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JAYMIN EVE



SHADOW BEAST
SHIFTERS

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SHADOW BEAST SHIFTERS BOOK 1

JAYMIN EVE

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Jaymin Eve
Rejected: Shadow Beast Shifters #1

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*To everyone who dreamed of being kidnapped by the devil. Because
we're fucked up like that.
Embrace your darkness.*

From the ashes, the phoenix will rise.

I reread that line from my college assignment. English Lit had hit us with our first big task of the year: we'd been asked to discuss in detail a novel that was not without some serious flaws. Firstly, its constant use of allegory to instill "meaning" into the story all but drove me insane. Not to mention the prose. Oh, man, don't get me wrong—in the right story, I was all over a stunning usage of words with sentences flowing in a circle of emotions and light, making my heart soar and brain flutter. Other times, though, I wanted to scream for the author to just "get to the fucking point."

My mom always said I couldn't possibly be her child because she'd been born of stars and moonbeams and I'd been born of facts and figures. Whatever the fuck that meant. Probably meant she would have enjoyed this English Lit story—if she wasn't drunk, that was.

As for me, I hadn't gotten to choose the tale, and the report had to be written. I wrote better with a connection, so I'd searched for one and found it in that line. It ran over and over in my head, consuming my thoughts and dominating my day.

All because I would love nothing more than to rise from my own ashes.

Twenty-two years old; senior in college; born into the most powerful shifter pack in the world. Life should have been roses and chocolates. Or stars and moonbeams... if I wanted to twist the knife

a little harder. And maybe it would have been if Dear Old Dad— a.k.a. Lockhart Callahan—hadn't decided to die via challenging the alpha, making my family persona non grata. We were lower than shit in this pack, and the only reason we were still here, according to my mom, was because the enemy you knew was better than trying to make it out there as lone wolves. A fact I had my doubts about.

“Mera!”

Mom's drunken holler reminded me that I was avoiding her this morning. She wanted money and my hard-earned cash was hidden away for a reason: the moment I shifted for the first time and had control over my wolf, I was getting the hell out of here.

Just a few more weeks.

All shifters turned for the first time, under the winter solstice full moon, in the year of their twenty-second birthday. It was already November, I had quietly turned twenty-two last month, and very soon, I'd be able to escape from this fucking mess of a town.

Throwing my barely-holding-on tablet into my ratty old bag, I slid one strap over my shoulder and jumped out the window, landing gracefully on the ground below. Our apartment was a two-bedroom POS in the middle of Torma, a town on the edge of the Santa Cruz Mountains in California. The town was owned by the pack. Our alpha was the alpha of all American packs, and that made us the best.

According to that sanctimonious asshole anyway.

Personally, Torma was my own version of hell on Earth, and I couldn't wait to be rid of it.

Heading toward school, I tightened my hold on my backpack and lowered my head to keep from drawing attention. The pack's punching bag would do well not to advertise herself. Stay low. Stay alive. Survive one more month.

And rise from the ashes.

There was one school in Torma. *Pack school*. Ranging from Pre-K all the way to college. I'd never left this town—getting permission to leave was a mission in and of itself—and had attended pack school since the first grade.

I had exactly one friend to show for my many years stuck here.

“Hey, girl,” Simone called as I walked through the front gate, making my way up the garden-lined path.

“Hey, Sim,” I said, reaching her side in a second. “Still working on that braid, I see.”

Simone had fantastic hair; it was dead straight to her waist, thick, and so black, it almost looked blue in the sunlight. She loved to experiment with hairstyles, and for the last few weeks had been attempting to fishtail braid it. *Attempting* being the operative word.

Her expressive face screwed up into a tight knot of annoyance. “Why the fuck is it so hard?” She gestured to where most of the strands had already fallen loose. “I watch the videos online and those bitches braid to their ass in like five seconds, one-handed while filming it, for shifter’s sake. Bullshit, if you ask me.”

I snorted out some laughter, elegant as always. “Keep working at it. I definitely think you’re getting better.” White lies kept the world spinning, right?

She shot me an *I know what you’re doing but thanks for being a great friend* stare as we continued into the school. Whoever had built this monstrosity of a brick building in 1847, hadn’t thought much

outside of practicality, because no one would design anything to be this ugly, squat, and depressing, unless it had just been the easiest style at the time. The only redeeming character was the wood-lined gardens, filled with flowers and herbs, that surrounded the perimeter.

Poor attempt to cover up the fact that it needed to be bulldozed and started again.

“I’m not sure I can stay here for another year.” Simone sighed, her dark brown eyes dropping dramatically. “I mean, is it even legal to stop us from traveling and meeting new people? I’m sick of all these assholes.”

She wasn’t the only one, but legal or not, we weren’t allowed to step foot outside Torma without permission. Leaving us stuck here, with the same shifters whom we’d grown up with. Shifters I hated.

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up about leaving until you’ve shifted and learned to control the beast,” I said, repeating the cardinal rule while holding open the glass doors to the building for us to enter.

Personally, I wouldn’t be asking for permission, but Simone, unlike me, had good standing here thanks to her parents’ place in the pack: enforcers for the alpha.

She let out another exaggerated sigh. “True. But the moment that happens, we’re heading on an epic road trip. I already have it all planned out.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her I would be long gone before that. Simone’s birthday wasn’t until January, so that meant she still had over a year until her first shift, missing this year’s winter solstice.

I couldn’t wait for her, and I wouldn’t ask her to be a lone wolf... Most of them turned mutt in the first few years, losing control of their beasts completely. Mutts were always put down by the packs, but it was a risk worth taking for me.

One way or another, I’d be put down whether I was mutt or not. It was just a matter of time, so why not give myself at least a fighting chance out in the real world?

“So,” Simone said, changing the subject rapidly, “your hair... I mean, we’re going to talk about it, right?”

Reaching up, I attempted to run a hand through the bird’s nest I had going on up top. “Shit, I forgot to brush it. Had to get out of the dumpster-house in a rush this morning.”

She examined me closer. “Look, normally, I don’t blink an eye, what with my own...” She waved a hand toward her “braid.” “But today is a new kind of interesting you’ve got going on.”

Dammit. There was a bathroom nearby, so I ducked inside with Simone following.

My hair was long and wavy, a stupid wave that wasn’t quite a curl but had enough definition to make it look constantly unruly. And it was red—the only redhead in the pack, to make blending in so freaking easy.

“You should let me cut it? Or Daphne,” Simone suggested unhelpfully.

Gritting my teeth, I shook my head. “You know I can’t waste fifty bucks on a cut.”

Pulling out the tie, I ran my fingers through it a few times. Simone stepped in to help as well, and eventually, we tamed it.

“The color is still the most stunning shade I’ve ever seen,” she said wistfully, tracing her fingers through a few loose strands.

It was an unusual color, that was for sure. A deep burgundy at the scalp, it lightened in an ombre effect to end up strawberry blonde on the tips. Subtle and natural—*and weird as fuck.*

Story of my life, really, being the freakshow of the pack. *Thanks, Dad.*

The sound of students filtered under the door, and as soon as a few juniors entered the bathroom, we bailed. I couldn’t stay in any enclosed space for too long or I’d end up with the crap beat out of me.

The hall was busy, so I put my head down and hugged the strap of my bag closer. “Did you get the assignment done?” I asked Simone, who was partially blocking me so we could maneuver through the shifter students.

She nodded and sighed simultaneously. “I want the twenty hours of my life back that I spent reading that shit, though,” she stated. “Like, it was worse than that one on the island where all the kids turned into feral assholes.”

I shuddered. “Hated that one, too. I’m starting to think I’m just not into anything with too much realism.”

She blinked at me. “You think that was realistic?”

“Kinda reminds me of how our pack is run,” I said, trying—and failing—to sound blasé.

Simone side-eyed me closely before giving a shake of her head. “I can’t even argue with you. It’s a dictatorship, but that’s how shifters don’t turn mutt. Wolves need a powerful alpha or we go rogue and our beasts take over.” Her face fell. “Not that I’d know, having to wait another damn year to shift.”

To say Simone was pissed about our first shift not being together was an understatement, but the *Rule of First Shift* had been passed from the original creator of our kind. The dark deity we worshipped.

Shadow Beast.

He’d set the shifter command and it couldn’t be overruled. Wolves had tried in the past, but no one had been successful in bringing on the change early. Call it wolf puberty, set in stone.

Maybe it was because we aged slowly and could live for a couple hundred years longer than humans. Or maybe the beast just liked the age of twenty-two.

No one had met the demon of our kind to ask him.

“I want it so bad,” Simone continued. “But I’m also freaking out about the pain. You know how bad it is when I break a nail, and this is like...”

“Breaking every bone?”

She shuddered. “Girl, could you at least attempt to sugarcoat it for me?”

I shrugged. “Pain doesn’t bother me like it used to. What I’m afraid of is *not* being able to bond with the wolf. What if she rejects me?”

Like every other person in my life. Yeah, I know, *sob sob*, we all had a sad story.

“She won’t,” Simone said forcefully. “She’s going to love you, and you’ll hunt rabbits, and it’ll be like having your second-best friend built in for life.”

No one was replacing Simone in best friend *numero uno* spot, apparently... not even an entity I shared a soul with.

“I’m almost positive I’ll have control by the third shift,” Simone added, shaking her shoulders in a confident little dance. “I’ve so got this.”

“I have no doubts at all,” I said, meaning every word.

The first two shifts were always a complete loss as the beast took over, our human side barely remembering anything at all. The majority had control by shift four or five, but I wouldn't put it past Simone to have hers down by shift number three. She was that determined.

Either way for me, the second I had control of my wolf, I was escaping this fuck of a town.

And never looking back.

Just as we passed the main run of lockers for the seniors, a familiar group came into sight, easy to spot as students parted along the hallway for them like they were royalty.

I supposed they pretty much were.

Simone saw them at the same time as me. “*Run!*” she whispered harshly, shoving me toward the nearest exit. It was too late, though. They'd seen me, and I couldn't outrun them. Especially not the two who had already turned: Torin Wolfe and Jaxson Heathcliffe.

Why the fuck were they even at college at all? They'd graduated last year, but for some insane reason, would not leave.

“Stay!”

The command came from Torin, future alpha of the Torma pack. His father, Victor, had ruled us for fifty years now with no sign of retiring. I mean, the fact that he'd changed their last name to *Wolfe* pretty much said everything one needed to know about how highly he regarded himself and his standing in the shifter world.

And Torin, the precious only son, was the future alpha. With this power, he could command wolves in the pack. Not that he generally needed any help in controlling them, especially the female shifters, thanks to his bright green eyes, chocolatey dark hair, and the sort of chiseled jaw that love stories were written about.

For me, though, he was a horror novel—my worst nightmare.

Two of the three approached now, and my stomach swirled as I prepared myself for what was to come. Torin's command had been the one to stop me in my tracks, but today he hung back to let his friends have their fun. In truth, Torin had never really hurt me, but he didn't stop the others either, and that was just as bad in my opinion.

Sisily Longeran, the alpha chick of my year, started to circle me. “Mera Callahan,” she drawled, “the redheaded bitch of our pack.”

She took great pleasure in pointing out on the regular that no one else had my shade of hair color. The rest of the pack fell somewhere between honey blond to the darkest of raven locks, with all shades of skin color included. I had tanned skin and hazel eyes, the same as many others, but my hair...

A giant fucking stop sign announcing my presence.

“Sisily Longeran,” I shot back, “the next alpha-mate. You and Torin are going to make such beautiful babies.”

Beautiful, evil little shits, but I refrained from mentioning that.

Sisily’s smile spread as she drifted closer to Torin. They did look great together, with her perfect mahogany mane and bright azure eyes so striking against his coloring.

The moment she first shifted, after the solstice moon, their expected bond would kick in, and they’d feel the connection. The mate bond was all pre-ordained. *A magical fucking miracle.*

I had a mate out there too, but if it was any of the assholes in my pack, I’d rather chew my own arm off.

Sisily, done flirting with the *almost-alpha*, returned back to me. Her jasmine and lemon myrtle perfume drifted with her, and I almost gagged. This was her signature scent from Thomas, the apothecary master, who handmade all of our skin products so we didn’t react to human chemicals. And I fucking hated it to the point that one whiff induced nausea.

At least it did usually give me a heads up that she was close by, so I could escape. Not today though.

She bared her teeth, chest rumbling, and knowing what was coming, I braced myself as she slammed me into the lockers. The entire row shuddered under the assault, and heat burned along my back. Shifters healed fast, but I wouldn’t have that ability until my beast was released, so for now, I got to suffer and heal *almost* humanly slow.

“You are pathetic,” she spat. “Weak.”

“You wish,” I replied, shooting her a dark smile of my own. What she called weak, I called *staying the fuck alive until I could escape*

them. An entire pack versus one wolf? Yeah, who could win with those odds?

I had fought back at the start, but it only made the beatings worse. So now I chose to grow mentally and emotionally stronger, forged in a fire of their hatred, all the while biding my time until I'd be free.

"Leave her alone," Simone shouted, unable to get to me; Torin was deliberately in her way.

"Simone, it's cool," I said, forcing myself to sound cheerful. "Sis here is super clumsy; I'm used to her tripping and falling into me."

Sisily's growls grew lower and more menacing, but I was beyond giving a shit.

"Stop it!" Simone tried again, and I really wished she wouldn't. As I'd told her many times, there was no need for both of us to be a target. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to her.

Thankfully, her parents' position in the pack saved her from the worst of the bully behavior, but some still found small ways to punish her for having me as a friend.

Fucking loyal friend that she was; I barely deserved her.

"Shut it, Simone," Sisily said without looking away from me. "Or you'll join your half-breed mutt of a friend."

"Half-breed and mutt," I said with a forced laugh. "And last week, I was also a whore. I mean, my mom is super proud of me. Just so you know."

Her hands formed into fists as she went in to break my nose again—signature move of hers—but she was stopped by Jaxson Heathcliffe.

My favorite tormentor.

My oldest friend outside of Simone.

Even if we were definitely more enemies these days.

"I thought I told you to give up coming to classes," he drawled, leaning in close, his finger swiping across my cheek. It was a gentle motion, but the darkness brewing in his coffee-colored eyes spoke of something different.

A chirpy smile crossed my face. "Right? I mean, I tried that, but my teachers were all 'you're going to fail' and 'I've been looking for a

red fur throw for my bed,' so I decided maybe *not* showing up was a bad idea."

Why. Was. I such. A smartass?

Honestly, this facet of my personality was going to get me straight up murdered. And I did *not* need any help in that department.

Jaxson crowded me into the lockers, and the burning in my back increased, but I didn't make a sound. Leaning down, he ran his nose across my neck, scenting me. He'd never fucking done that before, and I wondered if this was the moment my father's sins finally caught up to me and my throat got ripped out.

When he pulled away, his eyes flashed, and I swallowed down my next stupid comment, choosing instead to focus on his face. My expression was defiant because I would never back down to him. Never.

Jaxson was gorgeous, with brown skin, midnight black hair, and a long, lean body that hid none of his strength. It made sense that he was best friends with the future alpha. They had a similar look—the epitome of shifter males in both alpha-ness and good looks.

Personality wise, though, they were ugly, small-dick fucktards.

"My dad wanted to kill you and your mother," Jaxson murmured, breath brushing over my cheek.

This was the first time I'd heard that, so I paid attention. My dad and his dad had been best friends, second- and third-in-line to the alpha, both powerful and confident men. Jaxson's dad was the one who'd straight-up gutted mine, mere seconds after he'd attempted to take out Alpha Victor.

No questions. No trial.

"Why didn't you leave college?" Jaxson pushed again. "The real reason?"

I shoved against him with all my strength, not moving him an inch. "What the fuck happened to you? We used to be friends!"

When your parents are best friends, it stands to reason you'll grow up around each other. He'd been a big brother to me, but the moment my father had betrayed the pack, I'd lost everything.

The darkening of his eyes from coffee to tar was the only indication I had that this was going to be bad. His hand shifted to claws, swiping across my chest in one move. It cut through my shirt

and bra, leaving large, red welts across my breasts, just short of breaking the skin. He'd done that deliberately; I'd never seen anyone with the control of Jaxson, and if he'd wanted to break the skin, he would have.

"Why do you hate me so much?" I asked quietly, forcing my face to remain calm even as pain pulsed against my chest, joining the pain in my back. "I'm not my father. Why are his sins mine to pay for?"

He swung his arm again, this time punching past my head, slamming it into a locker and smashing the metal in. "It's your fucking face. I don't want to see it."

With one last scowl, he spun and left. Sisily, smiling like the smug bitch she was, hurried after him. Torin took an extra second, his eyes landing on my exposed breasts and the red lines from the claws.

"Best get yourself cleaned up," he said shortly.

When they were gone, I sank back against the damaged locker, wincing as I did. My breathing was rapid as I fought for control, and if I had a beast inside me right now, I'd definitely be standing on four legs. Our wolves were a good escape from the pain and fear.

"Come on," Simone said softly, tugging at my arm. "I have your extra clothes in my locker."

She kept them because at least once a month, my locker was destroyed by some sort of disgusting prank. Trash, paint bomb, blood, guts, dead animals.

They weren't creative, but they were consistent.

My head was ringing as I followed her, one hand clutching the front of my shirt to keep it together. As I walked, a familiar feeling filled my body. I thought of it as my brain distancing itself from the carnage of my life. Sometimes, when it got really bad, my vision doubled over as a darkness descended across it. A darkness that called me.

Fractured sanity was my thing these days.

"I have to leave Torma," I murmured, mostly to myself.

Simone shot me a sympathetic stare, reaching out to grab my hand. She'd heard this from me before, but she didn't understand how serious I was. I couldn't do this any longer.

My family line was tainted in Torma.

My legacy, and that of any children I had, all but destroyed.

After decades running with the Torma pack, the Callahan name had been reduced to two shunned wolves: Mera Callahan, an almost-turned shifter, and Lucinda Callahan, a drunken she-wolf who barely remembered she had a family name.

Nothing worth fighting for any longer. Not here at least.

As far as I was concerned, the solstice full moon couldn't arrive fast enough.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. I was ignored, which allowed me to get to my four classes, hand in all assignments, and even eat lunch in peace. My back and chest stopped hurting after a while, and if it weren't for the memories of their assault, I'd almost have felt normal.

The violent thoughts tended to linger for longer than the pain.

"You know Victor won't let you go," Simone said as we stood outside the school, watching the cars zoom off. The weekly pack meeting was on Mondays, so they'd all be heading out to the alpha's land soon.

I didn't bother to answer. It was a circular argument that we'd had many times.

"No one leaves Victor's pack, Mera! Not permanently. He won't allow it. I suggest we ask for a vacation away and then just see how long we can take before they order us back."

I shot her a smile. "He'll let me go," I said assuredly, stepping off the path now that the parking lot was clear. Surely, Victor would accept it was better not to have a "tainted" wolf like me in the pack.

"He changed his last name to Wolfe," she called after me. "He's an egomaniac who requires control and power over everyone."

I waved once before setting off, backpack in hand and an ache in my chest. Simone was trying to save me from making a big mistake, I got it, but she hadn't lived my life.

Sometimes, the harder choice wasn't really that hard at all.

The heaviness in my body faded as I got closer to the downtown area. I was heading to my afterschool job, the one lifeline I had—and the key to my escape from here.

The town of Torma had about ten thousand shifters, with a bustling main street, where my workplace was located. “Good afternoon, dearie,” Dannie called from the back room as I stepped inside, the bell tinkling above the door.

“Hey, Dan,” I called, dropping my bag in the drawer behind the counter.

Dannie, the wanderer, was a newish recruit into our pack. She’d shown up here ten years ago, just after my father’s murder, and had somehow gotten herself added to our register faster than anyone in pack history. She didn’t have family here, at least none that she admitted to, and was one of the few not to treat me and my mother like lepers.

“Oh, darling, what happened to your chest?” she asked, breezing out with a box in hand, wild, blond curls piled on top of her head. Dannie was of indeterminate age, with only a few lines around her blue eyes. She also fancied herself a bit of a fortuneteller, and even though I wasn’t a believer, the lady often knew things that she shouldn’t have.

Like the fact that I was sporting some tender spots between my breasts, despite new clothing covering the evidence.

“Just Jaxson and Torin putting me in my place,” I said, leaning forward on the counter. “I’m fine, though. It’s only a graze and barely hurts now.”

For a second, her eyes were no longer sky-blue; instead, they were a murky purple that reminded me of potions and midnight-kissed lagoons.

“I’ve traveled to many lands in my lifetime,” she said. “Met more alphas than I could count. Torin is rising among the list of my least favorite, and that’s saying something.”

Turning my head to the door, I double-checked that no pack members were entering. Dannie said shit like this all the time, and in this pack, that sort of “treason” was a highly punishable offense. Thankfully, to my knowledge, she’d never actually been caught.

“You shouldn’t say that out loud,” I warned, because I cared about her eccentric ass.

She dropped the box, waving me off. “Girlie, I’m not scared of that overgrown fleabag. You should take me up on my offer of putting him in his place the next time he oversteps with you and your ma.”

A nervous chuckle left me, but I didn’t argue with her. She was a harmless, batshit-crazy old shifter. But I loved her because she’d been more like a mother than my own in the last few years. And this job had basically saved my life.

“I’ll get the new order shelved,” I told her, snatching up the pile already unpacked on the bench.

Dannie’s Books was the only bookstore in town, and long before I’d worked in these four walls, I’d been a regular customer. Books had been my saving grace for years. An escape from my mundane, sometimes seriously terrible life. And it was pretty much why I’d been extra-pissed to spend hours reading that stupid story for my school assignment.

Never waste time on bad books. There were too many amazing stories out there waiting to be discovered.

Wandering into the shelves, I breathed deeply, absorbing the incredible and unique smell that only books had. The older books in the “used” section smelled different to the new ones, and despite the chemical undertones that my shifter nose picked up, I loved all the scents. Basically every good memory I had in the past ten years was here. With Dannie, and especially with the books.

“Oh, that new shifter series by *Leia Stone* is in, too,” Dannie called after me, her voice muffled by the shelves between us. “I kept a full set aside for you.”

“I love you!” I shouted back, already excited to find a new world to escape into. I loved reading an author’s take on shifters. Some of them got it so accurate that I knew they were shifters secretly writing fiction, but humans wrote about us, too. Often with more inaccuracies, but I loved that all the same. As far as I was concerned, any fantasy world that I could get lost in was okay by me.

The rest of my afternoon passed by quickly and at 6 P.M., Dannie turned the closed sign over and locked the door. It was still just light outside, winter creeping closer, but not quite here yet. I grabbed my

hoodie, slipping the three paperbacks into my bag and swinging it over my shoulder.

“Are you heading to the meeting?” Dannie asked as she rifled through the cash register, counting out my money. She paid me every day in cash “just in case.” She never told me in case of what, but I wasn’t complaining. This was the best and easiest way for me to stockpile it.

“If I had a choice, the answer would be *no*,” I said, my chest growing tight at the thought of being in the same place as thousands of shifters who hated me. “But if I don’t show up, Victor’s enforcers track me down, beat the fuck out of me, and drag me there anyway. Might as well avoid the beating.”

I wasn’t guessing. I knew this from experience.

She patted me on the shoulder, tingles of her energy running across my arm. Those small zaps happened a lot when Dannie touched me. I was used to it now, and even felt comfort from the familiarity.

“Change is inevitable,” she said, her eyes hooded. “Your change is coming. Prepare for it.”

I swallowed roughly, wondering if she was doing her psychic thing again. I hadn’t told her about my plans. Simone was the only one who knew I wanted to leave, but I sensed that Dannie had some idea as well—she always saw too much.

“See you tonight,” she called as I unlocked the door to leave.

“Yep, see you then,” I replied, waving over my shoulder as I stepped out into the street.

A chilly wind whipped past me and I realized that maybe winter was creeping up faster than I’d expected. Made sense. The solstice was around the corner, and I’d been counting down to that motherfucker for months.

Winter was finally coming.

Yeah, I went there.

“**W**e must prepare the pups now for their change next month,” Alpha Victor said, his power locking us in place so no one would miss a word of his speech.

Simone wasn't wrong when she'd called him an egomaniac; he was that and so much more. My father had been the only one in our history to try to take him out, and I still had no idea why he'd turned against his friend and alpha. It was something that kept me up at night, especially after a particularly hard day.

“We have decided that this solstice, we'll travel even farther across pack lands,” he continued, sounding pleased with himself. As per tradition, only the alpha, beta, and their sons would be with us for our initial shift. The rest of the pack would find us later, and this was when any new mate bonds would kick into gear.

For me, I cared about none of that, or how far we roamed over the vast lands controlled by the Torma pack. I cared about one thing and one thing only: getting control of my wolf so I could bail.

“Now onto our mixer with the Strigent pack,” the alpha said, changing the subject rapidly, as was his way. “We've had petitions for a full participation from all unmated wolves. Hopefully, a few more true mate bonds will kick into effect.”

These mixers happened a few times a year and were a big deal. From what I'd observed in my twenty-two years, shifters were dominated by their need to find their mate. I didn't blame them for this—I would have liked to have someone in my corner. Someone

who was the perfect match for me and would support me no matter what.

I'd been alone, so fucking alone and lonely, for almost my entire life.

But at no point had I ever been desperate enough to want to mate with anyone in this pack. I mean, there was no way, just through some quirk in fate, I'd suddenly be all hot and heavy for one of these assholes who had tormented me. Right?

Life couldn't be that unfair.

"Tonight is one of the last group runs before our pups join us," Victor shouted, his honey-blond hair springing up as his wolf rose to the surface. "Let's change and commune with our beasts."

Shouts rang out around the massive field we were congregated on, outside the alpha's mansion with its sixty bedrooms and as many bathrooms. It was as far from a humble dwelling as any place could be, but it was nothing compared to the many thousands of priceless acres attached to it.

Wild and untamed land that the pack would cover tonight in their run.

Those of us too young would leave now, before the beasts emerged. I'd seen the change from human to wolf before, of course, but never in a mass gathering like this.

Simone grabbed my hand as the alpha lifted his head and howled to the sky, releasing us from his power. "Let's get out of here," she said. "I've got my car."

We ran. Like at school, it was best if I made myself scarce when the wolves base instincts emerged.

"Is your mom here?" she asked, both of us full-on sprinting to the field where her car was. She was smart enough to park off to the side, where no one could block us in. This was not our first pack meeting, and we were adept at survival.

"Didn't see her," I said shortly. "And she wouldn't accept a ride from us anyway. She'd be in there, shifting with them, trying to worm her way into the heart of another."

My father had been her true mate, but she didn't care. His death—his betrayal, as she put it—had destroyed all of us. And I got it. Part of me hated him more than I could imagine hating anyone.

Another part missed him with an intensity that took my breath away.

Sliding into Simone's old red pickup truck, I tried to calm my breathing, even as my heart pounded against my chest. I wasn't winded from the run. Nope, it was the fear that did that.

Fuck. Fear was so debilitating, and not for the first time, I wondered what it would be like to live without it. To just... get up each morning and not dread the fucking day.

An absolute truth struck me then, while I was trying to calm my damn heart for the second time that day: I should have run years ago. The fact that I'd stayed here, placing myself in this position to be tormented daily, was an absolute disgrace.

Turning myself into a victim over and over again was a shame I felt deep in my soul.

"I have to leave tonight," I decided, intensity lacing my tone. "Tonight is my best chance. They'll be gone on their run for hours, and the town is empty."

Simone slammed on the brakes, the car screeching to a halt. "Are you fucking kidding me?" she all but shouted. "Girl, you're one month out from your shift. You can't go now. You'll die without an alpha to guide you through the first change."

My hands were clenched at my sides as anger and humiliation coursed through me. "I let them turn me into a whimpering bitch," I said through gritted teeth, my throat so thick, I could barely get the words out. "I've lived in fear for a decade. I've had the worst kind of shit done to me, and I wear the scars both internally and externally from it. Why the fuck have I stayed so long? On a one-off fear I might die during my first shift? At this point, that would be a blessing."

Not to mention leaving before my shift would lessen my bond to the alpha and make it even harder for him to track me. As I said the words out loud, allowing my mindset of *waiting for my first shift to leave* to change, it all made a lot more sense to go now. Tonight.

Simone was dead silent, her eyes huge and filled with tears. She swallowed roughly, more than once, but couldn't seem to get herself under control.

Reaching out, I placed my hand on hers, squeezing it. "I love you. I would never have gotten through my fucked-up mess of a life

without you, but I have to leave. I have to run now and never look back.”

She didn't argue again, just nodded a few times, tears spilling over and trailing down her cheeks. “Where...” She cleared her throat. “Where will you go?”

I would be a danger for my first few shifts. I had to find a safe place, somewhere deserted with plenty of room for me to run.

“I don't know,” I admitted truthfully. “But anywhere is better than here.”

She buried her head in her hands, a sob escaping. “This can't be goodbye.” Her voice was muffled until she lifted her head again. “You've been my best friend since we were pups. I mean... Come on, Mera. Think about what you're giving up.”

Fuck. She was destroying me.

“What about Dannie?” she said. And now we were bringing out the big guns. “You don't even want to say goodbye to her?”

Simone was not going to let me go without a fight, and I was already so worn down from fighting. “I'll sleep on it, okay?” I said, trying my best to lighten my tone. “Maybe I can last another month. I mean, what's a month in the great scheme of time?”

She swiped at her eyes, nodding a few times. “Yes. You can make it another month. I'll keep you safe. I can do it.”

Reaching across the car, I wrapped my arms tightly around her, just breathing in the faint scents that Simone always carried with her. Lavender from the flowers in her front garden, and aniseed from the licorice she secretly loved. I'd miss that.

When we were done with the emotional sob fest, Simone got her car going again, taking me right to my front door. “I'll see you tomorrow,” she said, examining my face. It wasn't a question. She was telling me I better be here tomorrow or she'd beat my ass.

I nodded, forcing a smile. “You got it, babe.”

With one final look at her beautiful face, terrible braid, and kind eyes, I sent out a silent hope that one day I'd be strong enough to return here.

And she'd forgive me for what I planned on doing.

“Lucy, order’s up!”

It had taken me a couple of weeks, but I was finally answering to my fake name: Lucy Jones. Leaving Torma was the best decision I’d ever made; the second-best was heading for a town without any pack, deciding I was going to risk it on my own.

The freedom of waking up without fear was everything, and my only negative thoughts these days were about how many years I’d wasted in Torma when I could have been free.

Hurrying over to the counter, I grabbed the heavy tray with three burgers and about fifty tons of fries. In these parts, truck drivers all but fell into the diner, starving after being on the road for many hours. This tray of food would be gone in no time.

“Here you go,” I said with a smile, lowering the tray to dish out the three plates, with the shared fries in the center. “Need me to top up your drinks?” I asked, noticing they were halfway empty.

“Nah, all good, love,” the burliest man said, his salt-and-pepper moustache quivering as he bit into the burger. The other two were shoveling the food in, too, so I let out a chuckle.

“Alrighty. I’ll check back in a few minutes.”

I rounded out a few more tables, filled drinks, dropped orders off, and all the while, I had a genuine smile on my face. Sure, life wasn’t perfect. I missed Simone and Dannie and knew they’d be upset at my sudden disappearance. Not to mention the stress over my first

shift next week—I hadn't really figured out what to do about that yet. But I'd take these small, dark moments over the lifetime I'd been living before.

"How long have you been in Hood River?" salt-and-pepper moustache asked when I popped back to refill his soda. "I've been stopping here on my route for twenty-odd years, and I've never seen your pretty face before."

He was a harmless flirt. I enjoyed those the best.

"Not very long. I was passing through and this place won my heart over, so I decided to stay."

It was the abundance of greenery here, a veritable sanctuary for my wolf, who would want nothing more than to get lost in the forest. Even better: no official pack for a hundred miles in all directions.

Hood River had a lot going for it.

"You're too young to be stuck in a boring-ass town like this." One of the others scoffed. He was younger than moustache, and he clearly enjoyed more of a nightlife than was available in this small town.

I shrugged. "Boring is kinda nice these days." Lifting their empty plates, I shot them all another bright smile. "Can I get you gentlemen anything else?"

Moustache shook his head. "Just the check. Thanks, sweetheart."

I nodded, turning to leave. Just as I took a step, the front door slammed open, and the resounding bang echoed across the diner. In that moment, I lost my sense of happiness, as the fear I'd lived with for most of my life flooded back in, and I all but hit the floor.

"Sorry," an older, grey-haired man said, stepping farther inside. "Wind caught it."

I couldn't really explain the way my body reacted to unexpected situations. I'd been preyed upon and hurt so many times that I was conditioned now to expect pain. Usually, I hid it better, but judging by the way the three truck drivers were looking at me, this time, I'd failed at that. Averting my gaze, feeling the heat in my cheeks, I hurried off to get their check.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Get it together, Mera!

In my head, I berated myself for drawing attention like this. For falling back into the same old patterns. The few weeks away from the pack clearly wasn't enough time for me to change, not really. But I was going to keep moving forward, forcing myself to deal with this new life. I refused to let those bastards win.

Ringling up the full order for the trucker's table, I hurried by and dropped the check off. The three of them watched me silently, and I prayed they wouldn't ask any questions. Thankfully, by the time I got around to a few more tables, they had left, and I picked up the money, noting that they'd covered their bill and left a very nice tip for me. Pity money no doubt, but whatever. I'd take it at this point.

Beggars couldn't be choosers, and I was stuck in a rundown old cabin in the woods that needed a few updates. This money wouldn't go to waste.

The rest of the night passed in a blur of trays, spilled sodas, and shitty tips. Making me even more thankful for the truck drivers. When it was finally time for my shift to end, I heaved a sigh of relief, rubbing at the back of my neck to loosen the muscles there.

I'd been tense for the past few days, feeling the stirring of the beast inside. This wasn't the first time, but she was much closer to the surface now.

I could taste her energy. The wildness that rode within her soul. She was ready to shift.

"Great work tonight, Lucy."

I turned as Greg, my boss, jarred me from my thoughts. As bosses go, he was pretty great; his wife was nice as well, even though she rarely visited the diner.

"Thanks, Greg," I said. "The hours really fly by when it's busy like that."

"My favorite kind of night," he said with a booming laugh before he exited onto the main floor. I sat at the bench to cash out, separating my money from the tips before depositing the rest into the small safe near the cubbies.

I'd actually done better than I'd expected with tips and would be able to get that extra heater for when winter hit even harder. It was a slow chill this year, but the deep freeze was going to arrive soon. I wanted to be prepared.

“See you later,” I called to everyone as I exited.

It was near midnight and I had a couple of miles to walk home, so I didn't waste time, kicking off with a medium-paced run. In a lot of ways, Hood River, Oregon reminded me of my pack home. Abundance of forests, cooler weather, but unlike in Torma, here there was a lot of passing-through traffic. And definitely a lot of humans.

It was odd that no shifters had made this a permanent pack ground yet, but with all the forest, it was only a matter of time. When that happened, I would be long gone.

When I was about halfway home, the tense feeling pressing into my spine increased, and as I slowed, tingles raced over my skin. I spent more than a few seconds looking around, trying to figure out what had my hackles up.

Very little light existed this far from the main town. The forest was thick and ominous around me, and even with my shifter senses, it was eerie. Not for the first time, I cursed my choice of isolated cabin, but with my non-existent rental history, and lack of stable income, this had been the only place I could get. I hadn't worried too much, thinking when I changed it would be best to be out of town, but it did leave me vulnerable, with no one to call for help.

For now, all I could do was run and hope like fuck it wasn't another shifter.

Pumping my arms and legs hard, I sprinted, focusing on breathing and not tripping over my own feet. Shifters were naturally graceful, and my night vision was fantastic, but mistakes were made in situations like these, and I refused to be the classic horror movie heroine falling over her feet.

The forest grew darker around me as the familiar path that led to my cabin came into sight. *Thank fuck.*

I hit the first step, leaping onto the porch while fumbling for the key to snap it into the lock. For once, I didn't have any issue, getting it open in one twist before crashing through the door and slamming it behind me. My breath came out in harried gasps as I tried to calm my frantic nerves.

I didn't drop my guard, though, hurrying into the kitchen to procure a weapon, my eyes locked on the front door as I waited for

them to bust through it. After five minutes of standing in the dark, two large cleavers clutched in my sweaty palms, I crept toward the windows. Peeking out of each, I looked for movement, but there wasn't a sign of anyone being out there.

Had my overactive imagination gotten the best of me?

I made my way through the rest of the cabin, switching on a single lamp in the living area. Two rooms made up the bulk of this rickety dwelling that had very little going for it—outside of its gorgeous old red-brick fireplace.

I was too tired to bother messing with it tonight, though, so I just slipped into the tiny bathroom and took a lukewarm shower before changing into a tank and clean underwear and crawling into bed. I kept the blades beside me just in case, but it didn't seem like any attack was forthcoming. Not tonight anyway.

As I snuggled down, I started reading a new book on my phone. I had a crappy old smartphone, one of the earlier models, but it had the kindle app, which was my lifeline for paperbacks on the run.

The shifter series Dannie had gifted me was long finished, but that author had led me to other amazing indie writers, and I was currently in the middle of my new favorite series.

Dragon shifters, *amirite*?

I mean, I might have been a shifter myself, but the thought of a burly dragon dude was just freaking delicious. I hoped that they were out there, hidden, and the concept wasn't as fantasy as most humans would expect. Maybe I could manipulate the fates somehow and score myself a dragon shifter as a mate. Weirder things had happened, and to be honest, I'd prefer any other shifter as a mate than a wolf. Those bastards had been making my life miserable for ten years, and I was ready for a change.

I wasn't on shift at the diner the next day, and since I was still filled with tension from the feeling of being watched last night, I decided to lay low. Maybe try to fix some of the issues in the cabin.

Two hours later, with the door hanging at an even worse angle, the bathroom filled with even more muck and scum if possible, and the fridge emptier than ever, I called it quits and headed into town to grab enough food to get me through the rest of the week.

The full-moon-after-the-solstice was closing in, and I still hadn't really come up with a plan. It was inevitable that I'd lose control of my wolf. She would take the lead as her first steps to freedom, and in doing so, I had no idea what path she'd choose. The cabin was deep in the forest, and logically, any animal should stay within nature, but knowing my luck, she'd head straight into Hood River to get her ass shot at by a paranoid human.

And of course, I had to survive the shift first.

Despite these worries, I still didn't regret my rapid dash from Torma. My only regret was Simone. I missed her so much, and I would have hurt her by leaving like I did. The ache to talk to my best friend hit me all the time, but I knew that even one phone call might send my current life tumbling down around me. The pack was fully modernized now, and they knew how to track the same way a human would. I could leave no trace. My phone was on airplane

mode, which helped me get through my already downloaded *to be read pile*, but it didn't allow me any contact with shifters.

When I got in town, I went straight for the local store. It was half-filled, everyone looking a little frozen and miserable as they loaded their baskets. No one glanced my way, even though I was technically still new enough to create curiosity. My initial reticence had been enough to deter their questioning, and these days, I was usually able to shop in peace.

Today, I headed straight for the cold cuts section. My need for meat had increased over the past month, and while it was tough to try to afford the fresh cuts that my soon-to-emerge wolf craved, it was imperative that she wasn't shifting hungry.

"I'm getting your protein," I muttered to myself as she swirled in my chest, my stomach growling as we got closer. "Calm down."

Of course, this did not calm the wolf soul down at all, and I wondered if I was going to find myself with a beast who fought me during every change. I'd heard about shifters with that wildness in their wolves, and it was always a cautionary tale.

Praise the Shadow Beast, I legitimately did not need one more worry. My wolf would not be wild. *Say it enough and it must be true.*

When I was done loading the food staples for the week, I waited to check out, trying not to make eye contact with anyone. An uneasy chill traced down my spine a few times, and for a moment, I thought I caught sight of a familiar face, but when I looked again, it was just Tom, who worked for his father in the hardware store a few buildings over.

He smiled awkwardly at me when our eyes met, and I returned that smile. He was a nice-looking guy, not much older than me, with golden brown eyes and perfect teeth, but there was no way I could ever date a human. Even if they wouldn't be freaked out of their fucking minds when I ate more than them, could bench six hundred pounds, and growled at random annoyances, I'd also live for many more years than they would.

And outliving someone you loved was my idea of torture.

"Sixty-eight dollars and twenty-two cents," Claudia, the ancient lady behind the checkout, trilled. "And you're looking a little peaky, dear. You should get some of the special chicken soup Earl made."

Claudia was third generation born here—her family had migrated from Haiti many decades ago—and she knew absolutely everything about everyone... except me, of course. She spoke a million miles an hour, running her sentences together and meshing multiple thoughts in one, all the while grilling you for personal information. But there was no denying her husband Earl made a mean chicken soup.

“Sure,” I said with a nod, picking up one of the takeout containers. “How much extra?”

Claudia smiled, her pink lipstick smeared on her teeth, as always. “Free today, sweetheart. You need a little home cooking.”

“Thank you,” I said, dropping the correct cash into her hands and gathering up my couple of bags. “Have a nice afternoon.”

She smiled at me, her eyes shrewd as she examined me closer. “You too, dear. You too.”

Needing to get away from her prying eyes and the continuing uncomfortable sensation of being watched, I hurried out and didn’t look back. There was a decent chance my new paranoid personality was simply a side effect of my impending first shift—it was next to impossible to tell how each shifter would react coming up to their first shift. But there was always a plethora of personality changes in that time.

At least if I was feeling this way due to the shift, there was no stalker on my ass, and I could stop anticipating an ambush at any point. Would be nice to relax for a few days.

The wind picked up on the long walk home, and by the time I got back into the cabin, I was half-frozen. The thought of a fire to warm the room was enough to have me putting in the effort to light a decent one, and when it was roaring away, I even cooked my dinner over the flames.

Rare steak didn’t take long to perfect anyway, and I mostly enjoyed the added smoky flavor the fire produced. When I finally crawled into bed, after setting my alarm for an early start at the diner, I wondered if this was going to be my life forever. Alone. Books and fire and food my only comfort.

I mean, as fucked-up as it was, this was still better than being in Torma.

Just had to survive my first shift, because it'd be super shitty if I died before I ever even got to live.



I ARRIVED EARLY to work the next day after a shitty, restless sleep. Thanks to Ms. Wolf scraping at my skin like she was an actual physical animal trapped inside, and not just a sliver of my own soul.

“Lucy!”

Tessie Johanson hugged me as I walked through the door, and this time, I didn't even flinch. Tessie was another full-time waitress, and she had flaming red hair, but unlike mine, hers wouldn't be red for long. She changed her hair color as much as I changed my clothes, and I had no clue what her natural shade was.

She was also a hugger, and it had taken some getting used to, but now I kind of liked it.

“I've missed you this week,” she said, even though it had only been a couple of days since we'd been on shift together. “We're supposed to be in for a busy day today with the festival in town.”

I smiled, stashing my bag and jacket in the small cubbies. “That's fantastic. I could use a little extra cash.”

She smirked, following me as I got my apron out. “Hells yeah, me too. The purple I'm getting for my hair next is going to take three sessions with Mark. He's the best, but dude costs bank.” Her lips twitched. “Are you sure you don't want to get a trim? I can book us an appointment together.”

I snorted as we entered the main diner room to start our shifts. “I've told you, food before hair. I don't have the money to waste, but I can't wait to see the purple you choose.”

She sighed, wistfully staring at the long, braided mess down my back. “Your hair is the most amazing natural color I've ever seen. Mark would legitimately kill his mother for a chance to get his hands on it. He'd probably do it for free.” Her face lit up. “I'm going to ask him.”

Before I could protest, she had hurried off to her section, and I got to work on mine. As predicted, there was no lull all day, and I

found out about the carnival and food festival that was moving through the town over the next week, bringing in a ton of visitors.

“You have to check it out!” an overly enthusiastic, ten-year-old boy told me. “They have rides and toys and cotton candy.”

I smiled at him while refilling his juice. “Sounds amazing. I’m working for the next few days, but maybe I’ll get a chance to sneak away.”

Greg, who was nearby chatting to one of the regulars, must have heard me. “Your friend from California was in here yesterday asking about you. Maybe you can take her there. It’s definitely one of the highlights of the holidays.”

Like someone had doused me in icy water, shock traced across my skin, freezing me in place. “My friend?” I managed to choke out.

He nodded, still looking affable, like he had no idea of the bombshell he’d just dropped on me. “Said she was in town to surprise you. Figured she made it out to your place last night.”

Somehow I didn’t drop the jug I held. Somehow I didn’t scream and sprint out of the room. Somehow I managed to calmly nod my head and walk away, into the back room.

“Everything okay?” Tessie asked, nudging the door open to drop off her armful of dirty plates.

Shaking off my panic, I forced a natural smile across my face, failing miserably, if her expression was anything to go by. “Just got some bad news. Could you maybe cover the rest of my shift? I need to head home quickly.”

Her sweet smile pulled at the corners as her face crinkled in concern. “Of course! Lord knows you’ve covered me plenty of times over the past few weeks.”

“You’re the best,” I blurted out in a rush, grabbing up my bag and jacket. “I’ll make it up to you.”

Total lie. This was the last time I’d see any of them.

I hadn’t been paranoid—my cover was blown. And after I grabbed my stash of cash from the cabin, I’d be out of here never to return. I was already cursing myself for being so stupid not to bring the money with me. It hadn’t felt safe wandering around with thousands of dollars, and I might pay the ultimate price for that stellar decision.

“Lucy,” Tessie called as I hurried out the door.

Forcing myself to slow, I turned my head back.

“Take care out there,” she murmured, and I found myself staring into her sad, grey eyes. It was almost as if she knew this was the last time we’d see each other, and as sadness welled up, I forced it down. I had no time to dwell on my losses.

The rest of today was about survival.

“You too,” I replied softly before I slipped out of the room and left the diner behind for good.

Unlike when I went into work, the carnival and food stalls were completely set up now, brightly colored tents visible as I dashed away. The streets were filled like I hadn’t seen here before, and it was clear this traveling event was a big deal. In some ways, it was a total blessing in disguise for me. The more people, the easier it would be to hide my escape from Hood River.

The crowds thinned as I got closer to my forest home, and when I was a mile or so out, I went into stealth mode, heading off the beaten path and into the dense foliage. A direct route was way too risky at this stage.

When the familiar surroundings of the cabin came into sight between a mass of old redwood trees, I slowed to a stop. Closing my eyes, I let my senses roam out as far as I could, searching for a disturbance to my area.

