless, which led her to believe they were not your average hired guns.

They were not looking for tourists to rob. They wanted something.

Her heart flipped over and she tried to calm her nerves. Were they jaguar?

Her razor sharp eyes normally could pick out a target hundreds of feet away, but sadly, her raptor like qualities only shone in the daylight. Her powers to shift and morph into her eagle form faded as soon as the first inky fingers of night crawled up from below the earth.

Such was the curse borne by all Eagle Knights. They could only function to the fullest of their abilities with the caress of heat on their backs and the kiss of sun on their faces. Unfair really, considering her many enemies had no such problems.

The jaguar, nocturnal creature that it was, could shift, hunt and kill whether it be night or day, and the magicks, they could spell and charm whenever the fancy struck.

It was one of the reasons her people had been hunted to near extinction hundreds of years ago. Bitterly she thought of the band of jaguar warriors that had until recently lived not too far from the archeological dig in Caracol.

They were a particularly vicious bunch.

She should know. They'd captured her and held her prisoner for several months. Skye bit her lip and tried to push back the rush of memories that always accompanied thoughts of the DaCosta jaguars. She broke out into a sweat and felt panic begin to inch its way deep into her belly.

The DaCostas could never know that she'd survived the destruction of the compound, and subsequent battle deep in the belly of the Mayan ruins in Caracol. If they had even the slightest inkling that an Eagle Knight was still messing about in the Belizean jungle they would never stop looking for the portal. They would assume and correctly so, that the portal had been moved from its original resting place in Mexico, to a safe place here in the vast mountains of Belize.

Only her father had known the precise location. He'd been murdered while trying to carry out his final mission—to seal the portal forever—and with his passing the final resting place of the portal had vanished.

Hatred, thick and nasty threatened to choke her airway as her thoughts slid to Cormac O'Hara, the man who'd killed her father. She felt the rage swell but quickly shoved all emotion aside. There was no time for that.

The Sorcerer would meet his fate one day. Michael Knightly was gone from this earth and Skye was determined to see Cormac follow.

Tears threatened as she slipped into the heavy thicket of trees. She would not fail her father or her people now. She was so close to the portal she could taste it. She *had* to find it before the DaCostas and O'Hara got their hands on it. The bastards were now in league with each other, and she felt the noose of their evil tightening around her each and every day.

Bitterly she swallowed the tears back and feasted on the anger that lay deep in her belly. To fail would mean that her father's death had been in vain.

And that, simply, was not an option.

Silently she began to move deeper into the cool cover of pine trees, her breath held tightly as two men appeared in the small clearing a mere twenty paces from her. They were both tall, heavily muscled, and carried deadly weapons that even now were circling about.

Looking for her.

The taller of the two stopped short and his nostrils quivered excitedly. "She's here. I can smell her."

A lump of panic fell from her throat to land heavily in her gut. Skye felt faint but held on with gritty determination as her mind frantically worked out plausible scenarios. Hopefully ones that didn't end with her butt being served up on a platter to the two hard bodied mercenaries.

The second soldier dropped to his knees and studied the ground she'd trod upon only minutes earlier. His head snapped up and she shrank behind a large tree. His eyes seemed to glow an eerie bluish yellow and her senses roared to life as adrenaline began to pump throughout her veins.

Both of them were dressed head to toe in black and she could just make out the beginnings of an intricate tattoo along the left side of the one closest to her. Skye bit her lip as the fear deep in her gut began to surface. The man's eyes continued to search along the path she'd taken and his mouth split into a grin, one that somehow didn't manage to creep into his eyes.

He was jaguar. Of that there was no mistake and probably one of the DaCosta's.

Fuck. This was worse than she'd first thought.

Her feet began to ease away from the tree trunk and she dared not move her eyes from the clearing as she continued to disappear deeper into the interior. Slowly she adjusted the satchel that hung from around her neck. She might not be able to shift and fly out of this situation, but she was gifted with extraordinary speed, strength and stamina.