I stood there for at least ten minutes, not moving—barely breathing while not letting my guard down. Despite my lack of a completed bond with my wolf, by the time I was done, I could hear the rustling of birds from miles away, crickets and other insects nearby, and the creek that was across the way from the cabin.

My senses were stronger than ever, and I was almost certain no one lay in wait. At least not around my cabin.

I didn’t relax as I slowly crept forward, taking care to step silently—not exactly an easy task in a forest. But I was close enough to shifting to have the grace of a wolf at my disposal.

Avoiding the front door, I sidled along the west side of the cabin, toward the bedroom window. I might have been a dumbass in not keeping my cash on me, but I wasn’t completely without brains or logic. If anyone was lying in wait to ambush me, having successfully

hidden themselves from my senses, they'd expect me to walk through the front door. I'd anticipated this from the start, and the bedroom window was my backup plan. It was always unlocked and well oiled, for a silent escape.

That part of my plan worked perfectly as the glass slid up silently, and I paused again, more cautious than I'd ever been in my life. The room was empty of scent and movement. No other heartbeats or feel of new energy. Lifting my leg over the windowsill, I entered with barely a sound... I was getting good at this stealth mission.

My bag remained packed at all times. It held cash, some clothing, plus food and water. In a heartbeat, I had it on my back and was slipping out the open window.

Fuck yes! I silently congratulated myself as I took off into the forest, sprinting with less worry about creating a noise. It appeared they hadn't found my cabin yet, and maybe there was still a chance at escape.

Maybe that was the point I made my first mistake: having hope and letting my guard down. Thinking I was so clever, getting away with my cash and bag. Already planning where I'd go from here, never to see Hood River again.

But I wasn't the only one racing through the forest today. Someone had been waiting for me, just not where I'd expected. The cabin was too obvious, and those bastards had lulled me into a false sense of security when there'd been no one inside.

But make no mistake, they had been waiting for me, and now I would be in a fight for my life.

Knowing that I'd rather die than be taken by the Torma pack again—and who the hell else would be chasing me?—I didn't slow. If those bastards got their hands on me, they'd probably make the last ten years with them seem like a wonderland. I couldn't let that happen. I'd fight to the death if need be, because I was not going back to Torma.

My wolf swirled inside, fighting to break free, and despite the impossibility of shifting before the full moon, it actually felt like she might succeed in forcing the change. My face ached as if my jaw was morphing, teeth shifting to accommodate the shift.

"*Meerraaa*," a mocking voice taunted from my right. Another joined in from the left, both of them familiar and terrifying.

Torin and Jaxson. Alpha- and beta-to-be.

Of course Victor would have sent them after me—the better a shifter knew a person's scent and energy, the easier it was to track them down. I'd grown up with those bastards, and they'd locked straight on to my energy. But why? I honestly hadn't expected them to care I was gone at all, but apparently, Victor wasn't ready to release any of his wolves. Even ones he hated.

"Or is it *Lucy*?" Torin added, his laughter closer than before.

Greg had said it had been a woman asking about me in the diner, but clearly these two had been there as well. It had probably been Sisily... Stupid bitch never went anywhere without the alpha and beta. I knew for a fact my boss wouldn't have given out my personal

information to dudes, but a woman was different. Greg was old school like that.

And it might just get me murdered.

My speed picked up, but there was no way I could outrun fully turned shifters. Especially not if they wolfed out.

“Come on, Mera. The pack misses you,” Torin added, his laughter gone now. “Father doesn’t like when his pack members leave without a goodbye. You know that.”

He was basically running side by side with me, and despite the odds being so against me, I palmed the blade that was always in the side of my bag, preparing myself for the fight.

Someone tackled me from behind, and I hit the ground hard, the solid weight of a wolf on my back. *Fuck!* Spinning over, I kicked at the smaller wolf, realizing this must be the female.

She didn’t hesitate to attack, and I wanted to scream as her claws and teeth slashed into my skin. Swinging my blade, I sliced through the fur, and wondered which bitch was on me. Sisily hadn’t turned yet...

My blade glanced off the dense fur that protected her hide, and she snapped at my throat, but I managed to lodge my arm in her mouth to stop her. It cost me arm skin, but unlike my throat, that wasn’t going to kill me.

The wolf was a dark grey color—hair color often dictated fur color, and I had no idea who was grey in the pack. She was average size, too, with deep brown eyes. “Get off me,” I growled, and with unknown strength, I managed to knock her back so I could crawl to my feet.

Blood sprinkled the ground, and even in the darkening sky, I could tell that it was from more than just a few scrapes. Bitch had hit something important; something to worry about tomorrow, if I was still alive to care.

Strong arms wrapped around me, biting into the injuries I’d already sustained. Before Torin could crush me further, though, I stabbed him, right in the chest. My blade wasn’t silver or any of the metals that reacted badly to shifter magic. It was basically a medium-sized switch blade, which would do minimal damage. Except when stabbed through the heart. *Whoops.*

Torin's eyes widened and he stared down at me for a beat like he couldn't believe what I'd just done. "Like father like daughter," he muttered before I jerked from his hold and he stumbled back.

Jaxson was at his best friend's side in a heartbeat, his darkening gaze drilling holes into my face. "You'll pay for that, Mera," he growled, his face already starting to change as he fought his wolf.

I flipped him off because I was apparently without self-preservation these days. "He's not gonna die from it."

And he wouldn't. It'd just take a few days to repair and he'd be in a bad way until then. Heart muscles did a lot of work in the body, and a blade through one, even for a shifter, was never good.

"Protect him," I heard Jaxson shout to the unknown bitch wolf, and then the first crack of bones told me he was about to shift.

I had one shot to get away because if he caught me in his wolf form, it was all over. My blade was still buried in my enemy's chest, and deciding that I'd be faster without my bag, I took off emptyhanded. Ironic that I'd thought the bag had been worth the risk of detection because it had all my money. Now I knew that I'd have been better off running straight from the diner and never looking back.

Sprinting faster than I ever had, I made it to the edge of town, ready to plunge into the streets still teeming with people. Wolves had one very strict rule above all others: never let the humans know of our existence. Any shifter spotted in public was in a shitload of trouble with their alpha, especially in this day and age of phones and recording devices.

Being among the humans gave me a shot at escaping since Jaxson would have to be careful. He might even have to change back and be forced to prance about naked. He deserved that sort of karma, not that the overconfident bastard would worry about being naked.

He had nothing to worry about, truthfully, but he could at least attempt some humility.

The sounds of an approaching wolf propelled me forward, and I'd been sure I was about to make it when Jaxson got hold of my shirt with his teeth, yanking me back. *How the fuck was he so close?* The overachieving bastard had shifted in seconds.

People were only a few dozen feet away, and I could have screamed, but if Jaxson's wolf was in control, he'd kill them all. I couldn't do that. Not to innocent humans.

I had to accept my fate.

Fighting to get free, I was halted when he pounced on my back. Dude was a big man, and an even bigger wolf. With the air knocked out of me, I tried to crawl, gasping for breath. Jaxson slid off, nudging me over so I was on my back, and with my chest heaving, I stared up at his midnight black wolf.

Fangs flashed in my face as he growled, and I knew this was my last moment on Earth. No matter how I tried to fight, he was larger and stronger, and I was succumbing to the injuries littering my body.

Sorry, my wolf.

I'd longed to know her better, but it wasn't to be.

Maybe in our next life.

She howled then, a long, echoing lament that filled my body, but no sound emerged from my mouth. Jaxson leaned in closer, and just as his jaw clamped around my throat, I heard a shout from behind him. It sounded like Torin, but I couldn't be sure because the wolf holding my life in his jaws sank his teeth in, yanking at the skin, and everything went black.

At some point, I had accepted that there was no waking to another day.

I'd seen my last sunrise.

Eaten my last taco.

Sang my last song.

And while I had no regrets about running and attempting to have a better life, I was pissed as fuck about dying. I sure as hell didn't deserve this fate, especially at the hands of the bastards who'd made my life hell in the first place.

Except it turned out death didn't quite want me yet.

A splash of water smacked me in the face, followed by a slap across my aching cheek.

"Wake up, you stupid bitch," a voice growled close by.

As more awareness filtered through me, pain made itself known. A groan escaped my lips, the sound small and pathetic.

"Should have left her for dead," that same female grumbled. "Useless cunt is just lying in her own filth. Embarrassment to shifters."

"Takes one to know one," I murmured, words raspy and barely audible. My eyes still weren't open, but I scented her moving closer.

"What the fuck did you just say?"

I forced my lips into a smile, even though my face felt like it was on fire. "I'll talk slower. Takes... One... To... Know... One..."

At this point, I could barely remember what she'd said. She'd called me something... Useless...? Worthless?

"Did you just call me a cunt?" she snapped, and the pain in my side increased. At this point, I felt the nails digging into me from her half-shifted hands.

"Right," I slurred. "I almost forgot. But yes, you're a total cunt fuckhole, and I hope you get herpes and die of syphilis after your dick falls off."

She roared so loud, it would have hurt my ears if I wasn't already in so much pain that a little earache was nothing of concern. Her grip on me tightened, and another weak whimper left me.

"You're going to wish that you died when you ran," she murmured, sounding gleeful. "My job is to break you down until you are begging for death, and then, Victor is going to take over."

Now I knew who this was: Glendra, the alpha's mate. Torin's mom, or as I liked to call her, the pack whore.

She was a nasty shifter I'd hated for years. She'd hung around my father like a bad smell way too many times for me to think she was anything other than someone who craved the attention of powerful men. She needed the gratification, and despite having a true mate, she could never seem to stop her wandering eye. And part of me still wondered if she wasn't half the reason my father had attacked the alpha. Wouldn't put it past a bitch like her to deliberately orchestrate drama that ended in murder.

Despite my pain and fatigue, I called on my wolf, and she rose within me like the perfect spirit goddess she was. The Shadow Beast was our god, more devil than angel, and I'd need his resilient strength to get through this.

Darkness was going to be my calling, and I allowed it to fill me so I could best this wolf.

Slamming my head forward, I cracked her in the face, knocking her scrawny ass off me. I followed this with a two-footed kick that sent her shooting away. Her screech was cut off by a heavy thud. She'd definitely hit something hard. My eyes were open enough at this point to see her sprawled back, unmoving.

And I knew exactly where we were: in the torture chambers below the main pack house. This is where my mother and I had been

taken when Dad had attacked Victor. It was here we'd been subjected to "questioning" until everyone had been satisfied that we'd had no idea what my dad had been planning. Fat lot of difference that made anyway; we were still treated like fucking lepers.

But at least I knew my way around here from that time. Silver lining?

Glendra had left the door to my cell open, and I took the opportunity to get the hell out of there. Sprinting as best I could, I welcomed the surge of adrenaline, knowing it might be all that got me through. Taking the stairs as fast as possible, I fought the nausea and head spins. There was no time to succumb to my injuries; I had to get to safety first.

From below, I heard the first sound of a howl. Glendra was calling the other wolves. Hopefully, I'd be faster than them...

When I reached the first-floor landing, I took the less-traveled path toward an exit I often used to slip away. It was off to the side of the smaller kitchen, and to my knowledge, very few knew about it. The best part of this exit was its close proximity to the forest.

More howls joined Glendra's, the sound and scent of wolves all around, but I tunneled my vision and didn't look back. For some reason, I hadn't died from Jaxson's attack, and I was not wasting this second chance.

When I burst out of the unlocked back door, the last slivers of moonlight bathed across me, and my wolf howled in my chest. It was early morning on the eve of the full moon, and that was the best news I could have gotten. Not only was it energizing to my wolf, the rest of the pack would have been sleeping as they rested up for the solstice change tomorrow.

This gave me a few extra minutes, and sometimes that was all a shifter needed.

Sprinting across the icy lawn, I ignored the sharp bite of air across my bare skin. My clothes were torn and tattered, but thankfully, the same ones I'd been wearing when I'd been attacked... almost a week ago. If the moon was any indication. *Damn*. Had I actually been recovering for that long?

Howls rang out back at the pack house, followed by the distinct sound of wolves shifting in the early morning air. I picked up speed, my feet barely touching the ground as my wolf lingered closer to the surface than I'd ever felt before, lending me her strength, speed, and senses.

When I reached the forest, my wolf's excitement increased. We liked being surrounded by nature like this, and it would help to obscure our trail. They'd still track my scent, of course, but in here there were ways to slow them down.

Ducking and dodging, I almost lost my balance as the occasional bout of dizziness hit me, but I held my shit together long enough to reach the wide creek. Without hesitation, I dove into the water.

Gah. It was so cold. The sort of cold that felt like I'd been struck with a taser, shocking my system to life. The sort of cold that drained your life and energy if you let it.

But I wasn't ready to die today.

Kicking hard, I swam to the surface, gasping for air as my head popped up. Wolves, as a general rule, were not amazing swimmers. The density of our beast was a magic that transferred to our human forms, but I had always loved to swim.

I also loved that it masked my scent, and very few had the capabilities to follow me in the stream. Pushing through the numbing sensations in my limbs, I started to swim, staying below the surface as much as possible. No real predators lived in these fresh waters, so all I had to keep an eye out for was debris and the pack.

At one point, the rapids pushed me along and I took a few moments to relax and regain some energy. Just up ahead, there was a bend in the bank, and it was here I planned on crawling out.

I had clearly underestimated how hurt I was, though, because when I attempted to grasp on to the edge of the bank, there just wasn't enough strength in my grip to beat the incessant pull of the undertow.

My fight wasn't completely gone, but no matter how hard I struggled, I kept losing traction.

Then my fingers went limp as the current finally tore me from the bank.

Just as I was about to be sucked into the dark water, a hand shot out and wrapped around mine, yanking me up and out in one strong tug. The shifter had been hidden behind some long reeds on the edge of this stream, positioning themselves perfectly to grab me.

And I was completely screwed.

If I didn't have the energy to pull myself from the water, then fighting would absolutely be a waste of my time. But fuck if I wasn't going to give it the old shifter try.

I could rest when I was dead.

"I knew it," a familiar voice growled. "You're so fucking predictable, Sunny."

I flinched at the name. An old nickname I hadn't heard since my dad had died. Mera Callahan was my birth name. Our family name meant *little bright-headed one* and when I was born with a head of red hair, which slowly morphed into an ombre sunset color, my nickname had become "Sunny."

Fuck Jaxson for remembering that. And why the hell was he choosing now, of all times, to use it again?

"Don't call me that," I hissed, attempting to yank my hand away as I stood shivering before him. "You have no right."

In the early morning light, I could neither hear nor scent another wolf nearby. Jaxson had used his knowledge of me to track my path,

but no one else had that same benefit. Maybe there was still a chance of escape.

“No one expects a wolf to head into the water,” he continued, his voice a low rumble, expression hidden by the shadows cast from nearby trees. “But you were always different. Always had to stand the hell out and make us all take notice.”

I crossed my arms because the freezing air against my wet clothes had my nipples saluting the world, and I would hate for this *disloyal asshole* to think that had anything to do with him.

“I’ve done nothing to stand out,” I replied, my voice as cold and dead as my heart currently felt. “I’ve always lain low, hid from the world, and squashed my shine to not offend you all. *You* chose to keep me close for torture purposes. *You* chose to chase and follow and make me relevant. I would have loved nothing more than to forget you even existed.”

Or even better if they literally ceased to exist.

Jaxson released me, and I rubbed at my wrist, even though it wasn’t particularly hurting. He circled me, like a hunter scenting his prey, but whether it got me killed or not, I was done being the weak one.

“Why am I alive?” I asked bluntly. “You ripped out my throat.”

Of all the shifters to try to kill me, it hurt the most that it had been him.

He paused, and light washed across his features, highlighting the peculiar expression on his face. “I would never kill you, Sunny.” He sighed, looking exhausted all of a sudden. “Lace, a shifter who was from the next town over, caught your scent when she passed through. We’d already put out a notification of you being missing, and she called us. I made sure to knock you out and make it look worse than it was so she wouldn’t question our strength. We got you back here asap to heal up.”

Lace was the female bitch who’d attacked me.

I snorted. “If you wanted me to heal, then why the fuck did I wake up tonight with Glendra in my cell, claws in my body, and murder in her eyes?”

His face morphed, darkness drawing his eyebrows closer as anger filled his eyes. “That wasn’t supposed to happen! She’s a little

upset about Torin. He's been much worse off than you and still hasn't woken. The alpha is attempting to force the shift to help the healing process."

My expression didn't change. Did they expect me to feel bad about defending myself? Better not hold their breaths waiting for that to happen.

"So what now?" I said with a sigh. He was a shifter on the eve of the full moon. His strength surpassed mine at the best of times. And if hypothermia didn't take me out soon, my injuries would. As much as I wanted to attempt another escape, as more time went by, it was growing clear I had no shot.

Jaxson leaned in closer, and I gritted my teeth so as to not react to his scent. As much as I hated him—like a real, *push him down the stairs and say, "he fell"* sort of hate—he had always smelled like a sexy forest ranger. Musk and pine, with a hint of snow. A truly heady scent for a shifter. And despite the fact that I was probably the only twenty-two-year-old in the world who was a virgin, I had no disillusion about my high sex drive. There was an intense attraction I felt toward some of the men in our pack at times. But I refused to have sex with shifters I hated. Yeah, I was picky like that, but at minimum, my lover would have to *not* torture me. Shocking, right?

"Now," said Jaxson, "you accompany me back to the pack house and see the fucking healer so you'll be ready for your shift tomorrow."

"Yeah, not happening," I replied, tightening my arms around myself. "Glendra already made it clear that she's going to hurt me bad and then hand me over to Victor. I think I'll take my chances with the river again."

Jaxson's arm swept around me, so fast that I barely even saw him move. Now my arms were pinned to my side, and I had no strength to fight against his hold. Jaxson had always been strong, but this was a whole new level, even for him.

"The alpha wants you here for your first shift," he rumbled. "Glendra won't touch you again."

I snorted. "Excuse me if I don't believe you." I'd been lied to many times over the years. Especially by him.

He didn't seem to care if I believed him or not, carrying me with ease as he walked along the edge of the bank. My wolf whined, disliking this dominance over us, and it was looking more likely that when we turned, we'd be alpha enough to go against these shifters.

My soul felt wild, and strangely enough, we hadn't missed the pack life too much when we'd run.

Maybe I'd shift into a dragon when my time came. They seemed to be more lone *wol/ves*. Yeah, I went there. My wolf snarled, like she was also sick of my inner monologue, so I spent the next ten minutes regaling her with every stupid thought I'd had in my twenty-two years of life. For shits and giggles.

If you wanna be my roommate, you better get used to it, I warned.

No more snarls came my way, but at this point, she appeared to be ignoring me.

"Why did you run?" Jaxson asked, startling me from my mental battle with a wolf soul.

"What?" I asked, my forehead wrinkling at the pure stupidity of that question.

"Why did you run?" he repeated.

"Uh, Glendra was trying to murder me, right after you tried to murder me."

Was this dumbass for real?

Jaxson sighed. "Not tonight. Why did you run from Torma?"

Oh.

I shook my head, my cheek brushing against his hard chest muscle that was taking up my personal space. "Didn't you know? I've always wanted to hide out in a shitty old cabin in Hood River. It's, like, the American shifter dream."

He growled and it was much more impressive than my internal wolf's. "For once in your fucking life, stop being a smartass. You ran one month before your shift; it doesn't make sense. Did something happen to set you off at that particular moment?"

I didn't reply. I didn't owe him any explanation of my actions. The way I was treated should have been reason enough, and mostly, there had been no catalyst outside the realization I'd already wasted too many years being a victim.

“This is the first time since we were kids that you’ve allowed yourself to be alone with me,” I said, changing the subject. “Might be the last time too, if you hand me back to the pack.”

A small huff of air escaped my mouth as he released his hold, all but dumping me on my ass. We were on the edge of the forest, the only barrier that remained between us and the open expanse of pack lands around the house. “Your father almost cost my family everything,” he snarled, staring me down like I was a piece of shit he’d stepped in. “Associating with you, or any Callahan, is a kiss of death.”

My wolf growled at his dominant position, and before I could think it through, I was on my feet, so fast and graceful that there was no way it was done without a little shifter help. I couldn’t wait to finally turn and have these abilities grow stronger.

I didn’t bother to address Jaxson and his insanely unfair comments, instead turning my face away from him to assess the situation and see if any wolves were closing in.

“Did you hear me?” he snapped, and it was abundantly clear he’d waited ten years for this knock-down fight he was trying to instigate, but honestly, I’d given up a long time ago expecting anything from Jaxson.

He didn’t give an inch, though, so I let out a sigh. “Sure, I imagine your life got super hard after my father was ripped to pieces, Jax. You’re totally in my prayers.”

To the fucking Shadow Beast. In the hopes he eviscerates your ass while you’re sleeping.

Silent threats counted. It was fact.

Jaxson seemed taken aback by my refusal to fight, but why would I put myself through an argument I couldn’t win? In the early days, I’d fought back a lot. Over and over. And it had only made their torture worse. I’d also begged and cried and cowered. All in the hopes I would find the one action to pacify the bullies so they’d leave me alone. But nothing had worked.

After a few years of that, I’d figured out that my reactions were only giving my bullies satisfaction.

So I’d stopped.

I'd stopped crying. I'd stopped fighting back. I'd acted like I'd barely noticed them... like their taunts hadn't bothered me at all. And funnily enough, this was what had ended up working. Sometimes they'd even left me alone for months. Glorious, perfect, peaceful months.

"What's with your hesitation to take me to Victor?" I challenged. "Are they throwing me a welcome home parade? Should I act surprised?"

I pretended to search through the tree line again, waiting for my "surprise."

Jaxson growled, wrapping his long fingers around my wrist and yanking me along as he started to walk. He was definitely muttering something about *fucking smartass*, but at this point, it just made me laugh.

The second we stepped out into the wide-open land, skittish fear traced along my spine, and I focused on breathing through the anxiety. I might have been back here, but I was still standing, and I'd do my best not to let them see my fear.

"One day, you'll look rattled again," Jaxson said, staring me down. "One day, I'll figure out your weakness, and when I do, you'll fucking belong to me. Like fate always intended."

What did he just say?

Reaching up, I tapped him on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, what? *Belong to you?* That sounds awfully possessive for someone who thinks associating with a Callahan is a kiss of death. Not to mention, it's only polite to take someone out to dinner before you try to own them."

Where the fuck did he get off even making a statement like that, after all the shit he'd put me through? My life would have been a whole lot better with Jaxson in my corner, and instead, he'd chosen to abandon me. Worse than that, he'd chosen to lead the fucking pitchfork squad.

He blinked, his light brown eyes clear in the sun rising on the horizon. "From what I recall, the last time I took you out for dinner, you weren't a very polite guest."

The memory hit me hard, and it hurt because I'd tucked all those memories away for a reason. To save myself. And his one statement

brought it right to the forefront again.

“I’d eaten something bad,” I said reluctantly. “I didn’t mean to vomit everywhere. You shouldn’t have insisted on swinging me around by my wrists.”

I’d been nine, he’d been ten, and it had been about a year before everything had gone to shit in my life. We’d been running in his backyard while our parents had prepared dinner for their weekly get-together. Jaxson had set up a special little table for us back near the huge old oak tree, and it had been for...

“My birthday surprise,” I murmured, and he nodded. A snort of laughter escaped me. “One of us was surprised, at least.”

Jaxson actually laughed. “Honestly, here I was trying to make a grand gesture in the way only a dumbass prepubescent boy could, and you turned it upside down. Typical Sunny.”

Grand gesture.

Fuck him and his smooth words. Fuck him bringing this topic up, when he’d spent the years after that trying to destroy every part of who I was.

“Take me to Victor.”

He blinked at my abrupt change of tone and topic.

“I can’t guarantee your safety once I hand you over,” he said seriously.

I laughed. In his face. “Guarantee my safety? Dude, I’d take my chances with almost every other asshole in this pack if I didn’t have to see you again.”

And just like that, I reminded him that we were enemies. That he was on my shit list, not my Christmas card one, and that he had orders to return me to the alpha.

This time when he grabbed me, it hurt, and I would no doubt have a bruise there tomorrow. Whatever. I didn’t give a damn and thankfully, our shared moment over more innocent memories was gone as well.

Last thing I needed was to develop softer feelings toward any of them again.

That would truly be the stupidest thing I could imagine doing.

“Once you shift,” Victor said slowly, his dark grey eyes taking me in, “I’m going to tie you to Torma, with the strongest bond there is between an alpha and his pack. You will serve me for the rest of your days.”

They’d all been waiting for us when Jaxson had marched me back into pack lands. Half a dozen wolves including Torin, and Jaxson’s father, Dean Heathcliffe.

I cleared my throat. “Let me get this straight. You despise me because of my father, have turned a blind eye to the pack’s torment of me over the years, but now you want me to...” I held a finger up. “And stop me if I don’t have this right... *serve* you?” I laughed, cementing my fate. “You better be referring to waitressing and not fucking because I promise you won’t be happy with a wolf like me in your bed.”

Victor’s expression darkened, his pale skin taking on the honey-blond color of his wolf as he stepped forward. “You think you’re too good to fuck the alpha?”

Uh, yes. A thousand times yes, but since I’d already pushed his patience today, I decided not to say that out loud. Victor didn’t appreciate my silence, either. His fist slammed into my cheek, knocking me off the step. Agonizing pain arced through my jaw and down my spine, my head spinning as black and white dots danced across my vision.

Victor moved over the top of me, a leg on either side of my torso. "If I decide to fuck you, mongrel pup," he growled, "there's very little you can do to stop me."

He stepped away then, a swift boot to my side his goodbye.

"Get her back in the fucking cells and make sure no one goes near her," he snarled to his son before he stormed out the door, dragging Glendra with him. She was in trouble, but I was too busy trying not to succumb to a concussion to worry about that stupid bitch. She'd made her bed, and now she had to lie in it with that shitbag she called a mate.

Jaxson got to me first, his touch gentler than I'd expected as he hauled me up.

"It's the eve of the moon," he said in a whisper. "The healing will kick in soon."

"Ugh," I groaned, the first sound I'd made since getting hit. I was pretty proud of myself for not even whimpering. Victor would never have the satisfaction, the sick bastard.

And I'd die before I let him touch me.

"Let's get her downstairs," Torin said, reaching his best friend's side. "Before dad comes back again and does something worse."

Maybe it was the blow to the head, but that sounded a tiny bit like judgment against his dad. I'd never heard Torin show anything other than respect bordering on reverence to the walking bag of sperm he called a father. *Interesting*. At least it would have been in normal circumstances. Right now, I was just trying not to pass out.

Torin held his hands out to Jaxson, like he was going to take me, but beta-in-training shook his head. "I got her. I'll make sure she stays safe in her cell until the shift tonight."

Torin shrugged, his interest in me already waning, especially as Sisily pranced her stupid ass into the room, looking fresh and perfect despite the early hour.

"Keep her alive," Torin murmured before he walked away, leaving me with Jaxson.

I wasn't too steady on my feet, so there was no choice but to let him half-carry me while I tried really hard *to* vomit on him. Again.

By the time he deposited me back in my original cell, the pounding in my head was worse, so I sank into the hard floor.

Closing my eyes helped, as I focused on breathing in and out evenly, while praying I'd pass out for a few hours.

A clank outside my cell roused me sometime later, and I gingerly lifted my head to find Jaxson sprawled back against the wall opposite the bars, watching me.

"Creep," I snarled, wincing at the jab of pain in my skull.

He shrugged. "You haven't been attacked in your cell again, so maybe you should be thanking me."

"Not even on my death bed," I replied with all the sugary sweetness I could manage.

He just smirked, and I closed my eyes to block out his face. At some point, I dozed off, only to be woken again by an angry voice. When I managed to get my eyes open, I was ecstatic to see Dannie ripping Jaxson a new one.

"What happened to her?" she snarled. Her face was turned away from me, but I knew the expression she'd be wearing. Angry Dannie was scary.

"She insulted the alpha," Jaxson shot back, standing up taller, towering over her. "She's lucky to still be alive."

Dannie scoffed and Jaxson narrowed his eyes on her. "What are you even doing down here? No one is supposed to be on this level."

Dannie tilted her head back, meeting his glare for glare. "I'm here to check on my friend. I don't trust you all to ensure her safety, especially since the alpha takes great pleasure in punishing that poor girl for an event that had nothing to do with her."

I waited for Jaxson to argue with her, laying out in detail how my father's treason had doused the Callahan name in shame, and that we all must suffer for it. Only... he didn't.

His eyes met mine over her head. "She's awake if you want to talk to her." His voice was grim.

Dannie, no doubt, had already known I was awake. She took an extra moment to stare Jaxson down before she spun and made her way across to the bars. "Hey, sweet girl," she said with a gentle smile, crouching down to my eye level. "I missed you."

Guilt hit me hard. "I'm an asshole," I choked out, pushing myself up, thankful my head wasn't pounding quite as hard.

Dannie laughed. “Yep. Total asshole. You’re just lucky you weren’t around Simone when you first left. The mouth on that girl...”

A burst of laughter escaped me, followed by a groan as the pounding surged back with vengeance. When I was in a sitting position, I rubbed at my head, desperate for water to wash the dry taste from my mouth.

A bottle slid across the floor toward me, hitting my thigh. Lifting it, I found one of Dannie’s special concoctions. She called it an energy drink, making it for me when I was down, and while it tasted like ass, it was totally worth it for the results.

“I thought you might need a pick-me-up before tonight,” she said softly, her eyes darting to where Jaxson was still standing, arms crossed as he watched us both closely.

Trusting her, I unscrewed the top and downed the entire contents in one large gulp. The chicory flavor was a little saltier than usual, but as always, I just plugged my nose and chugged it. Almost immediately, the pounding in my head eased, and my eyesight was no longer doubled.

“You’re a witch,” I teased, sighing at the relief.

Usually, Dannie laughed with me when I called her that, but this time, she just smiled. A slow, secretive smile, and not for the first time, I wondered how much we truly knew about Dannie the wanderer.

“Rest up, my dear,” she added before she turned away. “I’ll see you for the shift tonight.”

Jaxson cleared his throat. “Solstice shifts are exclusive for alphas and betas only.”

Dannie wrinkled her nose at him. “Did I ask for your input? Did I even look in the direction of your pathetic face?”

He looked absolutely affronted that someone was talking to him like that, but before he could open his mouth and reply, Dannie got in first. “You had everything in your hands, pup,” she said softly, “and you threw it away through pride and fear. You’ve lost what you could have had, and when our girl comes into her own, she’s going to rip your face off. I, for one, can’t wait to see that.”

Jaxson spluttered, but Dannie was already sashaying her ass out of sight, uncaring that a furious shifter was half-wolfed-out behind

her.

I was lucky to have a friend who thought I was something worth losing, when everyone else in my life—except Simone—had just thrown me away.

Jaxson's black-as-fuck eyes were locked on me, his jaw hard and unyielding as the energy and scent of his wolf filled the underground cells. "Don't lose it," I said bluntly. "I don't give a fuck what your personal beef with Dan is. Control your shit."

He attempted to murder me with his expression, but I just closed my eyes and laid my head back down, determined to get as much rest and healing in before the full moon shift. Some wolves died during their first turn, bodies too weak for the soul they housed.

No fucking way would I give these assholes the satisfaction of seeing me succumb to the wolf in that way. Nope. They were going to see me stronger than ever, and one day, hopefully sooner rather than later, they would no longer be a threat to me.

By the time night rolled around, the pain was long gone, energy sparking beneath my skin like I'd stuck my hand in a power outlet. I'd always felt the foreign beat of another in my soul—usual for a shifter—but tonight, it was different. She was stretching her legs and pushing against the invisible holds that had been forced upon us for years.

Twenty of us stood naked, the bright light of the moon bathing across our skin. I was at the back, trying desperately not to think about how vulnerable I was in front of a ton of wolves who hated me. Thankfully, Dannie was there with me, not naked since she wasn't shifting, but it was good to have a friend at my back.

And thankfully, my worst tormentors—Jaxson and Torin—were with their fathers. Maybe I'd get through this without having to associate with either of them.

"New shifters," the alpha shouted. "It's finally time to allow your beasts to run free and experience the power that comes with being a full-blooded member of our pack."

Dean stepped up, and even though he was only the beta, his presence was as commanding as the alpha's. He was tall and broad like his son, with hair as inky black, and eyes that were a piercing blue. He looked far too young to have a son in his early twenties, but that was the perk of wolf genetics.

"The moon is almost at its peak," he said in his low accented voice. Despite growing up here, he always rolled his *rs*, European

style. “Very soon, you will lose conscious thought and allow your wolf to finally be free. You do not need to fear this change, for we will be with you the entire way, keeping you and the rest of our pack safe.”

Wow, how reassuring. For everyone but me. I’d never expected to end up back here for my first shift, but I’d have to make the best of it now. My wolf was ready to run and nothing I did would stop her.

The air was freezing, but I was far from cold. My blood was an inferno as I tilted my head, letting my hair fall in loose waves down my back. As the energy grew in my gut, an almost unbearable swirl of power, it felt like my hair was swirling around my body too.

When the moon burst with the brightest light of the night, my eyes closed involuntarily against the glow, and my wolf spirit rose to be truly visible to me for the first time. A deep burning red covered her, like an aura, and as she pushed toward the surface, the barrier holding her fell away.

Be free. Run.

Her warmth brushed across my face, like a caress, but that was the end of any soft touches as the change took me over. Dropping to my hands and knees, pain burst across every nerve ending as my back arched, body elongating.

“I’ll help you through this...”

I’d missed most of the alpha’s speech, too focused on my wolf, but when those words registered, I almost laughed out loud—the only thing stopping me was that if I opened my mouth, I’d probably scream from the agony. I knew, for sure, that bastard would die before he’d lessen my pain in any way.

The crack of bones echoed across the clearing. I wasn’t the only one in the midst of debilitating pain, and as my fingers broke, sending me down to my forearms, I started to pray that no one attacked me while I had no chance of defending myself.

Shadow Beast. Help me survive this.

It always struck me as amusing that we worshiped an entity who was depicted as a dark, scary figure living in the shadows, more animal than human. Not to mention, he literally had the word *beast* in his name.

It was only a nickname, though—no one knew his original title. It was either a long-held secret or information lost to time, until

eventually he was known only as Shadow Beast.

The one who stalks you in the night.

“Release your wolf!” Dean shouted, and this time there were screams as the strongest part of the change rendered us in a state somewhere between human and animal. At some point, the human part of my mind faded to the wolf, and when that happened, the pain was muted.

Free. Finally free. Run, run, run, run. Run in the moonlight. Chase the rabbit and scent the prey all around us. Pack. Family. Bonded. Alpha...

I'd lost myself, as all newly shifted wolves did.

She was instinct, ground beneath her feet, moonlight on her back, freedom in her heart.

As she dashed through the forest, the fuzzy place my human consciousness had been in lifted, and awareness filtered back through me. I found myself completely aware, riding along in the agile body of a wolf, and for a second, I freaked the fuck out.

What was happening?

What had jolted my brain back into normal mode so quickly?

Run together?

Damn, this was the trippiest thing I'd ever experienced, but it was also the most incredible. The wolf was still in control, even as more awareness returned to me, and when she dipped our head to scent the ground, one red and three white paws came into view. The rest of me appeared to be various shades of red, just like my hair, and I could have laughed at the irony of that. No Torma shifters had red hair, so there were no red wolves. Now I got to be a beacon in the moonlight, too... Callahans and their bright-headed ancestry.

Run! My wolf pressed again, and this time, I shoved worry aside and enjoyed her enthusiasm.

Yes! A short run and then we escape.

An opportunity had been handed to me. The fact that I was aware for this run when no one would expect that meant that I could try to slip away. Escape the pack again, and this time, I would never stop running.

We both agreed with the plan and took off. Whatever unease I'd felt at being present faded under our joy of running as a wolf. The

wolf's vision was a mix of black, white, and grey, with a tinge of green. And despite the darkness in the forest, once the moon's glow left our fur, we could still see as clearly as during daylight. And the scents... everything was amplified tenfold to what I usually smelled. Now it seemed I could differentiate between the various pine trees, the ghost pine being strongest in this form. The largest trees were deep and earthy with hints of citrus. The redwoods were dustier in their scent, with...

Rabbit?

My wolf lost interest in the forest the moment the small creature's scent hit us. She turned rapidly, leaving the pack, chasing food. She was desperate for her first meal, and apparently, rabbit was on the menu. I expected to feel a little grossed out by her desire to eat a creature alive and bouncing around, but the revulsion never came. Instead, I felt her hunting instinct as strongly as if it was my own.

Our senses locked completely on the creature as we stalked its path, and just when we were about to reach our goal, the scent of another who'd clearly been following us downwind hit me. On instinct, we dropped and rolled as a huge wolf landed on us.

We hadn't quite gotten the hang of our new body and skills yet, so we were completely at the mercy of the much larger shifter. At first, I thought it was an attack, but then as they playfully rolled me, I caught on to what was actually happening: pack bonding. Only problem was I knew who this wolf was, and while he might expect I'd never remember this moment he was trying to instigate, I would most definitely.

Jaxson didn't get to have me like this, but running away would clue him in on my current awareness, so I had no choice but to play along. Thankfully, my wolf took over our thoughts again and I settled back to mourn the life I could have had if my father hadn't fucked it all up. My father, who wasn't even here to see my first shift. We'd talked about it so much. All those plans and dreams just shredded in claws and failed dreams.

Not that the last ten years were his fault alone. The pack could have taken a different approach, a more logical one that didn't punish innocent shifters for the actions of one individual. Jaxson, especially, I'd expected better from.

This moment hurt.

And the memories of tonight would haunt me for years, but I couldn't make myself leave.

Jaxson's wolf and mine played for hours, frolicking like they were old friends. Technically, they were, but they were now enemies, and that was what we needed to remember above all else.

Pack. My wolf whined at me.

No, I reminded her. *Pack does not attack pack. They hate us.*

Finally free of her confines, she had temporarily forgotten the last ten years, caught up in the heady sensation of running free and being with her pack. To her, the wolves had never been an issue; it was the human sides that caused all the drama.

I let her have this moment, and in all honesty, both of us enjoyed it.

When the moon finally lost its luster, the early light of day creeping across the pack lands, we felt the call of the alpha, yanking on the bonds that tied us to this pack, and to that sociopath.

Fuck! We'd forgotten about escaping and now it was too late to try. Now they would be keeping an eye on me, so I would have to bide my time.

Next shift for sure.

My wolf was fatigued as we jogged with the others back toward the pack house, and it was only when the alpha came into sight that I remembered one more chilling fact: he'd said he was going to bond me to him in a way that would ensure I could never escape.

And I'd spent my only chance at escaping running with a bastard who had turned his back on me at the first sign of drama. *Why was I so fucking stupid?*

My wolf didn't understand the issue. She figured we were strong enough to get away at any point, but fuck... They'd tracked me down once already, and that had been before the bonds were as secure as they are now. If the alpha tied us even closer together...

We'd be prisoners forever.

I turned my head, but Jaxson was right up my ass; there was absolutely no way for me to escape. My heart pounded hard, more of the wolf fading as we approached the alpha. He was back in human form, naked, waiting for us. More wolves were here now—a lot of the

pack had joined the run tonight. I couldn't see Dannie, but I hoped she was out there somewhere. I needed an ally.

As my wolf joined the others, a dark grey wolf sprinted to the alpha's side and started to shift. My wolf surged forward toward him as my insides burst to life, sparks firing along all my senses. The intensity almost sent me to the ground.

There was no way to stop my beast as she sprinted for the grey wolf.

The alpha's son.

Our true mate.

Torin hadn't quite shifted to his human form yet, and just as the magic was about to wash over him, he must have scented us. True mates only had to be shifted and near the other for their wolves to recognize the mate bond.

I had lost complete control of my beast now as we ran faster than the wind, our souls desperately searching for the one who would make us complete. The one who would right the wrongs this pack had bestowed upon us.

If I'd have been in my right mind, I'd have been disgusted at this sentiment. I was not the type to wait around for a white fucking knight. No way. But wolves did not think like humans, and mate bonds were sacred and revered... cherished.

It was the human side that screwed with the magic.

Victor seemed taken aback as we dashed toward him, and I saw his stance adjust as he prepared to be attacked. He thought we were just like our father, but he couldn't be more wrong.

When I sidestepped him and headed for his still wolfed-out son, the expression on the alpha's face was almost comical. Torin, meanwhile, had his hackles up, and that was my first indication this was not going to go well.

Not a huge surprise to me, even if my wolf held more faith.

My emotions were mixed, strongly leaning toward disbelief, disgust, and annoyance, but there was also the tiniest bit of hope.

Hope that this might be the moment everything changed for me in this pack.

Torin would be the future alpha. He would control all the wolves, and if I was his true mate, they would have to learn to tolerate me. My father's sins might finally not be mine to shoulder.

He straightened as I closed in, his wolf almost double the size of mine, and a grey so dark, it was near black. There were a few speckles of white on his right eye and two white socks on his back paws, but otherwise, he was a midnight beast.

A magnificent midnight beast who was showing no signs of ill effect from the blade I'd plunged into his chest.

Torin took a step toward me, but before we touched, another wolf jumped between us, snarling and howling. I didn't know this one, but from the thick, mahogany pelt, it wasn't too hard to guess. The fur color teamed with an aggressive possessiveness of Torin made it clear who faced me: Sisily.

And she was pissed.

Her wolf slammed into mine, and unlike Jaxson, this roll had nothing to do with play. It was pure violence, claws and teeth tearing into me with a ferocity that spoke of more than putting me in my place. This was purely designed to hurt... maybe even kill.

I had zero experience fighting in wolf form, but instinct kicked in, and we fought back. My jaws clamped down into her flesh and, since she wasn't as accustomed to pain as I was, she let out a series of yelping howls. Blood filled my mouth, and I could taste her power as it drained from her body and into mine. It was the oddest sensation, but I was so caught up in the battle that I didn't care.

"Enough!"

The alpha command froze us both in place, and I was wrenched away from her and dragged to sprawl in front of Victor. Getting back to my feet, I growled at the alpha before turning my attention to the human at his side: Torin.

"What do you want me to do, son?" Victor asked, staring me down, his alpha power locking me in place.

Torin's jaw tensed, his lips twitching, and I couldn't figure out what was happening. He was my mate. My true mate. The other half of my soul.

What was he actually considering right now?

“Banish her from the pack,” Torin said, sounding unsure, but he didn’t retract that statement. “I never want to see her face again.”

Pain like nothing I’d ever experienced before—and that was really saying something—crashed into me like a ton of bricks had been dropped on my body. Onto my heart. Destroying me in a way that fists and torment never had. My wolf, so newly released, dropped her head back and howled to the sky. Our soul was shattering into crystal shards of agony, the howl continuing on long past our ability to breathe.

“Banishing her won’t break the bond,” Victor warned his son, looking smug and satisfied with what was about to happen.

“I’ll expunge her from my soul if it’s the last fucking thing I do,” Torin spat, crouching down so that he was eye to eye with us.

For an extended moment, our eyes remained locked, his swimming with an unknown emotion, mine no doubt filled with pain. Although, anger was starting to make its way through the pain, and I clutched on to it like a life raft. The anger would get us through.

“You’re a disgrace to shifters everywhere,” he said slowly, like I might have trouble understanding. “You probably won’t remember this in the morning, but you’ll feel the tear of our bond as I start the rejection process.”

Standing in one rapid movement, he reached out and yanked a very naked Sisily into his arms. She had cuts and bruises littered across her human skin, but not nearly enough for my liking. “Sisily is to be the next alpha with me,” he said, really digging the knife in, “and if you set foot on this land again, we’ll take great pleasure in killing you.”

I hadn’t thought I could hurt more than when he’d told his father to banish me, but then he kissed her, hands roaming across her body, tongue stroking against a bitch who was not his mate. This time when my soul screamed, our howl was louder than I’d ever heard, and it wasn’t until Victor tried to kick me out of the way that I noticed it was hurting the other shifters in my vicinity. Pack members were hitting the ground, covering their ears against my lonely lament.

“Kill her!” Victor shouted. “Kill the demon bitch!”

Demon bitch? I’d fucking show him a demon bitch.

“No!” Torin burst out, but he was too late.

Dean Heathcliffe, family friend turned enemy, had my neck in his hands, and as he twisted sharply, I reached deep for the strength to get out of this. No fucking way would they take me down. Never again would I bend to the will of the Torma pack.

I knew I had untapped strength; I just had to find it.

My wolf showed me the way, her debilitating howl just the tip of the iceberg. Giving her all the freedom, her power shot out like a bullet into the universe, and we were aptly reminded that we were not born of a human spirit.

We were born of the Shadow Beast, and it was to him that she called.

Another howl burst free just as Dean attempted to snap our neck. But his hands slipped off.

He tried again and again, but each time, he was thwarted by the power within my beast.

The world turned from black, white, grey, and green into something that was shades of the deepest plum. This new vision stretched across the well-lit landscape, and a second sight descended over my normal view.

Suddenly, I could see objects that hadn't been there before, as if a shadowy veil had descended over the real world. Dean's hands slipped off me one last time and he fell to the ground, unable to touch me a moment longer.

Shaking our fur, we got to our feet, and as I leaned forward, my nose brushed across one of the new dark figures in my veiled vision. A shadowed being that was about six feet tall.

It reacted.

The shadow fucking reacted.

It spun before running away in a skittish manner.

My wolf was as shocked as me, both of us trying to work out what the freaking hell we'd done. She surged forward again, attempting to touch another shadow—this time, it looked like a tree, which was definitely not part of the pack lands. The fields just around the pack house were normally clear, so this was from the *other* place.

Tugging hard on the shadow tree, a small explosion of power sent a shockwave through me, and I was jerked away from the misty

branch. When I hit the ground, my wolf whimpered, completely exhausted. As the change back to human kicked in, I braced myself.

I expected it would take me a long time and hurt like fuck to turn, but it was over in a few seconds, and I stood to find that every other member of the Torma pack remained on the ground.

Completely out cold.

Well, fuck. What in the actual shifter hell had I done?

If it wasn't for my newly enhanced senses, I'd have thought they were all dead. It was so still, an eerie silence my only companion as I crept forward. The pack lands were almost never without some sort of revelry, whether in human or wolf form, but outside of the slow rise and fall of chests, there were no other signs of life.

My bare feet padded through the soft grass as I stepped over the wolves around me, careful not to disturb them. All I could think was a second perfect opportunity to escape had been handed to me, and I would not waste it this time.

I had to break this bond to the Torma pack.

To Torin. That fucking bastard.