Skye inhaled deeply, turned to the left and bolted up a steep incline with all the speed she could muster.

Dark laughter followed behind and she swore as one of the hunters words drifted on the air to mock her.

"Run little bird, it only makes the hunt that much more interesting."

She ignored the taunt even as the import of his words washed over her. They knew what she was!

Panic, fear and anger mingled together until it became a tight knot of pain that spliced across her gut. She ignored it and mentally fought for the ice cold calm that she knew resided deep inside her psyche. Her body answered the call and she welcomed the ruthless strength that began to flood her veins.

Everything faded away. She was aware of her heartbeat and she visualized the muscle, encouraging it, cajoling more energy as her lungs expanded. Her legs became a blur as she sped through the verdant jungle, leaping over dead logs, vast arrays of flora, almost flying so fast was her body moving.

A loud roar colored the night and she stumbled as it echoed into the quiet blackness that surrounded her. Up ahead, mist from water vapor began to pour over her and the thunder of a waterfall became crystal clear as she sped toward it.

The entire area was awash with water falls, caves, grottos...it's what made the Maya Mountains so incredible. But they were dangerous and she continued along, picking up speed as she ran toward the deafening roar.

Skye knew it was her only chance to survive.

Her long legs covered the distance in no time and she burst through the thick foliage, skidding to a halt as her eyes quickly scanned the perimeter.

To her right was yet another cave, the dark opening covered with a protective mist that seemed sinister as it fingered and clawed its way over the rock face and out toward the low hanging canopy. Out of its mouth water rushed and sped with a fury toward the ledge to her left, where it disappeared into the night.

From where she was perched, Skye had no clue how far down the waterfall trailed, but from the sounds she could hear, she anticipated a long drop.

The mist was heavy and it clung to her skin, molding the white tank top to her breasts. Her hair had long since fallen from its pony tail and fell in wavy talons of caramel down her back, where it clung, full of humidity, to her sweaty skin.

Her sapphire blue eyes pierced the night, but once again the curse of the sun prevented her from seeing any other means of escape.

She could try the cave or jump over the falls. Desperately her head swiveled around as she continued to search for a way out, her large eyes widening at the sight of both jaguar hunters as they burst through the thick stand of trees into the small clearing, only twenty feet from her. One was in human form. The other growled deep from its belly and paced back and forth in all its majestic animal glory.

The large jaguar was black, signaling its status as something other than a regular shifter. They were of the warrior class. And they both looked at her like she was a tasty morsel they wanted to sample...before the real games began.

The one in human form laughed outright as his gaze raked over her body, lingering salaciously on her breasts before settling on the juncture between her legs. Skye's eyes darkened as a slow anger began to burn through her. When he licked his lips, she spit into the ground, which elicited a harsh laugh.

"That's good. I like a woman with spunk almost as much as I like to play with my food. It's so much more palatable when its essence is spirited." He continued to laugh while the jaguar at his side roared in triumph. His eyes glowed eerily. "Hell yeah, this is gonna be fun."

Skye tried to ignore his words but truthfully, she was more terrified than she'd like to admit. And that was saying a lot. In her young lifespan of twenty-six years she'd seen and done a lot, but her current situation was about as bad as it could get.

She was trapped with few options, alone in the jungle and facing two very ruthless, deadly jaguar warriors.

Enemies that her people had faced for eons.

She felt the flush of blood hit her cells as she grabbed onto all the power she could muster. She needed more time. She needed to think.

"Who the hell are you?"

The jaguar roared at her words and she flinched slightly at the intensity of its vocalization. The tall man to its side smiled once more, and through the thick mist his white teeth flashed at her, the canines seeming to twinkle with an unholy shimmer.

"I think you know exactly who and what we are." He snorted as he began to slowly move toward her. "And you should be very afraid little bird."

Skye began to inch to her right; the darkened interior of the cave was looking a tad more inviting than it had seconds ago. The jaguar warriors were too close to the edge of the waterfall, effectively cutting off that escape route.

Her eyes narrowed and she made a face. "Siegfried and Roy's lost cousin?"

Loud laughter echoed her words and the warrior in human form began to clap, slowly, methodically. The sound grated on her last working nerve and Skye grimaced as she continued to slowly move toward the cave.

"I think our little eagle deserves some sort of award for her acting skills." He looked to the jaguar at his side and then winked through the mist at Skye.

"What do you think Christo? Should we reward her with some play time before we get down to business?"

The cat licked its lips as its tail flickered back and forth. Skye felt bile begin to rise from deep in her chest and she swallowed thickly. She needed to keep them occupied and away from her, at least until she was close enough to the cave to make a run for it.

"Keep talking to that cat on steroids and I'm gonna have to call the crazy police, which might be kinda hard since we're out in the middle of the jungle."

"Enough!"

Skye jumped, nearly slipping upon the wet rocks as his voice tore through her. His eyes began to glow in earnest and the air around him shimmered as it darkened considerably, encircling him in a blanket of malice.

"We know exactly who you are, Skye Knightly," He laughed once more and she felt every single hair on her body rise as the danger of her situation tripled, "*and we know what you are.*"

Skye bolted, leaping over the large boulder that stood between the cave and her body, reaching deep into her satchel as she crested the rock to land hard, knee deep in rushing water.

A splash sounded behind her, and she whirled around, releasing a deadly blade—one that was charmed and dipped in poison—in a hard arc that struck the jaguar dead center in its massive chest. The beast roared in pain and the man at its side snarled in rage as he too, jumped toward her, his anger and bulk carrying him forward in a rush.

Skye tried to twist away, but the warrior was too powerful and his momentum crashed his large body into hers, knocking them both into the fast moving water that fled the cave. Her head went under and she sputtered wildly as she came up for air, her feet churning fast in an effort to get away from her enemy.

His fist came from nowhere and connected with her head in a hard ringing slam that brought stars to her eyes. She flew back and once more was under water. Skye kicked with all her might, hoping to ride the current over the falls, and felt tears of frustration rise as a painful grip wove its way around her calf and she was hauled out of the water, and thrown back onto the embankment beside the mouth of the cave.

To the furious man above her, she weighed little more than a doll. His heavy frame covered hers, the muscled thighs gripping her body as his hands encircled her head. Her arms were trapped against her sides and the sheer weight of him made breathing difficult. Skye ceased her struggles, aware that it both inflamed and excited the man.

His eyes were as black as tar but the tinge of blue light that shone from behind them was eerie and he smiled at the fear that briefly graced her features. He ground his body against hers, laughing as she bucked her hips, the reaction instant as a sickening lurch went through her.

“You’re not going anywhere bitch.”

His hands tightened cruelly against her cranium but Skye held on and uttered not a sound as he continued to apply pressure, his fingers sharp with their claw like nails, biting deep into the skull. She watched in silence as his eyes began to shimmer and the blue light that lit them churned brighter and morphed into a deep red color.

His mouth opened to a slash of white teeth and his tongue reached down toward her. He growled menacingly and Skye tried to arch away, but she was held fast, and shuddered as he licked her face from her forehead down to her chin.

She was gonna be sick. She could feel her gut rolling over as a mixture of dread and fear settled in the shadows of her soul.

“It’s a shame really, how this night will end. You taste like the sun. And make no mistake, I will taste every inch of you, but first I need to know where the portal is.”

“Screw you, dickhead.” Skye spit in his face and cringed, expecting some sort of physical retaliation. Instead laughter echoed across the stillness of the night.

She closed her eyes as he howled at the top of his lungs, “The jaguar will once more feast upon the flesh of the eagle.” He moved slightly and she was able to breathe a little easier, “but first things first.”

The bile that had been sitting at the back of her throat rose quickly and even though Skye was a warrior in her own right, an Eagle Knight, she felt shame wash over her at the fear that began to beat through her body as his eyes raked her curves.