Now that I was back in human form, I wished there was time to stab him again, followed by a swift decapitation. No coming back from that, even for a shifter. But for now, I'd just have to be satisfied with leaving my joke of a true mate—and never looking back.

By this time, the early morning light had really found its feet, and there was a bite to the sun that suggested today would be one of those "hot" winter days. Generally, those days were followed by a massive freeze, and we'd all wake up to patches of ice and snow.

Not that I'd be here to see it. My very naked ass was on its way out.

My wolf whined gently in my chest, a sad, mournful sound. She'd had such high hopes for the one who would share her soul, and

maybe if Torin's wolf had been in control, it would have been different. Wolves were honorable in ways humans were not.

My wolf whined again, but she didn't try to enact her will over me. She accepted our fate. Too much hurt existed between Torin and me for it to ever be repaired, and I would die before allowing him to claim us.

He doesn't want us.

I wasn't sure who thought that, but it was the fucking truth, and I had to look down and make sure I didn't have a blade in my chest this time.

Run!

The wolf snapped me out of my musing, and even though I'd been quietly creeping across the field as fast as I could without making noise, I'd missed one huge obstacle in my way: Torin.

He stepped out of the shadows... my mate.

Rejected mate, to be more accurate.

Torin must not have been as affected as everyone else by whatever I did, and he'd come straight for me the second he could. Speaking of, the others looked like they were twitching now too. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Torin bit out, his voice low and rumbly.

A growl spilled from my lips, more animalistic than I'd been able to manage before tonight. "I'm leaving," I snarled. "To never return. You should be grateful."

It was Torin's turn to growl, and unfortunately, his was much more impressive. He stalked a few steps closer, the muscles of his arms and chest tense. Since he was naked, it was easy for me to see his dick start to harden, like he was reacting to me, despite the rejection of our bond.

Spinning, I took off in the opposite direction and got a decent distance away before he tackled me. We wrestled, and not in the fun, naked way. Nope, this was about survival for me, and once again, I was thwarted by the superior physical strength of a male shifter.

If I survived all of this, I needed to develop some fighting skills that would even up the odds in a battle.

Torin hauled me up, his hands wrapped around my biceps as he held me in place. “You do nothing without my permission,” he rumbled. “I. Own. You.”

I kned him in the balls, and whatever inflation had been in his dick would be long gone by the time he retrieved his testicles from his throat. Shifters were tough, but I had spared no power in that hit, and it was enough to knock him back, his hand cupping himself.

“You are dead to me,” I said quietly, not willing to expend any further emotion on him. “Don’t show your face before me again, or the next time I stab an object through your heart, it will be something that kills you.”

He lunged for me again, but I was already moving, sprinting across the field.

“Stop her!” Victor shouted, a rumble in his tone as he came fully awake.

I didn’t look back, pushing through my exhaustion. Footfalls sounded behind me, closer than I would have liked, and I picked up my pace, almost completely tapped out in energy.

“Sunny,” Jaxson hissed.

Fucker.

Somehow, I found a small reserve of strength, sprinting even faster. Jaxson let out a muttered expletive, the air making the slightest *whoosh* sound as he dove forward to tackle me. I’d been expecting it, though—Jaxson and Torin were so similar in their approach—and as I judged the direction of his attack, I sidestepped him.

My footing was sure and strong, despite fatigue, and I didn’t lose any time in my deflective move. If being a shifter didn’t come with all this pack bullshit, I’d think it was the absolute best thing that had ever happened to me.

“Mera!” This bellow was from Torin, and I was legitimately getting whiplash from him. Why would someone who’d rejected their mate be so adamant that I wasn’t allowed to go anywhere?

There was no time to ponder that because the alpha must have decided that enough was enough, and as he jerked on the ties I had to his pack, my feet finally missed a step and I tumbled forward.

Motherfucker. I'd forgotten about the alpha control, and even though it was weak on me, it was enough to throw me off-balance.

As I pushed myself up, a heavy fist slammed into my temple, and everything went fuzzy and grey around the edges. Shifters packed a mean punch, and while I had no idea who'd hit me, the blow definitely knocked the reality out of me.



IT TOOK at least thirty minutes to heal a head injury, and by the time I was back in fighting form, I'd been taken into the pack house and chained to a bedpost. It was a reinforced metal post that looked unbreakable, even for shifters. My cuffs clanked against it as I jerked into awareness.

"Why the fuck is she in your room?" Sisily snarled, jabbing Torin in the chest. The pair of them were across the room as I frantically looked around. "You rejected her, and I want her dead. Right now."

Torin's room. He'd brought me to his room?

It was dimly lit, only a small sliver of light seeping through a partially open blind, but with my new shifter vision, I had no issue seeing Torin and Sisily—both clothed now, thankfully—having their little fight.

"She's my prisoner," Torin said in a controlled voice. "My father has advised me to think on what I want to do with her."

"What is there to think about?" Sisily shouted even louder. "You said you love me. You want to make me your mate. Just kill her ugly ass and get it over with."

Her focus was on Torin, but he was watching me, his eyes averted over her shoulder to meet mine. The self-centered bitch probably hadn't even noticed that her "love" was barely paying attention to a word she said.

Narrowing my eyes, I tried to kill Torin with mere thought alone, and a small smirk tilted up his lips. I ignored the way that smile still affected me, forcing the memories of his rejection to the forefront of my mind. That was the only thing I needed to remember.

Sisily was still shouting abuse, each sentence less coherent and more tearful, but she was cut off completely when Torin wrapped his arms around her, jerking the shifter-bitch up against his body. His mouth was on hers in the same instant, and this felt a lot like punishment for my lack of reaction to him before.

I couldn't look away from the absolute train wreck they were. A glutton for punishment and pain, dark agony filled me as I stared.

Sisily moaned loudly, and since Torin wasn't doing anything except kissing her, I had to wonder if this was all a show for me. Even on her side.

Torin's hands moved lower to her ass, hauling her up as she wrapped her legs around him. Pain exploded in my chest. He had her cradled against him in the sort of embrace that only a true mate should know. Show or not, this fucking hurt.

I didn't know all the steps that went into a proper fissuring of the mate bond, but I knew that a public display of rejection like this was one of the early steps. I refused to part my lips and let the howl rising in my chest free, choosing instead to bite down hard on my tongue, using the sharp jab and blood to distract myself.

Torin was trying to break me. In the worst way he could think of, with a woman I fucking detested. But I was an expert at hiding my grief, thanks to their many years of tempering me in the fire.

I could do this.

Sisily was half-naked at this point, panting and moaning all over him like a bitch in heat, and despite the fact that I could barely breathe through the splintering of my soul, I wasn't going to sit here like the victim.

No, thank you.

"Come on, Sis," I bit out, grateful my voice sounded calm with just a hint of bitterness. "That porn you've been watching is so outdated. No one says, 'Please, please take me, baby' anymore. You've got to work on your dirty talk."

Torin's growl was loud and echoing, so I turned my fake-bored expression on him. "I have to say, after the years of rumors, I expected a little... more." My eyes dropped to the front of his pants, and despite the thin material of the basketball shorts he'd thrown on, there wasn't a remote sign of arousal there. If I hadn't already seen

his somewhat impressive package, I might have thought he'd been an asshole all of these years to overcompensate for his tiny dick. But nope, he was just thoroughly unexcited to have Sisily grinding against him. Poor, dumb, desperate bitch.

"You should hold out for a man who doesn't think of you like a sister," I helpfully suggested.

Sisily screamed and lunged toward me, but Torin stopped her before she got close.

"She's jealous." He laughed, sounding smug as fuck. "And now she gets to watch me bend your perfect ass over my bed and slam my way-above-average cock in your tight little pussy."

I snorted. "Tight... uh, sure. I mean, Don and Shortie double-teamed her"—I winced—"in the same hole. But, you know, I'm sure those rumors about her peeing a little when she laughs are greatly exaggerated." I shot her a fake expression of sympathy. "Kegel exercises are gold, babe. You really should look into that."

Sisily's cheeks were red, her eyes flaming as she tried to control her fury with some deep breathing. Falling back on my smartass mouth was helping me compartmentalize the pain—it was only hurting my soul at that point, but fuck, who needed a whole one of those anyway?

A little darkness never killed anyone.

Torin had those damn eyes of his on me again, searching across my face, staring in a way he never had before. Like he was seeing me for the first time. I didn't like it. It made my wolf squirm and a part of me pant like I was the bitch in heat now. No. Thank. You.

When my apathetic expression didn't change, his eyes narrowed, and never taking his gaze from me, he spun Sisily around and yanked up her skirt. When his dick emerged a moment later, it was finally hard. Guess he figured out how to make it work again.

"You asked for this," he murmured, and I wondered what Sisily would think if she knew he was fucking her without removing his eyes from mine.

I forced a smirk to tip up my lips. "I'll give you some pointers. It looks like you need the help."

He slammed into her, and she groaned, her eyes fluttering closed.

I was desperate to do the same; close my eyes and block my ears, but I refused to look away. All I had left at this point was my pride, and for sure, hell would freeze over before I gave him the satisfaction of seeing me rattled.

Forcing myself to relax, I breathed in and out, pretending for a moment I'd just skipped to a particularly boring porn video. In and out, slam that dick, stare at my face like he was memorizing it.

I held up two fingers. "My score is two out of ten," I said without inflection. "And that's only for Sisily's moaning; she's almost believable."

Torin gritted his teeth, fucking her harder, and for the first time since he'd entered her, the bitch opened her eyes. Now both of them were staring into my ragged, tattered soul.

"Good thing you got that chlamydia problem sorted," I said sweetly. "I've heard long term, it can—"

I didn't get to finish my sentence because Torin had apparently had enough, tossing Sisily across the room so she all but landed at my feet. "Both of you, get the fuck out of my sight!" he roared.

He was the one who left, though, storming from the room, balls flapping in the breeze. Sisily got to her hands and knees, breath still panting from her mouth, and when she lifted her head to growl at me, I figured this was going to end very badly.

I'd been left alone with an unsatisfied wolf shifter. One who hated me. One who was in love with someone who wasn't her true mate.

Oh, joy.

Sisily, true to nature, lunged forward, but while my hands were linked to the post, my feet were free as a daisy to kick her right in the gut. She'd been hellbent on revenge, her attack sloppy at best, giving me the perfect opening to hit her hard.

For the second time, she flew across Torin's room, and when she got to her feet, she stood there shuddering like she'd almost lost control of her wolf and was about to shift.

New shifters couldn't change on command yet; that would come with practice and control. But we could lose ourselves to the wolf if pushed far enough.

"I'm going to make sure he kills you." She coughed, her smile brittle and broken, just like her words. "You're nothing. He's hated you for as many years as he's loved me." She had to swallow hard before continuing. "Make your peace with today. It's the last you'll have here."

An expert at fake smiling, I managed to lift my hand high enough to flip her off. "If I have to choose between seeing your face again and death, well... I mean, that's not even a choice." I tilted my head back and shouted as loudly as I could. "Shadow Beast, get your ass over here and take my soul to the underworld."

As our creator, we assumed he existed in the land where shifters go after death, and since Sisily was determined to send me to my maker today, I'd give her an extra hand.

She looked spooked for the first time. “*What the fuck are you doing?* You know better than to call him here.” She backed away, muttering something about *a crazy-ass shifter* and then she sprinted from the room.

Wow. If I’d known that was all it took to scare her away, I’d have tried to summon him long ago.

Just as I had that thought, a trickle of icy energy traced down my spine. Subtle at first, it was only enough to bring the fine hairs on my body to a stand. My wolf stirred, the first real energy she’d shown since our shift. We’d both been mourning and depressed, on the inside, at least.

What is it? I mentally asked, but she couldn’t really answer me. In this form, she was just instinct and I was the brains. A hush grew across the room, and with it came a sense of panic. Pressing down on me, urging me to run. It wasn’t a natural instinct. This was being exacted over me, like an alpha’s will. But it was so much stronger.

Yanking hard at my restraints, I fought harder than ever to get free, but the reinforced steel was unbreakable. Before my eyes, the light slithered from the room. There was no other way I could describe the event, but I would swear that was what happened.

The existing slivers of light were slowly replaced with darkness, like a candle being snuffed out. *What in the...?* It was freaking midday, at the latest—far too early for nightfall.

And when had night ever fallen in mere seconds like that?

I stilled, and whatever noises had been in the pack house died off too. The only sound I could hear now was a dripping tap in a downstairs bathroom. *Drip, drip, drip.* A steady thud that was all that stood between me and total silence. The darkness was complete now, and even with shifter vision, I was having trouble seeing anything inside Torin’s room.

Was there a solar eclipse I hadn’t heard about?

Such an event was usually big news in the packs because it affected our shifter cycles. It was a stretch to think one just arrived without notice.

My breath puffed out as the air grew chilly.

Not good. My instincts were still screaming at me, even if that unnatural fear had thankfully faded to a manageable level.

Where the hell was everyone?

I jerked on my wrists again and again, until they were raw and bleeding. Healing kicked in pretty fast, and eventually, I stopped wasting my energy, focusing instead on my wolf. Calling her did nothing—either she was too exhausted or there was something extra in these cuffs weakening her. Which left us in a shit ton of trouble. Whatever was going on, I did not like facing it chained and vulnerable.

The door swung open, and as the familiar forest scent hit me, I was actually relieved. “*Mera*,” he hissed.

“What are you doing here, asshole?” I snapped, too rattled for my usual sarcastic apathy.

Jaxson didn’t answer, instead choosing to grope me in a search for my hands. I didn’t argue or fight him because I wanted out of here more than anything. A second later, there was a snap of my cuffs and I was free.

Rubbing at my wrists, I got to my feet, my brain already in survival mode.

Earlier, when it had been light in here, I’d noticed some of Torin’s clothes on the floor, so I felt around until I found them, dressing immediately. Wearing his possibly used clothes was gross as fuck, but being naked in this sort of situation was way worse. It might only be a shirt and pair of sleep shorts, but at least I was covered.

“What is happening in the pack house?” I whispered once I was dressed.

Jaxson moved closer; his scent stronger without other stimuli to distract me.

“I have no idea,” he said in a rush. “It hit when I was driving back from town. I could literally see the lights disappear, an all-encompassing darkness taking its place. Even my car lights went out.”

Saying this was bad was a vast understatement. “How did you know I was here?”

He stopped moving. “Your scent. I could find you anywhere, Sunny.”

Jesus. Fuck.

Those were not words used lightly by shifters. Scent meant a lot to us and committing someone's to memory was more than just normal pack behavior. It was mate behavior.

Memories of his wolf frolicking with mine hit me, the joy we'd both felt at the time, but those moments would never be strong enough to drown out the rest. Never.

"Could this have something to do with what you did earlier?" he asked seriously. "When you froze everyone with your howl? When you found out Torin was your... true mate?"

He almost choked over those last words, and it was clear he didn't like this twist in fate. *Me either, dude.* Me. Either.

"What did you do on the field?" he pushed for more information.

Right. That thing. Not to mention the *other thing* he had no idea about, where I could apparently see shadows and touch them.

"I honestly have no idea," I finally said. "I've been locked in this room since then, so whatever happened probably doesn't have to do with me." *Right?*

"We should investigate."

He grabbed my hand, and I yanked my fingers free.

His wolf growled, low and menacing, not liking my reaction. "What the fuck, Mera?" Jaxson hissed.

Reaching out, I wrapped his shirt in my hand, jerking him closer to me. "What the fuck? Seriously? You're *what the fucking* me? What's your game, Jaxson? You've treated me like shit for the last ten years, but now, out of nowhere, you're acting like we're friends. Call me cynical, but something stinks in the Heathcliffe household." I lowered my voice. "Hint: it's you."

Jaxson shook his head. I couldn't see it, but I heard the movement and was close enough to feel the air shift around us. "You left." His voice was brittle. "I thought I'd be happy about that, finally having you away from me and out of my head. I hoped for it for years, to stop the torment."

Ouch. "I left—"

"You left me," he said, interrupting, "and my wolf lost his fucking mind. We've barely shifted since you disappeared, and it was only when you returned that he's relaxed enough to let me in. Apparently, you're pack." He took another pause. "To both of us."

I swallowed down the angry, pissed-off, mean-as-fuck comment I wanted to make, and instead pushed back on where my hand was still tangled in his shirt. "It's too late, Jax," I said stiffly. "We can't come back from this."

Sad silence met my statement, and I wondered if we were both thinking the same thing: there was too much water under the bridge, and if we stumbled into past feelings, we might drown.

The atmosphere was tense between us as we crept out of Torin's bedroom, but there was way more to worry about than our mess of a relationship. The pack lands were under attack. We didn't know how or why, but it was clear that something was very wrong.

"Where did everyone go?" Jaxson muttered, guiding me out into the hall. We still couldn't see anything, and there was no sound of life in the corridor.

"Why were you out of pack lands anyway?" I asked, staying near him.

"I left to run an errand in town," he murmured. "And as I said, when I drove up, everything went dark."

Great. So neither of us knew a fucking thing except the world had gone dark when it wasn't supposed to. "I think this might indeed be my fault," I admitted.

I'd been trying my best to ignore the deep, panicked part of me that knew I'd done this by calling the Shadow Beast. Could it really be a coincidence that the light had fled minutes after I'd said his name?

But, seriously, what the fuck? I'd heard other people curse and call out to him. It was like a figure of speech, right? Not a literal invitation to pop his ass Earthside and shake shit up.

"It's not your fault, Meers," Jaxson replied, almost instinctively defending me. I didn't bother to argue since we were now outside,

the fresh icy air slapping us in the face, and we could finally see a little in front of us.

Out here was a source of light I couldn't identify, but it was enough for our shifter vision to kick in. "This is not like nightfall," I breathed. "It's like a shadow has blocked out the sun completely."

A shadow.

Mother fucking fucker.

"I can scent pack over here," Jaxson said, and for once, those words were a relief.

He led me around the side of the house, toward the front entrance with its circular driveway. Jaxson's fancy blue sports car was awkwardly parked there, driver's side door still open like he'd exited in a rush. And right behind it was...

"The fuck..." Jaxson muttered, seeing them at the same time as me. "They weren't here when I arrived." His hands trembled as his voice wolfed out.

Hundreds of pack members were out in front of the pack house, statue still, staring up at the sky. At a tiny point of midnight shimmer to be more accurate. Shimmer that was the source of light.

Jaxson angled his body in front of mine. "It's magic."

We might have been shifters, but that wasn't really magic. We shared our souls with beasts, and they lent us their energy and senses, giving us extra abilities. Magic, like waving wands and casting spells, was the stuff of legend.

No supernatural creatures we knew about could do this.

"Stay behind me," Jaxson said, creeping closer to the pack.

No way did he get to order me around, so I moved forward at my own pace, by his side. When we reached the front of the group, where Torin and Victor stood, I could really see the spot of darkly shimmering mist. A mist that every single shifter stared at.

It was about eight feet tall, flickering gently in the night air; a portal of midnight glitter that shouldn't have been visible against the black backdrop, but it was.

"Mera," Jaxson hissed, pulling me to a stop. "Don't move a muscle."

I jerked my arm free. "Muscles move whether I want them to or not. You really shouldn't have slept through biology."

He glared at me. “Not the fucking time, Sunny. Not. The. Time.”

I smiled sweetly, hoping that it wasn't so dark that he would miss the murder in my eyes. “If you call me ‘Sunny’ one more time, there will only be one functioning member of this pack remainin—”

My threat was cut off by an icy rush of air. So cold that even with a shifter metabolism, I shivered uncontrollably, my skin covered in goosebumps.

“That’s why I said not to move,” Jaxson murmured so low, I could barely hear him. “That sparkly mist is hiding something.”

The icy air ramped up, and maybe it was that I was staring directly into the shimmering darkness, but I saw the exact moment the shadows abandoned their master, revealing a being that could only be described as beyond this world.

My mouth went dry as I stared, frozen by more than the arctic winds.

He was touched by light. The only light that currently existed in the world. Raven hair tousled in curls atop his head—a hairstyle that could have made him appear angelic, but there was nothing further from the truth.

He was breathtakingly scary and perfectly sinful.

Maybe it was his intimidating height, well over a foot taller than me, or maybe it was the way his eyes were beams of red and gold, flickering between the two with an intensity that had me wanting to start running and never stop.

I didn't move, though, unable to tear my gaze from him, devouring each detail like it'd be on the most important test I'd ever take. He had a cut jaw and high cheekbones, lending him to an ethnicity that could never be defined, because it did not exist on the earthly plane. His clothing was exactly what I'd expect a human to wear: dark pants, heavy-soled boots, and a form-fitting black shirt. But the body below them was impressive to the point of impossible.

And I was almost certain his muscled arms were inked as well, tattoos peeking out from the edge of his shirt. They should have been hard to see in the night-like light, on skin that was the darkest shade of bronze in existence, but they glowed softly, adding one more impossible to this... creature.

He stepped toward me, his focus intense, while flickers of inky smoke swirled lovingly around his perfection. I couldn't tear my eyes from that face carved from gods and sin, wrapped in bronze skin and depthless eyes.

I stared into a nightmare-spattered dream. And it scared the absolute fuck out of me.

"Mera!" Jaxson shouted as all the shifters around us collapsed, like they'd been released from the magnetic hold of this being.

At the same time, the shadows withdrew, retreating from the pack lands as they tunneled back into him, until once again, the world was filled with midday light.

"What the fuck is happening?" Victor roared, having finally returned to his full senses.

His eyes darted around, trying to figure out exactly who was to blame for his sudden appearance in the front of the pack house. When his gaze landed on the smoke-laced male, he blinked more than once, his anger dying off.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

The shadow dude paid no attention to the alpha, his eyes locked on me. I had no fucking idea why he was staring me down like I was the last ice cream on a summer's day, but it was completely unnerving.

"Who are you to trespass on pack lands?" Dean asked, slightly braver—or stupider—than his alpha. "Speak now or face the highest of repercussions."

The man's lips tilted up, full, plump lips that again should have made this angel-faced god look sweet. They did not.

His smile was dark and sinister, his eyes filled with flames.

Flames so legit that for a second, I almost expected to feel heat wash across the pack lands. There was no denying any longer who stood before us...

"Shadow Beast," I whispered.

For this, I was rewarded with a smile. "At your service, pup."

Fuck me sideways with a spoon. His voice was deep and rumbly with just a hint of Scottish accent. Gasps rang out around the pack lands, and many of the shifters fell to their knees before him, bowing low.

Not Victor, though, the arrogant fuck. “What do you want?” he asked, sounding confident, but I caught the tremble of his hands. Not a surprise since standing before us was our deity. Worshipped by our kind.

The being who’d created shifters and to whom we owed a shit ton of allegiance.

Shadow Beast stepped closer to me, ignoring all the others. “You did something tonight, didn’t you, little wolf?”

I swallowed hard. “I called you?”

He shook his head. “I was already looking for you when the call came through.” He tilted his head back, tongue darting out. “Your energy tastes like the one who touched the Shadow Realm earlier.”

My throat was so dry that when I tried to speak, nothing more than a croak emerged. “No.”

Shadow Beast narrowed his eyes on me. “No?”

The heat of him was stronger now, most of the shifters shuffling back, leaving me alone.

“I didn’t touch the Shadow Realm.” I thankfully sounded more confident this time. “You have the wrong shifter.”

What did I have to lose by lying? He was probably going to kill me either way.

He stepped closer again, and I tried to run, but my feet were planted to the ground like useless tree stumps. The closer he got, the more I had to reassess his height... Fuck, he was over eight feet.

Except... As he leaned down, his height reduced until he was once again a head taller than me. Eight feet to six-and-a-half feet in an instant. *Did he just morph his height at will?*

I stilled as he leaned over, running his nose along my cheek. Not touching, but I felt his energy as if he’d caressed my entire body in that one stroke. “Smells like bullshit,” he murmured close to my ear, and before I could react, he wrapped huge-as-fuck hands around me and hauled me up and over his shoulder.

This snapped me out of my stunned immobility, and I screamed and fought against his hold. The asshole made a grumbling sound before a strike of pain rocketed across my skin, an electrical zap akin to a stun gun.

“Stay still and this won’t hurt,” he warned, whatever dark humor he’d been rocking earlier disappearing. “Fight me, and I’ll make you wish that you’d died during your first shift.”

“Choices, choices,” I shot back, falling into my usual response to big bullies. “However will I decide?”

He stopped moving, lifting me fully as if I weighed ten pounds, holding me so he could see my face clearly. “A shifter with a death wish. Never thought I’d see the day.”

I smiled. I was very good at a sweet tilt of my lips, all while my eyes were telling them to go fuck themselves. “You seem a little slow on the uptake, and I’m sure it’s been a while since you were around anything other than your hand and some demon minions, but it’s frowned upon to steal people.”

As the flames in his eyes flared to life, I was zapped again, this time dialed up to level ten as I screamed.

“Stop!” Victor bellowed. “You cannot touch my shifters like this. There are laws and you’re breaking them.”

The electrical pain died off as I huffed in and out, trying to catch my breath—would I survive if he did that again?

“You think to challenge me?” Shadow Beast asked, finally looking at the alpha. “You mortals worship me, have offered me every conceivable tribute, and yet you would deny me this one shifter?”

I tilted my head to see Victor. “Seriously?” I huffed. “Do you think it should only be Torma pack that gets to torture me?”

Shadow Beast and I were both glaring down the fucktard of an alpha now.

Victor cleared his throat. “There are rules,” he repeated. “And if this shifter is valuable, I expect to be compensated.”

Ah, yes. Now it all made sense. He wasn’t worried about my health or safety. He just saw an opportunity to make a deal with a powerful entity.

“Dad!” Torin snapped, speaking for the first time. “She’s my true mate and I get to decide her fate. No one else.”

Victor nodded, his expression one of jubilation. “Yes, right! True mate bonds exist above all other rules... Even your claim on the mongrel bitch. You can’t take her without her mate’s permission.”

The Shadow Beast's chest was rumbling. The others might not have noticed because it was subtle, but I felt the deep fury he was rocking.

Victor was about to meet his maker—literally—and I couldn't feel anything except a sense of satisfaction after the many years of living under his horrid rule.

Just thinking about that had my chest rumbling as well, and when I met the Shadow Beast's eyes, I shrugged. "You might be a scary bastard, but I fucking hate this pack."

His pain had lasted a few seconds, while this pack's had been a lifetime.

"He rejected me," I added, "so there's no tie you need to worry about. My mate did not accept the bond." Making his claim null and void.

"Mera!" Jaxson yelled, sounding panicked and furious. My name was a warning to shut up, but I'd never been good at heeding those. I did flip him off, though.

Torin let out a rumbling howl, his features shifting as he partly wolfed out. "I didn't even have time to think about the bond," he argued. "Maybe I would have changed my mind before I fully severed the bond."

I snorted, twisting my face toward the scariest fucker in the world. "I'm ready to go with you now," I said. "Anything to avoid staying here with this pack of weak-ass bitches."

More howls filled the air at my insult. Torma was so used to being the "strongest" pack that anyone thinking they were weak was the worst slur of all.

Shadow Beast cocked his head, staring at me again, almost as if I'd surprised him in more ways than one. Personally, I enjoyed surprising demon creatures—it was one of my strongest skillsets.

With a shake of his head, he dropped me back over his shoulder, striding away from the pack. I couldn't see the direction we were heading, but I had a very clear view of the inky smoke swirling around us, coating his lower half almost completely. As it reached his heavily muscled shoulder, my body also started to disappear into the darkness.

I was about to be engulfed in shadow and I couldn't even be upset about it—I was way too freaked out for that.

“Sunny,” Jaxson called, his voice hoarse. “Fight him.”

I chuckled, the smoke caressing my arms in cool strokes. “I couldn't even fight you bastards when we were kids. You think I can fight the creature of darkness?”

Shadow Beast snarled. “Darkness is not my calling card, mutt. You would do well to remember that.”

Mutt. Charming.

It kind of *was* charming in his almost-Scottish accent.

“Stop them!” Victor shouted, sending his wolves after the Shadow Beast, even as he remained behind in relative safety.

Or so he thought.

We stopped moving, the beast turning as flames licked up and across his arms, the heat so intense that I actually wondered if I was going to burn alive. Those flames obeyed the will of their creator, flinging from his fingertips and engulfing Victor completely.

“Only a weak alpha sends his pack out to do his job,” Shadow Beast murmured. “Torma is too strong for one such as you to control it any longer.”

Victor's screams as he burned to death would be heard across Torma, followed by his son's howls as he lost control and shifted into his wolf, trying to get to his father. Jaxson held his clawing, fighting best friend back, and the pair of them were the last thing I saw as the Shadow Beast stepped into darkness—or... *shadows?* And we both disappeared.

hadn't really thought my bravado through. At some point, I fell in with the Shadow Beast being the lesser of two evils.

The. Motherfucking. Shadow. Beast!

What was wrong with me?

"I can walk, you know," I said, sick of hanging over his shoulder like a bag of potatoes.

There was no reply as he continued moving through darkness... darkness that faded as we ended up in a white hall. Like, one minute it was dark and then there was light.

I blinked a few times, adjusting my sight, only to find this hall was basically empty of anything interesting. "What do you want from me?" I pushed.

"Just shut the fuck up," he growled. "You're already a problem I don't want to deal with, but a creature like you can't be left to its own devices."

Rude. "Most women don't like to be referred to as a *creature*," I told him huffily.

His chest rumbled, but he didn't respond, and I had a strong feeling that his whole silent brooding thing was going to continue for a while. But, on the plus side, he wasn't killing or torturing me. *Yet.*

"Can I call you 'Shadow'?" I asked a few minutes later. The silence was getting to me, and apparently, I was a lunatic with a death wish. "'Shadow Beast' is such a mouthful." I paused, but he

made no response. "Do you have another name you go by? Or was momma beast really into... uh, darkness."

Still no response.

"Okay great," I chirped, having gone too far to stop now. "Shadow it is!"

Chest rumble. No response.

Great. We were making some real progress.

After some time, I started to notice that this hall wasn't as devoid of life as I'd expected. Or at least not life, but doors. They were quite well hidden, with each one almost seamlessly blending into the wall. They were as white as their surroundings, dozens scattered on each side.

Weirdly, the more attention I paid to the doors, the stronger they felt, until I was completely enthralled with the heady feeling seeping from beneath them.

"What is this place?" I whispered.

This time, he answered. "It's a pathway between Earth and the other worlds."

I blinked. "Literally?"

Chest rumble. Okay, great. I was annoying him again. "I mean, you don't have to smite me and go all grumbly beast. It's a perfectly normal question for someone to ask."

"Shut up, pup," he snapped.

This time I decided to obey, all the while hoping I'd be alive long enough to learn about this secret new world I'd found myself in. He was back to his eight-foot height at this point, marching us along the endless white hallway, light below our feet and above our heads, and all the while, the smoky shadows continued to surround their master.

"Each of these doorways leads to a place of power and worth," he said, surprising me. "Some of them are on the Earthly plane; others are in realms that connect to Earth. Deities can walk these halls, and many of their homes are behind these doors."

Well, well, look who was Chatty Cathy now. Maybe I could ask him another question and actually get an answer.

"So—"

"Shut up."

Okaayyy. Moving on then.

I managed to keep my mouth shut as we continued along the hall, only blinking when a shimmery veil appeared at the end of this pathway. Shadow didn't hesitate, stepping through into what looked a little like a... church.

"Ironic," I muttered.

We jolted to a halt, and when I was set none-too-gently on my feet, I stared at his massive body walking away from me. Hot damn, he was a freaking lot. Impossibly broad shoulders, dark crop of curls, and a fucking swagger that told the world not to fuck with him or he would destroy them.

I was screwed. This *being* was hands down the scariest motherfucker I'd ever seen in my life, and I was trapped in some magical path between worlds with him.

As he continued to move away, I took a quick minute to explore the room. It wasn't as light in here as the unnaturally illuminated hallway. Instead, the vibe was open and clean, the décor a mix of pastel and wood tones.

Miles above us were arched ivory ceilings, and from where I stood, it looked as if scenes of battle were carved into bone. Scattered between these carvings were deadly-looking spikes—sentinels lying in wait for the right moment to fall from the sky and annihilate their prey.

Stepping farther into the room, I fell a little in love with the tall narrow windows crossing the left and right side of the huge space. They were almost ceiling height and absolutely spectacular, with arched peaks at the tops, falling to natural curves on the bases. They sat side by side, creating an illusion that the entire wall was one large window.

It was from here natural light flooded the cathedral, and I stepped closer to see what was outside, only to find it was nothing more than a swirl of clouds filled with twinkling lights.

Before I could explore any further, the inky smoke appeared from nowhere, twisting around my legs, and I yelped as Shadow himself followed. "Did you not say you could walk?" he asked, annoyed as always. "Don't make me carry you again."

I saluted. "Yes, sir. I didn't realize I was supposed to follow. My bad."

The sudden way he was staring me down made me very nervous.

“You don’t fear me?” he said, and his voice was soft. Normally, that would be a good sign, but this was the sort of soft a serial killer got right before he cut off your toes for a trophy.

I gulped. “On the contrary, I’m all but pissing my pants right now.”

His eyes dipped low for a second, like he was taking in the odd clothing I’d snagged off Torin’s floor. Pretty sure it was the first time he’d given my appearance more than a cursory glance, and he really didn’t seem impressed.

He probably dated goddesses or whatever other mystical beings were out there, so I would try not to take offense. “Follow,” he snapped, stalking off again.

This time, I didn’t push my luck, staying close behind him while still trying to take in everything in the room. As we pushed deeper into the space, I noticed for the first time that some of the windows stopped short to make way for a doorway nestled below. Like in the white hall, the doorway design was also seamless, and now that I was closer, it was easy to appreciate the craftsmanship that had gone into this room.

“Is this still a part of the path between worlds?” I asked.

He didn’t bother to look at me. “In a manner.” Okay, then. Cryptic *and* an asshole. I was starting to see where the alphas got their arrogance from... inherited from their maker.

We wandered for a long time through the church, its size another aspect unnoticed until we’d been walking for ten minutes and were only a third of the way through. Above us, the hand-carved ceiling grew more and more elaborate, and by the time we reached another large portal, I was crushing hard on this building.

Shadow, with his smoky friend, stepped through this new portal, disappearing into whatever lay beyond. He was cut off from me then, his energy gone like it had never existed. There was no way for me to even tell what lay beyond this veil, with its navy swirling vortex completely opaque.

I hesitated to follow, wondering if I should take my chances escaping now. Even if I ended up in another world, at least I’d have given it a shot. A shot was all anyone really needed.

I called on my wolf to help make this decision, and as she swirled to the surface, I was relieved to feel her energy strong once again. *Run?* I asked her.

She shimmered inside, soul restless and unsure about us leaving. The Shadow Beast was our god and upsetting him didn't sit well with her.

He killed someone as powerful as Alpha Victor and kidnapped us, I reminded her. *He's beyond dangerous.*

I felt her trust in my decision, and I knew I'd have her support no matter what. This gave me the courage I needed to move. Sprinting, I headed for the closest door, having already wasted too many seconds pondering if I should do this or not. When my palm landed on the brass handle of the white door embossed with flowers and thorns, I felt a buzz of static electricity and almost jerked my hand back.

If I hadn't been so desperate, I wouldn't have risked whatever lay beyond this, but I couldn't continue to live as a prisoner and victim. As I turned the handle, there was a click, and an ethereal melody slipped through the tiny crack. A sigh escaped from me, the smallest of breaths, and all fear fled.

Yes. This was the right move. I needed to be in this land of beauty and light and love and warmth. My eyes fluttered closed as I pulled on the door, ready to embrace my destiny.

Before I could take that final step, something hard slammed into me, knocking me sideways. The music was cut off a second later, and as the fuzziness in my head faded, pain returned along with my sanity.

Shadow Beast loomed over me, staring down, his eyes narrowed. "You really are the stupidest fucking shifter I've ever met. Almost got yourself trapped in the fae realm." His lips twitched in dark amusement. "What they do to Earthlings who stumble into their world makes me look like a fucking saint."

With one last derisive stare at my pathetic ass, he turned and walked away, and I huffed some air into my lungs, trying to calm myself. I had no idea what "fae" meant, but if it was short for "faerie," like in the fantasy stories, then... *WHAT THE FUCK, MAN?*

That music had not been of this world, so I could only assume Shadow was speaking the truth about the fae realm. *And* apparently, he'd already crossed back through the veil, trusting that this time I wouldn't take my chances on another world I didn't understand.

Dude *vastly* overestimated my intelligence and sense of self-preservation.

Or so I thought until the smoky swirls of his little friend wrapped around me, lifting me up into the air as I squeaked loudly. Okay, then. He had sent in reinforcements and had zero trust.

Realizing it was pointless to fight at this stage, I just relaxed into the weird sensation of being carried by air and closed my eyes briefly as we drifted through the dark veil. When the next room came into view, I gasped and all but threw myself out of the smoke trying to get a better look.

"What the fuck?" I gasped, scrambling to my feet. "You live here?"

I wanted to make a reference to another beast with a growly disposition, because just like the dude in that movie, the real-life Shadow Beast lived in the freaking library of my dreams.

Actual. Literal. Dreams. But unlike the movie, I would have kicked this guy out in the cold if it meant I got to keep his library.

Stepping farther into the room, I all but drooled over the dark timber shelves lining the walls, running as far as I could see. Every single shelf was filled with books—thousands upon thousands of incredible new adventures to discover.

Trying to act cool, I casually sauntered closer to the first shelf, running my fingers over the many books. Most of the covers in this section were in shades of muted reds and greys, with gold writing across the spine. The writing was not in any recognizable language, which only made me want to read them more.

Closing my eyes, I took a second to breathe deeply, inhaling the various scents into my lungs. Gods, it was perfect. If I made it through my time with the Shadow Beast, I was making it my life work to get a library like this. No matter the cost.

A rumble from across this magnificent room drew my attention, and I reluctantly turned away from the sweet scent of adventure and followed his energy deeper into the library.

Gods, it was huge. Bigger than the biggest shopping mall I'd ever seen, it reminded me of an ancient, gothic, turn-of-the-twentieth-century abbey. And while the previous white room had been light and open, this one was cozier and more comforting, with the sort of ornate detailing reflective of boatloads of character. I particularly loved the huge crystal chandeliers—five in total—that were evenly spaced right through the center, hanging from the twenty-foot-high ceilings.

There was no more time to take it all in, though, because Shadow had clearly reached the end of his limited patience. One would think by the way he was rumbling at me, *he'd* been the one kidnapped out of his life and forced to deal with an asshole.

He waited for me in the sitting area of my dreams—fitting to be in the library of my dreams—surrounded by solid, heavily padded couches. At his back was a roaring fireplace, the mantle bricked with a dark stone.

As I passed through some couches, I noticed a small table with a couple of open books. Had Shadow been in the middle of reading when he'd been pulled to Earth by my actions? The urge to try to sneak a peek at what he enjoyed to read overtook me, but I managed to refrain, focusing instead on the beast himself.

"This is where you live?" I asked, my voice a little breathless at the pure perfection of his home.

"Yes."

I shook my head. "Having this much beauty and knowledge at your fingertips is beyond words."

Again, he stared at me like I'd said something unexpected, and I decided to shut up and let him have the floor. Even if I was still sneaking little glances at the library. Without opening one book, I knew there was information here that humans and shifters would kill to possess. Lost stories. Secrets. Spells. Magic and life. And he just had it all to himself.

New goal: figure out how to toss him out into the snow and take over the library.

He sat in one of the single seater armchairs. A huge piece—I supposed it had to be to encompass his frame. Again, he was watching me with those fire-touched eyes that just never stopped *seeing* everything. Stripping me down to the base element that made up my soul.

My wolf stirred in my chest, her energy reaching out to touch the beast himself. Shadow didn't flinch, just accepted her touch, and I had no idea what went on between them because she didn't communicate it to me, but I felt like she was content when their exchange was done.

"Sit," he ordered.

Deciding to choose my battles wisely, I didn't fight, settling into the chair opposite his.

There were dozens more chairs around us and I had to ask, "You have a lot of visitors?"

His eyes flared, and I could have sworn swirls of inky smoke slithered off him as his face settled into hard lines. "I do the talking, pup."

I glared. *Pup* was used in packs if the shifter was a child. Calling an adult a pup usually meant you thought they were small, pathetic, beneath you... an insult. Exactly how this motherfucker meant it.

Biting my lip to not say what was on my mind, I went to my happy place: imagining all the books in this room were mine and I'd be forever surrounded by their beauty and knowledge...

“Are you even listening to me?” he demanded.

I blinked at him. “Sorry. I figured if you wanted me to listen, you’d have ordered it. Like everything else.”

He stood—a giant, scary beast—and I lost the ability to move or speak or breathe. Everything inside shut down, and while my mind was screaming, I couldn’t force any sound from my lips.

“I could kill you without laying one finger on you,” he said, almost conversationally, and this time I was definitely listening. “Even better, before I kill you, I could make you hurt in ways that you’ve only imagined in your worst nightmares.”

If I had the ability to panic, I would have. As it was, not breathing was definitely taking its toll on me. If he didn’t loosen his hold soon, I was going to pass out, leaving me in a very vulnerable position with this devil. Thankfully, he released me just as dark spots danced across my vision. I collapsed forward, coughing and choking, my starved lungs desperately attempting to suck air in.

He retook his seat, relaxing, his legs wide in what used to be my favorite man-spread until I’d met this megalomaniac. “As I was saying,” he rumbled, “I need you to tell me exactly what happened on your pack lands earlier today. I felt your energy touch the Shadow Realm.”

His voice lowered on the last two words, growing colder, and I had zero clue what that meant. Shadow Beast was an enigma, and I had no reference for his tone changes. He was not shifter or human, and I was way out of my fucking element.

His chest rumbled at my silence and I gave myself three seconds to decide what to do. *Lie or truth?* Which gave me the better odds of survival? I had no idea if touching the Shadow Realm was forbidden or not.

“I really don’t know what happened,” I said, deciding part-truth was the way to start.

His scowl appeared like an old friend and I was already growing used to seeing it—Shadow’s signature look.

“I’m not trying to be difficult,” I said to him. “I really have no idea. Tonight was my first shift, solstice full moon and all that.” I refrained from adding my opinion on the stupidity of his rule, just in case he

was easily offended. As much as I wanted to ask him why the age of twenty-two, now just didn't feel like the right time.

"Your first shift?" He moved forward in his chair and I was almost certain I'd never had this sort of focused attention on me before. Shadow certainly knew how to make a girl blush.

And... piss herself from fear.

"Yes. First shift, and when the sun started to rise, I found my true mate." I paused as the remembered pain sliced through me again. The unfulfilled bond was like a ragged piece of soul dragging across rough ground.

"Your mind has trouble staying in one place, I see."

Shooting him my version of an angry face, I hurried to finish the story. "Anyway, as I was saying, first shift, got rejected by my asshole of a mate, got attacked, and because of the soul-deep pain of my rejection, my wolf went ballistic. This was when my vision doubled over, and I could see shadowy figures that definitely didn't exist in the normal Earthly plane." I swallowed roughly at the memory. "I'm fairly certain no one else could see them."

"You touched one."

Statement.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Can you do it again?"

I blanched. "Why the fuck would I do it again? It was scary and felt... unnatural. Yeah, not a fan."

He steepled his fingers. "Let me rephrase. You *will* do it again, or I'll kill you and everyone you love."

Fuck. "Well, when you put it like that..." I trailed off, wishing the floor would open up and swallow me. "The only problem is I have zero idea what I did, and replicating it is not going to just happen."

This was probably the point he exploded and ripped me into million pieces. I really just hoped it was quick.

"Shift."

"What...?"

"You're a shifter. Shift."

Fuck this guy. Fuck him right to hell. One without a library.

I spat my words out between gritted teeth. "Remember how I told you it was my first shift? I can't change on command yet. Rules of

the Shadow Beast.”

Should I really be reminding you of this, asshole?

Energy slammed into me, locking my body in a vise, and as my spine arched, my wolf howled and tore her way out of my body. Within seconds, I was no longer on two legs, but back in my red and white four-legged form, limbs shaking from the rapid change.

My brain merged fast into the wolf, growls rumbling in our chest as we stalked forward toward him.

Shadow was unconcerned. “Do you have the double vision?”

Our growls increased. Hackles up. Fangs showing.

The dark smoke wrapped around Shadow, who was once again watching me like I was the only being in existence. “You’re not seeing it now.”

It wasn’t a question.

With a wave of his hands, he forced the shift on me again, and my wolf’s howl turned into a scream as I changed back to human. It took a terrible toll on our bodies to change so rapidly, so it was no surprise that I ended up a naked, huffing, near sobbing mess on the floor.

Shadow didn’t give me another look, stalking away and disappearing back through the veil.

Silent sobs wracked me as I fought the fatigue and pain... and the loneliness of facing these trials alone. Would I never get a break? Was it too much to ask that every fucking day not be a hugely painful experience?

When my dad had first died—was murdered, let’s not sugarcoat it—I’d cried a lot. Over his loss, the loss of my friends, and especially the loss of our place in the pack. My mom had always been a bit of a distant parent, so I didn’t stress on her too much, but even her complete retreat from reality had hurt. It just had all fucking hurt.

Eventually, I’d stopped crying and learned to hide my pain inside, but today, I couldn’t seem to find my fortitude.

Five minutes. I would give myself five minutes to fall apart and then I’d get my shit together.

Shadow hadn’t returned by the time I’d pulled myself to my feet, dusted my naked butt off, and retrieved the partly torn shirt, shrugging it on. I wasn’t as alone as I thought, though, the dark

smoke making itself known. Ignoring it at first, I started to explore the library-slash-beast-lair.

“Is this a magic space?” I eventually asked the smoky mist trailing me. Shadow’s *shadow thing* was apparently my keeper while its master was gone. “The shelves just keep going on and on.”

When I couldn’t find an end in sight, I gave up and instead moved toward a shelf. My eyes bugged out when I saw *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin, *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, and a multitude of Terry Pratchett stories lined up. There were many more fantasy greats and classic stories in this section, and even though I was all about the hidden gems of the indie author world these days, my heart still fluttered over an amazing fantasy classic.

Only fantasy, though.

If someone mentioned Emily Brontë to me even once, I’d run away screaming.

With reluctance, I left those shelves and made the very long trek back to the fireplace and those cozy couches. No doubt Shadow would return to kill me sooner or later, so it was probably best to try to get some rest before my murder.