Her mind began to close in on itself and a vision of her father drifted past her eyes. How had it come to this?

Her father’s eyes sliced through her, full of love, encouragement but alive with the fire of battle. It was all she needed and once more she began to struggle against the monster. A surge of adrenaline rushed through her veins as her heart answered the call, and she continued to struggle, ignoring his harsh laughter.

Her blue eyes sought the black of his and her hatred for the jaguar sizzled. “I will never submit willingly to such filth.”

“I wouldn’t dream of you submitting willingly...that would take all the fun out of it, don’t you think?” His laughter fell over her like sharp glass and she felt the heat of his breath on her face.

Skye closed her eyes. She wasn't strong enough, physically to defeat the bastard on top of her. She braced herself and sought the place of calm and tranquility that resided in her mind. He would use her body, but she would plot and find a way out of this.

There was no other option.

An unholy roar rent the air and bounced off the rock face as it slid out into the night. It was full of power and Skye felt the warrior atop her still. Something new stalked this evening and she waited, hoping an opportunity for escape would present itself.

Her eyes cracked open and she watched as a furious snarl erupted from the man on top of her. His large hands ground their way into her skull once more and he cracked her head hard against the rock she lay against. The pain was immediate and Skye felt her sanity slip away as the scent of blood filled the air. A deep sadness leached from her heart into every cell of her body, but she could do nothing about it.

She would fail her father and their people.

And she would die this night.

The heavy weight left her as the warrior sprang from her, his body shifting into the mist. She fought the darkness that lingered around the edges of her mind, knowing her one chance for survival was fast slipping away. But her body wasn't working and her mind was slow.

She could hear the sounds of battle; screams, roars and a fight that sounded savage in its simplicity as flesh pounded against flesh. Skye inhaled deeply and forced her brain to work through the fog. She urged her limbs into work mode and lurched forward, her eyes automatically seeking out the enemy.

What she saw left her speechless. Two large jaguars were locked in a fight to the death.

To her left was the lifeless body of the jaguar she'd killed. Her eyes flew back to the two snarling animals and she slowly began to inch away. Her legs slid down the slippery rock and she drifted into the water once more. Once she was in she began to swim toward the edge of the ledge.

An insane and painful roar erupted from behind her and Skye quickly glanced back in time to see one of the jaguars crushing the skull of the other. The beast stood above its kill and its eyes sought hers through the mist and dark that enveloped her.

Something slithered through her as she locked onto the strange green eyes that shone brightly like a beacon. The jaguar stood there, panting and barking its victory. It began to pace along the embankment and it growled deep from its belly, but never broke eye contact with her.

If Skye didn't know better, she'd say it felt as if the animal were warning her of danger. She shook her head. All jaguars were evil. They lived to hunt and kill. They could take human form yes, but there was nothing remotely human about them.

Her feet scraped along the shallow bottom as she neared the edge of the falls, and slowly she stood. The animal roared its disapproval and jumped into the cool depths of the water, its body misting as it seemed to glide toward her. Skye glanced below and tried not to acknowledge the fear at the long, dark and dangerous drop.

Her head felt dull, thick with pain and she shook herself, her eyes once more drawn to the wall of mist. Sparks seemed to fly from within and she was taken aback as a tall, lean, incredibly ripped and naked man slid from the fog to stand before her. His green eyes glowed with a feral fire and her heart began to beat a rhythm that left her breathless.

He moved toward her with sinuous grace and Skye panicked. She took a step back and teetered on the edge, feeling the water twirl around her feet as it cascaded below. The man stopped and she noticed his tattoos through the darkness that separated them.

They glowed; small fissions of light wove its way along each talon of design. They clawed their way up abs that looked as if they were carved from stone. Black symbols caressed taut muscle and fingered upwards, along the left side of his neck.

He was a jaguar warrior. She had no other choice.

Skye inhaled a ragged breath and murmured, "watch over me daddy", before closing her eyes.

And then she jumped.