Choosing the largest couch near the fire, I closed my eyes and forced my mind to settle. I knew my reaction to this mess was odd. Most people would be screaming, rocking in a corner, or bawling their eyes out. But in all truth, after many years on edge, waiting for the moment someone took their torment of me too far and I was killed, I’d grown numb to panic and fear.

Exhaustion from the day’s events washed over me and I sank deeper into the plush velvet of the sofa. Shadow Bastard might have been a right old bastard, but he had solid taste in housewares.

As the fuzziness of sleep and exhaustion pressed darkness into my mind, the last thought I had was if I’d ever wake up again.

■ didn't dream. I was almost certain I didn't even move because when I jerked myself awake, disoriented as fuck, half my body was numb. Tingles started immediately as the blood flowed through my numb extremities, shifter healing fixing up whatever I'd broken during my sleep-like-the-dead episode.

Looking around, I wasn't surprised to find myself in the exact same position I'd been in before. On the couch. Fire burning... with the same-sized flames. How fucking long had I been asleep? Five seconds...

This place was whack.

"Shadow!" I shouted, my throat croaky. Clearing it, I tried again. "Shifters die without food and water."

Getting to my feet, I shook off the last bit of sleep drowsiness, stretching so tall, my vagina was hanging out the bottom of the torn shirt. I eyeballed the smoke shadow that had roused with me—it was drifting a little too close for my liking. "Go near my naked shit and I will figure out how to Hoover your fucking ass into the next world."

I'd seen *Ghostbusters*. I could handle this demon shit.

Maybe it understood me, or maybe it was a coincidence, but the smoke backed up to a respectable distance. Looking around, I wondered if Shadow had pissed off and left me to live out the rest of my days here in fantasy land, with a cozy magic fire and never-ending bookshelves. Just needed to install a hot chocolate and juice kiosk, burger land, and a bar.

Because wine.
And tequila.

Deciding I was done waiting for the Shadow Bastard to return to me, I made my way toward the shimmering veil, wondering if I might find him in the cathedral room. Heading forward with determination, I did not for a minute think I would be allowed to step free from the library, but there was no resistance as I sent my arm through first, testing for alarms or traps.

Seemed to be all clear.

“Come on, Inky,” I said with excitement. I needed a name for the smoky darkness, so I could easily differentiate it from Shadow. “Looks like we’re going on an adventure.”

Stepping through to the other side, I wondered what the point of the swirling darkness that separated the two rooms was. Could Shadow stop beings from entering if he wanted—

My thoughts ended abruptly as I reached the other side. “What in the...” I gasped as a dozen eyes looked my way.

This room of windows and doors, the empty, light-filled space, was now a bustling hive of activity. And just like in Shadow’s lair, there were hundreds of shelves stacked with books, filling all the spaces between the windows, pillars, and doors.

I kept blinking, like that would clear my sight and I’d once again be seeing the empty space.

A tiny, brown-skinned, wrinkle-faced *being* hurried over to me, and I was still just blinking with no idea how to handle this new world. “Welcome to the Library of Knowledge, Mera,” he chirped. “My name is Gaster, of the underground goblin clan of Faerie.”

Did he just say *goblin*? I stared harder at his bald head, round face, and slightly pointed ears. Okay, I could see it now.

I choked out some words. “You speak English?”

He shook his head. “Nope. I speak lower-level fae.”

“What—” I was cut off as he continued.

“You will be able to speak all dialects, understand all written word, and converse with all manner of races within these walls. You will meet many who make their homes in the dimensions connected to this library. As I said, I’m from Faerie.”

He stuck his hand out and I stared down at it before reaching out to grasp it. "That's a very human gesture," I noted.

He smiled, drawing my gaze to the unusual structure of his face. His eyes were huge, taking up half his face, the irises and pupils pitch black without an ounce of white. He stood about three feet tall, his skin gnarled like an old root of a tree, and he didn't have an ounce of hair on him that I could see. I wanted to study him closer, but it felt rude, so I kept my focus on his face.

"I have studied all cultures. As the concierge here, it's my job to guide all who step foot into these halls."

He bowed and as he rose, I finally noticed he was the perfect height to see right up my shirt. Not that he'd even made an attempt to glance, but still... "Do you happen to know if there's anywhere to get some spare clothing?" I gestured to the expanse of naked leg beneath the torn shirt. "I'm sort of running out of cotton."

Gaster's little face lit up; he looked downright excited by the prospect of having a task. "Yes! We have a room that can give you goods in exchange for daems."

I blinked at him. "Daem?"

It sounded like *day-em*, and I had never heard of that type of currency before. "It's the Shadow Beast's currency," he chirped. "But he gave me permission to allow you an initial entrance without payment. He said you'll eventually work it off in the library."

Color me shocked that he hadn't planned my death yet. Maybe he was still undecided. Either way, I was once again here to live another day, and that was about all I could ask from this shitshow I called a life.

Looking around, I stared at the many beings inhabiting the Library of Knowledge. So many of them were completely foreign in appearance. They were all clearly here for one reason, though: reading, reading, reading. Devouring the knowledge in these shelves. "Does everyone work here?" I asked.

Gaster followed my line of sight. "Oh, no. Only the goblins. My brethren work in the library. The others are a few selected from their worlds, allowed to access the information held here."

Before I could voice the million other questions I had, he reached out and grasped my hand, dragging me away from the veil of

Shadow's lair and through the long hall in the middle of the library. "How many worlds are there?" I whispered, more to myself, as we passed dozens of beings, each of them so vastly different from each other, I literally couldn't take them all in with enough detail.

Gaster chuckled, a grating sound that was almost unpleasant. "It has been a long time since I met someone who didn't know about the supernatural world. About the Solaris System that connects and branches to each of the lands."

I shrugged. "I mean, I'm a shifter, so I knew that there were more than humans out there, but outside of Shadow, Inky, and now you, I've never actually met any others."

He blinked, those black orbs so reflective that all the lights surrounding us could be seen in them. "Shadow and Inky?"

I jerked my head toward the darkness following me. "That thing and its master."

Gaster nodded, like he understood. "Ah, yes. They're the supreme beings around here. We do not mess with his section of the library, and in return, he doesn't destroy us all. We also catalog his books. The symbiosis works." His eyes darted toward Inky, like he was relaying that information directly to the blob.

I leaned down so I was closer to his level. "What is the Solaris System?" I whispered.

Gaster shot me a conspiratorial smile, and I was half in love with this tiny dude and his helpfulness. Pretty sure outside of Simone and Dannie, I'd never had anyone be this nice to me. "It's a transport system powered by the library. Connected energy portals that allow us to travel between the multitude of worlds. Each of the doorways here"—he waved his hand—"connects to one of the lands. So, I'm a goblin from Faerie." He pointed out the door with the alluring music I'd almost walked through. "And Chester over there is a water sprite from the land of Karn, which is mostly water." This time, he pointed to a door that was about ten feet from us, faint swirls of blue visible in the white grain.

And Chester... The Karn inhabitant was waif-like, with icy blue skin and a body so androgynous that I would never have been able to guess gender. Maybe they didn't even have the sort of gender I would understand on Karn. They had four arms, the second set a

little shorter, and I presumed they were useful in the water. Not wanting to overtly stare any longer, I turned my gaze away, waiting for Gaster to continue.

“Marin is a transcendent,” he said, picking up on my cue. “Closely representing the angels of Earth lore, they reside in Honor Meadows.”

Marin was a tall statuesque being, female in appearance. She was dressed in what looked like black and gold armor, with shiny black skin, and grey-tinged feathery wings emerging from her back. Wings that looked very much like they belonged on an angel. “Wow,” I whispered as I took in the full picture.

She was beauty personified, as if each plane of her face had been lovingly carved to perfection. Her long hair reminded me of Simone’s, thick and blue-black. Unlike Simone’s, though, Marin’s hair was in a perfect braid, ending around her calves.

Whatever Honor Meadows was, I could only assume it was filled with more angelic-looking beings like Marin.

“You reach their lands through there,” Gaster said, pointing out a door farther down the library.

This was so incredibly hard to understand and comprehend, but maybe because I stood within these walls filled with so much knowledge, none of it felt overwhelming.

Gaster continued on, pointing out animalistic beings, akin to a centaur who merged human and animals. Horse, goat, panther, and bird hybrids were in the library, but I was assured that in their land of Brolder, there were many, many others.

“Are there any dragon beings?” I asked seriously, still half-existing in an epic book hangover from my last shifter read.

Gaster didn’t miss a beat at my random question. “Not dragons like those depicted on Earth, but we do have great beasts who wander the worlds.”

Great beasts? I mean, if there was anything greater than the Shadow Beast out there, that would be a seriously scary sight to behold. But I was totally here for it.

Gaster continued his journey through the library, introducing me to many of the faefolk, including pixies, banshees, sidhe, trolls, and ghouls.

“In Faerie, there are hundreds of others,” he said. “It would take me weeks to list them all.”

“The universe is so much bigger than I expected,” I breathed, feeling both insignificant and emotional by my discoveries today.

“This is merely a tiny slice of the larger piece,” Gaster said, his smile still firmly in place. “But today, there’s no need to worry about this new life you’ve discovered. Let’s first find you some human comforts.”

I nodded, following him as he picked up the pace. His legs might have been half the size of mine, but the dude moved like an Olympic sprinter. I commented on that, jokingly huffing like I was out of breath. “We’re strong and fast,” he said, looking me over like he was seriously concerned for my health. “Don’t try to keep up. Goblins are able to move at top speed over long distances, and it’s best to remember that my assets are yours to use when you need support in whatever you undertake.”

I tilted my head, once again confused at the way I was being made to feel “at home” here. “Does Shadow know you’re, uh, looking after me like this?” I asked.

Gaster nodded. “Oh, yes. He knows everything. Don’t worry. This is all planned.”

Wonderful. I felt a lot better about being part of Shadow’s plan... *not.*

Gaster continued on his mission, and I stayed close by, trying to ignore the many curious lookie-loos around the room. I might have been side-eyeing all the new lands and their inhabitants in the library, but many of them appeared to be just as interested in me. I wondered if it was due to Inky on my tail, or was “shifter” a new race to cross their path?

As we closed in on the beginning of the library with its own shimmery portal that connected to the long, white hall, Gaster stopped. “This is the room of need,” he said, gesturing to a plain white door. He stepped forward and knocked twice before it swung open.

“Six daems,” a disembodied, near-robotic voice chimed.

Gaster pulled some shimmery gold nuggets from his tiny pocket.

“Make sure you get everything you need while inside,” he told me before the surprisingly strong goblin shoved me into a completely empty white room, the coins tinkling after me, vanishing into the seamless, shiny floor. “Wait!” I shouted as the door slammed in my face.

“Please stand still,” the voice said, distracting me.

I froze as a blast of frosty air washed over me, trailing down my body before it vanished just as quickly.

“You need a complete wardrobe, toiletries, and other essentials.”

I couldn’t tell if it was a question or not, but I answered anyway. “Yes. I have nothing other than this shirt.” I gestured to the rag I wore.

A moment’s pause. “Your belongings are being sent to the master’s chambers. Please proceed there for cleaning and robing. Good day.”

And just like that, the door opened, and that same icy wind ushered me right out of the room.

Gaster didn't appear to have moved an inch, standing exactly where I'd left him, smile in place. "Wow, that hour passed in a blink."

I was the one doing some fucking blinking at that point. "It couldn't have been more than one minute."

Gaster laughed like I'd told the funniest joke, but he didn't comment again, instead taking the lead back through the library, only stopping when he reached Shadow's darkness spattered veil. "I'm not permitted beyond here," he said, "but your clothes and other items will be in your chamber." His eyes flashed to the smoke blob. "Just follow Inky."

By this point, I'd figured out that "Inky" was something more than just a random mass of darkness seeped from Shadow. Gaster was too deferential toward it, even going as far as speaking directly to it.

Maybe being Shadow's minion garnered respect? Or maybe I'd just underestimated its intelligence, thinking of it as something without substance. I'd have to stop assuming shit in this world, because all of the rules were different.

When I stepped back through the veil—which apparently could keep people out if Gaster's statement was any indication—I almost ran smack-bang into a mountain of a beast. Shadow stood still and silent in the darkness, head tilted as he watched me closely. Fuck this guy and his intensity. If he kept this up, I was either going to blush or have a spontaneous combustion, a.k.a. instant orgasm.

I mean, if I didn't die of fright first.

"You have two choices."

And there he went, with that shining personality of his.

"Go on," I replied with the fakest smile I could produce.

"I kill you now and contain the threat." It was his turn to smile, and as always, that dark curl of his lips was terrifying. "This is my personal favorite."

Of course it was. "I honestly can't wait to hear choice two," I chirped. "Fingers crossed it involves my death as well."

If the look on his face was any indication, I was about to get my wish. "Option two," he bit out, "is for you to remain here, under my control, while you figure out how you touched the Shadow Realm. We will also have to gather up the creatures you released with your recklessness."

I held up a hand. "Okay... I have so many questions about what you just said."

Shadow huffed out a blast of power, literal swirls of inky smoke wafting around his face as he did. "No. More. Fucking. Questions."

"Fair enough, fair enough," I said. "But are you saying that when I did that double vision thing and reached for those creatures, I allowed some to escape into our world?"

A single nod.

"And you think I can help you round them up and... What do we do with them if we can't access the Shadow Realm again?"

His lips thinned. It was a warning sign I decided to heed by shutting my mouth. See, I could learn new things. Shadow crossed his arms, drawing my attention to his broad shoulders, and once again, I was distracted. Ugh. One should not admire the demon-god who wanted to murder you.

It was just common sense.

"We will contain them until you figure out how to replicate what you did. I'm sure, when the alternative is your death, you will spend a lot of time and energy on it."

Energy on *it*? His broad shoulders? Oh, wait, shadow creatures. Gotcha.

I nodded. "Right. I mean, it's a solid plan, Indiana Jones. Looks like we're going on an adventure."

He shot me a deadpan stare, and I had no idea if he understood the reference or not. Probably best to change the subject before he went with option one and killed me to shut me up.

“So, Gaster, the library concierge, apparently procured me new clothes. He said they were here somewhere.”

I gestured to the only other thing in this room to bring me to spontaneous combustion: the library. I still had hope that Shadow Beast would leave it to me in his will, although his immortal status put a slight damper on that plan.

“Follow me.”

God, I loved our conversations. So full of energy and clever turns of phrase. Like living in a Shakespeare play.

While I was mentally laughing at myself, Shadow turned, and as he walked away, I noticed his height grow. He’d been at the six-and-half feet height while talking to me, but I had a sneaking suspicion that the eight-foot size was more his natural height since he went back to it most of the time.

It was utterly fascinating how he did that, and all I could think was... Does everything change size? Yeah, this poor—*technically still a virgin*—wolf shifter had a very active sex life. In my head. I dreamt about sex, had a vibrator, and was actively participating in my own sexuality. Just usually alone.

Wait a freaking minute!

I needed my vibrator. Had that room of needs figured that out when it had been clothing me? Otherwise, I was going to have to find a chick friend here and get the lowdown on what this place was capable of. As cool as Gaster seemed, he was too much of a rule follower for me.

I liked to live in the grey sectors of life.

Shadow was halfway down the never-ending library, so I picked up the pace, racing after him. Last thing I wanted to do was piss him off when option one of “being murdered” was still on the table.

Putting my head down, I sprinted, only noticing at the last moment that he’d stopped. Careening to the side, I managed to avoid him, even as one of the tables caught my hip and I winced. Not that the sharp bite would last long now that I’d released my full shifter strength.

Shadow crowded into me, and I was suddenly no longer concerned about my smarting hip. “You’ve not begged or cried once,” he said, his voice softer than usual. “The few shifters who fall into my world are never calm.”

This was the second time he’d been confused by my lack of deferential fear toward him.

“I begged and cried for years in my pack,” I told him, my humor fading. “It made no difference. I’ve come to realize that when someone is stronger and more powerful than you, and you are at their mercy, begging and crying does nothing except give them some sort of sick gratification. I won’t build up bullies any longer. They get nothing from me.”

His eyes flashed with those flames, and in an almost calming manner, Inky snaked out to wrap around its master.

“You will learn to fear me,” he murmured, and I had little doubt he was right.

He walked away again, and I followed this time without pause. He took a sharp right toward a large, cherry red, hand-carved wood door. “This is where you will sleep,” he informed me. “Do not search for my quarters. I will kil—”

“Kill me, yeah, got it.”

Heat slammed into me, scorching my bare skin, and not for the first time, I wished I hadn’t been born with such a smart mouth.

“I’ll submit,” I said, throwing my arms up to cover and protect my face from the scorching fire.

“Submit,” he rumbled.

This motherfucker.

His power forced me to my knees, and I felt his fucking satisfaction. He’d get nothing else from me, though. I was forged through years of fire as hot as what he was throwing my way, and whatever game he was playing, I’d play along. But only on the most superficial of levels. Eventually, he’d let his guard down. Eventually, whatever this bullshit was would come to an end.

When that happened, it would be my time to shine.

“Who is your master?” Shadow Beast asked, stepping closer to me.

Everything inside responded to him, a molten burn starting low in my body as his energy fused with my own. “You are,” I bit out.

“You will not betray me.”

“I will not betray you.”

He was so close now, and I could not tear my eyes from his flaming irises, mesmerizing as they locked me in place.

“I own you now, Sunshine, and I will punish any and all insubordination.”

With that, an unearthly howl rang out through his library, followed by a strong gust of wind that slammed me back into the door. It hurt, but not as much as my hip, and for a shifter, it was nothing. It had been Shadow’s warning, and I knew he could truly destroy me if he chose.

Also, had he just called me “Sunshine”? Had he heard Jaxson call me “Sunny” back in Torma? Or was it just a coincidence...?

Either way, I felt decidedly unnerved by what had just happened.

He’d exerted his will over me and I’d been at his mercy.

Shadow Beast left as quickly as he'd arrived, and I was ushered into my room by Inky, all the while trying to figure out *what the fuck was happening*.

To say I was confused would be a major understatement.

Confused had been back in Torma trying to figure out how the Shadow Beast himself had blessed a union between me and that self-centered motherfucker of a future alpha. I mean, what the hell had I done wrong in my last life to end up mated to Torin?

Truthfully, after meeting the Beast himself, I had the sneaking suspicion that true mate bonds were not his domain. Definitely not the cupid type... not at all.

But yeah, that was my usual level of confusion—the *alpha-mate* thing was my normal life shit pile, and I was okay with it. But this... *this!* This was almost beyond belief, my brain unable to comprehend what was happening to me. He'd given me two options, but it looked like he'd chosen anyway. Option two: prisoner of the Shadow Beast.

The *motherfucking* Shadow Beast.

Not only that, but I was also existing on some magical plane—a Solaris System?—that had rooms leading to new worlds. And the libraries. Two stunning, priceless libraries filled with all the knowledge of the universe. *Too much. Too fucking much.*

This might have been a bit of a delayed reaction, but who could blame me? Anyone in this situation would need some time to truly comprehend it all.

Not to mention the Shadow Beast and his brilliant new plan.

If I'd had to guess what being kidnapped by him would be like, there would have been torture and pain involved. Maybe a ritualistic eating of my heart or something equally as fucked-up.

Knowing my luck, psycho gods were probably into collecting fingernails or eyeballs.

Weird bastards.

But nope, instead, he was keeping me so we could go hunting shadow creatures together.

It didn't make sense. There was more going on here that I wasn't aware of, and no way in hell was I letting my guard down around that fallen-angel-looking psychopath.

If anything, I was only going to double down on figuring out his weakness. Everyone had one, and when I figured out Shadow's, I would use it to crumble his world to its foundation. Dust. Atoms. Micro-organisms.

I'd be the harbinger of death to fire eyes, square cut jaws, and a mop of curls.

Then I'd laugh all the way to my freedom.

Popping to my feet, feeling a little better with my new game plan, I looked around my prison. Truth be told, *prison* was a little harsh; it was a large room with a half-decent-looking bed at the far end. Ten steps up from the crappy bedroom I'd had back home.

Opening the antique armoire with gold and silver inlaid detailing across the curved top, I blinked at the decent array of clothing inside. Rifling through, it was clear that everything in there was my size and style. Jeans, shorts, tanks, and a few comfy sweaters. The Room of Need did more than just provide; it appeared to read minds and memories to make sure everything was as you'd choose yourself.

Super fucking creepy. But helpful.

And right now, helpful was all I could ask for.

There was a small bathroom attached to the bedroom, and in the drawers I found toiletries and makeup. High-end Earth brands, the sort I'd drool over in magazines but would never have been able to afford on my own.

The perks would be amazing if they didn't come with a megalomaniac jailer.

Since Shadow had made his usual dramatic exit, I decided to take a quick shower and get myself cleaned up. Shedding the ragged shirt, I sighed as the hot water beat against my tense muscles, and for a moment, I allowed myself to fall apart.

Just a moment.

My shoulder slammed against the tiles as my head dropped forward and I clenched my hands tightly. *I can do this. I can survive this. After Torma, I can survive anything.*

From the ashes, the phoenix will rise.

A mantra was all a chick needed to make it through life. Right?

Once I was clean, dressed in underwear with zero holes—*whaattt?*—jeans and a simple white shirt, I felt like I was ready to figure out my place in this strange world. My new tennis shoes were silent as I headed toward the door, my hand settling on the ancient black handle, expecting it would be locked when I tried to press the lever. Except it clicked open, and I stepped out to find Inky chilling there, like the creepy version of Casper the Ghost.

“Wow, fancy meeting you here,” I said with fake enthusiasm. “I missed you in the hour we were apart, Inky. Don’t ever leave me again.”

It swirled higher, sliding around my new clothes, like it was trying to figure out what I was wearing. “This is how I normally look when I’m not half-naked,” I said with a smirk.

The black shadow swelled to double its size and seemed to almost... jiggle. I was going to call that its laughing move because anything else was too terrifying to contemplate.

The larger it grew, the more definition I could see inside of what I’d previously thought of as just swirls of shadowy smoke. It looked like a huge brain, with electrical pulses shooting between synapses. Human brains were not my specialty or anything, but it did make me wonder if Inky was way more sentient than I’d originally thought.

There was no way it was just an offshoot of the Shadow Beast... Inky was definitely its own special brand of supernatural creature.

“What are you?” I asked, my curiosity had those words bursting from me. “You’re like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

Fuck knows why I did the next thing, but sometimes my brain is slow. There’s no other explanation for why I voluntarily touched the

black smoke. As my fingertips glided through the darkness, an icy chill shot up my arm before I was knocked back onto my ass like someone had punted me halfway across the room.

“Shit!” I gasped, trying to shake the chill off as I awkwardly got to my feet. “I legit did not expect that.” Inky had touched me before, but apparently, it wasn’t a two-way street. Or maybe that was just my first and only warning not to venture where I wasn’t invited.

Inky shrank smaller but was definitely still jiggling. *Smug bastard*, just like Shadow.

Deciding I’d wasted enough time procrastinating, I made my way past the smoke entity and into the Library of Knowledge. When I stepped through the veil, a goblin was waiting for me right on the other side.

“Gah.” I jumped back, almost tumbling into Shadow’s lair again. “Don’t stand so close, Gaster.”

He bowed low. “My apologies, Miss Mera. I’ve been waiting for your return so that I can continue the tour and outline your duties.”

It felt a lot like I was about to be inducted for my first day of work, but if it led to more knowledge and a chance to find a way to separate myself from the dick of all deities, then I’d take whatever he threw at me. If this library held the knowledge of the world... there had to be something in here that defined the Shadow Bastard’s weaknesses.

“Lead the way!” I said with enthusiasm. Gaster blinked at me, those odd eyes capturing my attention as a sheen of green coated the black before it vanished.

“Finally someone as excited as me to learn,” he said, and I wondered if that flash of green was his happiness shining through.

“Totally,” I chimed in, ready to butter this goblin up so that I could have one powerful ally for future issues. I mean, maybe he wasn’t powerful in a physical sense, but someone who had the role of “concierge of the Library of Knowledge” had to be a useful friend to have.

Truth be told, I kind of liked him. People with his level of enthusiasm and child-like excitement for life were few and far between in my world. Shifters were more about being badass and snarky; even our pups were sassy little shits.

As we moved back through the many bookshelves, I noted that the multitude of beings I'd seen before were all gone, and in their place new ones perused the shelves, stacking books up in their arms and leaving again through their world's door.

"So none of these beings from the worlds work here?" I asked.

Gaster turned back to look at me, that damn smile still in place. "No one really works here, but there are a few dozen of us demi-fey who keep it running. The Library of Knowledge is a powerful entity, and if it fell into the wrong hands..." For once, that thought did not make him smile.

"Where do all the shelves go when it packs up for the night?" I asked, thinking of my first empty trip through these halls.

He offered me a blank sort of stare. "They go nowhere. The shelves remain as they are right now. Nothing has changed in the Solaris System and Library of Knowledge since I started here a thousand years ago."

Okay, ignoring the fact that he was at least a thousand years old, I focused on the rest of what he'd said.

"That can't be right," I murmured. "When I walked through this building with Shadow, yesterday or whenever, this hall was empty. All I could see were windows and the doors, but no shelves or books at all."

Gaster took a second to answer, like he was weighing up his thoughts. "The master would have been deciding your fate," he finally said, his voice lower and less animated than usual. "Until that was decided, you would not have been privy to the gift of knowledge that is contained here."

Oh. Right. "Shadow probably was planning on killing me at that point," I said. "So it makes sense."

Gaster threw both hands up, looking panicked. "Oh, no, I'm sure he wasn't. He's just cautious with strangers." *Yeah, that was it.*

We were in the center of the library now, surrounded by a mass of tables and chairs and some plump beanbags that looked super inviting. Unfortunately, there was no time for me to dive into their depths with a great book, because I was at "work."

"Feels weird to be the only one working here who isn't demi-fey," I said.

Gaster nodded. "I know, but you won't feel alone. As I said, many others are always here to gather knowledge. It's the highest honor to be chosen to peruse the library."

"Exactly how many worlds are there in this Solaris System?"

He'd mentioned a few, of course, but my need for more knowledge was increasing with every hour I remained here. The unnamed doors called to me, demanding I learn about them.

His eyes widened, black orbs shimmering in the twinkling lights above us. "Oh, you are in for a real treat. Follow me."

So I did.

He walked so damn fast that it was lucky I was a shifter and able to keep up with his short, powerful legs. He led me right to the farthest point of the room, to the veil that hid the white hallway from view.

“This is the directory!” Gaster chirped.

I stared around blankly, trying to figure out what he was talking about. “Directory?”

He gestured to the shimmery veil. “When it’s not acting as an early warning system to protect the library, it can be used to navigate the Solaris System.”

Oh, yes. Now that was excellent news.

Gaster placed his hand on a small panel that was offset to the veil, and since it was as white as the walls, I’d missed it completely until he touched it. “Place your hand here,” he explained, “and say *divulge*.”

The moment the word left his lips, the shimmery veil solidified, turning into an eight-foot-tall map. A very detailed map...

Gaster slid the screen across, zooming in on one section.

A very detailed and interactive map. *Fuck yes!*

“This is where we’re standing, and from here, you can find everything els—” He was cut off by someone shouting his name, a tiny figure hurrying into sight.

“A book is missing,” she said. It was clearly another goblin, looking decidedly more feminine than Gaster, with her shoulder-

length golden hair and thick dark lashes.

"This is Lady Hel," he told me. "She is a royal of the demi-fey and helps me out here as part of her right of passage to her final role."

I nodded like I knew what the fuck he was talking about. Lady Hel didn't even look my way, already hurrying back to the tragedy of a missing book.

"If you could excuse me while I deal with this disaster," Gaster said with a head nod. "Feel free to navigate the directory and I'll return shortly."

I shot him a broad grin. That sort of blind trust was going to get him into trouble, but for now, I wouldn't do anything too crazy. Especially not with Inky slinking around nearby, not letting me out of its "sight."

"I'll be right here," I promised.

He was gone in his *faster than a bullet* way, and I spun to the directory, ready to learn everything I could in whatever time I had. First, I focused on the map as a whole, zooming out to see the room in its entirety. The image was about ten times larger than me, so I took a few steps back.

It was an eagle eye view of the Library of Knowledge, giving me a clear layout. I counted the doors running along either wall: five on each. They were offset and divided by long rows and shelves, and when I zoomed into each shelf, I saw that many of them held books that corresponded to the lands that had nearby doors. One near Faerie had a small glowing dot, so I pressed my finger to it.

With a ding, a message popped up. *History of Faerie: Great Beast dynasty to the air folk.*

Holy fucking shit. I was going to be able to navigate this bitch so well with this directory. I wished I could import the map to a phone and carry it around with me everywhere.

The ten doorways were my first priority, so I pressed the glowing dot on the one closest to me. The real door was over my shoulder; from here, I could see it had a tiny swirl of darkness in the center. "Cousin of yours?" I asked Inky, chuckling at my own stupid joke.

On the directory, the square of information popped up... *Tundera. The Land of the Lost. Dark souls dwell within this world of no light,*

and from here, they will either find redemption or their true destruction.

Okay, cryptic and creepy. Super fucking cool.

The next door along, one I could also see in real life, was a normal, non-descript white door. The information popped up: *Valdor. Birthplace of the vampire. Creatures of lust and darkness. Drinkers of life force.*

Oh, yeah. Vampire town.

Wait... vampires? There were legit vampires? Were they in the human world, too?

I practically dove on the information button for the next door, desperate to know about this entire supernatural galaxy. The next door was too far down the library for me to see, so I just waited for the information to appear.

Karn: world is predominantly water. Inhabitants mostly able to exist above and below.

This one I already knew, and the information was way too brief for my liking, but thankfully, the shelves nearby had plenty more information. I just had to start reading. I pressed one of the dots on the closest shelf to the Karn door. It dinged straight away. *Karn: history, rules, regulations, water sources.*

I was all over that as soon as I was done here.

The last two doors on this side of the room was *Faerie: land filled with original magic. Inhabitants from a range of castes, including seelie and unseelie, demi-fey, and the lurkers.* And the last door popped up as *Frozen Tundra: no known inhabitants. Too extreme to be explored.*

Well, that was interesting. I quickly moved on to the other side, and in order they were:

Brolder: Birthplace of shifters. Hybrids. And Beasts of the deep.

Honor Meadows: the original source of light. Powerful beyond knowledge.

Shadow Realm: information unknown. Critical error.

Watchers: those with omniscient power. Governs many. Answers to few.

Desert lands: born of heat and fire, magics and wishes.

I blinked. “What the actual fuck?” I muttered out loud. I had so many questions. Just, like, so many.

“My apologies!” Gaster said, his words busting through my confused brain. “Apparently, a book was misshelved, and usually, the library itself handles that situation, but in this case, it was able to be slotted into two categories, and that was where the confusion arose...”

He continued to ramble, and I stared blankly at him, my mind still mulling over these various and vast worlds that connected to this Solaris System. The information about them might have been brief, but it was enough to capture my interest. Especially Brolder, the apparent birthplace of shifters. Had Shadow been there when he created us, making his own human hybrid version? Or was there another explanation?

Speaking of no explanation... What the fuck was up with the Shadow Realm? *Critical error?*

“Miss Mera?”

Gaster peered up at me, his gnarled face even more creased with what appeared to be concern.

“There are ten worlds that lead from this library,” I choked out.

He tilted his head, his eyes almost blending into the brown of his skin as they lightened slightly. “Eleven actually.” He jerked his head to the directory. “Beyond this one is the pathway to the humans.”

Right. Right. I knew that. I’d walked that long hall... or been carried for most of it, anyway.

My eyes shot to Inky, who was creeping closer for the first time since I’d touched it. Like it knew I was thinking about the Shadow Beast. *Back up, bitch*, I mentally warned, and whether it was my expression or what, it stopped moving closer. Good Inky.

“What is up with the Shadow Realm?” I asked, turning back to Gaster.

His face dropped before he shook his head. “That’s not my story to tell. Now, please, follow me.”

He spun and hurried back into the library, and I stared after him. Guess that was his hard line, and he was not crossing it. Following as directed, the awkward silence lasted about fifteen seconds before

he was back to his happy self. “The master wants me to start you in cleaning, and you will work your way up from there.”

Gritting my teeth, I didn’t argue. No doubt this was Shadow’s plan all along, and I was determined he never knew he’d struck any points against me. Sure, I hated cleaning more than almost anything in the world, but I was going to go out there and do a perfectly adequate job at almost cleaning. Nothing like moderate effort to prove a point.

Gaster led me to the cleaning supplies, all of which were brand new because “the library usually cleans itself,” but nevertheless, I spent the next however many hours leaning on a broom and dusting *dust-free* shelves.

All the while with a smile on my face because *fuck you, Shadow Beast*. He wanted me to fear him, and he had no idea how close he was to that achievement, but he also must have wanted me to hate him. In that, he could count himself successful.

It was impossible to tell time in this library, with its constant rotating guests from the worlds. To pass the day, I spent a good number of hours trying to guess which world each inhabitant came from. Some were super obvious—like Karn—while for others, I had zero idea.

The only consistent in this place were the dozen or so goblins who all seemed to follow Gaster around. I enjoyed watching them as well, the goblins having a clear hierarchy that appeared to have nothing to do with gender or position, and everything to do with intelligence and respect.

They might have been the most advanced race of all.

As I people-watched, learning as much as I could and filing it all away for future reference, my stomach started rumbling. Loudly. Spinning on Inky, my stalker, I growled. “I need to eat and sleep. Make it happen.”

It swelled in size, and I could again see all the sparking lights swirling inside the vortex of darkness. I was too tired and hungry to care that it was almost the same size as me now and could blast me across the room if I pissed it off. Thankfully, before I had to throw down with a smoke cloud, Gaster appeared, beaming smile in place.

“Wow, you’ve certainly brightened up the place with your hard work today.”

It legitimately took every single ounce of my self-control not to punch his chirpy mouth. Had I said I liked him earlier? What the fuck had I been thinking?

“I’m going to show you to the dining hall,” he chirped, “where you can procure as much sustenance as you need.” My spirits lifted, and just like that, he was off my shit list again.

“Thank the beast.” I gasped, letting the broom clatter to the floor. It vanished in a flash, the magic of this room demonstrating in no uncertain terms how useless my sweeping had been. “I’m about five seconds from starving to death.”

My wolf raised her head, rumbles rocking my chest, and I realized that this was the first time I’d felt her in hours. She was subdued here, calm in my chest, and at times, I wondered why she acted as if we’d been shifting together for years, rather than one or two times. The weirdness of that, though, was so low on my crap-to-worry-about scale that I barely even gave it a second thought.

Nope. My wolf and I—and our dysfunctional relationship—was the normal part of my current life situation.

Sad to say.

Food. Glorious food. Probably the second-best part of this magical library world I'd found myself in. Food and books, could anyone ask for more?

"Do you eat like this every single day?" I enthusiastically asked the woman a few seats down from me as I shoved a large slice of rare roast beef in my mouth. At least I hoped it was beef, but whatever, it tasted good.

She turned toward me for the first time, her nose wrinkled as she stared me down. I blinked back at her. "Not much of a talker, hey?" I asked, wiping my mouth with a napkin. "Don't stress. I can talk enough for both of us, and before you know it, we'll be fast friends."

Her eyes, a startling magenta color, widened as shock crossed her perfect face. It took a few more awkward staring moments for me to slot her firmly into the "Honor Meadows" world. She had that otherworldly glow of the beings from that land, and a face carved right from an angel for sure.

Clearing her throat, she stood, the dark amber-colored wings I'd missed in my first perusal springing into view. With her alabaster skin and long, mahogany hair, she was almost the complete opposite of the first woman I'd seen from Honor Meadows, but if these two were any indication, everyone from their world was tall, willowy, and perfect.

"Do you have males in your world? Or other sexes?" I asked, and again, she just stared—clearly, she had no idea what to make of me.

She and Shadow could probably start a support group. “I’m just curious. I think it’s awesome if you only have one or no defined genders. Labels are annoying anyway, right? And, seriously, whatever you’re doing, keep doing it because you’re hot as hell.”

No doubt she now thought the half-starved shifter was not only crazy but also hitting on her. If only. The fact that I couldn’t experience a true sexual attraction toward women when men were such assholes was one of my greatest laments.

Another blink, and then she spun, hightailing it out of the room.

With a shrug, I went back to eating.

Gaster had dropped me at the dining hall about twenty minutes ago—approximately, since I was just guessing time at this stage—and when I sat, small robotic creatures buzzed around, asking for my order. About the same height as Gaster, they didn’t have faces, and were more like mini phone booths on wheels. I added them to my list of creatures to learn about—the never-ending list.

Now that the beautiful woman from the Honor Meadows was gone, there were only a few other beings in the room, along with the robot-servers. The dining hall itself wasn’t that remarkable, mostly filled with long, wood tables, running in rows with ten or so feet between each bench. It’d sit at least a few hundred in here at full capacity, but that was its only claim to fame.

For the rest of my time there, no one came near me, and I wondered if *Angel Face* had already spread the word about my incessant chattering. *Whatever*. Like I needed more supernatural friends who would probably stab me in the back. Simone and Dannie had always been enough for me, and I just wished they were here, exploring this world and having an adventure with me.

Then again, this adventure was likely to get me killed, so maybe it was best that I was discovering it alone. The world needed more shifters like my best friends, and I’d have to be permanently sedated if anything happened to them.

Just as I reached out for a slice of cake—caramel with a banana cream frosting by the looks of it—a hush fell over the room. I mean, there were about eight of us in here, so it wasn’t *that* noticeable, but teaming it with the hairs on my arms standing up and a tingling

sensation down my spine, I knew that there was only one explanation.

Shadow. And he was standing right behind me.

Part of me wanted to cower, and since that pissed me off, I forced myself to take a bite of the cake, letting the rich—definitely not banana—flavors dance across my tongue.

It was delicious with hints of caramel and... rose? More importantly, the hit of sugar was helpful in calming my frazzled nerves.

Heat scorched along my body, any exposed skin tingling like I'd been dancing a little too close to a fire.

I still didn't turn.

Seriously, though, why was I playing dominance games with a god? There was literally not one good reason, but I couldn't make myself stop.

The second bite of cake was even better than the first, and an involuntary moan escaped from between my lips. *Jesus, Mary, and thank fuck for sweets.*

Honestly, I hadn't even realized I was a foodie until this moment, because I'd never been given the opportunity to really indulge myself.

"Are you done?"

His low growl of words stopped me right in my tracks, his energy rendering me powerless to move or continue eating.

"Not. Quite," I managed to choke out.

His next growl came from deep in his chest, flames crashing in the air around us, and just like that, the room was empty. No doubt about it, the Shadow Beast was both feared and respected to almost ridiculous levels. For good reason.

Some of the hold on my body lessened, and I decided to stop fucking around as I turned toward him. "Oh, hey," I said casually. "Didn't see you there."

Actual smoke escaped his nostrils. Like... fucking smoke. Come on, dude, could you be any more of a demon cliché? Flames erupted in those stunning eyes of his, and there he went, stepping up the cliché just a touch more.

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. You’re perpetually pissed off. Did you need something from me? Or am I just late to my next useless cleaning session?”

In all honesty, if I didn’t get sleep soon, I was probably going to collapse into a puddle of wolf.

“I’ve tracked a shadow creature down,” he said, those plump lips and perfect white teeth capturing my attention as he spoke. He distracted me in the worst way, and I wanted to hate myself for that weakness, but... he was darkly delicious, and I was only human... ish.

He was staring at me, no doubt waiting for my response, and I’d forgotten what he’d even said.

“Uh, you...” *Creature, right?* “A shadow creature! Oh, great. You tracked one down. Let’s go and get it.” I sprang to my feet, graceful thanks to my wolf. “Is it on Earth? Should I grab a jacket?”

He tilted his head to the side, like he was trying to understand me, but the secret to my success was making sure no one ever did.

“Yes, it’s on Earth, deep in Canada. You will need warmer clothing to counteract your weak frailties.”

I smiled. “You are so right, Shadow. Thanks for always thinking of my wellbeing.”

For some reason, don’t ask me why, I went to clap him on the shoulder as I started to move past. The way I would have done when I was sarcastically joking with Simone. But this wasn’t Simone. This was a god, a Shadow Beast, a demon of the darkest worlds.

Just like with Inky, touching him without permission was a terrible idea, but it was too late to stop. The moment my hand landed on his shoulder, fire shot up through my palm, and my screams rang out through the hall. I’d never felt such intense pain like that, and by the time I wrenched my hand away, I expected to find nothing more than a scorched stump at the end of my arm.

There was not a mark on me, though. “What...” I spluttered. “What the fuck was that?”

He’d touched me when he carried me to this shithole, and I had felt no pain.

Shadow’s giant, giant height returned to just one “giant” as he stepped closer, not looking as pissed off as I’d expected. “No one

touches me.”

That was it, his entire explanation. “So you tried to burn me from the inside out?”

He shook his head, curls moving gently with the movement, and I had the most insane urge to reach up and run my hands through them. Like, the fucker had almost broken me a second ago when I’d touched him, but apparently, I was a sucker for pain.

“That’s my power,” he said just as shortly. “If you can’t handle it, don’t step into the fire.”

I snorted. “Right. Gotcha.”

Asshole.

Once I was suited up in jeans, a thick jacket, gloves, and a wool hat—ninety percent certain those clothes had not been in my closet earlier—I walked through the library with Shadow. Inky was close to us again, slinking around its master, but I kind of felt good that it was there. Like an extra backup against these shadow creatures. Just the name itself invoked fear, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to see them and not freak out.

"How does it all work?" I asked as a distraction when we were nearing the hallway to Earth.

"The way you throw out random words and think they form sentences is appalling," Shadow said, his accent a little stronger than usual.

I shrugged. "Maybe you're just not smart enough to keep up with me."

He shook his head but was stopped from replying when someone from Karn stepped closer—not touching him, as was apparently his preference—and whispered to him.

The water beings were still some of the most unusual I'd seen, and that was saying something, considering the demi-fey and Brolder inhabitants. But still, the almost translucent nature of their bodies and how they appeared boneless as they slipped through the smallest of spaces was absolutely fascinating.

"What did they say?" I asked.

Shadow tilted his head in my direction, and since he was back to being eight feet tall, I craned my neck to keep him in my line of sight.

“What makes you think that’s any of your business?” he asked. No growls or grumbles, though, so I was counting that as a win.

I shrugged. “It’s not, I’m sure. But you’re keeping me prisoner, and I’m curious about this place, so I’m going to ask questions.”

His lips actually twitched minutely and for a beat, it appeared he was amused by me. “Learn to ask the right questions, pup, and you just might survive.”

Oh, great. Very reassuring.

He took off then, long-ass legs sending him through the shimmery veil directory and into the Earth hallway. It looked the exact same as last time, a white expanse of hall littered with multiple doors.

“Do these lead to other worlds as well?”

He’d told me something about them the first time, but for the life of me, I couldn’t remember what it was. Fear no doubt had me blocking out those hours.

“No. The true worlds are all off the library,” he said, surprising me by being forthcoming with information. “These doors lead to *other* areas.”

And the information had dried up.

There was no more time for questions; he was moving so fast, I basically had to sprint to keep up with him. I hadn’t caught the way he’d entered this hall the first time, when we’d left Earth for here, and it became obvious why when the white walls just tapered off and then we were standing in a forest. A very thick, snow-covered forest, the early evening air temp dropping dramatically in a split second.

As an icy breeze cut through me, I shivered, thankful that I at least had as much clothing on as I did. Wolf shifters didn’t feel the cold like humans, but when temps were this low, we still suffered without protection.

Shadow paused his overachiever walking pace, lifting his head and closing his eyes as he breathed deeply.

“L-Lost it al-already?” I chattered, my body taking longer than expected to adjust to the rapid temperature change.

He shot me a dark look, and in the exceptionally low light, the fire in his eyes glowed like a million fireflies. “Creatures from the Shadow Realm are not easy to track or contain, but if they’re left to roam free, they’ll raze the Earth, along with its many resources, to the ground in a matter of months.”

I internally flinched. *Fuck*. I’d done that... freed these creatures that could destroy the world.

Stepping closer to him but maintaining enough distance not to get scorched again—even if at this stage a little fire sounded kind of nice—I peered around. “So, are you capable of tracking and containing them?”

He scoffed, like that was up there with my top stupid questions. And considering how he’d reacted to many of them, there was some stiff competition. “You will learn to fear me, little wolf.”

It was my turn to scoff, only it sort of came out like a snort. “Yeah, yeah. So you keep telling me. What’s the point of wanting everyone to fear you, though? Doesn’t seem like a great way to make friends.”

He stopped what he was doing, and even Inky ceased swirling around his arms, settling against his chest instead. “You want us to be friends?”

I shrugged. “I mean, what would it hurt if we’re stuck together for a while trying to track these creatures of darkness down?”

Shadow was the one to move closer, his energy caressing me, sending warmth across my body that was almost as good as an orgasm. “There are five beings in this world I call friend,” he murmured, his accent the strongest I’d ever heard. “Five whom I trust with my life, and for whom I would fight to the death.”

At this point, I was mindless, lost in the thrall of his voice and power, but he didn’t take advantage. Nope. He stepped away, tearing the delicious heat and tingling energy away from me.

“You’re not in that five, wolf.”

He started to walk, and I blinked, trying to bring myself back to reality.

The fact that I wasn’t in the five beings he trusted with his life shouldn’t have come as a surprise to me. I’d known this dude for about one point three seconds, and in that time, it had mainly been

torture, snark, and fear, but for some stupid reason, I'd felt disappointed when I'd heard him say that.

Maybe by the end of my stay with the Shadow Beast, he would raise that number to six. Or maybe he'd murder me into a fiery ball of fur.

The fact that I didn't know which way this would all go was not as terrible as I'd expected it to be. Maybe I'd lost my mind, or maybe... just maybe, this was where my life truly began.

All I had to do was make sure I stayed alive, which meant not pissing off this beast—and sticking around to see what destiny had in store for me.

Speaking of, he was off and running again, tracking the shadow creature down. It wasn't exactly a quick process. We walked for miles, the snow growing thicker underfoot and the air colder on every part of my body exposed to the elements. No matter how much I tried to snuggle into my jacket, most of me still felt frozen, and eventually, when my eyelashes were nothing more than white popsicles, I ground to a halt.

"Are you legitimately fucking with me at this stage?" I growled, my wolf howling inside my chest. "Why are you so useless at tracking?"

Yeah, I was tired. Exhausted, even. And I'd sure as fuck had enough of being dragged halfway across the wilds of Canada, all for some small chance of stumbling upon a shadow creature.

"What did you say?" He sounded genuinely surprised.

"I expected you to be better at tracking than this," I continued carelessly, my entire plan of staying alive lost in my exhausted annoyance. "You're just leading us in fucking circles." I threw my hands in the air. "And what the hell am I even doing here? Why do you need me? Does the one who released the shadows have to return them or something?"

"Yes," he snarled. "The careless, pathetic human who released shadow creatures to destroy Earth has to be the one to claim them back."

Well, shit.

"Sounds like you can't really kill me then," I said, finding the silver lining.

Huge hands, strong and biting, wrapped around my biceps and hauled me up so that my face was at his eight-foot height. I gulped at his snarling expression, perfect in how terrifying and breathtaking it was. “You underestimate both your own importance and that of Earth. I do not need this world. But you... you have friends here. Family even. You’d do well to remember that.”

His advice was solid, as advice went, but I was more consumed by the fact he was again touching me and it didn’t hurt. How extremely unfair was it that he could instigate a one-sided touch relationship between us. Made me want to touch him more than ever, just because it wasn’t allowed.

“I’ve picked up its power trail again,” he said abruptly, breaking through the tightly woven tension between us, dropping me to my feet. “Follow me.”

I wanted to click my heels and salute him, but he was already gone, and my smartass action would be wasted. Oh well. There would most definitely be another time.

Shadow moved with determination now, seemingly locked on to this power trail. My ability to keep up was waning, and as my wolf gently whined in my chest to be free, I wondered if maybe it would be best to shift. I was about to ask him when we rounded a particularly dense set of trees, stepping out to stand at the edge of a frozen lake.

When Shadow Beast had stolen me from Torma, it had been a few weeks into winter, but where we were now was *dead of winter* weather, and I wondered if time was moving faster on Earth than in the Library of Knowledge. Or were we really far north in Canada?

Not that time really mattered when right in the center of the frozen lake was a... *creature* that was so far beyond anything I’d ever seen, it almost stole my breath away.

“That’s it?” I choked out, instinctively stepping closer to Shadow.

“Yes. It’s an abervoq.”

He said it so fast that I barely caught the foreign-sounding name, but I sure as fuck couldn’t miss the creature itself. Standing close to the eight-foot height of Shadow, it was a twisted beast. The top part looked like a bull, with huge horns, a snout, and large eyes. The

bottom half was a shaggy bear with black fur that blended well into the darkness surrounding it.

Darkness wasn't the only thing surrounding it, either. Nope. There were piles of carcasses, *hundreds of them*, filling the lake with death.

"All the animals," I choked out. "It killed them all."

Moose, bears, big cats, small bunnies. Nothing had been spared from its wrath.

"Abervog are blood stealers," Shadow whispered. "Akin to vampires, but it's about more than survival for them. It's a sport. They will try to best each other with the most kills. They're one of the more dangerous creatures that exist in Shadow Realm."

"Great," I replied just as softly, unable to look away from the midnight creature braying at the moon. "How do we stop it?"

I could feel his gaze on me, heavy and considering, and I had to decide which scary creature to stare at. Shadow Beast won.

"Have you figured out how to touch the Shadow Realm again?" he asked me.

I shook my head, mute. Words were in my brain, but I couldn't get them out of my mouth.

"Then we'll have to subdue and contain it in one of the prison rooms back in the library," he said, "until you learn to control your abilities."

I was nodding, all the while wondering about these *abilities*. What abilities did I even have? Wolf shifters should not have been able to *touch the Shadow Realm*, so why could I? And would I learn to do it again fast enough to stop Earth from being consumed?

Shadow stepped out on the ice, growing in size until he was larger than I'd ever seen him, and once again I was wondering if there was an upper limit in his size changes? And would I ever get to see it?

Inky grew with him, the mass of smoky swirls swelling until it was a storm cloud of darkness behind the lord of darkness himself. From my angle, the two of them together was truly terrifying. Weirdly enough, in this moment, I wasn't afraid of Shadow. We were fighting on the same side, and it was kind of nice to have an ally. For a change.

Slipping across the ice after him, Shadow, who was quite the distance ahead of me, was thankfully clearing a path through the dead animals left scattered by the creature. The blood remained, though, painting the ice into a grotesque artwork of red and black slashes. It was clear some of this blood was many days old, while other kills were fresh red spatters of death.

My boots slogged through it, and I knew I had to pick up the pace to reach Shadow's side. It got harder to keep my balance as the blood grew thicker and iced over in parts, turning it into the equivalent of black ice.

"Hold up, dude," I called, almost falling onto the carcass of a black bear. "If you need my help, you're going to have to wait for me."

Shadow didn't turn, but the abervoq did, stopping whatever it was doing, to stare straight into my soul.

Our moment was broken when it roared, leaping into the air and over the top of Shadow to land right before me. The ice cracked under its mammoth weight and I tried to back up, landing on my ass in the blood-soaked ice.

"What the fuck?" I screeched. "You're creepy as hell, abervoq."

It roared again, not liking my rapid judgment of its creepiness.

"No offense," I added in a panic.

It paused, tilting its head to the side, like it was trying to decide what I was and how my blood tasted. I didn't wait for that conclusion, kicking out and connecting to its furry body. I had no idea what to expect when my boot landed. Would this thing have substance or be like those shadows I'd first touched back at Torma?

My boot connected, and the abervoq slid away.

Jumping to my feet, I did the worst thing possible by slipping on some fresh blood, careening across the ice, and *unintentionally* slamming into the shadow creature. On instinct, I reached out, wrapping my arms around it.

Was I actually giving it a bear hug right now?

"Hold it for a moment," Shadow snapped, quickly approaching us.

The abervoq tipped its head back and roared before trying to shake me off like I was errant water trapped in its black fur. "Yep, sure. No problem," I gasped, holding on for life now. "No rush."

Meanwhile, I was cursing him under my breath. How was I even in this situation? And would I live long enough to save Earth today?

At some point, the abervoq must have realized I wasn't its usual prey, and instead of running in fear, I was literally hanging on like a baby koala. It smelled strange as I buried my head against the coarse fur, like smoke and dust and an earthy scent I had no reference for.

I didn't let go despite my fear, and I might have just lucked into a position that was safe from its pawing claws. It appeared to be worried it might slash its own chest, as its blows softened, leaving us in this weird dance of death.

Only one would be the winner today and I was determined for it to be me. No way had I survived everything I had in my life, only to get taken out by a creature that shouldn't even exist on Earth.

When it roared for the fifteenth time in as many seconds, my wolf also started to howl, and so did I—the call of my people ringing out into the dark sky above.

The abervoq stopped moving, stilling unnaturally, and just as I was trying to figure out the next horrendous thing it had planned for me, a clawed hand came up and caressed the back of my head. It was a gentle, almost loving embrace, and I tensed, waiting for the blade to fall.

Like it had for the hundreds of dead animals that currently surrounded us. I mean, there was legitimately nothing cuddly about this creature, and yet, right now, he was... hugging me.

I lifted my head, finally brave enough to view its face, but there was only a second for us to lock gazes before Shadow arrived, tearing the abervoq off me. I went flying as well, landing in a pile of stinky corpses. The frozen environment had muted the smell of death somewhat, but swimming in bodies like this sent a putrid waft of decay and excrement into my nostrils. Close to hurling up my dinner, I scrambled off the corpses, attempting to hold my breath.

Silver lining: I was covered in ice and blood, but at least I was alive.

Focusing on the fight, I blinked at how one-sided it was. One could go as far as saying that the abervoq was having its ass handed to it today. When it was nothing more than a crumbled mess at Shadow's feet, I moved closer.

Dark, glossy eyes stared up at me, and *why the fuck did that look make me so sad?*

"Place your hand on it," Shadow ordered.

I stared at him. "Why?"

His teeth appeared, looking a tiny bit sharper and more lethal than normal. "Just do as you're told."

Fuck you. "Sure, no worries. You should have just said so in the first place."

His jaw was twitching. His eye too, I was pretty sure. Seemed my job here was done.

Reaching down, I pressed my hand to the fur-covered shoulder. Shadow touched me and the creature, and I felt a buzz of his energy, stronger than usual, course through us all.

The abervoq let out one final mournful bellow, and then it was silent. Inky wrapped around the beast, lifting it into the air, and Shadow set off again in his overachiever walk. Meanwhile, I was in a touch of shock, trying to figure out what had just happened.

How had he used me to subdue the creature? It felt like he could have done that on his own. He was hiding something from me, and I sensed that while it still had to do with these shadow creatures, it wasn't about me restraining them. It was something else.

I needed the library. It held answers.

"Sunshine, move your ass!" Shadow yelled without turning around.

“Don’t call me that!” I shouted back, not moving an inch, even though I felt like I was about to freeze to death standing here.

Shadow appeared before me, and *how the fuck had he moved that fast?*

“You don’t like ‘Sunshine’?” he queried, seeming genuinely curious. I rubbed at my neck, wondering if I was going to get whiplash from his mood swings.

I shook my head. “My dad called me ‘Sunny’ because of our family name and my hair. It was a loving nickname, and I loved when he used it. But you... you’re the asshole who kidnapped me, threatened my life, and treated me like your slave. You want me to bow to you, for fuck’s sake. You don’t get to call me cute nicknames.”

He smirked. That curve of his lips was sexy as fuck, and since I rarely saw him with anything resembling a true smile, it about knocked me on my ass. Around Shadow, it was impossible to forget he was a god; there was so much *extra* about him.

My breath caught as he leaned into me. “You’re this bright, bubbly, annoying creature,” he drawled, “whom I can’t seem to kill, even when I want to. So ‘Sunshine’ stays, and if you have a problem with it, too fucking bad.”

I scowled. “Why do you talk like a human, cursing and shit like that?”

His smile had vanished, but his eyes were still amused, the red and gold vibrant. “I have lived among humans many times throughout the ages, keeping an eye on my wolves. I’ve adapted to every language and age. You’ll find I am very good at adaption.”

Before the smart reply that was hovering on the edge of my tongue could emerge, he reached out and snatched me up into his arms, hauling me over his shoulder in the exact same manner he had the first time he’d captured me. This time, there was no pain or unease as warmth surrounded me, chasing the chills away. Before I could protest being carried—I hated being held like this—we were out of the cold and back in the long hallway between worlds.

“I can’t enter this realm without your help, can I?” I said, figuring it out when he dropped me to my feet.

His expression was closed off again, and whatever humor had been in his gaze before was long gone. “Keep asking the right

questions...”

He turned and walked away, heading toward where Inky and the shadow creature waited for him. “‘Sunshine and Shadow’ sounds like a cute couple’s name!” I shouted after him. “Should we go by ‘Shadowshine’ or ‘Sundow’ for short?” I caught a glimpse of flaming eyes before he disappeared from sight, taking the creature with him.

After our frozen adventures, Shadow disappeared, and I spent the next few days perusing the library, studying the directory, and sweeping the *damn* floors. Gaster was still a familiar, helpful, smiling face, and it almost felt as if we were growing toward being true friends. He'd even taken to having lunch with me occasionally.

Today, he was busy with a new disaster. Someone from Bolder had given into their animal instincts, and when the female had not reciprocated, there'd been a bit of a scuffle. Apparently, in Bolder, it was touch first, ask permission later, but they were encouraged to fight if they weren't interested. I was slowly learning the rules, and this was one I'd seen up close and personal today.

The half-horse male and half-bear female had ended up destroying about three rows of books, and now the goblins were frantically returning their sacred place to order, overseen by Gaster.

Which left me eating lunch alone.

"Why do you sweep?"

I jerked my head up, blinking at the angel-faced chick who still always sat a few places down from me. After a quick glance around to make sure she was talking to me—even though I was the only idiot sweeping a self-cleaning library—I finally answered her.

"On orders of the Shadow Bastard—I mean Beast. The Shadow Beast."

Her lips twitched as she played with her food. I'd never seen her take an actual bite despite the fact that we sat next to each other almost every day. I'd also never seen her in the library itself. She only appeared to come to this food hall and didn't even eat.

"He's trying to break you."

I snorted before going back to eating the delicious chocolate cake in front of me. "He has no idea what it would take to break me."

Her gaze was still on me, the weight of her power solid and somewhat familiar now. And it felt like a huge step forward that she'd taken the time to speak to me. Even if it had only been two sentences.

The next few days, she wasn't at lunch, but she was on my mind. The enigma that was angel face. Maybe the next time she talked to me, I'd ask her some questions as well.



"THE MASTER HAS REQUESTED that you join him for dinner tonight," Gaster said, smiling up at me as I swept between a row of books. At least I had been sweeping until that statement, and then the broom clattered toward the floor.

Inky, my constant companion, caught it before it hit the floor. "Thanks, dude," I said with a smile, and Inky swelled to its larger size, jiggling as it went.

I'd been spending a lot of quality time with a smoke blob lately and was starting to think of Inky as a friend. Something I was in short supply of here.

Turning away, I forced a smile on my face "Why does he want me to go to dinner?" I asked Gaster.

He looked taken aback. "Mera, it's a great honor to dine with the master. You should be excited."

I shook my head. "And yet I'm not. Can I call in sick? It's that time of the month, you know?"

In shifter talk, *that time of the month* could mean a full moon shift or I was about to shed the lining of my uterus. Either one worked if it got me out of dinner with Shadow.

Inky jiggled, laughing, and I narrowed my eyes. “You’re no help, buddy. You love that overgrown fireball. For once, I’d like an ally in my corner.”

Gaster and Inky continued to stare at me like they could not for the life of them understand why I wasn’t on Team Shadow. Fighting the urge to smack my hand against my forehead, I spun on my heel and stormed off toward my room. Entering the Beast’s lair, a sense of calm descended over me. There was something innately comforting about the dark wood library, with its always-burning fire, plethora of books, and masculine but not overwhelming décor. Since Shadow’s presence had been scarce, I was starting to think of it as mine. Even going as far as trying to research ways to kill a Shadow Beast so I could keep his lair.

What can I say? Shifters were possessive of anything they considered theirs, and this library had easily fallen into that category.

For the first time in days, Torin’s face flashed through my mind, and my wolf let out a soulful cry that had my eyes burning. Wolves were usually the most possessive of their true mates, but Torin and I had been doomed from the start.

At least staying busy helped to keep that asshole off my mind and ease the cracks in my soul from his rejection. Part of me longed to see him one last time—for closure or maybe just curiosity’s sake. Torin was ingrained in my energy, my soul, and purging him was going to take a fuck ton of time. In the meantime, Shadow and his shenanigans were a good distraction.

Back in my room, I stared into an ever-changing armoire. Tonight, it was filled with evening gowns, clearly in anticipation of Shadow’s dinner requisition. Reaching out, I ran my hand over the silky material. There was a gorgeous range of colors, and I would have chosen many of these outfits if left to my own devices. Not that I’d ever had an occasion to need any dress this fancy.

At first, I gravitated toward a modest black gown, with a sweetheart neckline and ankle-length hem. Staring at it briefly, I was about to pull it from the hanger when a surge of annoyance filled me. Shadow, once again, was forcing his will on me. He didn’t ask if I wanted to have dinner with him; he just demanded.

I would not slink in there like a demure mouse, under the thumb of her captor. Nope. Fuck that. The black dress was returned and in its place I chose a fiery red number that would normally clash with my hair. But, in this case, it was actually a perfect ombre match, starting dark at the plunging neckline before fading to a light strawberry near the hem.

Flawless. Not that I expected anything less from this magical place.

So my dress was sorted, and I was going all out with the rest as well. For the first time in days, my hair would come out of its scraggly bun, and I'd finally break out some of the fancy makeup in my drawers. Shadow wanted me at this dinner, and he was going to get me. Every fucking primped and perfected inch.

It was time to remind Shadow that I was no one's pet.

“**W**hat the fuck?” I growled, dropping the makeup brush with a clatter onto the bench.

How did other women make this shit look so easy? I was starting to sympathize with Simone and her braids. Hair and makeup were hard, and unless I wanted to show up looking like a clown, it was best to just wipe everything off and start again.

By the time I was done, my face was mostly bare, with just a little darkening across my eyeline, some mascara, a touch of red on the cheeks, and deep rich red lipstick. That would have to do.

My hair, though, was working for me for once... Thank the Shad

—
Actually, screw that. I was thanking no one.

Perfect curls cascaded down my back as I slipped into the red gown, and when I couldn't get the zip secured, I called for Inky, who was waiting in my bedroom.

“Inky! Buddy, can you get in here and help?”

The swirls of dark smoke slid under the door and I tried not to freak at how creepy it looked. *Inky is our friend. Or frenemy at least.*

“I can't get the zip done up,” I said, talking to smoke like it was a living, breathing entity. “Can you help me?”

Icy chills traced across the bare skin of my back—I couldn't wear a bra with this style—as Inky drifted closer. When Inky touched me there was no pain, just an icy electric zap over my skin. It had no

issue zipping me up, and just like all the other clothing from here, the dress fit as if it had been custom made.

One absolute truth of my time spent here—there was no way I could go back to buying my clothes off the rack.

With a final glance in the mirror, I smiled at my reflection. I seriously had to dress up more than once every twenty-plus years. Don't get me wrong. Jeans, shirts, and mom buns were my jam, but there was something to be said about stepping into some glamour on occasion.

Tonight was my night.

Pulling on the matching heels that had been provided, I wobbled around for a minute before finding my balance. When I was ready, I left my room and entered the lair. It was fitting that a beast would have a "lair" and I wondered if there would come a point in which I'd get to see his *real* beast. Did Shadow actually have a furrier side?

Walking toward the veil, I realized I had no idea where this dinner was being held. The only place for eating that I knew of was in the hall, and I doubted that was what Shadow had meant when he'd had Gaster demand my presence at dinner. Especially not with the style of clothing I'd been provided.

When I neared the fireplace, I heard a deep burst of laughter and about died. My hand dropped to my stomach, trying to calm what felt like a thousand butterflies having a rave. *Laughter?*

I'd never heard Shadow actually laugh, not in an open and relaxed manner like that. It was disarming, and enticing, and completely unnerving. Who was with him causing this sort of happiness?

Unable to help myself, curiosity hammering in my chest, my stomach still a mess, I moved forward, my heels clicking on the wood floors as I walked. The heat of the fire reached me first, every one of my senses expanded to try to pick up a new scent or unnatural energy.

But there was nothing.

Whoever was with Shadow was as powerful as the beast himself, able to mask their power with ease. Inky wrapped around me suddenly, and I ground to a halt. "What?" I whispered. "Is it dangerous?"

I was released immediately, and before I had time to question it again, Shadow was looming before me. The warmth I'd thought was fire had actually been him. His presence had a liquid heat trailing down my spine to settle in my six-inch-heeled feet.

Shadow's gaze was heavy, the gold in his eyes like a burst of sunshine, matching the burning flames of his power. "You're late," he said. How two words could sound so ominous, I had no idea. "We don't like to be kept waiting."

I pasted on my broadest smile, praying the red lipstick wasn't smeared on my teeth. "A woman is never late, Shadow. We arrive precisely when we mean to."

Thank you, fictional character, for the perfect quote once again—I'd been waiting years to use that one. Shadow shook his head like he couldn't for the life of him figure out what the fuck I was going on about.

So the usual with us.

"Wait, *we*?" I burst out. "Who is *we*?"

His teeth flashed in the low light of the nearby fire, and I had the distinct feeling I was about to be eaten by the big, bad wolf. "It's time to figure out what you are, Sunshine. Outside of a pain in my ass, that is."

I crossed my arms. "Look. Being a pain in the ass is my calling in life. I'm never going to stop, not even for you."

His eyes drifted down to where my arms were firmly secured under my free-boobing tits. This position pushed them to new heights, and in a low-cut dress like this, my nipples were about to salute the world.

We both stared at the impressive display, and in all honesty, I felt no need to be shy and cover up. My body was the only one I had, and I would wear that fucker with pride. She kept me strong and moving, and I was grateful every day I was still alive.

"So, gonna take me to dinner?" I finally said, cutting through the heavy tension.

Shadow's focus returned to my face, his jaw a little more rigid, his eyes blazing. Both of which probably had nothing to do with my tits and everything to do with him being annoyed by my existence. It

wasn't as if he'd noticed me in a sexual way before now, treating me more like I was a pet he had to temporarily keep alive.

That was made all the more obvious when he clicked his fingers for me to follow as he walked with Inky toward the couches. Couches that were not empty.

Swallowing down my shock, I halted on the edge of the fire's glow, trying to take them all in. I'd expected there would be one guest—since he'd said *we*—but five males were seated around the fire, casually chatting, crystal glasses filled with a deep red liquid in their hands.

There was a low, hypnotic rumble filling the air as they talked, and I couldn't understand a word of it. Their lyrical language swirled and surged in the oddest cadences, and I was desperate to know the words. Unlike the Library of Knowledge, though, here in the lair, there was no magical translation system. A true shame because whatever they were discussing had them super animated.

Even still, the simple act of staring at each of these truly spectacular specimens of the male species was probably more than enough entertainment for the night.

"She's here," Shadow said, and almost immediately, the others shut up and turned our way. "This is Mera, the shifter I was telling you about."

Five sets of eyes landed on me, and in a less confident body, one would have melted to the floor at the intense level of power and sex appeal in a small area. Demure wasn't my style, so I decided to just proceed as normal. "Where has Shadow been hiding you five?" I said, blatantly admiring each and every one of them...

Wait... five? Shadow had told me he trusted *five* beings. Looked like I was about to meet Shadow's friends. Lucky me.

All of them got to their feet, and as they moved closer, Shadow crowded into my back. I had no idea why he was so close to me, but I was too distracted to worry about his weird behavior.

The first one to approach was a good head over six feet tall, dressed in long, silver robes, adorned with what looked like real jewels of varying color and size. He had shoulder-length hair, and it was so icy white, that if snow drifted onto the strands, it would blend in.

In actuality, he was, in his entirety, built in shades of silver and light, with silvery eyes—more elongated and cat-like than a human’s—unnaturally glittering as they stared without blinking. He also had slightly pointed ears, the tapered peaks sticking out from the sides of his partly braided hair.

“I’m Len of the Silver Lands,” he said in perfect English, reaching out to me in the human gesture of shaking hands. The moment we touched, tingles of ice ran across my skin, his power surging into me. It didn’t hurt and wasn’t invasive enough for me to jerk away, but it felt like more than just a mere exchange of energy.

“Silver Lands,” I repeated, my hand still firmly in his grip.

He smiled, and it was how I imagined an archangel looked right before they cut someone’s head off in a vengeance quest. “Yes, I’m a prince of the silver providence in Faerie.”

Ah, right.

I decided to keep a tally.

Friend One: Len, the silver fae prince.

Len’s gaze was full of mischief and amusement as he released me, and I didn’t miss the way his gaze went straight to Shadow. Len shook his head minutely, and I was guessing that was his signal to the beast that he couldn’t read me, either.

Good.

Next up was Len’s complete opposite. Even taller, he was broad and powerful in every way, dressed in black leather pants and a long-sleeved bone-colored shirt. His dark hair was almost shaved to his head in an easy-to-manage style.

As he approached me, the very deep, dark blue of his eyes remained locked on my face, like he was trying to read me from afar, and I spent just as much time examining him because *he was just so damn pretty to look at*.

I mean, gods, he had eyelashes that one could see from outer-fucking-space.

“I’m Reece, from the Desert Lands.”

He didn’t touch me as Len had done, but he did stand close enough that we were all but touching. Far too close for strangers, but for some reason, it didn’t bother me. Tilting my head back, I tried not

to sound breathless. “Desert Lands, hey? Let me guess... you’re a prince as well?”

Reece didn’t smile. Something told me this guy smiled even less than Shadow, and *why was I so into these dark and damaged assholes?*

“He’s a deity,” Len piped up from where he’d seated himself again. “Competes with our Shadow in power. And broodiness.”

My lips twitched at that, and I already had Len slotted into the smartass friend category. Every group had one—the clown. And while that didn’t mesh at all with his regal looks, it fit his personality perfectly.

Friend two: Reece, the desert deity, was harder to categorize, but I had a sneaking suspicion he was the muscle.

The next one to approach was around six feet tall, with the most defined physique I’d ever seen on a man. Easy to tell since he was wearing the equivalent of male boxer briefs—and nothing else.

“I’m Alstair,” he said, his voice a whisper across my senses, like a casual breeze on a summer’s day.

I placed my hand in his, and it was cool in a different way to Len’s. Soothing, making my head spin as I was reminded of days by the creek.

“You’re from Karn,” I breathed.

Alstair nodded. “Yes.”

I shook my head. “You look nothing like the inhabitants I’ve seen from your world.”

Alstair was far from the androgynous figures I’d previously observed from the water world. And while his skin had a slight blue tinge to it, it was without the translucence of his brethren. His hair was my favorite part, though, a tangle of green and blue curls that sprang across his head. They matched his eyes, which were almost completely aqua, the smallest pupil dot in the center.

“I’m a warrior of my kind,” Alstair said softly, and once again the simple act of him speaking was calming. “A rare race who is born into their position, tasked with keeping our people safe.”

Friend three: Alstair, the water warrior.

The cool and calm in this hotheaded group.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” I said softly, adopting his manner unconsciously.

“And you,” he returned before he walked back to take his seat near Len. Reece hadn’t returned to the seats yet, and instead remained at Shadow’s side, the two giants in the room standing at my back, making sure I at no point felt completely relaxed.

I could feel Shadow’s eyes on me, watching and assessing as each one of his powerful friends approached me. It made sense that these would be his trusted friends, each of them strong and powerful. His equals... or almost.

The second-to-last was definitely from Honor Meadows, and his appearance answered my question about whether there were male figures there. And just like the females of his world, this male was a sight to behold.

Pure gold wings on his back, he wore a simple pair of black trousers, leaving the rest of his golden skin on show. His long, honey brown hair was braided in a thick and complexly interwoven style that no human could have achieved. And his eyes were so dark, it almost looked like his iris and pupil were one.

I’m Galleli.

Those two words landed in my head as I looked around frantically, trying to figure out what the hell was happening.

“Galli never speaks out loud,” Len called out, the unofficial MC for this meet and greet. “You’ll get used to him being in your head.”

I gulped. “Can you read my thoughts?”

He shook his head. *Not unless you allow me access to your mind. This is simply me sending my words in the manner most comfortable for me.*

Not sure if it was comfortable for *me*, but I wasn’t about to tell him that.

“What’re your special skills in Honor Meadows?”

It seemed all of Shadow’s friends held positions of power and worship in their worlds, and I was sure this dude was no different.

I am one of the Chosen. We are gifted with extra power and skills and are considered to be oracles of a sort. Images from the future and past will come randomly to us.

“Like a psychic?”

Those black eyes bore into me. *Nothing at all like a psychic.*

Okay, then.

Friend four: Galleli—not a psychic.

He turned abruptly and walked away, and he was now slotted firmly into the spot of reticent talker. In more ways than one.

And as spectacular as he was to look at, he also made me feel uneasy in a way the others who'd come before him hadn't. There was a repressed fury simmering below the surface that could erupt at any time, and I decided then and there to keep my distance from that one in particular.

The final of the friend group approached, and when he stepped closer, I was surprised to see he was the most classically human in his beauty. Bronze skin, striking green eyes, tousled blond hair shorter on the sides with a little more length on top. But while he looked like a genetically blessed human, his energy was far from normal.

"I'm Lucien."

The moment he touched my hand, a jolt of icy electricity hit me, and I gasped. This made him smile, and I caught a glimpse of sharp incisors before they disappeared from view again.

"Valdor," I guessed.

He nodded. "Why, yes. Nice to see you're both clever and stunningly beautiful." He leaned in closer. "I'm a vampire master from Valdor, and I think you should ditch the grumpy beast and run away with me. I would shower you with jewels and more treasures than you could ever need."

Friend five: Lucien, master vampire.

The smooth-talker—I'd been waiting for him.

"Come on," he said in a charming manner, bringing his face close to mine, bending his head to press a kiss to my hand.

"Enough," Shadow demanded, interrupting for the first time. "You're here to help me work out what the fuck she is, not seduce her."

I snorted. "And I thought it was hard in Torma to lose my virginity. Apparently, it's going to be even harder here..."

There was dead silence as I trailed off, six sets of eyes locked on me, some wide with shock, others with interest.

“Are you trying to tell me...” Shadow started. “That you’re untouched?”

The laughter burst out of me before I could stop it. “Definitely not. I’ve touched myself more times than I can count.”

More silence, although there were a few smiles around the room now—Len and Lucien in particular.

Shadow leaned closer. “Don’t deliberately misunderstand me. You know what I’m asking... you’re untouched by another?”

Wow, this was not the sort of conversation I’d expected to be having in a room full of powerful men. Since it was none of their business, I just shoved past Shadow, taking care not to touch him before dropping into a squishy sofa.

“One of you assholes better get me food,” I said grumpily. “Since this is supposed to be a dinner.”

There was laughter, although Reece and Shadow, who were still doing their stoic enforcer thing, remained silent.

“She’s legitimately not afraid of us,” Len said, shaking his head. He leaned forward in his chair. “Why are you not afraid of us, lamb?”

I mimicked his movements, crossing my legs as I leaned forward, no doubt flashing everyone way more cleavage than they’d expected to see tonight. “I’ve been tortured by powerful men my entire life. Growing up in my pack as an outcast, there’s very little that wasn’t inflicted on me, outside of rape. At some point, I had to stop fearing my demise and start living for every day I got to remain on Earth. I choose to embrace my power and strength—and never show my fear. This is who I am now, and I won’t change for anyone. Not even you six scary motherfuckers.”

Len was no longer smiling. Instead, he was staring at me like I’d just stripped butt naked to wave batons and do a cheer.

Reece took his first step from Shadow’s side, watching me closely in a way he hadn’t until this moment. He didn’t say anything, and while he still looked somewhat pissed, much of the tense anger had left his jaw. My words had thawed a little of his chill. Very little.

“You don’t need to fear us,” Alstair told me quietly, drawing my attention from Reece.

Shadow grumbled. “Speak for yourself. I’m still trying to figure out if my best move is just to kill her and forget about Earth. Would save

me a shitload of trouble.”

I flipped him off, because why not, right?

His eyes darkened, and as he started toward me, he grew in size.

“Ah, fuck. She’s gone and done it now.” Lucien groaned. “Shadow is going to beast out and we’ll all have to pick up the pieces. Just leave her alone, man,” he called out. “She’s too beautiful to tear apart.”

“Silence,” Reece demanded. “This is Shadow’s property, and he will choose what to do with it.”

So I flipped him off as well because *fuck you, dude*.

Len was in hysterics at this point, half out of his chair as he held his stomach and laughed. “Fuck.” He snorted. “I hope Shadow brings home more stray humans for us to play with. This is the most interesting night I’ve had in ages.”

“Enough!” Shadow rumbled, and it was almost impossible to understand him with so much beast in his words. “Get the fuck out. Now.”

His friends didn’t sweat his mood swings, taking their time getting to their feet and finishing off their drinks. Half of them waved or saluted goodbye and left the lair. The other half probably thought Shadow was going to murder me tonight and they’d never see me again.

And they might be right.

Once the room was near empty, I noticed Reece was still there, posed in what I was dubbing *his* look. Arms crossed, face expressionless, eyes stripping me to the core.

He was most definitely Shadow *the second*.

"It's fine, Reece," Shadow the first rumbled. "I just need to put a wolf shifter in her place."

Shadow *one* and *two* exchanged a brief look, and it was clear that enough years of friendship existed between them for wordless communication.

Reece shot me a commiserating stare but said nothing else as he left the room.

Alone with Shadow, everything felt a touch scarier; the beast looked like he was fighting an internal battle. "Why that dress?" he finally bit out. "Red is a trigger for me. In many ways."

Great. I glanced at the long, red curls that were trailing across my shoulders. "That wasn't in the rule book," I told him. "You should print a copy for the next person you kidnap."

"You obey rules?" he asked, some of the fury and rage in his voice fading.

I shrugged. "Only if I agree with them. It's not like I'm trying to be completely obstinate for no reason, but I have a mind of my own, and I choose to use it."

He was in front of me in a heartbeat, too fast for me to even anticipate the death that was coming for me. Despite my bravado, I

trembled as he leaned down to trace his hands over my body without actually touching me. I couldn't breathe, or think, or even speak as his heat caressed me, sliding across my bare skin and down under my dress. The tips of my nipples were so hard now that just the sensation of the silk against them had me biting back a groan.

There had to be something fundamentally wrong with me, that even while I was trembling with fear, anticipating my last breath, part of me was turned on by the brute of a beast. The taste of his power on my tongue was intoxicating, my legs clenching as *need* filled me.

My wolf whimpered in my chest, and it was a ghostly echo of how she'd reacted to Torin. Shadow was enticing to both of us.

"Something on your mind, Sunshine?" he asked, another wave of heat rolling through me.

"Fuck. You," I managed to choke out, thankfully not sounding as turned on as I was.

His chuckle was dark and unamused. "You don't do that, apparently, and maybe, just maybe, I've figured out exactly how to get you to fall into line."

Yeah, no. Never happening. I mean, I liked dick—in theory—as much as the next heterosexual woman, but I would not be that chick. Not today.

It took every ounce of willpower I possessed to step away. "You'll never tame me that way," I told him, proud of myself for not letting a single waver enter my words. "I will never break."

Bend, yes. But breaking was a whole different story.

I took off then, sprinting as fast as I could in a dress with heels. For once, Inky wasn't right on my tail, and I was grateful that I might have a night alone. I needed a moment away from them. From the intensity.

When I reached my room, I slammed the door behind me, leaning back and breathing deeply. A few minutes later, I knew Shadow wasn't coming after me, and that had to mean one thing: his suggestion had been a test. Another one.

I couldn't tell if I'd failed or not, and even though his power cascading over my naked skin had me wanting to climb that beast and fuck him until I screamed, I was proud of myself for saying *no*.

The balance of power was already too skewed between us, and if he ever took me completely, he'd own me in ways that I couldn't allow.

Instead, I would do what any strong, proactive, horny-as-fuck woman should: get myself off tonight and tomorrow find someone else to lose my virginity to. Taking the power from Shadow completely.

He'd made a big mistake using his power against me that way. It had woken a dark and dangerous need I'd been suppressing for too long.

Stumbling into the shower, I tore the dress off, using my shifter strength when I couldn't reach the zipper. It was a shame to ruin something so beautiful, but it had been ruined by the events of tonight anyway, and I needed it off.

When I got under the water, I turned it all the way to freezing, letting my head hang against the wall. The tremble in my limbs hadn't subsided; the fire in my gut burned hotter than ever, and I wondered if maybe it was close to the full moon on Earth. My blood had never boiled like this before.

Spinning to place my back against the wall, I slowly slid to sit on the floor of the small shower stall. The icy water was like fire against my overly sensitive skin, and my body ached, a heavy thrum beating steadily between my thighs. Closing my eyes, I clenched my teeth.

My right hand slid across my breasts, playing with my nipples; gently at first, before I got a little rougher. The pain was a welcome relief as a moan escaped. At the same time, my other hand skated between my thighs, sliding into the liquid pooling there.

At the first stroke of my fingers across my clit, I moaned again, head pushing back against the wall, while I worked over the tight nub at my center. Whether it was the full moon or Shadow Beast, I was completely lost to the pleasure, and if he'd have been the one touching me, I might have promised him anything.

"Fucking hell," I sobbed, my fingers moving faster as I slid them inside my pussy.

Shadow's face crossed my mind; the way he'd kept his dominating stare locked on me all night, through each of his friend's

introductions. So darkly enticing, all the while stripping me bare in the almost-there dress...

I cried out as the orgasm slammed into me, with so much force that as I tried to suck in enough air to not die, I almost choked on the water streaming down my face.

The pleasure lasted so much longer than usual, and when I was done, I felt fucked in more ways than one. Mostly, it was the knowledge that I couldn't let that happen again.

No longer would my orgasms have anything to do with Shadow.

“S till sweeping, I see.”

This was the third time Angel Face had spoken directly to me. For once, I was the cranky one, my wolf clawing at my chest as the need to shift pressed against me.

I snarked back. “Still moving food about your plate without ever putting any of it in your mouth, I see.”

She smiled, dropping the bread she’d been tapping against her plate.

“We don’t need to consume food in my world, but I love the scent, so I sit here to enjoy it as much as I can.”

I stared at her. “You don’t eat?”

She chuckled at the obvious incredulity in my tone. “We don’t eat food, no. This is not what sustains my race, but it smells so enticing.”

I slammed my hands on the table. “Are you shitting me?”

Amusement danced through her stunning eyes. “Humans have always been my favorites when it comes to a delightful turn of phrase.” She regarded me closely. “And you... You are special.”

I sniffed. “Trust me, I’m not special. I’m just bubbly. All of you supernatural creatures are so broody that when someone comes along who genuinely enjoys life, you think she’s some unusual creature that needs to be studied.”

Angel shook her head. “No, it’s something more than that. From the first time you sat near me, not even realizing that no one ever

sits in my section, I felt a buzz of energy from you. My curiosity over you has grown with each lunch we share...”

My wolf chose that moment to surge forward, sending me into a half-shift before I got her under control. Shooting to my feet, I gripped the edge of the table. “Not to be rude, because I’m loving our new bonding moment, but do you know of a place I can shift and run?”

She didn’t miss a beat. “I do, actually. Would you like to visit my home?”

I blanched. “Is that okay? I mean... I was warned not to leave here.”

She was standing too, a head above me, looking like the goddess to beat all goddesses. One would feel insecure if one weren’t in the middle of fighting her wolf soul.

“Are you afraid, little wolf?” she asked me.

Another shudder and wave of energy. “No. Just... take me to...”

No more words were needed. Angel wrapped her hand around mine, and then we were in the library, standing before the beautiful door of the meadows. Inky, who must have been nearby even though I hadn’t seen him in the dining hall, swelled up into a huge mist to try to block us.

Angel waved it away. “I will watch over her. You know you’re not welcome in Honor Meadows, and I don’t need to remind you that it’s not in your best interest to get in my way.”

Inky started sparking, synapses visible inside the smoke, but Angel showed no fear. She just waved it aside. “We’ll return soon,” she said, opening the door.

The brightest light I’d ever seen had me shutting my eyes briefly, and I wondered how this was my life now. About to step through a random doorway into a new world, with a being who had done little more than grunt and glare at me for weeks.

But none of that mattered. This was my first taste of freedom in a long time, and my wolf and I were so ready for it.

Honor Meadows had a calming feel in the air, the light and warmth reminding me of late summer in Torma. It smelled good too, giving me vibes of grandma’s cookies, fresh-cut grass, and rain lingering on the horizon. Maybe this land was all about providing the

perfect ambience to feel at peace. Because that was exactly what was happening.

“This is my home,” Angel said, waving her hands to encompass the pristine surroundings, which included a long field dotted with flowers in shades of muted gold. “You can run here as your wolf,” she said, her face more relaxed than I’d ever seen. “I’m the last of my family line and will fly above to keep you safe.”

On instinct, I hugged her. Again, there had to be something wrong with me to keep doing this, but thankfully, Angel’s power didn’t shock me into a new reality. Our energies met and mingled, and I felt a buzz across my skin. It was both stimulating and soothing at the same time.

When I pulled back, I waited for her scowl to return, but instead, she looked upon me with wonder. “Unusual,” she murmured, but it was too late to ask more as I lost the battle with my beast.

A howl built in my throat until I threw my head back and released it to the world. There was only time to strip my clothes off before the change broke my bones and rebuilt me as a wolf. A very excited wolf who felt right at home in this land, prancing and yipping as she butted against Angel’s legs in a typical canine way.

We took off, racing through the light, fresh air. It was obviously different to Earth; we could even move faster, with far less fatigue. When I bounced high across the ground for the second time, Angel laughed.

“We have less gravity,” she shouted from above, her wings fully expanded as she stayed with me. “Run like the wind, wolf walker.”

I did, and it was the best time I’d had in... as long as I could remember. Just me, my wolf, and a guardian angel above. I never did reach the end of her golden grassed field, and I never saw anything else in this land, not even a speckle in the saffron-hued sky.

When we were exhausted and the clawing need to run had faded, we flopped down, resting our head on our paws, allowing the dual nature of our minds to drift as we enjoyed this perfect temperature. After a short doze, we woke to find Angel sitting nearby, staring out into the distance. As always, she looked beautiful beyond this world, and... a little sad.

“Ready to return home, little wolf?” she asked when I lifted my head. “The beast will be raging, so it’s probably best we don’t annoy him any further.”

I nodded, getting back to my feet and following her as she opened a doorway into the library. Like Shadow, those with access seemed to be able to just open a doorway wherever they wanted.

She didn’t follow me through, and I glanced back to find her framed in the door, the glow of Honor Meadows behind her. “See you at lunch,” she said, and then the door was firmly closed.

Not feeling any great urge to return to my human form—and we’d forgotten our clothing anyway—I decided to give my wolf more time to stretch her legs. We padded through the shelves, going where instinct led, and it was nice until I caught sight of Inky up ahead, swelled almost to the size of one wall. It was still in “pissed off mode” and I had a sneaking suspicion I should lie low for a minute. Give it and Shadow time to calm down.

Ducking my head, I darted through the first set of shelves, following the wall until I made it back to the front veil, exiting into the white hallway. My wolf was somewhat in control at the minute, and she had the urge to get back to Torin... to the one we were bonded through fate.

I, on the other hand, had no such fucking urge, but the wolf was leading the way.

Before we reached the point where you could step to Earth, a white door distracted us. Or my wolf, more accurately, since I was confused as fuck about what we were doing.

She pressed her nose against it, and without any effort, it sprang open. When we moved inside, it was dark, just the light from the doorway splashing through, but not enough for me to see deeper than a couple of feet.

We should leave.

My mental urge was ignored by the stubborn bitch that was my wolf, and as she stepped farther inside, I let my own curiosity have wings—seemed I didn’t really want to stop her anyway.

As we padded deeper into the room, the darkness cloaked us completely, and I knew we weren’t alone. I felt something hovering

just out of sight, and it was only when a familiar bellow shattered the silence that everything became startlingly clear.

The abervoq. The shadow creature. My wolf had walked us right into its prison, and she was now beelining for it, head thrown back as she howled in return. *What the actual fuck?*

Our eyes adjusted enough that its large shape came into view, its limbs restrained by thick chains. And still, the wolf padded closer without hesitation, and then, to my fucking shock, she lay down against the fur of the creature. The abervoq let out one final bellow, but it didn't claw us to death. Instead, a paw draped across us, almost protectively, and once again, safe from the wrath of the Shadow Beast, we slept.

The roars woke me.

No longer in my wolf form, my disorientation lasted a few seconds before the memories returned: running in Honor Meadows with Angel, running from Inky, and then hiding out...

I jerked up, or at least tried to, but there was a heavy furred arm draped over me, holding me in place. *The abervoq! Fuck. Shit. Fuck!* What the hell was my wolf thinking when she'd escaped right into this cell, and... how was I not dead?

The arm stirred, lifting enough that I could roll out from under it. Stumbling my way back toward the door, I eventually found the wall, groping across it for the exit. When I pulled it open, light filling the small space again, I let out a low shriek as Shadow stepped out of the, uh, *shadows* and made his presence known. "Oh, hi there," I chattered, my nerves shot. "What're you doing here?"

His body vibrated—there was no other way to describe it—and a new illumination filled the room as flames licked up over his skin in the shape of a burning wolf. *Oh, my shifter.* I blinked, unable to tear my eyes from the burning wolf that Shadow wore almost like a façade above his true self.

"Fire demon wolf," I breathed.

I'd heard the rumors of the Shadow Beast shifting into a fire demon, but I'd thought they were exaggerated tales. There were so many stories passed down about the beast, some saying he was ten feet tall, others that he ate the souls of the dead. They spoke of his

fire eyes and sharp claws. One story blended into another until it was hard to keep them straight.

Considering how close some of these were to the actual truth, one had to wonder about the soul eating one, too.

“You seem upset,” I said stupidly. Understatement of the year right there, but I had no idea what to say to calm this situation.

Silence.

Not a word.

If the cut of his jaw was any indication—oh, and that flaming demon beast—he was too pissed to speak.

“My wolf kind of got the best of me,” I added, quieting my words, even as my own annoyance grew. I didn’t need a fucking psycho beast losing his shit because I didn’t do exactly what he wanted. When words still weren’t forthcoming, I attempted to step around him, tired and ready to wash off the last twenty-four hours.

Shadow did his instant movement, appearing in front of me, the glow of his fiery wolf brighter than ever in the near darkness. “What is your fucking problem, dude?” I snapped. “We went for a run as a wolf, she decided to play with the shadow creature, and then we took a nap. No. Big. Deal.”

He wrapped his hands around me, palms so huge, they covered half my upper body. As he yanked me up and against him, I flinched at the rush of heat that crashed into me. There was no pain, and instead of pushing him away, like any normal person would, I reacted the way a recently shifted—horny and naked—wolf would.

I wrapped my legs around him and pulled him even closer.

Shadow’s face descended to mine, the fire of his demon wolf disappearing. “You belong to me,” he said, his voice nothing more than a rumble of fury and demon. “Not to Honor Meadows. Not to the shadow creatures. Not to the wolf pack. Not to any of them.” His voice was louder than I’d ever heard. “No other can lay claim to you while I do. You would do well to remember that, wolf.”

His lips were so close, and as each forceful word emerged, they grew even closer. My body ached as I pressed myself harder against him. It wasn’t like I’d missed the words he’d said—his dominant, possessive claiming—but in that moment, I didn’t give a fuck.

“What do you want from me?” I breathed. “If you think you have a claim over me, then what the hell are you going to do with it?”

Was I insane to challenge him? Yep. Was I going to do it anyway?

Obviously.

“I’m going to figure out what you are,” he growled. “Then, when I figure that out... let’s just say, your usefulness to me will have run out.”

Ouch. Well, okay then.

The abervoq roared from behind us, different to his usual bellow—melancholier, if anything. I had a sense it was sad that I’d left, and still chained to the wall, it could not reach me.

Shadow’s eyes darted over my head toward the bellowing creature. “I will figure you out,” he warned me. “And when I do, whatever threat you pose to me or the Shadow Realm will be eliminated.”

Blah blah. “Yeah, I get it. You want to kill me. You’re sad you can’t kill me. All you dream about is killing me. It’s a fun dance.”

He released me, but already anticipating this move, I landed easily on my feet. This time, when I scrambled around him, he let me go.

When I reached the door, I turned back for a second. “Don’t hurt the abervoq. I’m sure it has no idea what the deal with me is.”

“Leave.”

Okay, then.

Thankfully, there didn’t appear to be a way for Shadow to kill these creatures, or he’d have done that from the start. Shooting one last worried glance behind me, I took another step toward the door, but for some reason couldn’t make myself leave.

Shadow didn’t turn back to me, but he seemed to know I was still there. “I won’t hurt the creature,” he bit out, clearly reluctant to give me any reassurances. “Can’t promise the same for you after your insubordination.”

Sticking my tongue out at his back, I decided that was the best I’d get. I just had to hope he had more honor than the stories said. Truth be told, he absolutely had a temper, and there was that coldblooded murder of Victor—who’d totally had it coming—but for the most part,

he wasn't unstable. If anything, every one of his actions was controlled and strategically planned.

Today was the first time I'd seen him truly lose it. I'd pushed him too far, as per my one true talent.

"I'll check on the abervoq," I yelled as I ran out the door, slamming it behind me. After the dark room, it was bright enough in the hallway to have my head spinning and dots dancing before my eyes.

And I felt panic. All the freaking panic. Dealing with Shadow had distracted me briefly, but now I couldn't help but remember that I'd had a nap with an abervoq. One of the most feared creatures in the Shadow Realm.

Why was I befriending such a being?

Possible explanations ran through my head, each more farfetched than the last. But I mean, in reality, was anything truly farfetched at this point?

Shadow stayed away from me for days, and for the first time, it bothered me. I found myself with a shit ton of questions and no answers, and after many sleepless nights, I was desperate to see his grouchy face. I mean, he was a god, with centuries of life and knowledge under his belt. He had to know something helpful and I was anxiously needing answers.

“Still sweeping, I see,” Angel said, bursting through my dark thoughts. At some point my “Angel Face” nickname had turned into Angel, and now I couldn’t think of her by any other name.

I shot her a smile, feeling slightly cheered to see her in her normal lunch spot. “Are you actually joking with me at this point? Did Hell freeze over?”

She tilted her head. “Is that what humans think Hell is? A world of fire and torture?”

I nodded. “Yeah, for the most part, it’s all brimstone and burning. Eternal damnation. Blah blah.”

She considered this, her brow furrowed. “Is that the worst afterlife their minds could conjure? Because, for me, I’d take being burned day after day over other events. That’s just physical pain...”

The magenta of her eyes deepened, swirling into a magma spiral, and for some reason, I expected the color to spill from her irises and leak down her cheeks.

“You’ve lived through a hell worse than burning, haven’t you?” I asked.

She didn't reply, the usual bread in her hands as she used it to sop up a soup she would never taste. For a moment, I freaked that I'd overstepped and the small grounds I'd made in a friendship with her would be destroyed.

"I have," she said, and I felt a pang at the thought of her suffering. "And I'd take fire any day over an eternity of closing my eyes and seeing their deaths."

Her voice trilled with the sort of sadness that was soul deep, buried in her very essence—creating a woman who would never be whole again. My heart ached, and I had to offer whatever comfort I could.

"If I could ease your demons," I said, reaching out and placing my hand on hers, "I would do it. Even at cost to myself. And I hope that one day your torments settle, and you find a semblance of peace."

I had demons of my own, and maybe that was the reason we'd become friends. Angel's demons played well with my own, and while I already knew I hadn't suffered losses like she had, I did get it. And I would support her whatever way I could.

After all, a woman with a loyal female friend at her side could literally destroy or save worlds.

Angel squeezed my hand before releasing me, and her energy felt a little lighter as she went back to playing with her food. With a chuckle, I returned to mine as well, and we sat in a companionable silence.

When she finally got up to leave, I cleared my throat. "What's a girl gotta do to find out your name? I mean, you're 'Angel' to me now, but I'd still like to know the real you."

As she turned her head back, mischief danced in her eyes, the color much lighter than before. "I don't use my name any longer. As far as I'm concerned, it's dead and buried, like my heart."

For the love of fucks everywhere. She was stunningly tragic, and I already hated that my friend had been through this kind of torment.

"'Angel' it is, then," I breathed, my throat growing tight.

She nodded. "I like that. See you tomorrow, Mera."

Then she was gone in a flurry of mahogany hair and amber-tinted wings. My appetite disappeared as I stared down into my half-eaten food, wondering how I'd misread her so badly from the start. Initially,

I'd thought her attitude toward me had been due to our vastly different stations in life. I was a lowly shifter and she was this goddess of a woman. But then she'd told me that no one ever sat in her area...

Except one dumbass shifter. Who had somehow lucked out in garnering her interest.

I jumped when a hand landed on my shoulder. Tilting my head back, I found Angel standing above me. "Thank you," she whispered. "You're the first being to talk to me in five hundred years. I come here to smell the food and feel the energy, but other than that, I'm always alone."

I'd had it all so wrong.

Jerking to my feet, I spun and wrapped my arms around her, holding on as tightly as I could. "You never have to be alone again. If you ever need help or someone to talk to... or anything at all... come to me. I'm your friend now. Your family, if that's what you need. We can protect each other in this fucked-up world."

She held on like her life depended on it, and despite the slight crushing of my ribs, I didn't even try to pull away. When we finally parted, she smiled brilliantly, and I was hit with how perfect my chosen name was for her.

She placed her hand on my chest, just above my breasts. "We call our family *treasora*. Our treasure. I am honored to bring you into the fold of mine."

Her free hand then went to her own chest, pressing against the armor she wore, and a glow burst from it and landed against her palm on my chest. The glowing string of gold slithered into my chest, a tingling sensation following it.

"We are bonded now," she murmured. "A bond that will grow stronger over time. In a few years, you will be able to reach out to me with your thoughts. And I will do the same."

I was left breathless and confused as she stepped away, giving me a final nod before she once again left, this time for real.

Whoa.

I stood there in shock, both content and confused by what she'd done. I liked it, though.

"It's a great honor," a deep voice said from behind me.

I turned to find Shadow casually leaned against a wall, his shoulder propped in a way that made his already impressive biceps larger. Today, he was dressed casually in torn-up jeans, a tight Henley-style ribbed long-sleeved shirt, and army green boots, laced up his calves. He'd look human, if it weren't for the impossible height and the face blessed by the gods. If anything, the more I was around him, the more his beauty captivated me. From the top of his tousled curls to the tips of his boot-clad feet, there was not a flaw on him.

At least not physically.

"Honor?" I echoed, still a little off-kilter from Angel's actions.

"That she would bond with you in such a manner."

He straightened, stepping toward me. "And once again, here you are, gathering powerful allies to your side. Allies whom no one else could tame, no matter how they tried."

"Angel is a powerful ally?"

His smile was brief. "*Angel*, is it? Yeah, that fits. Let's just say, she's one of the few beings who might actually hold her own against me."

He seemed amused by this, and not at all threatened—outside of a small flame burning in his irises. Feeling like I should divert his attention from Angel, whom I was coming to understand had been allowed to exist here because she mostly kept to herself, I cleared my throat. "Did you need me for something?"

He nodded. "We're locked on to another creature from the Shadow Realm. Time to head out."

I smiled. "Dude, anything is better than sweeping. Even demon hunting beats that by a mile."

His eyes got a tiny bit wider. "You're still sweeping?"

I nodded. "Yep. Got me some genuine arm muscles, but your already spotless library is not getting any cleaner."

The slightest lip twitch. "I'll find something else to keep you busy."

I had the scary thought that maybe his "something else" was going to be way worse than what I'd been doing so far. "You know, sweeping is great," I added in a rush. "I'm most definitely making a dent in all the, uh, dust."

He shook his head. "Come on, Sunshine. Let's grab the next creature before it kills more of your precious humans."

For once, even hearing that dreaded nickname didn't upset me. Hurrying after him, I caught up in seconds, almost tripping over a smoky entity. "Inky!" I exclaimed. "I haven't seen you in days. How are you, buddy?"

Inky swelled up, sparks flying as it wrapped around me. "That good, hey?" I said with a laugh. "Yeah, I missed you too."

Shadow shot me an odd stare, calculating, but without the malice he usually showed in my presence.

"No closer to working me out, are you?" I said with a smirk.

Not that I was surprised, since I hadn't worked myself out, either, but it was still fun to taunt him.

"I'm starting to get a clearer picture," he said, nodding his head like he was putting it together. "Much clearer."

Something told me the moment he worked out my secrets, whatever appeal he'd found in keeping me around would disappear very quickly. Time to return to the woman of mystery who was worth more alive than dead. For the sake of my entire planet.

Returning to Earth should have felt like coming home, but I found the longer I was away, the harder it was to reacclimatize myself to being here. I was no longer a regular shifter who knew nothing about the Solaris System, and it felt impossible to ever be that naïve chick again.

“Follow me,” Shadow said, stepping out into a wide, grassy field. Wherever we were this time, it was hot, and I squinted at the bright sunlight.

“Is it summer?” I asked, trying to get my bearings as I stared at the deep blue sky, flawless outside of a few dark clouds brewing a storm out on the horizon.

At a guess, it felt like we were somewhere south, at least in the U.S.

“The cold season has finished, yes,” Shadow said, pulling darkness around himself, like the sun was offending him. It was the oddest thing to see, with literal shadows lingering above his skin, forcing the light away.

Inky drifted closer too and in the bright, summer day, I could see more pigment and color in the smoke than ever before. “Summer,” I mused. “So I’ve been in your lair for months?”

I couldn’t correlate that. It felt like maybe a month at the most, but judging from the heat, it had to be six months since I’d been stolen from pack lands.

Shadow shrugged. "Time is a human constraint. I don't track it obsessively the way you all seem to. But..." He lifted his head like he was scenting the air. "It's July."

He just... sniffed out the month? Okay, awesome. What else could he do with those senses?

Wait, what? July.

"How is that possible?" I breathed. It had been almost seven months since he'd stolen me from Earth. Simone and Dannie would have definitely assumed me dead at this point—my mom probably hadn't even noticed I was gone—and I felt sick at the thought of seven months just fading away from my life.

"I need to see my pack!" I bust out, stopping Shadow in his tracks.

He turned, height dropping low enough that I only had to tilt my head back eighty degrees to see his face. "You want to return to your pack? Have I not treated you with respect the entire time you've been in my presence?"

There was a warning in those words, like he wanted me to choose my reply very carefully.

So, as usual, I didn't. "I wouldn't go as far as respect, but you have been... less of an asshole than I expected," I forced a smile, because I needed him to give me this, "but my reason for wanting to return to my pack is simply to advise the only two shifters in the world I care about that I'm not dead. It's been seven freaking months, and the entire time, they've had no idea what happened to me."

His pupils dilated as he stared me down, examining my face, searching for a deeper meaning. "I could send Inky?"

It was all kinds of amusing that he'd adopted my nickname for his smoke friend, but I'd laugh about that another time. Today, I was focused on one truth only: seven months from my pack lands. "I think that might freak them out, considering Inky can't speak, and even if it could, they would no doubt run first and ask questions later."

Shadow shrugged, and I refused to let myself get distracted by his shoulders today. "I'll take your request into consideration."

He turned away, ending the conversation, and somehow, I knew that was all I'd get out of him. I'd try again tomorrow. This was too

important to just let slide.

“Where are we?” I asked, hurrying to catch up, wiping my brow at the sweat already accumulating in this intense heat. “Somewhere south, for sure.”

He didn’t stop this time, and I had a sneaking suspicion he didn’t want to tell me in case I tried to escape. But why would I? Shadow would find me no matter how fast or far I ran, and when he caught me, my life would probably be forfeited.

I wasn’t about to overestimate my or Earth’s importance to him. Dude barely gave half a fuck about anything, let alone us.

“I think we’re in Columbia,” he said shortly. “If humans haven’t decided to change country names due to land mass shifts since I was here last.”

Uh, excuse me? When the freak had land masses changed last? Was he as old as the dinosaurs or something? And did I really want to know that? I was much more comfortable thinking of him being a young whippersnapper around a few thousand years old.

Time for a subject change. “Why is it so hard to sense the shadow creatures? You’ve felt... like two of them in all this time.”

It had been a month in the library—seven months on Earth, apparently—and this was only the second one on his radar. For once, he didn’t ignore or rumble at me. “I can only sense them when they use their various abilities. Otherwise, they’re virtually undetectable. All of us know how to hide our energy when resting.”

Not only when resting, if Shadow was anything to go on. I could almost never feel him until he was very close, and even then, something told me he was still controlling the flow of power around us.

There was no more time to think about it, because we had apparently arrived at our destination: a ragged green and brown field, scattered with prickly thorns and spots of completely dead grass—like a pack of wild dogs had pissed about the place, leaving perfect rings of death. We stood under one of the only trees, a gnarled and ancient piece that would have looked half-dead, if not for a few sprigs of new growth up high.

Shadow didn’t move, staring out across the land, his head tilted in a way that told me he was searching. The creature was not

immediately visible, and just as I started to search with the beast, there was the splat on my skin. I looked down to see a sticky substance drifting across my right arm. *What...?* I blinked as more hit me in the face, and as much as I wanted to make a sex joke, now was not the time.

Because what in the gross shit just landed on me?

Shadow dove for me the moment those sticky strands across my body tightened and I was yanked up into the sky. He caught me in time and thankfully was strong enough to wrench me free from whatever had caught me in its tendrils.

“Ah,” he said when we landed safely on the ground, his firm grip around my biceps.

“Ah?” I screeched. “Ah?! What the fuck is *ah?*”

“It’s a *sprecker*; a spider demon.”

A whatintheholygodsnow?

Shadow was close enough to block out the sky above, so I leaned back to try to see around him. The branches spanned out wide above us, and I thought I caught some movement, but it was gone before I could be sure.

“It almost had me,” I said, trying to get my heart rate under control. “Could my wolf have fought it?”

Shadow was watching me closely, his hands still on me, the heat branding my skin.

“You could have tried to fight,” he said, “but the poison in the droplets on your skin would eventually seep into your blood, rendering you too weak. The sprecker only has to wait you out, and it moves at super speed, climbing and dodging in a way that very few can replicate.”

His expression showed zero concern about this *poison currently absorbing into my skin*, as his palms cupped my face. Heat slammed into me, the fires of his eyes burning bright as he ran his hands across my cheeks. His touch wasn’t smooth; the skin of his palms roughened in sections. I wasn’t sure how that worked for a god with ever-repairing skin, but it was what it was. The worst part was that every time his touch caught on my skin, my stomach did some fucked-up swirl, heat pooling low in my gut.

Really fucking low.

By the time the fire of his power had cleansed my skin and blood of the sprecker residue, I was breathing heavier than I was comfortable with. He removed his hands, and I was able to think much clearer.

“How are we going to stop it?” I asked, trying to back away because he was still too damn close for my sanity. Like... this was not the time to have a mental breakdown and lick a shadow god, right? That would just be a bad idea, no matter how curious I was about his reaction.

The tree at my back stopped me from getting far, and when Shadow leaned in closer, I almost lost my shit.

“You can let me go now, Sunshine,” he murmured, and that was the point I noticed my hands tangled in his shirt like *I’d* been the one pulling him closer. *Well, fuck.*

Wrinkling my nose, I growled and shoved him away. “Debatable about who is holding whom, dude.” When in doubt, deflect and blame everyone but yourself.

“Here it comes,” Shadow said, forgetting me as his attention was once more sky-bound.

A gasp choked in my throat as a grey monstrosity came into sight. It didn’t have the eight legs of a spider, but there were multiple limbs. Way more than eight, although some were very small and useless looking, but at least six of the ones close to its furred head looked strong and capable as it scurried about. And how many eyes did one creature really need?

“It wants you,” Shadow said, the full force of his gaze meeting mine. “I’m fucking shocked, are you?”

I gawked at him. “Did... Did you just use sarcasm?”

He lifted his shoulders in a half-shrug, but we all knew the truth. Shadow Beast had just... joked—*sorta*—with me, and I’d gotten to witness it. Maybe I’d spread those stories if I ever got back to pack life. Or maybe I’d make up some even scarier ones because joking aside, his badassness had not been underestimated. As he was about to prove.

Bending his powerful legs, he launched up into the tree, and like he was channeling Tarzan, pulled himself up and along each branch. “Can’t you fly?” I shouted up to him.

He paused. "Where's the fun in chasing them down like that? Nah, I much prefer to go at them with a more even ground."

Lunatic. He was an actual lunatic.

"Stay there," he said. "I'll be back for you to neutralize it."

Crossing my arms, I rolled my eyes at Inky. "Your master is a fucking crazy beast, you know that, right? You're friends with someone who likes to chase demons down... for fun!" I shook my head. "We need new friends."

Shadow landed hard in front of us, the ground shaking at the solid thud. As he straightened to his eight-foot height, there was an actual legit smile on his face. "Haven't climbed a tree in five hundred years. Forgot how fun it is."

I just blinked and blinked, wondering if I'd hit my head. Or maybe the poison had managed to infiltrate my blood and I was hallucinating. Shadow looked almost... *happy*. I had no idea what to think about that.

Patting my face a few times, I gave myself a firm slap, trying to wake up from whatever dream this was. Hands landed on mine before I could try again. "No," he said, serious again. "Don't do that."

With a twist of my head, I attempted to see his expression, but he'd already turned away, reaching out to grab the grey creature about to attack us. The sprecker covered Shadow almost completely in its poisonous and sticky substance, but that wasn't enough to stop the beast from using his shadow magic to secure it in a small, convenient bundle.

"Your turn, Sunshine," he told me, not looking my way.

Gone was the open expression he'd worn before, a blank nothingness on his face, hiding all his deeper emotions in the many layers that was Shadow Beast.

For a second, I'd had a little more of him to hold on to, but as always, it disappeared before I'd gotten more than a taste.

Scariest part was that this time, a taste was nowhere near enough.

Once Shadow had the sprecker secured in one of the white door prisons, I made him show me the abervoq. Who, thankfully, looked to be in perfect health. Pissed off at being caged, bellowing when it saw me, but was unharmed, from what I could see.

After that, Shadow took off and left me to my own devices and I started to wonder where he went all the times he disappeared on me. Did he have a lover somewhere? Or was he visiting his friends in their worlds?

I wanted to follow him, but he was always so fast—there one minute and gone the next, disappearing into smoky shadows, like he could use them to transport him. Which left me with no true idea of how to track him. Instead I focused on my second-favorite pastime: scouring the library to learn about the worlds.

Most of what I'd picked up in between sweeping was general information about the various lands and their inhabitants. I liked to combine that with real-life observations of the beings who frequented the library, and through both, I felt I had a reasonable grasp of the ten worlds.

Well, nine. No one knew shit about the Shadow Realm. Except Shadow himself, and he was not the share-with-the-class type.

"I really want to visit the worlds," I told Gaster, following him around to help shelve books. "Like, each of them at least once so I can experience the differences."

He tilted his head back, hands still moving as he placed books without looking. Somehow, he just knew where they went. “Most of them would more than welcome your exploration. A few are not so hospitable, but if you’d like me to compose a travel guide for you, I’d be happy to in my spare time.”

I hugged him, taking the poor guy completely by surprise. No one here randomly hugged—that was apparently an Earth tradition—so I kept startling these poor beings.

“Thank you, Gaster! And even though I know you have zero free time, if you can find some, I’d love a travel guide.”

There was no way I could sneak into the worlds without some help. I couldn’t speak the languages, could not blend, and had no idea of the many and varied dangers I was sure existed. But if Gaster got this guide to me... it would help so much.

“I know Honor Meadows is a lot like Earth,” I said. “And I loved visiting with Angel, but I really hope to see at least a few of the other worlds.”

Gaster nodded, eyes back on his books. “Honor Meadows would be familiar to you, except for the way they use magic in place of technology and science. They’re nature-based in many ways.”

I knew all of this from my research, but I always enjoyed hearing about the worlds. “They pass their magic through the family lines?” I asked to confirm.

“Oh, yes,” Gaster chirped. “The larger and stronger your family line is or was, the more magic and land you will control.”

That made me think of Angel, whom I was almost certain had no one left at all in her family. Was that why she was so powerful? Or had these deaths actually weakened her power-wise?

“Ms. Mera!”

I spun as Lady Hel dashed up. The demi-fey royal didn’t usually speak directly to me, but it seemed she had a message.

“Hey, Lady,” I said with a smile. “What’s up?”

She was briefly confused by my turn of phrase before she plastered a smile back on. “Master wants us to release you from sweeping duty. You’ve paid off your initial daem loan and can now move on to other tasks. He wasn’t sure what you’d like to do instead, though. Do you have any ideas?”

Gaster looked ecstatic by this news. "You can roam around now and check out more books."

It clearly hadn't escaped his attention that while I'd been "sweeping," I'd managed to do a lot of reading too.

"That sounds amazing..." I trailed off as a familiar face came into view, back in the shelves. Someone I desperately needed to speak with. "Let me just wander for a while. Maybe a new task will come to me," I finished, distracted.

Gaster and Lady Hel didn't seem to notice. "Oh, yes, fantastic idea," he said. "You explore the many shelves, read the books that catch your eye, but don't try to unlock any books that have a key insert on them."

That caught my full attention. "Key insert?"

He spun and perused the nearest shelves before apparently finding one of these "untouchable" tomes. "See this," he said, holding the spine close to my face. Straightaway, I noticed the small metal insert, with its perfectly round hole. "They're locked for the safety of the reader or to protect classified information. It will zap you quite hard if you try to bypass the lock, and I'm not sure if you'd be strong enough..."

He trailed off, but we all got the gist of what he was saying.

"No worries, Gaster," I said. "Plenty to read here without worrying about ones that might burn my eyes out."

He was all smiles again, satisfied his warning had been delivered, as he placed the non-descript book back in the shelf. "Call if you need me," he cried before hurrying off again. If I had one tenth of his energy, I'd probably be a hell of a lot more accomplished than I was.

But there was no time to worry about my laziness, as I went into stealth mode, stalking the male I'd caught sight of before: Len of the Silver Lands. This was the first time I'd seen any of Shadow's friends in here, and I was not wasting the opportunity.

The fae was dressed in silver robes again, these ones even more elaborate and exquisite than the last set. How he walked about with so many gems and all that metal adorning his arms was beyond me, but it didn't seem to hinder him as he grabbed at random books. He

was searching for something specific, and almost everything left a disappointed look on his face.

“You could help, rather than lurk in the shadows,” he said, not turning. “Pun intended.”

Pun? Some sort of dig about Shadow that I wasn’t quite getting.

I stepped out from behind the shelves. “How long have you known I was there?”

He chuckled, a deep, rich sound that I was pretty sure contained all the fucking magic of the world, if the sensation along my skin was any indication. “I saw you before you were even born, sweet wolf. There’s nowhere you can hide.”

What?

“Okay, sure, that makes sense.” Not even remotely. “But for real... Do you need any help with your search?”

He shook his head. “No. I’ve been searching for a long time to reclaim a special gem that should have been passed down through my family. It was stolen by someone we trusted. There’s very little chance it will ever be recovered, and yet, when I have free time, I still search through the books for any mention.”

He jerked his head toward the shelves, although any movement that smooth couldn’t really be described as a jerk. “Faerie tomes update themselves using magic. Only there’s never anything new about our stone, and without it, we are significantly weakened.”

I’d read more than a few Faerie books and had a pretty good idea what he was talking about. “You can store magic in your gems to boost your own power, right?”

It was why he wore so many on his person, and why his family was particularly powerful, despite the missing gem. Royals were not born to their position in his culture; they took it with force. I also knew that the gems that could store power were rare on Faerie, each of them viciously guarded by those who possessed them.

Len looked somewhat impressed by my knowledge, his silvery eyes sparkling. “Correct, little wolf. Different stones have different capabilities. The one that was taken is an exceedingly rare yellow sunburst stone, with almost limitless storage capabilities. Legend says it came from a drop of pure light, the only one of its kind.” He shook his head. “It just doesn’t make sense that those who took it

would not use it, and yet... if they did, there would be a record. The last noted mention of the sunburst stone was the day it was stolen from my family.”

I thought on that. “Almost like they stole it for a specific reason and that reason hasn’t come to pass yet?”

He let out a ragged breath. “That’s what worries me. Technically, they could be storing slivers of energy within the stone every day, which would not activate it. Over the years, they’d still amass enough power to devastate faerie... or the Solaris System. We need to figure out who stole it and stop them before they use it against us.” His frustration was obvious. “It’s my job to protect my family and my kingdom. I cannot fail at this task.”

“Have you asked Shadow?”

The moment I’d said that, I regretted it, especially as Len’s smile grew, genuine amusement dancing across his features. Now it looked like I thought of Shadow as our one and only savior, and arguing would only dig the hole deeper.

“Despite the rumors,” Len sounded amused, “Shadow doesn’t know everything. And as useful as my friend is at times, in this Faerie matter, he cannot help.”

A snort of laughter escaped me. “Rumors? Bet he started them himself.”

Len genuinely looked like he was trying not to laugh. “A true friend never tells.”

He was a true friend; they all were. I had no doubt that if anyone tried to hurt one of the six, the rest would retaliate without mercy.

“You’re all lucky to have each other,” I said. “I’m sure, being as powerful as you are, it’s hard to find friends you can trust. I’m glad you managed the impossible.”

Len’s gaze was dissecting me, reading beneath my words. “We’re a friendship forged in blood, born on the battlefield, where many of us fought against the other. Fate decided that we’d be stronger on the same side, especially after Shadow saved half our lives... and the rest is history.”

“Shadow saved you?”

He nodded. “Oh, yeah. He’s always been a lone wolf with no side to fight on, from a world beyond reach.”

Finally, we had arrived at a topic of conversation I was most interested in. Shadow and whatever had happened to the Shadow Realm. I mean, why was there no information about it? Why had its door been sealed, leaving Shadow the only one from that world here?

Outside of my creatures, of course.

My desperate craving need to know the whys, hows, and whos of this situation was the reason I'd stalked the fae. He didn't move away when I leaned in closer. "Why is Shadow here and not in his world?"

Len shook his head. "Gonna take more than a beautiful face to get me to spill secrets about that guy. He'd kick my ass, and trust me, it hurts when he does."

"So I gotta ask him," I said with a sigh.

Len's smile faded. "You're braver around him than most mortals. Immortals too, actually, outside of the five of us. Don't give him an inch—he'll respect you more."

I shrugged. "It's not in my nature to cower. He'll either kill me or he won't, and in the meantime, I've got a life to live and a personality to polish by practicing confidence."

Len brushed his thumb across my cheek, the movement over in a flash. It was disconcerting how fast all of these guys moved—if they ever attacked, I'd be dead before I saw it coming.

"We're having dinner again tonight," he murmured. "You should come."

Before I could reply, he disappeared into thin air, leaving me looking around trying to figure out how he'd done it.

"Will you have actual food this time?" I shouted into the empty space.

My only answer was a deep laugh, and then his energy faded from the library.

When I finished my perusal of the library, I popped my head into the dining hall, but there was no sign of Angel, so I just headed into the lair to shower and change. Len's mention of their dinner tonight had stirred my curiosity, and I wanted to check it out. Mostly so I could learn by observing these powerful beings. Shadow knew way too much about me, and I knew way too little about him. It was an uneven balance of power and I hated that more than anything.

I wasn't so stupidly naïve that I was unaware of Shadow and his *greater plan at work* here. He told me next to nothing about his actions behind the scenes, and whatever he was planning, it involved me. In a way I would probably not like.

He'd said he needed me to subdue the shadow creatures, and that was the reason I was still here and going out with him, but I was almost certain that was bullshit. He didn't need me. He'd subdued and caged them basically on his own both times.

He was keeping me for another reason, and I needed more information to figure this shit out if I had even the smallest hope of surviving.

For this dinner, I didn't bother dressing in a sexy cocktail number, instead pulling on leather pants, knee-high black boots with a decent heel to shoot my height up among the giants, and a skin-tight white tank that I covered with a short, black leather jacket. Damn, I was going to miss this closet more than anything when I left this place.

Maybe I could take it and the lair with me because they were both the stuff of dreams.

I was alone when I stepped out of my room; even Inky was making itself sparse these days. Shadow was “trusting” me a lot more, and it felt like a trap I was about to get caught in. I also kinda missed the smoke blob, too. Especially when I had no idea where the dinner was.

“What are you doing, Sunshine?”

I didn’t jump because I was too cool for that shit. Especially in front of Shadow.

Hopefully, he couldn’t hear my heart pounding like a damn drum in my chest.

“Len invited me to your dinner,” I said shortly.

He replaced the books in his private shelves, turning as his gaze slowly caressed every leather-clad inch of my body. “And you’re dressed like *that*?”

It was impossible to tell what he meant by that, because his tone and facial expression gave me no context to go with those words. At a guess, he didn’t seem impressed, but *you know what*...

“Fuck you, buddy. No one dictates what I wear, and I’m a sight more covered than I was the last time you invited me to dinner.”

His jaw twitched, eyes blazing, but he didn’t push the subject. “Have you figured out how to touch the Shadow Realm?”

I swallowed hard. “I mean, you still want me to do that?”

Flames licked across his arms and I was surprised at how long it had been since I’d seen this sort of irritation in his expression. “Yes, I damn well want you to figure it out. This is legitimately your only task over the next few days while I track the next shadow creature.”

I crossed my arms. “I have no idea how I did it! Like, not a single fucking clue. My soul was broken, my heart aching, and I was being attacked. Unless we can replicate that...”

He grabbed the edge of my leather jacket, using it and it alone to hoist me up in the air so our faces were mere inches apart. His face that was eight freaking feet from the ground. “If I have to replicate the worst moment of your life, Sunshine, I will fucking do it. All day, every single day. There’s nothing more important than discovering how to... return the creatures to the realm.”

He'd changed track last minute on that sentence. We were back to his cover story of "needing to return the shadow creatures." Not that they weren't important, no doubt they were, but there was something more. Something that had to do with the reason his realm was closed off.

"You've had enough time to settle in here," he said harshly. "I've given you more leeway than I would any other in my custody. Don't push me further, and never forget that I own you, wolf. If I wanted, I could destroy you in a heartbeat."

This was not the same Shadow who had taken me out to find the *sprecker*. That one had seemed lighter, open... like he'd been warming up to my presence. *This* Shadow was the scary fuckhead who'd stolen me from the Torma pack.

"I'll add it to my to-do list," I choked out before I kicked my legs, hoping he'd let me down.

Only he didn't.

"Repeat the list to me."

"Let me down, asshole," I shot back.

He shook me, and the fucking strength this guy had was terrifying, but thankfully, so far, he wasn't using it against me in any overt way. So far.

"List!"

Glaring with every fucking ounce of my glaring ability, I spat each word at him. "Figure. Out. How. To. Touch. The. Shadow. Realm."

He yanked me closer, and I could feel all the hard lines of his body. Not that he seemed to notice how close we were; he was too busy demonstrating his power over me. "What else is on your list?"

I blinked rapidly. "Why does that matter? As long as what you want is number one, surely, you don't give a fuck about my other goals."

A low, dark laugh. "Correct, but I also need to know what is distracting you."

Shadow had reached the end of his patience, and it was growing abundantly clear I probably should have spent more than five seconds trying to figure out how I'd touched the Shadow Realm.

There was no give at all on the hard lines of his face; I was not getting out of here without obeying his will. With a huff, I told him the

truth. “Learn about the ten worlds, read all the books in the library, discover your secrets, and lose my virginity so I’m not the only twenty-two-year-old shifter virgin in the world.”

An extended pause. “You’re aiming to fuck someone in the library?”

That was what had caught his attention? Not the fact I was ready to ferret out all his secrets?

I shrugged. “I haven’t decided exactly who, but I’m perusing the selection for sure. I mean, a girl has needs.”

His eyes dropped to the way my breasts, barely caged in the skimpy white tank, were pushed up against his chest. “Is that right?”

Fuck. Me.

Was it hot in here? Had he burst into flames again?

“I forbid this,” he finally said.

Whoa, wait a freaking second...

“Not a chance, dude. My personal life is none of your business.”

His lips were so close to mine that I could almost taste him. If I darted my tongue out...

“What if your virginity is the reason you had the purity and innocence to make it past the blocks on the Shadow Realm?”

I scoffed. “Firstly, a virginity is not what makes someone innocent, and trust me, Shadow, I’m far from pure. Secondly, there’s no way you think my virgin status is a factor in this; you’re just trying to make life difficult for me.” I jabbed him in the chest, barely making a dent since we were so close. “Not gonna happen. I’ve waited long enough.”

A contemplative stare crossed his face and I wondered what bullshit he was thinking up now. “No one will even look at you twice if I give the order, you know that, right? You’d have more chance of losing your virginity on a deserted island with birds as the only inhabitants.”

I didn’t even want to *touch* that visual.

“Are you challenging me?” I burst out, all the while telling myself to just shut the hell up. I was giving him all the ammo to roadblock my plans. If I’d just kept it to myself, he’d have been none the wiser.

“You are no challenge,” he shot back. “You live on my fucking will alone. What makes you think you can best me in any way?”

That was it. "I bet I can lose my virginity in the next two weeks."
You are the dumbest fuck, Mera.

Cruel amusement danced in his eyes, and I resisted the urge to gouge them out. "You bet? And what are the stakes?"

Abort, abort. "If I win, you let me go back to my pack and see my friends."

"And *when* I win?"

Arrogant Shadow Bastard.

"On the small chance you win, what do you want?"

His smile was nothing short of freaking terrifying. "If I win, you will submit to me in a way you haven't so far. No more fighting. No more research. You will return the books you think you're hiding under your bed and accept your place here. At the bottom of the barrel."

Jesus. The prospect of that sent a bone-deep chill through my body. My soul actually ached at the thought of losing my will to fight. He would take it from me, I saw that in his gaze, but I'd laid that bet out, and now I couldn't back down.

"You're asking too much," I choked out. "The stakes are uneven. It's not fair."

His head angled to the right as he considered my words. "Who told you life was fair?"

I scoffed. "I know better than most that it's not, but in this situation, I won't take a bet *that* skewed in your favor." I shook my head. "Nope. If you win, I will stop fighting as hard, but I won't submit to you completely. Not the way you're asking. You'll just have to accept as much as I can give."

His lips pressed together, thinning out their fullness, eyes still assessing me. "Fine. You'll never win anyway, but I'm curious to see you in fight mode. Let the games begin."

He released me, but I didn't let him have the upper hand this time, wrapping my arms around his neck and jerking his face closer to mine. "You're going down, asshole," I seethed, my legs wrapped as tightly around his waist as my arms around his neck. I ground myself against him, feeling the hot pulse of pleasure inside. "I'm ready to fuck my way out of this state, and I won't let anyone stop me."

His growl was low and furious, and before I could think through my combative actions, he spun and crashed us into the shelves behind me, so his big body could completely engulf mine. My back ached, but not enough to stop the moan from emerging at the vibration in my pussy. His power was like a high-quality vibrator, especially when I was feeling it through every line of my body.

“You belong to me,” he rumbled. “Every single part of you. Until I decide it doesn’t.”

His hands were under my ass to jerk me harder against him, rubbing my clit in a way that I knew was deliberate. Another moan escaped, even as I wanted to rip his face off.

“Are you going to be the one who wins me the bet?” I gasped, on the verge of coming.

He laughed. Actually fucking laughed, and if it wasn’t for the hard cock pressed against my core, I might have thought him completely unaffected. Physically at least, he wasn’t as blasé as he often appeared.

Not that it mattered. He’d do everything in his power to stop me winning the bet, and I would do everything in my power to win it. As he’d just said: let the games begin.

Later that night, as I lay in my bed, my breaths still harsh and uneven, having just made myself come so hard that sweat coated my body, I tried to figure out what had happened in the lair. One minute fighting, the next dry humping, and the bet...

What was I actually thinking challenging him? Everyone here feared that bastard... everyone! I didn't have a hope in hell. But I had to try. It wasn't in me to just roll over and accept defeat, even if my stupid ass deserved it.

The rest of my night was filled with restless sleep, and I ended up switching on the light to dig out the books I'd stored under my bed. Books I really didn't need to hide since Shadow appeared to know everything I'd been up to since I'd stepped foot in this place. Probably due to that little snitch, Inky.

I glared at the puff of smoke who'd materialized a few hours ago, thankfully after the orgasm, and had proceeded to hang around like a bad smell. "You betrayed me," I said, glaring at it. "Snitching to Shadow about me."

It swelled into a great puff of black cloud, and as the synapses sparked at me, I had the weirdest thought it was trying to communicate. "I can't understand you, no matter how huge you get," I said with a snarl. "Why don't you just run off and tell your master that I'm reading again?"

Truth be told, these books were from Shadow's library, and the controlling bastard no doubt knew when anything was touched in

there. But in my cranky, sex-deprived, hungry-because-there'd-been-no-dinner state, I was looking for a fight. Inky was the only one around for me to grouse at, so it could just deal with it.

It swelled even larger, so I turned my back and pretended it wasn't there, all the while reading through my stolen tome about the Shadow Realm. From what the directory told me, there were exactly zero books about the Shadow Realm in the Library of Knowledge. At least none without a lock. In Shadow's library, on the other hand, I'd discovered five whole books on that realm, and there was no doubt more hidden away—it was much harder to search without a directory.

In the ones I'd found, though, the details were quite sparse.

A few facts I *had* learned: the Shadow Realm was actually the most similar realm to Earth, in regard to structure. They had masses of land, bodies of water, and lots of inhabitants who enjoyed sun, surf, and snow. Depending on where they lived. But there was a darkness in this land that was not in ours. An actual underbelly of shadow creatures that were considered lower level, controlled by the royals. Those with the magic and power—like Shadow himself—kept them as guards, pets, and amusement. Which made my theory about him just pretending to need my help to contain them way more plausible.

Not knowing Shadow's real name, I couldn't tell if he was referenced in these books, but there were a lot of mentions of the royal family, their arranged marriages, and the duties they undertook in each of their lands. He had to be a royal; there was just no way he could have the power he did otherwise, unless Inky somehow powered him.

The worst part was none of the books detailed the spell on the door or why the Shadow Realm had been cut off from the Solaris System.

Someone knew, though... I wasn't asking the right questions.

How did I touch it?

That in and of itself might have been the greatest mystery of all, since it was fairly clear that only those born of the Shadow Realm could usually access its powerful underbelly of energy. But I did have one working theory that it was my connection to the Shadow Beast.

Shifters were born of him, and maybe in my pain, my soul had reached into an ancient connection between shifter and beast. And then between beast and the world he'd originated from.

Dropping the book, I closed my eyes, searching for a way to touch the realm again. Recalling the pain of Torin's rejection, it was less intense; I'd grown accustomed to living with the loss, so how could I replicate those emotions and the way my vision doubled over, as it had been known to do in the past...

I slammed upright in bed, books scattering everywhere.

Throughout my life, when the bullying or attacks had been at their worst, I'd had this slight doubling over of my vision. An event I'd hidden from the world, pretending I hadn't been losing my mind, when in reality I knew it wasn't normal. Had that been me tapping into Shadow and through him the Shadow Realm all along?

To replicate it, though, I would have to put myself in a position where I genuinely feared for my life or suffered intense abuse. Weirdly enough, despite his asshole tendencies, it hadn't happened with Shadow yet, and that meant I needed someone else.

No doubt one of the worlds could create moments of terror. What had Shadow said about Faerie...? *What they do to Earthlings who stumble into their world makes me look like a fucking saint.*

Faerie might be the world for me to try, and knowing Len, he could help me navigate it so I didn't actually end up dead. He was Shadow's friend, so surely, if I explained what I needed, he'd help with this mission. But would it truly be enough to bring on my double vision if I was with someone who might protect me? It was so hard to predict what might trigger the double sight, and forcing it felt like an invitation for disaster.

By the time morning arrived, I was no closer to a conclusion about what to do to bring on the double vision, but I had added a bunch of new theories to obsessively mull over for days. Night well spent. But today, I had a bet to win.

With that in mind, I dragged myself out of bed and got dressed in my regular clothes. I wasn't about to wander around naked to win a bet—not yet anyway—and in all honesty, I was hoping to find a connection before I had sex. It would be nice if I could lose my

virginity to someone I was genuinely attracted to, with a personality that didn't make me want to stab them.

So my task was to talk to as many of the visitors as I could, and see whom I felt a connection with. Then, even if Shadow was watching, he'd see I wasn't doing anything different than before, and maybe after a week or so, he'd give up caring. So that was how I was rolling today: cool, calm, and casual. The three cs.

Hopefully, followed by *cock*.

The library was quiet when I entered. This in and of itself was not that odd. There were often times that the goblins who ran the place were the only ones around. But today, teamed with the fact that I was trying to win this bet and Shadow had warned me he was going to make it tough, there was a stink of him in the air.

Gaster came into sight after a few minutes, dashing around with an armful of books.

“Hey, Gaster!” I called, waving him over.

Frantic eyes darted in my direction, and outside of a muttered “Too busy, sorry,” he wouldn’t even make eye contact. This happened over and over, no one coming near me, speaking to me, or looking in my direction if they could help it. The few times anyone did accidentally catch my eye, the panic in their faces was hysterical. At least it would have been if I wasn’t completely fuming about this bullshit.

When lunch rolled around, I slammed my way into the table, ordering in short clipped tones to the robot servers. They apparently were not off-limits, because I couldn’t have sex with them.

While I waited, I tried to control my breathing and calm down.

“Shadow got to everyone,” Angel said. “Bastard is unbeatable when you challenge him.”

In my fury I hadn’t actually noticed her there. “You’re allowed to talk to me?” I asked, exasperated.

She shrugged, an apple in her hand today, with a small break in the skin. Maybe the smell was stronger that way. “Shadow can’t control me. I don’t fear him or his particular brand of persuasion. He knows that, and we have reached our truce of sorts.”

I huffed. “Well, looks like I have to lose my virginity to you.”

She turned fully toward me, abandoning her fruit. “What’s a virginity?”

Oh, wow. Well, this was going to be an interesting conversation.

“So, like, humans when they haven’t had sex...” I trailed off as she grinned. “You know, don’t you?”

Her laughter was one of the prettiest sounds I’d ever heard. “Yeah, I’ve actually spent a lot of time monitoring the human world. I’m fairly fluent in your languages and expressions.”

“Why did you monitor Earth?”

She shrugged. “Family business, of sorts. Keeping an eye on certain human families, ensuring their longevity and safety.”

I swallowed hard. “Kind of like a guardian angel?”

Those ancient-as-fuck eyes rested on me, the depths plundered with pain and memories. “Yeah, something like that.”

For some reason, that hit me harder than almost everything else I’d learned in this fantasy library. Guardian angels felt like a god thing, and maybe this was where the scriptures had come from—mythical beings from Honor Meadows, seen around Earth...

She chuckled again. “I’m still the same reticent asshole you met on the first day here. Don’t paint me with a halo just yet.”

My lips twitched and I couldn’t stop laughter from spilling over. “Okay, fair enough.”

She scooted a little closer, wings bumping into me as she settled in. “Now, let’s figure out your Shadow issue.”

I loved that I had a friend to brainstorm with, because I was going to need all the help I could get.

“What’s your current plan?” she started.

Taking a bite of my sandwich, I chewed a few times, mulling it over. “At first, I thought I’d just use the library as my hunting grounds. Talk with everyone who came through, and see if any sparks happened naturally. But since Shadow has decided to play hardball, I need to be a little more aggressive in my approach.”

Taking another bite, I sighed at the delicious flavors dancing across my tongue. At least one aspect of today was still good. “The library will not work at all,” Angel said. “You’re going to have to choose a land and find your sexual match there.”

I nodded, swallowing before speaking. “Yeah, that was Plan B. I just was afraid of stumbling into an unknown world and somehow getting myself killed.”

Angel’s lips twitched. “What about Earth?”

I stilled. “I didn’t even think of Earth.” Once again, proving that the more time I spent away from my home planet, the less I felt connected to it. “But it does make sense. The easiest world for me to navigate is the one I’m from.” Not to mention, human dudes were basically walking dicks. Their downstairs brains were strong, and they had no qualms about taking someone home for one night.

Angel was full-on laughing again, and I had literally never seen her this animated and relaxed. “Sometimes the simplest solution is the best.”

“How will I get to Earth without Shadow stopping me?” I wondered, knowing he would have already anticipated me using a door to escape and win the bet.

“I might have an idea,” Angel said, lowering her voice to the point I had to lean forward to hear her. “But you might have to lie low for a few days until Shadow has his friends over for their weekly games night.”

I knew those bastards weren’t having fancy dinners. It was probably beer and poker, or whatever the supernatural god version of that was.

“I can do that,” I said with a nod. “Might lull him into a false sense of success if I don’t react to the level of restriction he’s leveled on this place.”

Angel grinned. “Oh, yes, and even better, I want you to spend those days trying to seduce Shadow himself. That way, he thinks you have turned your attention from the library to him. He’ll enjoy that little game and will miss my manipulations.”

There was something about a scheme that got my blood pumping, as I all but rubbed my hands together in delight. “Yes! I’m

so here for this,” I said to her. “Just tell me what you need, and I’m going to be all over it.”

Angel patted my shoulder, her wings spreading out behind her as she got to her feet. “We’ll get you laid, my friend. Don’t even worry about it.” She turned to leave, her eyes landing on Shadow, who had apparently just walked into the room. Then, with one last small smile in my direction, she left.

Shadow walked right over to me, looking smug as fuck. Not to mention hotter than usual, his hair tousled and damp, the remnants of sweat beading his brow. He looked like he’d come straight from a workout, still in sweats, but I doubted he was pumping iron in a gym. Gods didn’t need to do that to get ripped as hell, so it was probably fighting.

I pitied whoever his poor opponent was.

“How’s today going for you?” Shadow asked, sinking into the chair Angel had just vacated. A drink appeared in his hand, a silver concoction, and once again, I was reminded of his abilities and power.

Power he was using against me, but I felt a little more confident with Angel on my side.

She had a plan, and speaking of... I smiled broadly. “It’s been great! I’ve got a ton of work done, the food is off the charts great, and I just had a chat with my friend. It’s been nice to have a chick friend on this side... Makes me miss Simone and Dannie a little less.”

Only partly a lie—I still missed my other friends horrendously.

With hooded eyes, he observed me closely. “And no other issues?”

I shook my head, retaining the same relaxed expression. “Not that I can think of.” My stare was more focused as I locked eyes with him. “How about you? Any issues in your world? Have you found another shadow creature for us to track down?”

Leaning back in his chair, he crossed his arms, broad shoulders bumping me just like Angel’s wings had. There was no pain, as was usual when he touched me. “You want to know about my issues?” he drawled, sounding like he didn’t quite believe me.

Leaning in closer, I wasn't surprised by the suspicious eyes he kept laser-focused on me. "Yeah, I do. You're one of the few not too busy to talk to me today"—acting dumb annoyed me, but it was a means to an end—"and I'm genuinely curious about your life. Especially the day to day of how you run the library and your lair."

If suspicion had a look, it would be his face, but he called me on my faked interest. "Right, well, since you asked, I've spent the morning dealing with the Faerie contingent. The silver clan and those from the realm of emeralds are having a little battle over a plot of land that is allegedly filled with precious stones. Going through the ancient scripts to find landholding rights is more time-consuming than you'd think, and since I'm acting as the intermediary in this, I'm about ready to head to Faerie myself and dig the fucking plot up to see if any of these gems even exist."

I was more interested than I'd like to admit in Shadow's life, subconsciously leaning forward. "So that's your role here, in the library? The one who oversees everything and keeps all the visitors from other worlds from falling into chaos?"

Shadow nodded as Inky rose up to twist around him. "In a manner. I was there at the beginning of this library being formed, and from that, I've been the guardian of the vast array of knowledge it contains. I've done my best to ensure it doesn't fall into the wrong hands. My protection also extends to any who reside within these walls unless they break one of the rules. I'm called on to mediate more than I'd like, but I wouldn't give up my power or control for anything."

"And yet you're willing to let Earth fall to the shadow creatures?"

He shrugged. "Earth is technically not part of the Solaris System. It's only bonded because I decided to partake in some of the desert land's finest beverages with Reece, and then when he challenged me to use my power to leave a lasting legacy... shifters were born."

I snorted. "Were you in Brolder at the time?"

Shadow nodded, and it all made sense.

"We were the product of a drunken bet," I said shaking my head. "Nice."

Shadow dropped his still-full bottle to the table. The clunk distracted me and by the time I looked up, he'd already spun his

chair toward me, reaching out to grab the arms of my chair and yank me around too. Now we were face to face, my legs trapped between his.

“What game are you playing, Sunny?”

I gasped. “No, you can’t call me *that*. ‘Sunshine’ is one thing, but ‘Sunny’...” I choked off, and as much as I refused to cry in front of him, hearing my father’s nickname from my captor hurt deep in my chest. Like a small cut, but each breath lengthened the wound, spilling more blood until I bled out.

“He still calls you that, you know?” he murmured, not moving away from me. If anything, he was dragging my chair closer with each word until I was practically in his lap.

“Wh-Who does?”

My father was dead, so whom was he referring to? *Jaxson*?

“Did I tell you what all the doors lead to along the hallway to Earth?” he asked, knowing full well he hadn’t.

“No.”

“Some are prisons, as you know,” he said slowly, drawing out this bullshit. “Others are storage facilities for magical objects that are too dangerous to be out in the wild.” Right, right. Get to the point, dude. “There are also some incredibly special doorways that lead to differing versions of an afterlife. I offer a choice to fallen shifters, depending on how I feel about their legacies on Earth.”

My heart skipped a beat, my eyes burning as tears rimmed them. Pride aside, I couldn’t stop myself from reacting to what he was saying. “You’ve seen my father?”

It was a whisper. A short, simple sentence that burned like it had been branded on my skin.

“I escorted him to his afterlife.”

My hands were moving, wrapping around his biceps as I held on to him with every ounce of my strength. “Can I see him? Please?”

The pain registered a second later—I’d been so caught up in the possibility of having another moment with my dad, I’d forgotten what happened when I initiated contact with Shadow.

“Argh, shit!” I screamed, wrenching my hands away and trying to breathe deeply enough to get through the pain.

Ouch, ouch, oucchhhh. Why did that hurt so badly?

And yet, somehow, it still hurt less than knowing my father was behind one of those doors, and Shadow was the one in control of whether or not I saw him.

“**Y**ou can’t see him.”

I knew the words were coming, I could see it on his face, but still... Was I bleeding to death right now? He’d dangled all the hopes in the world before me and then tore them away.

“Why? Please. Forget the bet. I will submit to you if you allow me to see my father.” I was begging, yep, and I had no fucking regrets about it.

Everything in my life changed when my dad chose to attack the alpha, and I needed to know why. I needed the closure. And I mainly needed to know if I could once again freely love the man who’d raised me but who’d also ruined my life.

I had so many needs. It was a fire fueling my every thought and action.

“Please, Shadow.”

For the briefest, minutest of seconds, it almost looked like he regretted his next words. “There’s no way for the living to converse with the dead. It doesn’t work like that.”

My wolf howled and a choked sob escaped my lips. “I hate you,” I choked out in anger. “I know there’s a way. You just don’t want to help me.”

“I could kill you and then you’d have all the conversations you wanted?” he snapped back. “The living cannot converse with the dead.”

“And yet somehow you did,” I raged at him, trying to wrench myself away. “You heard him use my nickname, so that means unless you’re dead, it’s possible.”

His face was inches from mine. A harsh breath of air crashed against my lips, and I inhaled his intoxicating scent.

“Listen closely, pup,” he said in a rumble of annoyance. “I straddle the line between life and death. The shadows all do. If you learn how to touch the shadow world again, maybe, just maybe, you’ll have the same ability as me to step into the afterlife. But until then...” He shoved me back so hard, my chair scraped across the ground and I ended up many feet from him. “Until then, don’t fucking question me.”

Damn him. Why was it always like this? Push and pull, hot and cold, life and death. We could never find our balance, and maybe there was no balance between us... Maybe we were both yin, with too much darkness in our souls.

Shadow stood, his expression once again neutral as he looked down at me. Usually, this positioning would have me scrambling to my feet, so I was at least attempting not to submit, but I couldn’t move. I’d been knocked down, the breath stolen from my lungs.

“You have thirteen more days,” he said as he turned and left the room, taking his energy and power with him.

I sank deeper into my chair, white-knuckling the side of the table. My dad was here. Just down the hall from where I stood. But which door was it? Should I just go open each and every one of them until I found the realm of death?

Popping to my feet, I rushed toward the library, only to crash fully into Shadow, who’d clearly been waiting for me. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me up with no effort at all, so I was being held completely at his mercy. “So predictable, little wolf,” he purred. “You didn’t even give me enough time to make it out of the library.”

I snarled at him, fighting... fighting as hard as I ever had before. “Why were you waiting for me?”

He grinned and I threw my head back and howled at the top of my lungs. A familiar howl that I’d produced when my mate had rejected me. The howl that had knocked the shifters down and let me touch the Shadow Realm.

My vision doubled over as nausea rose, ready to erupt like a volcano. “That’s it,” Shadow said, sounding far too pleased. “Build from this, Mera. Build a path you can follow.”

Ignoring him, I let my wolf out, attacking him as soon as I was partly shifted. When we bit down on his neck, there was a jerking resistance, our fangs finding no traction at all. We couldn’t pierce his skin; the beast was too strong for me.

“You’re wasting time,” he snapped at me, unconcerned by my attempt to kill him. “You need to open the door to the Shadow Realm.”

Door.

When my wolf wiggled to get down, he set me on my feet, and we took off as fast as we could toward the door. My wolf vision was doubled as well, turning everything more shadowy than normal.

Thankfully, the library was empty of its regular visitors, so we had a clear path, with only a Shadow Beast on my tail. Literal wolf tail as it was. This time, in our double vision, there didn’t appear to be any resident of the Shadow Realm close by to touch, or maybe it was harder to reach the realm from the library? Odd, since the doorway was actually here, and now in our view.

Unlike the last time I’d looked upon it, there was an obvious smoke coating the entire door today, looking a lot like Inky. It wasn’t the same, though—we sensed the difference. Inky was relatively positive energy, while whatever coated the door had been pulled from the depths of hell.

A hell energy my wolf did not want to touch. We shied away, but Shadow was having none of that, pressing in behind us, using his will to propel us forward.

A whimper escaped when our nose touched a puffy tendril of darkness that had escaped the mass. It recoiled, as did we, but once again, our backtracking was blocked by a giant asshole.

Shadow was not going to let us hide from a chance to break the seal on his land. As my wolf’s body was shoved forward, the smoke wrapped around us, insidious and cold, and I had the brief thought that I really should have pushed harder for answers about this world.

Especially why it had been blocked in the first place.

Warnings were there for a reason, and we should have heeded them. Because I had the sneaking suspicion that opening the Shadow Realm might prove to be the one thing that destroyed us all.

Our vision was no longer in shades of black and white with grey tinges, and there was no longer a double view of the landscape that we just couldn't quite touch.

Now we remained suspended in an eternal darkness.

This darkness was a living, breathing entity, one that had existed in the beginning and would be there long after the rest of us were gone. The first touch on my fur was icy and invasive, making my wolf want to simultaneously run and hide, but there was also a part of us... this tiny, curious part... that didn't rebel at the sensation. It embraced the dark, opening up our soul to let slivers of it creep inside. It was so slow that we didn't even realize it was happening at first, and by the time we did, well, let's just say, neither of us cared.

"Mera!" He said my name with a snap of command. "You must not embrace the darkness."

I understood the individual words, but the true meaning was lost to me. The new darker reality was all I knew... and I craved it.

"For fuck's sake," a rumbly voice muttered from nearby. "At least open the damn door before you let it consume your soul."

Maybe it was the asshole statement, or maybe it was just a moment of clarity, but Shadow's growl snapped us out of our dazed state long enough that I latched on to what remained of myself and my wolf, rolling to the side and calling on the change back to human.

For the first time—in our very limited shifting experience together—my wolf truly fought me. She didn't want to relinquish control, and

our silent battle continued for much longer than I'd expected.

"Shift!"

There he went, commanding me again, but this time, I appreciated the help. My wolf dug her claws in, though, as Shadow placed his hands on me. "She belongs to me! Release her."

My scream was low and guttural as the change ripped through me, tearing, searing, and burning me alive. The pain I felt when I touched Shadow without permission had nothing on this new form of torture. But when it was all said and done, I returned to myself, panting and sobbing on the spotless floor, naked and exhausted.

Shadow was still touching me, his power surging across my skin. "You have some explaining to do, Sunshine. If you don't die before I get you warmed up."

Shivers wracked my body, almost to the point of convulsions. Shadow must have lifted me because the next thing I knew, crashing rivulets of hot water poured over my frozen skin.

"Stop," I cried. "It hurts."

I was struggling, but the steel trap that was Shadow's hold didn't give an inch. "Let me go." I sobbed on his chest. "It's too much. Return me to the darkness."

"I will fight the darkness to keep you," he murmured against my skin. Maybe it was my delirium, but for once, he sounded possessive in the way a man would toward a woman.

Not the way a god did with his pet.

Or maybe I was just a really important pet.

"Shadow." I groaned, my head clearing as the bone-shattering chill eased from me.

"You just need to warm up," he said softly, and my aching head appreciated the low rumbles of his voice.

When he released me, I expected to fall to the floor, but instead, he wrapped one arm around my waist to stabilize me, while the other rubbed against my back, sending more heat circulating through me, using his particular brand of fiery power.

It was then that I realized I was naked as fuck, and he was in the shower with me, completely soaked. "Your clothes," I murmured inanelly.

“Not important,” he replied. “You almost died; might be worth focusing on that.”

“Asshole,” I muttered back, my eyes fluttering closed as an exhaustion, pure and consuming, sent me to the land of dreams.

“You know it, Sunshine,” was the last thing I heard before everything went completely dark.



I'D WOKEN up with a few hangovers in my time. Not a lot because an alcoholic mother did kind of deter me from drinking to excess, but Simone had managed to sneak—from her parents' collection—a bottle or two. Both times we'd finished it all, and since it had been before our first shifts, we'd definitely suffered the aftereffects.

Waking from the Shadow Realm door trying to possess me was nothing like that. It was more like death was tugging me closer to the afterlife, one painful drumbeat of my brain at a time.

As I opened my eyes, the light split my head in two, and I rolled over to vomit off the side of the bed. Vomiting with a raging headache only made the pain worse, so of course, I threw up again. Vicious cycle right there.

“You'll be cleaning that up.”

He sounded unamused, and I felt the same way as I propped one eye open to glare fucking death at him. “What did you do to me?” I croaked, wiping at my mouth as I hung listlessly from the side of the bed. A bed that was most definitely not mine.

I should have known straight away because while there was nothing wrong with my mattress—it was amazingly comfortable—this one was a cloud of luxury. The sheets were too soft to be any material on Earth, and they smelled so good, like...

I jerked upright, groaning as I did. “I'm in your bed.”

Looking around as quickly as my broken head would allow, I attempted to see everything in the “forbidden bedchamber.” I'd searched for this multiple times, but there'd been no sign of another bedroom in the entire lair.

“This was the closest room to get you into,” Shadow said. “A few more seconds, and the dark spell on the Shadow Realm door would have consumed you.”

He was sitting in a wide, olive-colored leather chair, with a back so high, it was even taller than him at his eight-foot height. His arms were relaxed on the armrests, a white long-sleeved shirt wrapped around the impressive muscles. His long legs were clothed in faded denim, man-spread before him. And all the while, those gold-and-red eyes examined my face.

He looked like a man who'd been sitting there for many hours, patiently waiting.

“What actually happened?” I asked, relieved to feel a slight decrease in the pounding in my head.

“What happened is you're weaker than I expected, and when you had a chance to break through a very powerful spell on the Shadow Realm door, you only managed to almost die.”

Right. “I'm good at almost dying,” I said conversationally, choosing not to bother being angry about him acting like a piece of shit. “But maybe, if you'd been a little more forthcoming about the Shadow Realm and what sort of spell is on the door, we wouldn't be in this position.”

Shadow shook his head, leaning forward to draw me in with his intense stare. “You see, there was no reason you needed to know that information to do what was needed. You just had to be strong enough to break the spell without it consuming your soul.”

Consuming my soul. Well, that didn't sound like fun. Running my hands across my body, as if I could check if everything was still intact, I felt only naked skin. Blinking down at the silky sheets pooled around my waist, my tits hanging out for the world to see, I shook my head. “Well, damn. Why didn't you tell me I was butt-ass naked?”

Shadow's chest rumbled as he actually laughed. “You act nothing like any virgin I've ever met.”

I snorted, still not attempting to cover myself. At this point, I'd been sitting here for who-knew-how-long and covering up now would just be redundant. “Had a few sacrificed to you over the years, I'd guess.”

With a shake of his head, he stood, unfolding his long length from the chair and stalking closer to me. I swallowed at the dryness in my throat. How one could go from near death to horny as fuck in a few minutes was beyond me, but, hey, at least I wasn't boring.

When he stood above me, I tilted my head back. "Mera," he said, his voice not giving anything away.

"Shadow," I replied.

"You need to get the fuck out of my bed, get dressed, brush your teeth, and find the damn path back to the Shadow Realm. Before it's too late."

Ouch. Well, okay then.

Avoiding the vomit, I dropped my legs off the side of his massive bed while taking a moment to look around, since this would probably be the only time I'd be invited into his secret chambers.

The room was darkly masculine, of course—king of darkness wouldn't be caught dead with anything else—and appeared to be mostly dominated by the huge bed. Outside of that, there was a television, and I stared longingly at it. It had been months since I'd indulged in my love of old movies and cheesy sitcoms, and to know Shadow had one just chilling here was such a jolt of reality.

I felt homesick.

"How many channels do you get down here?" I said half-jokingly, jerking my head toward the massive flat screen.

Shadow's expression was deadpan. "All of them."

All. Of. Them?

"Jealous," I cried, in a poor Napoleon Dynamite mimic, and what do you freaking know... he actually smiled.

"Maybe, if you can figure out how to do the one task I've set for you, then I'll give you some screen time."

"Like a toddler," I drawled. "Should I call you 'Daddy' too?"

The red and gold in his eyes shimmered to black, and I didn't even try to pretend I'd misunderstood the double entendre of what I'd just said. I had not forgotten Angel's plan, and *almost* dying wasn't going to stop me from fulfilling my part.

"Get the fuck out before I take you over my knee," Shadow rumbled, his voice deeper than ever. "Calling me 'Daddy' will be the least of your worries."

Of course, that jolted through my chest like an arrow shot from a magical blade, one that would never miss its target. *My father.* He was what had started all of this and almost gotten me killed by a dark realm. Was this the last time I'd sidle close to my final breaths for that man? Should I just say "fuck it" and let him go now? Kind of felt like I'd fought for my dad as much as possible, and yet I couldn't quite release my last shred of hope for answers. My last hope to see him one more time.

My head was a mess of father drama as I stumbled from the room, only to realize I hadn't paid attention to where I'd exited, and when I looked around for Shadow's door, there was nothing to be found. Just a set of familiar shelves near the fire. Well, apparently, his room was like the hallway to Earth: only Shadow could find it.

My bedroom, thankfully, wasn't playing musical rooms, and when I entered, I sank against the door, wishing that the weakness in my body would fade. My wolf felt like a shell of herself today, and it was so out of the norm that I was genuinely worried.

Sucking up as much strength as I had, I pushed off from the door and made my way into the bathroom, where I half-drowned myself in an attempt to get clean and clear my head. By the time I was done—never-ending hot water, bitches—I felt much more like my usual self. My usual self with a lot of questions and a new burning desire to discover what had caused that door to the Shadow Realm to react like that.

Why was it closed off to everyone?

I pulled on the clothing that I liked to think of as my "get the fuck out of my face or I'll kick your ass" style, including black leather pants, thigh-high leather boots with a decent heel, and a white tank that I tucked into the pants. I braided my hair—poor attempt but better than Simone's—and headed out to get some answers.

Stomping my way into the library, I had my resting bitch face ready for anyone who even glanced in my direction. Thankfully, Shadow had prepped the room for that, with every being who had been in there scattering the moment I appeared in their view. I'd temporarily forgotten that I was off-limits in a whole other way, but it didn't even matter.

What mattered was the door.

The Shadow Realm.

It called to me and I was going to figure that fucker out.

Marching toward it, heels clicking on the hard floor, I never let my focus waver. Rounding the corner, I stopped short at the sight of the door itself. No longer was it non-descript. Instead, the darkness I'd seen in my double vision was clear as day for everyone to see. Like a swirling portal of smoke, sliding up and down, blocking the actual door.

Reaching out, I stopped myself from touching it, instead just skirting my hand over the top, getting a feel for the energy. I could almost taste the cold, metallic spell on my tongue, and with it came a triggering memory of being locked in the throes of darkness, unable to break free.

"Heard you had a little adventure."

I recognized Reece's rumbly voice and raspy accent.

Not bothering to turn, I growled. "If you're not here to have sex with me so I can win the bet with Shadow, then fuck off." Not that I

was particularly attracted to Reece, outside of admiring his pretty lashes, but at this point I'd take almost anyone to beat Shadow.

A deep chuckle sounded behind me. "It all makes sense now," he remarked. "So much sense."

Pulling my hand from the darkness, I waved it at him. "You aren't making a lick of sense. Please just go away. I don't need the distraction."

He didn't move. I could feel his powerful presence in the same way I felt Shadow's, like I was standing too close to a power plant, surges of energy traipsing across my skin.

"What if I told you about the spell that holds this world hostage from us?" he said casually.

My curiosity was too great to ignore any possible information, so I spun, reaching out to grab at him before remembering it was a super bad idea to touch these guys without their permission. It was too late, though, as my hands landed on his chest, but thankfully, unlike Shadow, I felt nothing from Reece except an exceptionally firm pec muscle, and a whiff of something dry and earthy.

He looked down at my hands, not saying a word, and despite the laugh I'd thought I heard, his gorgeous face was once again stoic. Yanking my hands away, I swallowed roughly. "Please, I need to understand."

He nodded. "You will understand as much as I can give you, but I don't have all the answers. Shadow's secrets are his alone. I can only tell you about this spell."

Disappointment almost dropped me to my ass until I remembered that the spell itself was still pretty damn important.

"This spell is a living entity," he said, those dark blue eyes turned toward the shadowed door. "It's powered by an unknown source that we believe is in the Shadow Realm." His voice lowered, caressing my senses. There was an innate sensuality about the one they called a desert deity.

Shadow the second.

"The spell is incredibly intelligent," Reece continued. "It adapts. Every single time we figure out a way to cut through its hold, we'll be mere seconds from opening the door, and it'll regroup and reform, shooting us back to the very beginning of our investigation. Worse

than the beginning, because whatever means we used to best it will now be rendered useless. It counters everything. It adapts and learns.”

Great. A precocious, genius-level spell built of eternal darkness. Just what we all needed in our lives.

“Has it ever done to another what it did to me?”

Neither of us pretended he didn’t know about my dance with the darkness. Shadow had clearly gone straight to his friends for advice, and I didn’t blame him—I would have followed that exact same path. “Never. And from what I can tell, it didn’t adapt to you or your energy.” Reece eyed me closely. “If anything, you did some damage bringing it to view like this...” He waved at the swirls of smoke. “It’s unable to hide any longer and that’s a good sign.”

I made a growly sound. “But is it? As far as I can tell, we’re no closer to breaking through. I can’t touch it without my soul going all goth, so what’s the next step?”

He patted me on the shoulder, and I was surprised by that reassuring sort of gesture. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. Change is a good sign, even if we don’t know why yet. One thing is for certain: having you around is certainly going to make life very interesting.”

Closing my eyes briefly, I tried to calm my frantic mind. “I still don’t understand why I’m the one. Why is this happening to me when I’ve been insignificant my entire life?”

Reece’s face was expressionless, but his eyes were warmer than I’d ever seen, those incredible lashes framing them like twin portraits into his soul. Reaching out, he pushed a strand of my hair back. “There is nothing insignificant about you, Mera Callahan. From the first moment you stepped into the room, wearing Shadow’s signature color, I knew you were going to turn my friend’s life upside down. It was a worry, at first, but now...” He tilted his head. “Now I’m curious to see where this all goes.”

Shadow’s color...? Well, that explained a lot.

Reece nudged me gently. “No one is called to greatness until the time is right, Mera. This is your time.”

“Greatness?” I breathed.

He nodded. “Greatness comes in many forms. Some obvious, others not so much, but there is one constant everyone called to

greatness has in common: you will be pushed beyond your comfort zone, broken down and reduced to ash, but from this, you will rise and be more than you ever thought you could be.”

From the ashes, the phoenix will rise.

The fact that he'd chosen that exact analogy to use had to mean something.

“I'm not sure I'm ready for whatever this world has in store for me,” I said, my fears spilling out. “But since I'm still breathing, and I'm still fighting, I'm going to figure out this door. I will discover my connection to the Shadow Realm—”

I was cut off when Shadow appeared in a cloud of smoky darkness. “We must return to Earth,” he said, burning energy surrounding him. “Multiple shadow creatures have amassed. Move your ass, Sunshine. We've got some hunting to do.”

If the fate of the Earth wasn't hanging in the balance, I'd have told him where he could shove his order. But, unfortunately, since I was the dumb bitch who'd released these creatures in the first place, I really needed to take some responsibility for returning them. And despite my knowledge that Shadow was really the one doing all the work to take them out, if he wanted me there, I would go... just in case. Maybe it helped that the creatures had shown an unexpected level of interest in me.

“The abervoq and sprecker both paid a lot of attention to me,” I said, my mind putting the pieces together. “It can't be a coincidence that both times they targeted me.”

Shadow crossed his arms, still looking somewhat harried. “You were the natural target, being weaker and non-threatening.”

“Yes, true,” I said, “and that's what I initially thought as well. But the abervoq wasn't interested in attacking me. Truth be told, I don't think the sprecker was, either. And while I'm no shadow creature expert, didn't they almost seem curious versus murderous?”

Two sets of eyes were locked on mine, and I had to say, it did wonders for a girl's self-esteem to keep and hold the attention of a couple of gods. Sure, it might have been because I was some sort of shadow magnet, but whatever it was, I could pretend for a little longer that it was my shining personality.

“She has a point,” Reece finally said, nodding as if my words were making more sense than he’d expected. “Is there a possibility that someone from your world slipped across the veil in the last twenty-two years?” he asked Shadow.

Shadow tilted his head, arrogance creasing his brow as he looked me over. “She’s so human, though. Frail and powerless. There’s no way she’s from my realm.”

I forced a bright smile. “You should take this frail, powerless human and get to Earth, hey? Since we apparently have a world to save and you can’t do it without my frail, powerless help.”

Shadow’s lips twitched, and I received a smile from Reece.

“Come on, wolf,” the beast said, turning to leave.

“You forgot ‘frail and powerless,’” I called after him.

Reece continued to stare at me, a tiny half-smirk still etched on his lips. “What?” I asked, wrinkling my nose. “*He* said it.”

The deity shrugged. “You’re right. It is interesting, though...”

Don’t ask. Don’t ask.

“What’s interesting?”

“That he lets you push him that far. The last few shifters learned fairly quickly that Shadow doesn’t suffer insubordination for long.”

I swallowed hard, thinking of Victor. “Does he regularly murder shifters who don’t obey his every command?”

What kind of fucking psycho did that?

“He doesn’t randomly kill for fun,” Reece said, like he was personally vouching for Shadow’s character. “Only if they fight against his control.”

I... just. That was basically the same thing.

“You two need help,” I choked out. “Your brains don’t work normally.”

Reece just laughed, seemingly not offended, and at least this little moment had apparently warmed the desert deity up to me.

I was all about small victories these days.

Shadow didn't know it, but this time, I had another plan to enact while we were on Earth. Of course, step one was to save humans from the creature, but step two was to figure out if I could sneak away from him. I needed to know exactly how long it would take him to find me, and when he did, I might even learn the means he used to track me.

This would help me cover my trail when Angel's plan went into effect.

A dangerous little experiment that I'd probably be soundly punished for, but it would be worth it for whatever knowledge I might gain. I didn't think he would kill me, at least not yet. He wanted to see if I could unlock the door to the Shadow Realm—I was coming to understand that was his ultimate goal. He didn't really care about returning the creatures, since they could obviously remain in the prisons indefinitely.

He needed that door open, for whatever personal reasons he was not sharing with me, so I was reasonably sure he wouldn't kill me. Yet. And now seemed like as good a time as ever for a trial run of the great escape.

"Hurry up," Shadow snapped, seemingly in a worse mood than usual.

"What's up *your* ass?" I asked him.

He seemed to be trying to decide between sighing or smiting me, but with a much greater strength of character than I had, managed to

refrain from both. “Nothing is up my ass. I’m just sick of cleaning up your messes and having no reward for it.”

For a beat, I wondered what reward he was talking about. Was I supposed to suck his dick or something? I mean, I sure as fuck didn’t remember there being any talk of reward... Oh, wait.

The Shadow Realm.

He wanted me to unlock the Shadow Realm. Frankly speaking, it seemed like he needed his dick sucked more, to be honest. Dude was a tad wound up.

“Whatever you’re thinking, you need to stop now.”

I jerked my head up, wondering if he could read minds as well.

“Your scent changes when you’re aroused,” he said bluntly. “Not to mention the rapid breathing and pupil dilation. Classic signs that you either can’t or don’t bother to hide.”

“Why should I hide it?” I asked with a little jerk of my shoulders. “Natural response to stimuli, and a normal shifter need. Don’t you have needs?”

He bared his teeth at me. “My needs are being met.”

A piercing hot emotion hit me, almost sending me stumbling. I refused to believe it was jealousy, since Shadow was nothing more than my temporary jailer, whom I would hopefully be free of soon. No way was I Stockholming over here and falling for him.

All we had was a physical attraction, or more accurately, that was all I had. Shadow Beast might have treated me a little better than his other prisoners, but we both knew I was just a means to an end. I had to step into reality and stop creating false bonds between us before I started scribbling love hearts with our initials in them.

Time for a subject change. “Where are we on Earth this time?”

His eyes narrowed. “You don’t recognize this area?”

I took another look around. “No, I don’t think so...”

The early morning sun was weak and there was a chill in the air, which told me we’d once again skipped into the next season. “Wait... It smells like California.”

“It is,” he said.

“Torma, California?” I guessed.

“And they call humans slow,” he drawled. “Yes, we’re on the very Eastern point of your pack’s territory, to be exact. A mass of shadow

creatures have gathered here, and I'm sure even you can figure out why that might be."

"Because of me," I whispered, looking around for the mass.

Shadow nodded. "That's my theory. This was where you released them and your energy is strong in these lands. They're seeking you out, for some reason."

No doubt the strength of my energy was due to the twenty-two years I'd lived, breathed, and bled in Torma. It was my family home. My pack grounds. The one place I almost wished to never return, except to let my friends know I was safe.

Maybe I'd get a chance to see them today.

My wolf poked her head up, glancing around her lands, and I felt her urge to see Torin. Or at least his wolf. We hadn't been this close to him in almost a year—judging by the weather—and the pull to cross the lands toward him was strong.

I needed a distraction. "What creatures are we dealing with?"

Shadow didn't call me out on my frantic tone. "There's an abervoq, a falaster, and two grekins, from what I can tell."

Finally, a solid distraction. New shadow creatures. "The first one I know, but you're going to have to explain the other two."

He gestured for me to step ahead, directing me across the field. "A falaster is a mix between a giant centipede and an anaconda," he said, and I wrinkled my nose at the image that brought to mind. "They have no mouths or eyes but can smell a drop of blood from a mile away. They like to crush their victims, wrapping tighter and tighter, until eventually, they consume them through skin absorption."

"That sounds... delightful," I said, employing as much sarcasm as I could muster. "And the grekin?"

He grimaced. "I think they're my least favorite. Tricksters, their minute and diminutive stature lulls beings into a false sense of security. But if you turn your back, the two of them will tear you to pieces, laughing madly about it the entire time."

"Two of them? Is that how they always roll?"

Shadow nodded. "Yeah, they like to move in pairs. It makes for an easier job to initiate their tricks."

Simply fantastic news. "Is there anything normal in your world? Any creature that isn't trying to kill everything around it?"

Shadow paused, and I crashed into his back, not expecting him to stop so suddenly. “Oomph, sorry!”

He didn’t comment on my clumsiness, and we both knew I hadn’t hurt him, so it was immediately forgotten. “My world is the most beautiful land I’ve ever seen,” he told me, his voice lifting as tendrils of memories stole into them. “I miss it every single day, and it grates at me that my legacy there is unfulfilled. But life hasn’t always worked out the way it should for me.” As he stepped closer, my hand twitched to reach out and touch him. The memory of the pain stopped me, and that was when I realized it hadn’t hurt when I ran into him.

Weird...

“I promise, Mera,” he said, distracting me, “that if you help me with what I need, I’ll ensure the rest of your life is filled with every gift, power, and possession you could hope for.”

“I knew you didn’t care about the creatures,” I murmured. “You just need the realm opened.” Because he had an unfulfilled legacy there, apparently. Not that anyone would be surprised by that. Shadow oozed power and importance, both of which would be wasted without a legacy.

“It’s been a priority of mine for a long time,” he said, still in a sharing mood. “Returning to the Shadow Realm.”

“Why did you come here in the first place?” I asked, expecting his response to be something blasé like... *I wanted an adventure or It was a dare.*

Then he shocked me.

“I was betrayed.” His voice hardened and once again, I was staring at scary Shadow. “By one I trusted above all others. But with your help, I might finally right many wrongs. Their time is coming, and when I return to my realm, I’ll scatter what remains of them across the many worlds.”

Yikes. “Remind me not to betray you,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

Shadow was having none of that, though. “You won’t live long enough to worry about it if you do.”

“Fair enough.”

I jumped then as a massive crashing of trees and branches rang out above us. Shadow spun to crouch in front of me, and a second later my wolf rose to the surface, lending me her senses as we prepared for an attack.

Still in stealth mode, half-crouched with his arms out, Shadow started to creep through the trees. I followed because what else was I going to do? There were at least four shadow creatures out there, and as much faith as I had in Shadow, I did wonder if there was a number of creatures that would prove to be too much for him?

And what would that mean for me? Would the shadow creatures kill and consume me? Or would I once again make friends with monsters?

Guessed we were about to find out.

"Today, I'm really hoping you're as badass as your reputation," I murmured. "My stomach feels like a swarm of mosquitos are buzzing about in it, and I don't like it."

He stopped moving, turning back to see me. "Mosquitos? Pretty sure that's not the expression."

I gave a nervous laugh. "Honestly, it's so far beyond butterflies at this point."

Shadow nodded like that made perfect sense before he turned again and let out a low growl. He leapt forward, snatching something out of thin air.

No, not something... a sprecker.

"Didn't even know one of these was here," he said, looking around. "But... it's only a distraction."

I was eight feet away, and those words had me hauling ass toward him.

Just a few steps too late.

My arms were seized on either side, the grip firm and unyielding, and as a heavy object slammed into the side of my head, Shadow let loose a feral howl, the bright red flames of his eyes the last thing I saw as I was dragged away. No, actually, the last thing was a dozen or more shadow creatures descending on him, blocking his path to me.

The blow hadn't been strong enough to knock me out, and I was already fighting—I'd only just gotten used to the last psychopath who'd yanked me out of my life without permission. No time to acclimatize to another.

My hands shifted into claws, fighting and scratching, but my captors held me in such a position that it was hard to reach them. They felt small, despite the strength of their hold, and no matter what I did, I couldn't get loose.

Sticks scratched me as I was dragged, and as much as I clawed across the ground, there was no breaking my abductor's stride. It had to be a grekin, because the falster shouldn't have had a grip, but then again, it might have been a completely new creature. There had been so many unexpected creatures on Shadow, and that meant they'd teamed up to hide their energy... Classic ambush.

"Let me go!" I screamed, finally finding my voice. "I command you to release me."

The words flowed from me with more than just a human voice—wolf energy pushed them, and... *What do you freaking know?* The creatures stopped, releasing me in an instant.

Gasping for breath, I rolled to the side, ignoring my body's protest about the abuse it had just experienced. As I stumbled to my feet, the sudden movement worsened the pain, but I had enough adrenaline and anger to keep me moving.

Chirping was the first thing I registered, and when two shadows zipped past me, I barely managed to track them.

"Stop!"

I knew the command would work; I'd tapped into the same energy I'd felt when I'd touched the Shadow Realm. Not that I was

going to tell Shadow, of course, but it turned out he was right; I just had to find the path and keep following it.

The two creatures stopped flickering in and out of focus, ending in half-crouched positions, staring up at me. They looked like nothing I'd ever seen before, but if I had to liken them to anything, it would be a gnarled, tree-like leprechaun. No larger than knee-height—mine, not Shadow's giant-ass legs—they didn't wear clothing, but it wasn't like they were naked, either. They didn't have body parts like a human.

Two tree stumps with beady black eyes, a slash of a mouth, twig-like arms and legs, and an ability to move so fast, they were almost dizzying. Except, apparently, when I allowed my wolf to rise to the surface, using her power to halt them.

"What do you want with me?" I asked. These were the first shadow creatures I'd had a moment to question, and I wasn't wasting it. "Where were you taking me?"

They chattered at me, this rapid-fire clicking and clacking sound, and outside of the library, there was no way for me to understand their language. "Fuck," I muttered.

One of them tilted his head, watching me closely. "Fuck."

I blinked. Was it repeating me, or did it speak some English too?

"What. Do. You. Want. With. Me?" I spaced each word out, using hand gestures to get my point across.

"Fuck!" the same one repeated. "Fuck, fuck."

Great. I mean, I loved the word and all, but it was hard to have a complete conversation with just my favorite f-words.

"Mera!"

I spun at the shout, and not because it was Shadow barraging toward me like a madwolf on a mission. But because it wasn't.

That shout had come from someone else completely.

Someone who sent my wolf into a tizzy as she growled and scratched at my chest, and I had no idea if she was trying to get to Torin to kill or fuck him, but she wanted him either way.

"No, stop," I begged. "He rejected us."

"Fuck rejected." A harsh chirp of a word from one of the gremlin twins.

It was the other one this time, and now they had two English words in their arsenal. My favorite and my least.

“Mera Callahan, I command you to stay where you are!” Torin bellowed, half-wolfed out as he took off across the field that separated us. It was probably only half a mile, but he’d cover that in no time.

I lifted my foot, taking a step back, and another, before turning and sprinting away. Heading back for where I’d last seen Shadow.

His alpha command didn’t hold me.

At some point, my ties to Torma had been damaged enough that not even *his* command could hold me hostage, no doubt leaving Torin confused as hell as he chased after me.

My wolf whined, urging me to reconsider hearing him out, and fuck... I was tempted.

How was it fair that he could reject and break me, over and over, and still, my soul wanted to claim our bond? Didn’t matter, though. I would be stronger than this urge. I would protect both of us.

I felt when he was close, so I changed directions, while still moving toward where I’d left Shadow. At least I hoped it was the right direction—the grekins had dragged me pretty far by the looks of it, those zippy little bastards.

Torin was close, his half-shifted wolf form faster than my broken and bruised human. All I had going for me was pure determination not to end up in his grasp. I had no idea what Torin would do to me if he caught hold, but there was a chance he’d kill me straight-up so as not to deal with the remnants of our bond.

The death of a true mate usually resulted in an irreparable mental break for the other shifter, but Torin probably thought that because he didn’t want this bond, he would recover easier.

Either way, I could not let myself fall into his hands. I had to fight with everything I had, and hopefully, since I was no longer the same shifter who’d been stolen from Torma all those months ago, I’d have a new weapon to best him. Like my Shadow Realm abilities.

Like the shadow creatures... still frozen on my command.

Could I use them to slow Torin down?

“I release you!” I shouted, sending the energy out into the world, hoping I wasn’t too far away to reach them. Now I just had to stay

out of Torin's reach long enough to let those little leprechaun bastards do their worst. Torma might be searching for a new alpha before this day was done.

My pace was slowing as Torin's thudding gait grew closer, and it was only when the high-pitched whistling of the grekins reached my ears that I allowed myself a moment to turn around and assess the situation.

Torin let out a roar when they tangled around his legs, the three going down in a tumble. The new "alpha of alphas" didn't bother to try to negotiate a truce with them; he just used his partly shifted claws to rip into them before he gracefully leapt back to his feet.

Torin must have been able to see them even at hyper-speed, because his next swipe sent one flying.

Completely enthralled in watching this fight, I'd stupidly stopped trying to escape. The thought that I might see Torin get his ass kicked was too much temptation, but I had many regrets when his furious eyes locked on to mine.

"Don't move another fucking step," he warned, about thirty feet away. "Or I'll turn you over my knee and smack your ass until it's red and aching."

I blinked. "Did you seriously threaten to spank me as punishment?" I laughed. "Jokes on you because I'm into that shit, Torin. You'll have to try harder than that to threaten me."

That took him by surprise, and he faltered, just long enough for a second round of grekin attack.

"Fuck, ours!" they shouted.

It was my turn to look at the creature because I was starting to understand what it was saying. They thought my name was fuck, or at least that was their new adopted name for me. *And* they seemed to think I belonged to them.

“Fuck is not yours,” I shot back. “I mean, Mera. My name is Mera.”

“Fuck, ours,” the other shouted, disappearing from sight with a zap.

What in fresh hell was this?

“You and I need to talk,” Torin said, sounding a little less ragey. A grekin zipped at him again, but he just booted it away with one swift kick. Bastard was having no trouble seeing them and I couldn’t figure out why they were always a blur to me.

My wolf rose to the surface, like a sign I should have been using her senses instead of the more restricted human ones that I tended to favor. *Whoops, sorry.* Dumb moment there, not figuring out how Torin saw the grekins. Wolf senses could keep up with—

Torin moved, sprinting toward me, and I’d lingered too long to do anything except brace myself for the hit while simultaneously preparing to fight him. Because I would. I’d fight with everything I had in me.

As he closed in on me, Torin crouched in a typical tackle position, his intent to scoop me up. I embraced the wolf, allowed her energy to fill me as I took the option away from him, falling to the ground and spinning so I could slam my hand up into his thigh as he went past.

“Fuck, ours!” a grekin shouted, trying to grab at me again, but this time, I could see them coming, thanks to my wolf lingering close to the surface.

My fist crashed into its face. “Fuck not yours,” I growled.

Torin recovered far quicker than I’d expected, his hands wrapping around my arms as he hauled me off the ground and against his body. It was such an alpha signature move. Shadow had used it on me more than once, but it wasn’t the same with Torin. He was big, but not Shadow big. With the beast to compare him to, Torin seemed like a boy, without enough years of experience to harden him. One day he’d have it, but not this day.

“Let me go, you motherfucker,” I seethed, slamming my head forward to smash into his chin.

Torin let out a roaring rumble. “Bitch!”

“God yes, I am. You’re just realizing it now? Slow-ass fuck.”

“Bitch, ours!” a grekin chirped, leaping up onto Torin’s shoulder and wrapping its twiggy arms around his neck.

Was *bitch* an upgrade from *fuck*? Didn’t really matter, as long as they gave me a chance to get away. Wrenching myself out of Torin’s arms, I managed to get my feet back on the ground, but I was too slow again.

Sliding across the grass, I was jerked back when Torin wrapped a hand around my ankle. “Shadow!” I screamed, finally resorting to the ace in my back pocket—he had to be somewhere nearby.

“Who the fuck is Shadow?” Torin yelled, dragging me back into him with one hard jerk. He lifted me again, and this time, instead of shouting in my face, he kissed me. A firm slap of his lips against mine, the power rising up between us as the bond that had been rejected but not completely severed surged to life.

“No!” I cried, trying to jerk my head away, but he held me, forcing his energy into me. Forcing his power to mingle with mine. Forcing me in a way that no woman—or man—should ever be forced. My knee jerked up in an attempt to hurt him, but whatever I hit wasn’t enough to stop him.

So I bit him. As hard as I could, teeth tearing into his lips with force as blood spurted in my mouth. With a growl, Torin shoved me back, his face thunderous and brows furrowed. “What the fuck, Mera? We’re true mates! You belong to me... What the hell is wrong with you?”

What was wrong with me? *WHAT WAS WRONG WITH ME?*

“You’re as delusional as your father,” I growled. “And I belong to no one.”

The grekins had disappeared at this point, leaving just Torin and me in the Torma grounds.

“You’ll learn,” he said, not even trying to hide his narcissism. “I’ve come a long way in the year you’ve been gone, Mera, and the one thing I have figured out is that a shifter is stronger with his true mate.”

A derisive laugh escaped, and I licked at my dry lips, still tasting his blood. “I’m not a trophy to be carted around in the hopes I’ll increase your power.”

He moved toward me, his hands out to grasp my face, but this time, I saw him coming, sidestepping and kicking my leg out to knock him down. If he hadn’t been so focused on kissing me again, he would have seen that move and avoided it. Dick-brain was a man’s fatal flaw.

“I belong to no one,” I hissed as he sprawled on the ground. “I reject—”

My words to try to sever our bond were cut off by Shadow’s roar, and no lie, it was a relief to know he was fine and could get me the fuck away from Torin. My previous plan of trying to escape and see how far I’d get would definitely have to wait another day. Since apparently, my true mate had now decided he wanted to claim his trophy-mate.

“Shadow,” Torin breathed, looking both panicked and furious. “That’s who you were calling out for? The fucking Shadow Beast?”

With a smirk, I leaned in closer. “I’d take him over you any day, Torin.”

He tried to grab me again, but Shadow was there now, a glorious sight as his flames filled the field with heat.

And who would have ever thought I’d be so relieved to see that giant, scary asshole.

Beasting out, Shadow slammed a single palm against the alpha’s chest, sending Torin flying across the field. A dark satisfaction filled me; stupid asshole deserved that and so much more.

Despite the mortal danger of taking on Shadow—he’d seen this beast destroy his father with barely more than a thought—Torin didn’t hesitate to get back to his feet and try to attack. A bravery I’d normally admire, but in this case, I’d just slot him into the *too stupid to live* category.

“You can’t have her, beast,” he shouted. “I’m her true mate and I will not release her to you.”

Shadow was furious, his flames growing as his height shot up taller than I’d ever seen. He moved so he was firmly planted

between me and Torin, and at the current height, I was all but staring at his ass.

“Shadow,” I murmured, placing my hand on his lower back. Heat engulfed my palm, but it didn’t burn me—I was not Shadow’s target today. “Let’s just go. He’s not worth it. We have the creatures to worry about.”

He ignored me, and this time, there was a small zap of electricity down my arm, a warning to get my hand off him. So I did.

“You can’t ignore the laws you laid down at the creation of shifters!” Torin shouted more bullshit.

I tried to see around Shadow, to determine where the alpha asshole was, but every time I moved, Shadow was somehow still blocking me completely from sight.

“As easily as I created your kind, it would be just as easy to destroy you,” Shadow rumbled.

Torin’s laughter sounded light, but I’d known him for enough years to know he was far from relaxed. “See, I don’t think that’s strictly true. I’ve been doing some research over this past year, and it turns out that we’re now an important part of the power structure of both this world and... of you. Without shifters, you would not be rocking the current level of energy you’ve grown accustomed to.”

Heat flowed from Shadow with an intensity that told me he was a bee’s dick from losing it completely. “Whom have you been speaking to?” he asked. “There’s no way that knowledge is written anywhere in Earth tomes or scripts.”

Torin chuckled again. “Yeah, see, we have a mutual friend in common. She’s been to your world. She’s been to a lot of worlds, wandering around, and it didn’t take much *persuasion* to convince her to spill some of your secrets.”

Wandering. Dannie was a wanderer. That was what she’d always called herself.

This time, I didn’t bother to take it slow, throwing myself to the side so I could get around Shadow. “If you’ve hurt her, Torin,” I shouted, my voice changing as my wolf got involved, “I *will* kill you.”

Torin’s eyes met mine, and it was the first time we’d really stared at each other since he’d started trying to chase me down. “Come

home with me, Mera, and I'll make sure Dannie comes to no more harm."

My limbs trembled, and as heat burned through me, I wondered if any of that was from me, or was it all Shadow's fire? He was all but pressed against my spine.

"You might kiss me against my will," I spat at Torin. "You might touch and drag and hurt me. You've always had more power than me, but the one thing you will never have is me submitting willingly to you. Just ask Shadow here. My independence is the part of me I hold above all else."

"He kissed you against your will?" Shadow's words were sharp, each syllable a figurative blade.

I swallowed roughly. "Yeah, he did. Twice. Just before you got to us, so I now owe him a broken nose or two."

The heat soared around the beast, and I almost gasped as Torin dropped to his knees, screams ringing from him. Jerking my head up to see Shadow's face, he was staring the alpha down with an impassive stare—flames in his eyes.

Holy. Fuck.

I knew exactly what was happening, having felt this particular power before, and while I would never feel sorry for Torin, I was the one who wanted to break this bastard.

"Shadow," I said, placing my hand on his burning skin. "It's fine. I can handle him."

His chest rumbled, but he didn't argue as he released Torin. The alpha dragged himself up to his feet, shoulders heaving as he shook off that pain. I waited for his attack, but he decided not to respond in the same manner, choosing a different path.

He held his hands out to me and took a shaky step forward. "Just come home with me, Mera," he pleaded huskily, "and we can work out our dynamic. I know you've always wanted a welcome back into the pack, and now you have it. The alpha's mate will never fear for her life."

He had reached into my chest and yanked out my deepest, strongest desire. The wish I'd been making since I'd been a pre-teen. Since I'd lost my father. Since my world in Torma had imploded.

But despite his apparent sincerity, I knew the truth: he would control me for the power boost our bond brought.

“What about Sisily?” I asked with a derisive laugh.

“What about her?” he shot back just as fast. “She obeys her alpha, as all my wolves do, and whatever I decide works best for the three of us is what will happen.”

I lunged forward, prepared to murder this stupid fuck if it was the last thing I did. No one could miss what he’d just implied there, and if he thought he could start his own harem, then he was going to wake up with a blade in his chest. Again.

Torin and I went down in a tangle of limbs, and I shifted in the same instant, the pain almost negligent in my fury. My wolf wasted no time tearing into Torin’s throat, and at first the alpha didn’t fight me—my attack had taken him by surprise, but his survival instincts kicked in moments later as he too partly shifted. It was too late, though, with Shadow wading into the fight, and yanking me up and out of there before Torin could land a single bite.

“You’re a poor match for her,” the beast told the bloodied shifter. “And if you try to touch her again, I will forsake the power you provide to me and wipe your kind from this world.”

Torin spat out some blood as the visible gashes in his throat started to heal—unfortunately, I hadn’t hit anything too important. “You might claim her for now while you track your shadow creatures, but she’s not yours.” Torin showed no fear, and I honestly didn’t know where this bravery was coming from.

Shadow must have had the same thought, as the gold bled back into his eyes. “You have briefly demonstrated the reasons you were chosen as her mate, but it’s too little, too late.”

“Never,” Torin seethed. “If there’s anything else I’ve learned in the past year, it’s that only death is permanent.”

Shadow’s cynical laughter rang out as he turned, with my wolf still in his arms, and stepped toward the library portal. “You’ve put your death out into the universe, mutt. Let’s hope she doesn’t decide to take you up on that challenge.”

“I have your weakness, Shadow Beast,” Torin bellowed after us, finally managing to get to his feet, just as we vanished from sight and Earth was cut off from us.

Flames lit up the white hallway, and if I weren't safely in his arms, I would have burned to death in the inferno that raged around us. Shadow marched along, not speaking, and judging from his expression, it was best for me to keep my thoughts to myself.

But for Dannie, I would risk his wrath.

Initiating the shift back to human, I cried out as the pain of bones breaking and re-mending couldn't be ignored again. Shadow held me through it, and somehow it made it better... and worse. When I was finally a huffing, coughing, wincing human, I patted him on the shoulder.

"I have to go back," I said with urgency. "They're hurting my friend because of me. Well, you and me, and it's our responsibility to help her."

"I'll take care of it."

"What the fuck does that mean?" I bit out. "We need to take care of it right now. Please. It's not negotiable."

His hand landed on my naked ass, a firm slap, and as his power surged through me, I cried out. It hadn't hurt exactly, but it had been a warning.

A warning to shut the hell up. He had to know there was no way that was going to happen.

Kicking out, I started to struggle harder against his hold, and for my effort, I received another slap on my ass. This time, his hand tightened to the point of discomfort as he held me in place, his long strides continuing.

Damn it to hell! So he was ignoring me now and expecting I would just trust that he'd *take care of it*. And why in all the fucking fucks was he spanking me like an errant child?

Nothing boiled my blood more than that, and the fact that his hand was still on my ass, holding it almost possessively, made me want to... well, shit, it was making me flustered. Not being naked right now would have been excellent, but once again, I'd shifted before I'd thought about the ramifications. Tearing into Torin had been worth it, though.

"The talk about Dannie is not done," I warned Shadow. "We *will* be revisiting it very soon. However, I have some other questions that need answers as well."

“Of course you do,” he grumbled.

I ignored him and tried ridiculously hard to ignore his hand. “What happened to all of those shadow creatures? Even the little leprechaun trees disappeared...”

Silence.

“Did you capture and imprison them all in the time I was dealing with Torin?” At this point, we’d both stopped pretending that he needed my help to subdue them.

Silence again.

“What are you hiding from me, Shadow? What is so important in the Shadow Realm that you would keep me around just on the off-chance I get the door open?”

The silence was heavier, if that was even possible. We’d entered the library at this point, and as soon as the bright room came into view, I felt a pressing wave of exhaustion. Rapid shifts still drained my energy.

Shadow didn’t stop. He didn’t speak again. I wasn’t even sure he was breathing, but the flames continued to rage at an impressive height, thankfully not catching the library alight. The magic here must have protected it from storming savage shadow beasts. Otherwise, I imagined it would have burned down before now.

When we reached his lair, I was deposited in my room.

“Shadow?” I asked, “We need to talk about Dannie. And the shadow creatures. Maybe even Torin. It’s all important.”

He paused at the doorway, not turning back. “The next time I return,” he said, “you will open the door to the Shadow Realm, or I will kill you myself.” Pause. “That’s the only important detail you need to worry about.”

Then, with a surge of fire that singed the door frame, leaving a trail of burning embers and soot behind, he left the room, locking me inside.

“Let me out!”

For days, I'd been smashing my fist against, and screaming into, an unmovable door. Slumping forward, I closed my eyes and wondered if maybe Shadow had just decided this was the easiest way to deal with me. I had water in the bathroom, and it would take months or longer for me to weaken from lack of food, so there was no inherent danger, unless he forgot about me forever.

And maybe that was his plan. But I had friends and family to take care of, and I needed to win that bet if that was the only way to make him keep his word and allow me to visit the pack lands again.

According to my calculations, I had one week left now to fulfill my side of this bet, and for those few people I loved, I would do whatever it took.

Whatever it took.

Just had to get out of here first.

The redundant nature of pounding against a door that was sealed with something stronger than what a wolf could break had finally caught up to me, but I was literally at a loss of what else to do. I'd tried to call out to Angel, but clearly, our bond wasn't mature enough yet to hear each other's thoughts.

I'd even resorted to slipping written SOS notes under my door. I'd had to tear paper from one of the stolen books in my room—that hurt, even if it was one of those blank pages at the back. I'd used

eyeliner to write a “help me” letter, and since no one had rescued me, I’d clearly desecrated a book for nothing. I’d added that to my list of shit Shadow would pay for.

I’d also searched the room for hidden passages, but there was nothing to be found.

At this stage, I’d exit via the Shadow Realm if I could figure out how to touch it. Ironic, since this was the one thing Shadow wanted from me; the reason he had me locked up in the first place.

If I unlocked the realm, I might even be free to go back to Torma, bet or no bet. I mean, not that I would be rejoining the pack, no matter what Torin thought was going to happen, but I would return long enough to assure myself that Dannie and Simone were okay. Then I’d embrace freedom like I never had before.

Torin. What was up with that bastard of a shifter anyway? Since when had he decided to change his mind about wanting the true mate bond? It felt like a grab for power, not to mention control—he didn’t want his true mate freely wandering around the world.

Not that he’d have to worry too long about it... I was breaking the bond as soon as we were in the same room again.

At this point, I was sprawled across the bed, letting all these thoughts consume me. The lack of food wasn’t making me weak yet, but I was weary. Might be time for a nap. Maybe in my dreams I’d find the path to the shadow world, open the door, and the beast would release me from his hold.

Maybe I’d finally figure out what I was missing about the spell holding the door? What had we all missed? And in all honesty, how was I going to solve this mystery when a bunch of powerful god-like bastards couldn’t?

At some point in my musings and stress, I drifted off, a rumbling stomach my only companion. My dreams took on the same dark thread of my thoughts, slashes of red and gold scattered through a shadowed world. I was running, chasing, hunting. The wolf was in control as we let the colors slide across us. Only we didn’t have a real body. We were wolf, but we were not the wolf we knew from Earth side. This wolf embraced the fire-threaded darkness. This wolf could slip from solid form and become one with the shadow. And when we were shadow, we were powerful... invincible.

The feeling was heady, and I didn't even try to fight as we lost ourselves in the darkness. This was where we should have been all along. This was my calling... my destiny. The Shadow Realm...

I jerked upright, shaking off the disorientation of that dream in a heartbeat, even as my breath burst in and out rapidly. *It had felt so real.* On my tongue, I could still taste the acrid smokiness of the land we'd traveled; feel the cold tendrils of mist on my skin; crave the vast freedom that had been sitting before me.

My chest heaved as I fought the dual sensation of existing between two places. Had I actually been in the Shadow Realm in that dream? Or was it just a manifestation of Shadow demanding I figure out how to open the doorway?

The disorientation did not fade, even as I sat there for many minutes and shook my head and slapped my cheeks a few times. Stumbling to my feet, a whole-body shake was my next option, followed by a cold shower. I closed my eyes first and shook my arms and legs out, tingles following each movement, like my limbs had been asleep for far longer than that dream had indicated.

Still, a shadowy second vision persisted, right in my peripheral vision. I kept catching sight of dark movement to the side, but when I turned, it wasn't there. The dual sight made me nauseous as I ran to the bathroom, cranking the shower all the way to freezing as I jumped in fully clothed. Closing my eyes completely, I dropped my head against the wall.

The jolt of icy water did the trick, as the racing of my mind calmed, and when I finally reopened my eyes, the shadows had faded from view. Adjusting the water temperature, I sank down under the warmer stream, hugging my arms around my legs. My cheek rested against my knees as I contemplated the possibility that I'd touched the Shadow Realm in my dreams—and maybe had released more creatures somewhere.

After I finally calmed, my thoughts were centered on the stupidity of breaking the connection to the one place I needed to be above all others. I'd let fear grab hold of me and lost my opportunity. In the future, I had to do better than that, or I'd be stuck in this room for the rest of my life.

When I was done feeling sorry for myself, I shed the wet clothes on the bathroom floor, padding out naked into the main bedroom. My line of sight was on the floor as I marched forward, fuming about my stupid decision-making, so I missed the intruder in my room.

It dove at me, a creature of darkness that I'd never seen before, and I went down in a naked heap, screaming my fucking head off. The second the creature's and my flesh connected, fire raced across my pain receptors, just like when Shadow touched me.

It hissed at me in a foreign tongue, which I ignored as I swung my elbow to clip it across the face, shooting it back from me. When the contact between us broke, the pain faded, and outside of the two handprint burns between my boobs and shoulders, there were no other marks on my skin. From what I could see.

My full attention returned to the shadowy specter as it tilted its head to the side, observing me. More hissing sounds emerged.

"I don't speak shadow creature," I snapped, hands out in front of me in case I needed to defend myself again.

Now that it wasn't on top of me, I had time to really look at what I faced. This particular creature had four arms, two sets off each side of its torso, with wolf-like, curved hindlegs holding it upright. The face was wolf-like as well, with an extended muzzle, sharp teeth, and dark, beady eyes. It fit the shadow realm stereotype, being in shades of grey and black, and it was not happy.

More waving of those arms and hissing.

"For fuck's sake," I cursed, sprinting to the side and around it. "Shadow!" I screamed when I slammed into the door, using my entire body weight. "Inky! Gaster!"

One of these stupid fucks had to be close by.

Surely, Shadow had felt the disturbance; he'd felt it the first time I'd touched the Shadow Realm.

I just had to hold out long enough until he arrived, releasing me from this damn prison.

Spinning and pressing my back against the door, I was surprised to see the *thing* was still standing in the same position, watching me closely. When our eyes met, it took a step forward, and I braced myself.

In the adrenaline rush of being attacked, I'd forgotten that I had controlled the shadow creatures back on Earth. Something I hadn't had time to tell Shadow or anyone else.

Could I control this one too?

"Stop," I commanded it. "Don't take one more step."

It moved forward.

Shit!

Whatever this creature was, it felt strong, with a commanding presence. It was almost regal, as it sat eye to eye with me, on those wolf-like hindlegs. And the fact that it was too strong for me to control did not bode well for my chance of surviving. Especially teamed with a similar firepower to Shadow's.

"What do you want?" I asked inanely, since it spoke in clicks and clacks.

It took a step forward, making no sound, as it was clearly smarter than me and knew we couldn't communicate. I had nowhere to back up, already pressed against the door, so when someone slammed it open, I went flying forward, my face crashing into the floor, pain rocketing through my nose and cheeks.

"Ugh," I groaned, tasting blood as I dragged myself to my hands and knees.

From this angle, I had no idea who had busted through the door. Was it Shadow? Or could it be another beast that wanted to kill me too? Maybe *four arms* had a friend?

Maybe I'd hit my head really hard and this was all a dream? Or Shadow had murdered me in my sleep and this was my afterlife?

So many questions.

So few answers.

Story of my life.

My nose had already healed by the time I got to my feet, focusing on the two figures hissing at each other. The sight of a familiar eight-foot-tall male with broad shoulders and a mop of curls was a huge relief. Shadow towered over the wolfie beast, which would normally be a great sign, but he wore an odd expression I didn't like. It wasn't fear, but he was confused, and one thing was clear: this was not a normal shadow creature.

The two of them started to hiss back and forth, and I wished I could understand what they were saying. Shadow's face was darkness personified as he glared at me, and I wished I could take my naked, bloodied ass out of this space, because these guys meant business.

"What the fuck is going on?" I asked, wiping blood from my chin. "What is this creature?"

Shadow stared at me like I was the monster in the room. "What did you do?" he asked. "You released Igorna from the realm. He's an upper-level member of one of the royal families."

Igorna. That was a name, not just a creature classification. Apparently, this one was very different from the other ones. A royal.

"And he said you tried to control him. He felt the pull of an alpha to obey."

Whoops. I'd given myself away there, and honestly, neither of them looked in the mood for me to lie about what had happened. "I kind of controlled a couple of shadow creatures on Earth, but I have

no idea how I did that, so don't bother asking. It's as much a mystery to me as it is to you."

Shadow reached out and wrapped his hand around my arm, pulling me into his side. "Don't go near him," he warned me.

I snorted. "Wasn't planning on it. I already have the scars from the first time he launched himself at me."

Shadow stilled, and while he still hadn't taken his eyes off Igorna, I could feel his focus. "What scars?"

Lifting my long hair, I showed the world my tits, because at this point, that was the least of my worries. Credit to Shadow, his eyes landed on the handprints marking my skin, a few shades darker than the sun-kissed bronze of my chest, and didn't sink lower.

His lips thinned. A very bad sign with Shadow, from what I'd come to learn.

"Get dressed," he bit out, releasing me from his probing gaze and firm hold. "Looks like Igorna and I need to have a few words about touching my possessions."

Fighting back the urge to remind him that I was no one's possession, I decided now was not the time and did as I was told. Strolling away, I stayed close to the wall so as to not cross paths with Igorna. Reaching my closet, I looked over my shoulder to find its beady eyes locked on me.

Shadow moved closer, his chest rumbling in warning. Igorna lifted its lip and snarled in return, showcasing some impressive fangs, but it didn't move. That was reassuring. Maybe Shadow still had the upper hand against this wolfie dude.

When no one moved, I turned and grabbed at the first clothing my hand touched, pulling on some cotton sweats, a grey shirt, and socks. Fuck knew why the magic closet had given me socks and not underwear, but I wasn't about to argue. I noticed as I pulled the shirt down that the mark on my chest was gone now, shifter healing having kicked in.

But the damage was already done with Shadow and his temper. Mine too, if I was being honest.

The hissing was loud when I sidled back along the wall, Shadow's eyes snapping straight to me. Igorna turned as well, and

there was no way I could tell what it was thinking with such foreign features.

“What is it saying?” I asked Shadow, unable to stand the suspense any longer. “Did I pull it here from the Shadow Realm? Or did I just open a doorway and it walked through?”

Shadow didn’t answer, too busy hissing at the creature, and I was about a second from losing my shit when he finally answered me. “Igorna doesn’t know what happened. He was out hunting when he felt your presence. Following the energy resulted in him stepping through to our world. The prince is not happy about finding himself locked out of the Shadow Realm.”

“Is the library shadow door still locked?” I asked, wondering if I’d done more than just dream walk my way into the Shadow Realm. “Maybe I unlocked it while I was there.”

Like I’d summoned it with that question, Inky seeped into my room, twirling its way around Shadow. “The door remains unchanged. You bypassed it as usual.”

“So what can we do about our new guest?” I asked. “And did I release anything else this time?”

Shadow’s jaw could cut glass, it was so tense, his lips pursed as he let out a breath. “I haven’t had time to investigate if there are any others, and Igorna is going to be a bit of an issue because the power this beast wields is close to my own. Especially while I am in this form.”

In this form? “You have another form?”

My mind went wild trying to imagine him shifting into another form. Did he mean that fiery wolf thing he did? Or was there a complete other side to Shadow? Was it like Igorna’s? Or was it something else entirely?

Maybe he’d fashioned shifters in his image?

“You need to leave the room now, Mera,” he said, his tone brooking no argument.

Starting toward the door, I found myself hesitating, swinging back to stare at him. “Will you be okay, Shadow?”

“Fine!” he snarled. “The two of us just need to have a little chat.”

Igorna hissed his loudest hiss so far, and I didn’t like the sound of it. But this was no place for me, in a battle between shadow beasts. I

just had to hope Shadow would once again prove the rumors true and be the scariest one of all.

Rushing from my room, I headed straight for the Library of Knowledge. The urge to run back to Shadow was strong, but there was nothing I could do to help him except get in the middle and die. He was the scariest, most badass being I'd ever met, and I had to have faith he could hold his own. Not to mention the bastard had locked me away for days, so really, would I mourn if he died?

When I entered the library, I couldn't get over how normal it all was. Bright and airy, filled with beings milling around, doing their research. Like none of them knew about the days I'd been locked away. Or the new shadowy dangers I'd brought into our midst.

Marching through the shelves, I ignored the confused looks. Hadn't they seen a chick on a mission for food before?

"Ms. Mera!" A cheery voice caught my ear. "You've finally finished your research project! We missed you."

I paused, turning to find Gaster and his genuine smile behind me. Swallowing down my fury, I forced my own smile to appear. When I'd been stuck in the room, I'd felt very betrayed by him... by everyone. Thinking they'd all known I was imprisoned, and no one had even slipped some food under the door. Logically, I knew it was stupid to expect anyone to go up against Shadow, but it had still hurt.

"Research project?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, yes. Shadow said you were helping him out and wanted to remain undisturbed."

He did, did he? I returned his smile. “Shadow is a fucking liar. I was locked in my room, a prisoner, without food or entertainment. So if you’ll excuse me...”

I marched off, but not before seeing his face fall. Yeah, that was mean and bitchy of me toward someone who didn’t deserve it, but I was hungry and stressed, and that was never a good time to corner me with stupid happiness.

When I reached the dining hall, my first glance was to look for Angel, but her spot was empty. Typical. I finally get out of my prison and my one friend was MIA. She clearly had a life that didn’t involve me and the needy bitch that I was didn’t like that. Hopefully, she at least noticed I was missing and asked someone about me. I had to believe that there was one supernatural creature here who gave a fuck about me. Since Shadow clearly didn’t.

Inky popped up out of nowhere, wrapping around me, like it wanted to remind me that it cared. “You don’t care,” I said, shooing it away. “You’re just Shadow’s sycophant, and that means I can’t trust you.”

Inky swelled and it had been a while since I’d seen it do that, so I stared, mesmerized by the beauty of its sparking synapses. For a minute, before I forced myself to turn away. It was time to start distancing myself from Shadow and anything connected to his world.

The small metal servers ducked around then—I’d grown very used to the robotic-type beings, having learned they originated in the land of Faerie. Normally, I didn’t like being waited on, but from what I knew, they didn’t mind the tasks they’d been given. After all, they had been created by the fae with the sole purpose to serve. The square, metal “face” didn’t have eyes or a mouth, so there was no way to tell if they were happy, but I somehow doubted they even felt emotions such as those.

Or maybe I was justifying it because I really loved their efficient service.

Once I’d placed my order, I sat back, trying to ignore my rumbling stomach and the small part of me that was worried about Shadow.

“Why are you still sitting here?” I spun to see Angel on my right.

“Did you just...” I looked around to try to figure out how the hell she’d gotten here so quickly and without me noticing. Had she

appeared out of thin air? Or could she move at superspeed?

“Shadow is occupied with another powerful entity,” she whispered, leaning close to my ear. “My spies told me that he’ll be away for at least a few hours. Let’s get you laid.”

I should have been on my feet sprinting for the hallway out of here, but I hesitated. “I need food first. I haven’t eaten in days.”

She leaned back, looking me over more thoroughly, her eyebrows furrowing. “Let me guess. Shadow didn’t have you on a research project.” I shook my head and she made an angry rumble of a sound. “I need to beat the shit out of him.”

Same, girl. Same.

“He had me locked in my bedroom until I figured out how to open the Shadow Realm. I tried to call you through our bond, but I probably have no idea how it actually works.”

Her angelic face morphed for a moment into something that resembled an avenging harbinger of death. It was no less beautiful but was terrifying in its intensity. The sort of face that when directed at anyone would send them running. “Our bond will take time to mature,” she bit out, “and eventually, you’ll feel me as part of your energy, in a similar way to your wolf.”

I nodded because that made sense.

“And Shadow,” she growled, “is next on my list to destroy. I asked him pointblank about you, and I do not appreciate being lied to.”

I sighed. “Technically, he didn’t lie. He left me there to figure out how to open the door to Shadow Realm. I guess that was his ‘special project.’”

“Lie by omission is still a lie. I was inquiring to your wellbeing and leaving you to starve is not ensuring optimal health.”

I’d come to learn that the more formal her speech was, the more pissed she was.

I shrugged. “Well, I’m sure as shit not going to argue about planning his death. Let me know if you want any ideas.”

Her smile was brilliant, if not a little brittle, as anger still pinched her face. “I’ve heard the sign of a true friendship on Earth is finding someone who will help you hide a dead body.”

My smile matched hers. “Accurate, my friend. Very accurate. And if the need ever arises for you, don’t hesitate to hit me up for help.

I'm totally your girl. No questions asked."

Angel hugged me, and some of the tension that had been building inside of me over the last few days eased. Over her shoulder, a dozen or more shocked faces were pointed in our direction, and I wasn't at all surprised. This was highly unusual behavior for anyone here, let alone someone from Honor Meadows.

I squeezed her tightly in return and she let out a long gush of air. "Another human custom I could get used to," she murmured. "I often saw this from afar, and now I understand the expressions they wore."

Her words softened my heart and more of my tense anger released. It had been a long time since I'd been hugged with care like this, and I soaked it up like the sad shifter I was.

When we pulled away, neither of us knew what to say—we weren't really the sort of chicks who did softer emotions, so with a quick clear of our throats, we focused instead on the food that had arrived, courtesy of a server. Angel's food always appeared a few minutes after she sat, even though I'd never once seen her actually place an order. It was a skill I wished I possessed, but at least mine wasn't far behind hers.

I fell on the food like I hadn't eaten in months. Shifters did not deal well with food deprivation, even if technically we could go a long time between meals. Today, everything tasted like the best thing I'd ever eaten. The bread was sweet with just enough butter and the stew was hot, spices and flavors exploding across my tongue. There was also this delicious, fruity, bubbly drink that was reminiscent of soda, only lighter with less syrup.

Angel shook her head, a throaty chuckle accompanying it. "I don't envy mortals much, but when you eat with such abandonment, it makes me long for a similar moment of joy."

"Are you sure you can't eat the food you play with?"

She shrugged. "I don't need it for sustenance, but maybe..."

With curious eyes, she lifted a piece of buttered bread to her lips. She inhaled, sniffing the food first as all true foodies did, and then as her teeth bit down, she chewed thoughtfully before wrinkling her face and spitting it out.

"Okay, that's not good," she huffed. "Maybe I'm not missing out."

I chuckled, which turned into a full-bodied laugh. Her face was just so disappointed and disgusted. What a letdown after all that time she'd been imagining the taste.

"Maybe next time we'll try chocolate," I suggested. "It's your best bet at finding a food to match or exceed your expectations."

Her narrowed eyes didn't speak of a whole lot of trust about that, but she didn't argue. "Should we discover this chocolate on Earth?" she asked, reminding me that she'd initially sought me out to try to get me away while Shadow was busy with Igorna. An opportunity I should have snatched up with both hands, but for some reason, I was still hesitating.

"Shadow is going up against a powerful creature," I murmured, leaning in close. "It was stronger than any of the others we've rounded up. Should we check to make sure he's okay?"

She pursed her lips, ignoring my question. "How did you get covered in blood?"

It just occurred to me that I'd been sitting here with her for twenty minutes, face smeared in blood, and she hadn't asked until now. "Did you not notice I was bloodied up before now?"

"I noticed," she replied quickly. "But I figured if you wanted me to know why, you would have brought it up. It's polite not to ask."

I gently shoved her. "You've clearly spent too much of your life around violence if you don't blink an eye at someone casually eating lunch covered in blood."

The emotional demons that plagued Angel flared in her expressive eyes. "Truer words were never spoken. Violence is in my blood, my family's blood, and my past and future will be painted in shades of red." She chuckled without humor. "Metaphorically speaking, since I don't bleed in the same color as a human."

Well, that was interesting. But there was no chance to ask her what color she did bleed because a roar split the air, with enough force to knock me to the ground. Angel caught me before I faceplanted, and as she hauled me up with the sort of strength I associated with Shadow Beast, we both faced off against whatever was coming our way.

Somehow, I felt a little more confident with my friend at my side.

“**S**tay behind me,” Angel hissed, arching her upper body forward in a pose designed for striking hard and fast. “It’s a shadow hunter.”

I’d never heard of a shadow hunter, but the tense undertones in her voice told me that they were bad news. They were also probably here because of me, and once again, I was proving that my stupid ass was too dangerous to be left alone.

This was really Shadow’s fault, with his insistence I connect to the Shadow Realm.

Yep, I was satisfied with ninety percent of the blame lying with him.

“Behind,” she said again when I started to sidle around her.

“Girl, I don’t roll that way,” I said to her back. “I’ve never relied on anyone to fight my battle before, and I’m not about to start with you. We stand together.”

It was fine to wait for a knight in shining armor to save you—that was many a young shifter’s dream, but not mine. My knight would have no doubt shown up in shit-covered, rusty metal and proceeded to let me down over and over again. Why wait for that? Why have hope when it was always proven to be worthless?

Angel just shook her head but didn’t argue. “Also,” I added, “I know and acknowledge that you’re ten times more badass than me. But I will still always stand with you.”

Before she could reply, more roars ripped the room apart, and my wolf stirred in my chest, trying to surge forward with a howl of her own. I had the sense that drawing attention to us was a bad idea, so I locked her down the best I could.

Two shadow hunters came into sight, shrouded head to toe in black, marching swiftly along the rows. My wolf's restlessness grew even stronger and I had to wonder why the hell everything in the Shadow Realm made her react so violently. Could it just be about a Shadow Beast connection? Or was it something else?

And would I ever solve these mysteries before one of these creatures took me out?

"Two of them," Angel hissed, and there was a quiver of light along her skin as her wings burst free, weapons appearing in both hands. They were curved blades, shimmering gold and silver, with wickedly sharp tips on the ends.

"What are they here for?" I whispered. "And how do we take them out?"

She leaned farther forward, those blades swinging around her hands with the sort of skill that I would never possess—if I even remotely attempted that, I'd cut my damn arms off.

Maybe she really didn't need me at her side.

"I've never heard of them being outside the Shadow Realm," she said, not bothering to hide her annoyance. "They're used to round up any creatures that escape royal control. Like supernatural bounty hunters. What they're doing here, I have no idea, but the fact that they've arrived while Shadow Beast is busy is bad news."

On the almost certainty that this was my fault, I had to do everything in my power to ensure that no one got hurt. And I seriously had to figure out how to send them back because it was getting crowded on this side of the door now. Not to mention it was all making sense why that door had been barred in the first place. Shadow creatures were just like the Shadow Beast—dangerous and uncontrollable. One of them in the Solaris System was more than enough.

Another roar shattered the unnatural silence, followed by the sound of scrambling as everyone scattered from the dining room, trying to escape whatever fate these two had in mind.

“What’s under their cloaks?” I murmured. “I didn’t even see their heads move when they screamed.”

Angel shook her head, focus never wavering. “No one knows. They always wear the shrouds, and the screams are debilitating to anything weaker in energy than them. Which is almost everything.”

Excellent. “We’re still standing, at least.”

Silver linings were not usually my forte, but I needed one today. Maybe Angel and I could at least hold them off until help arrived.

Unless we *were* the help...

“I’ve tangled with a shadow hunter before,” she said, swirling those blades again, “and one is no match for me, but two...”

The unsaid was obvious there. She had no idea if she could handle two. “I’ll be the annoying distraction,” I said as another scream, much louder this time, almost knocked me down. “That might give you an edge.”

They were standing in the middle of the row, and Angel kept trying to edge me out of the way. When it was obvious I wasn’t going to move, she let out a huff and launched herself forward, deciding to attack first.

Her wings released a powerful gust of air that knocked both cloaked figures back, their faces remaining well hidden in the darkness of their hoods. This close, I could tell they were tall and solidly built, with a black mist coating them from head to toe.

Angel crashed into the nearest, her weapon slicing out in a rapid arc, and at the same time, she released the blade in her left hand, sending it flying across the table. The second hunter managed to dodge the blow, but the curved blade returned to Angel in time for her to throw it again, all while parrying blows with the one she was face to face with.

The screeches were deafening, and I fought against the urge to cover my ears and crawl under the table. If Angel could somehow fight two dudes with magic flying blades on her own, I could manage to stay on my fucking feet and not cower like a bitch. Had to live up to my big talk of fighting my own battles, and at minimum that meant staying on my feet.

My wolf scratched against her metaphorical cage, trying to force a change. After a moment’s hesitation, I decided that maybe I should

let her have the lead here. I had more weapons as a wolf, but there was still a small concern over the odd way she acted around shadow creatures.

“Get out of here,” Angel shouted, not hearing my internal debate. “Get Shadow.”

That was the logical step to take, but there was every chance he was fairly occupied himself. Surely, if he wasn't, he would have already felt the chill of these two hunters—their icy energy was like a slap in the face with a frozen bag of balls.

Change! My wolf was not taking *no* for an answer, and with no more time to worry about the right path, I released her and let the shift wash across me. The pain was over in a flash, and it was the fastest I'd ever shifted. A great achievement if I wasn't about to fight a darkness-washed hunter.

My wolf had no fear of these beings, and since I was hidden deep inside her soul, there was no hesitation as we attacked. Together we struck when, on my own, I would have shied away.

When we attached to the dark cloak, Angel let out a scream. “Don't touch their darkness!”

It was too late to stop. My jaws already clamped around the cloak, tearing it away from the body. The wolf and I both wanted to know what lay below their shroud.

It tasted odd, the material musky and decaying. There had been no scent until we'd attached to it, but the moment that cloak was in our jaws, we were hit with wafts of death and blood.

It didn't deter my wolf, who was vicious in her attack, as more and more strips were torn from the hunter. Angel continued shouting warnings at me, but I was beyond hearing.

The hunters screamed louder than ever, but it didn't hurt at all in this form.

“How the hell are you doing that, wolf?” Angel bellowed so close to my ear that I was forced to hear her... forced to think about what she was saying.

Touching them was apparently a big no-no, for reasons I wasn't aware of. There was just too damn much I didn't know about this world; information that would no doubt come in handy when I was on the frontline battling.

Since they hadn't killed us so far, we didn't stop, choosing instead to up our attack, aiming higher to reach its "face."

Sharp jabs of power slipped off my fur as it hit back. We felt the blow, but there was no follow-through with actual pain. More of its dark cloak fell to the ground, and my wolf was almost cut in two as a sickle blade zoomed past my head and embedded itself deep in the depthless hood of the hunter.

Its shriek was different this time. Higher-pitched with less force. The first scream was an attack, but this one was pain. Angel had hit right in the spot to cause the most damage.

The black cloak fluttered to the floor and we backed up, eyeing it. Whatever substance had been holding the hunter together had vanished with the strike of Angel's blade, leaving behind a bundle of dark material.

Angel's second battle cry was accompanied by a clap of her wings as they slammed into the remaining hunter, before he, too, was dispatched with her blades.

Her fucking awesome, wickedly sharp blades.

If I didn't think I'd somehow kill myself with them, I would totally be getting a set.

When we were standing above two puddles of material, she spun to me, her chest heaving as she ran her gaze over my beast. Trying to pry out my secrets.

"You, my friend," she huffed, "are no human or shifter."

We stared up at her, my wolf as confused as me. What the heck did that mean?

Gaster arrived soon after this, and since I wasn't ready to be naked in front of the world again, I was still in wolf form. "Oh my." He gasped, looking down at what remained of the cloaks. "You defeated them on your own!"

Angel grimaced. "Is the Shadow Realm door still sealed?"

He nodded in a rapid, nervous manner. "That was the first thing I checked, because if the doorway was open, we'd have a lot more to worry about than a few hunters."

They were talking about the doorway that Shadow was desperate to get open... right? Apparently, no one was privy to that information and it didn't sound like they'd be happy about it if they knew. But Shadow did what Shadow wanted here, that much was clear, with no one brave or strong enough to go up against him.

But it would have been interesting to see their reactions if they knew.

Might drop that little fact at some stage, just to stir the pot.

"Are there any more hunters, do you think?" Gaster asked nervously. "I've sent out an alert through the lands, and I'll await their replies and advice."

Angel shook her head. "There are no more in the library. I've attuned myself to their energy, and it's resonating empty now that they've been dispatched."

Gaster looked down again like he couldn't quite believe they were dead. "We would have been in trouble without you. Kind blessings,

royal one.”

He bowed low then, holding the pose respectfully.

I tilted my head back to see her face, and even in the grey-scale vision of the wolf, it was clear she was annoyed by the title and genuflecting. “I did what any in my position would have, and honestly, if it wasn’t for Mera-wolf, I might not have had a chance to take them both down.”

My wolf preened a little. We’d been a damn good distraction, all without suffering from touching their cloaks.

Gaster, who was almost face to face with me in this form, stepped closer, peering into my eyes. “How were you able to help, Ms. Mera? The shadow hunters are greatly feared, and to touch them is to touch death for a mortal. Your soul forfeit to them. You must have been very lucky to avoid their touch.”

Wow, okay. So now we knew what was supposed to happen when a mortal touched them.

Angel arched an eyebrow at me. “Yes, very lucky,” she said. “I wrongly assumed she would know about them. I forgot that all knowledge of the Shadow Realm has been long suppressed by the beast himself.”

Hence why her warning had been too late to stop me from half-eating a hunter. Being some weird shadow magnet had come in handy today, preventing me from forfeiting my soul... which sounded a little scary.

“Did you find Shadow?” Angel asked, shifting the focus from me, like the true friend she was. “Surely, he would be interested in a little invasion of shadow folk.”

Gaster did another of those rapid head movements. “I tried to find him, but there’s no sign of him at all.”

A trickle of fear stirred deep inside, in the place where I couldn’t quite hate Shadow. Had Igorna done what I thought was impossible? Had he hurt or killed Shadow, leaving shifters at the mercy of a life with no god? I had no idea if Shadow had ever done anything beneficial for us, but it was nice to know that he’d existed in the background.

I had to check on him.

As we took off toward the room, Angel shouted after me: “Be careful. Trust your instincts.”

My wolf let out a yip of agreement before sprinting into the Library of Knowledge, which was no longer a peaceful and tranquil room. It looked like a tornado had gone through it; the hunters had caused a shit ton of damage before they’d entered the dining hall.

Once again, a shadow creature had sought me out. And once again, I had no damn idea why.

Entering the lair moments later, we found it quiet and still, unlike the chaos of the library. Whatever magic of Shadow’s that kept this place a sanctuary appeared to still be intact. Just silence, and a chilly crisp air—

Wait, chilly? It was never cold in here...

Changing direction, my wolf detoured toward my favorite place with its soft couches and roaring fire. A fire that to my knowledge had never gone out or even burned low.

Until right now.

Not a speck of flame was visible, the darkened interior looking like it had been cold for days. My wolf nosed us forward, whimpering as a true fear slunk its way into our chest.

Shadow was gone. If the fire had burned out, then did that mean his energy was no longer present to keep it going? Had he found a way to return to the Shadow Realm with Igorna? Or had the creature managed to destroy him?

The questions spun in my head, and even in my wolf form, with muted human emotions, we were afraid. Heading toward my room, we moved slowly, not wanting to be ambushed. Creeping through the stacks of books, I noted that nothing was disturbed, so other than the lack of fire, there was no way to tell anything was amiss. But deep in my soul, the place where I believed gut instinct arose, I felt the change.

And I didn’t like it.

When we reached my room, the door was ajar—it was never ajar. So now we had two disturbances to the status quo, and that was all I needed to know that we were completely and totally screwed. Creeping inside, I allowed my senses to roam free first.

There was nothing. No scent, heartbeat, power resonance, or physical presence. Pushing farther into the room, I was relieved to see it looking empty and untouched. No massive fight had happened here, that much was clear, and I wasted no more time shifting back and changing into new clothes.

Thankful that I'd had a chance to eat and my energy wasn't completely depleted, even after a rapid shift, I threw a jacket over my tank and pulled my boots on. Hurrying from the room, my aim was to return to the Library of Knowledge, find Gaster, and force him to tell me everything about the Shadow Realm. No longer would I put up with his bullshit response of *that's not my business*.

Yeah, sorry, bro, when two worlds started to collide, it was everyone's business.

The library had regained some of its composure upon my return, the goblins righting anything that had been disturbed by the hunters. Those two had cut a path of destruction through the shelves in their journey toward Angel and me. And one of my biggest pending questions was why they had targeted us... me.

Unless it had been Angel who'd been the first point of elimination, as one of the few beings who could kick their asses. It felt narcissistic to keep thinking this shadow drama shit was all centered around me, but fuck, it just kept coming my way.

"Mera!"

I expected that call to come from Angel, but it was actually Len, the silver-cloaked and silver-tongued friend of Shadow.

"You need to come with me," he said in a rush.

I shook my head. "No, I can't. I have to find Gaster or Angel. I have so many questions that need answers..."

He reached out and placed a hand on my forehead, and almost immediately, darkness clouded my mind.

"You bastard," I slurred before whatever he'd done took full effect, and I collapsed into his arms.

I awoke fighting, snarls in my chest as my wolf's howls rang free. For a few seconds of time, I was stuck between wolf and woman, thanks to the fae magic Len had used on me. I remembered all too clearly how his energy had started at the tips of my toes and worked its way up until my brain had been overwhelmed, and I'd passed out.

And now I was ready to kick some fucking fae ass.

Rolling off the soft surface, I dropped to the floor silently, half-crouched as I stared around. I was in a garden. No, actually, *garden* was too much of an understatement to be accurate.

I'd found myself in the epicenter of the most perfect piece of nature I had ever seen. Flowers ran for miles, in colors that didn't exist in the earthly plane. Dotted between were trees, so magnificent and grand that the entire scene looked like it was a painted depiction of perfection.

And the smell. *My god.* As I took a step forward, an overwhelming crush of scents hit me. There was no way I was on Earth or in the library any longer, and considering it was Len who'd decided to hocus pocus my ass and bring me here, that left me with one logical conclusion.

I was in a land I'd been warned never to go to.

Faerie.

What they do to Earthlings who stumble into their world makes me look like a fucking saint.

That warning was extra terrifying today.

Shadow was a cold-blooded bastard who thought nothing of pushing me, punishing me, and possessing me like I was a piece of furniture that he owned, and he'd warned me off this place.

Yeah, I was fucked, and when I got my hands on Len, I was going to rip his pretty hair from his pretty head.

Not able to stay still when it felt like I was under attack—despite the complete lack of anything alarming in my vicinity—I crept forward through the swaths of flowers. I made a concerted effort not to touch anything, and half a dozen steps later, I passed a bunch of yellow daisy-like flowers. Daisies that were seven feet tall with thick, midnight purple thorns all the way up their stems. On the other side of them were shorter floral bunches, in a pink near blinding in its intensity.

Those flowers, above all the others, caught my eye. My steps faltered, and I found myself reaching out to run my fingertips along their velvety stems. They were almost too perfect, with not a single flaw in their greenery or variation in the flower petals.

The perfection made me uneasy. Nothing alive could look that flawless, and yet I felt its energy. All of nature had it, and these flowers were particularly strong. Pausing just before my fingertips made contact, I inhaled one final breath of their sweet scent before moving forward—

“Halt, Mera!”

The command had me snatching my hand away, my heart thundering in my chest. Fuck, I'd lost my head there for a minute and had almost done exactly what I'd promised I wouldn't. *Don't touch, eat, or interact with Faerie*. That was the old urban legend and I'd had every plan to adhere to it, until the flowers had drawn me in.

Len, my warning system, strolled closer, dressed more casual than I'd ever seen from him before. His silver cloak was gone, revealing quite the impressive set of broad shoulders encased in a simple long-sleeved black shirt. I'd never seen him wearing an outfit so dark, and the contrast was quite striking to his silver coloring.

He was slender compared to Shadow, but most men were, and now that he had his sleeves rolled up to the top of his forearms, I could see the lithe corded muscle there. The tight black pants did

nothing to hide the rest of his physique, and it was startlingly obvious how he'd developed into such a flirt. Women would throw themselves at someone like this. Most women... but not me.

As soon as Len was in striking distance, I strode forward, hauled my arm back, and slammed my fist into his face. Confusion drifted across his features as his head jerked. "Shit, Mera." He groaned, rubbing his cheek. "What the hell was that for?"

I growled, a wild wolf sound. "How dare you drag me here without my permission?"

Len tilted his head, still seeming confused by how upset I was.

Jabbing my finger against his chest while fighting the urge to hit him again, I raged. "If one more of you fucking assholes thinks you have the right to take my will away, I will find out how to ensure you breathe your final breath."

"Technically, we don't need to breathe," Len murmured.

Ignoring him, I glared with total effort. "All of you have seen the last compliant version of me."

I jabbed him again, even though the tip of my finger was starting to ache from being pressed so firmly against his chest muscles. Len reached out and grasped my hand, stopping me from moving it again. "I'm saving your damn life." It was his turn to growl, and it was impressive for a non-shifter. "Shadow said there were creatures from his world running loose, many of whom would be looking for you. He wanted you protected while he rounds them up before the next fucking apocalypse starts."

I sagged forward. "Shadow is alive?"

I might not have admitted it to myself, but a part of me had mourned that bastard from the moment I'd seen the fireplace cold and empty.

Len laughed. "Of course he is. Nothing will kill Shadow."

Rubbing at my temples, I let out a sigh. "Why didn't you just tell me this at the library? Would have been a lot easier than whatever it was you did."

He shrugged. "Would it have been, though? You're pretty well known for being a touch argumentative and I literally didn't have the time to waste. If anything had happened to his little shadow magnet, my friend would not have been happy with me."

Len wasn't scared of Shadow—their friendship was obviously long and true—but he was respectful of the beast's power, and that was always a safe place to stand.

"No matter the situation, you never have the right to take my will away from me," I said, my voice calmer.

Part of me was still pissed off, ready to throw down, but in truth, Len had let me get a decent hit in and hadn't returned the favor. And if he was literally trying to save me, then I no doubt owed him an apology. Which was in the mail. With the rest of my fucks to give.

"I understand," Len said. "It won't happen again."

Right. Sure. Very reassuring.

"So, what now?" I sighed. "I just hang out here in your garden that I can't touch, waiting for Shadow to call on me, like it's the 1900s on Earth?"

"You didn't miss that thing about not touching the flowers, eh?" Len grinned. "Humans are smarter than they're given credit for."

I didn't bother to inform him I was probably as human as him, according to Angel anyway. "Your bellow of 'halt' wasn't exactly subtle. And I know the fables of this land. Just lost my head for a moment with that particular flower."

Len's grin grew broader. "Oh, yes, she's my most enticing little sweetheart. But also not good at playing with strangers." He turned abruptly, strolling toward the vibrant pink flowers, and when he reached out to touch them, they morphed completely into a single entity, with a huge open mouth and razor-sharp teeth formed by thorns. Thorns that hadn't been visible at all in their other form.

"They like to lull their prey into a false sense of serenity," Len said, continuing to pet the damn plant monster like it was a cute kitten. "Never trust anything this beautiful."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Already ahead of you. Why the fuck do you think I fight so hard against Shadow and his band of merry psychos?"

Len abandoned the creepy flowers and I stared fascinated as they returned to their sweet and innocent state. No one would expect that under that perfect façade was a plant that ate people for breakfast.

“You think we’re Shadow’s band? How do you know *I’m* not the lead singer?”

All of them had a surprisingly strong grasp on the English language, and I had a sneaking suspicion that like Angel, they’d all spent more than a little time Earthside.

“I notice you didn’t deny the psycho part.”

He shrugged. “Psycho’ is in the eye of the beholder. And truth be told, there’s very little we haven’t done in our long lives, and not everyone is going to understand the way our power or minds work. So... yeah, there’s truth in what you’ve said.”

“No argument from me,” I said, forcing myself to keep a straight face.

I looked around again, ignoring his smirk. I couldn’t offend this guy, that was clear, so I stopped bothering and instead gestured to the land of Faerie. “Are you going to show me around?”

Len’s smile faded a touch. “You should stay here in the immortal gardens. This world is not kind to those who carry human weaknesses. It’s best that we don’t tempt the land of fae.”

I blinked at him. “Okay then. Weirdest warning I think I’ve ever received, but I’ll heed it, don’t worry.”

Len led me back to the platform I had woken on, and now that I wasn’t focused on the flowers, I saw it was a large slab of rock with a thick, soft cloak draped over it. That was where his silver cloak had gone—I hadn’t noticed until now.

“Sorry I hit you,” I said softly, staring at the evidence of him not being a complete asshole.

Len just nudged my shoulder. “I deserved it. I forgot about consent—fae aren’t the best with acknowledging consent, especially royals, but most of our females are submissive in a way humans and shifters are not, so it’s not usually an issue. Personally... I prefer the fire.”

Our eyes caught and while there was no real spark between us, I appreciated his confession. In truth, this was exactly what I’d been hoping to find in the library so I could win the bet. A connection with someone I found attractive. Len ticked all the boxes in that regard, but... I needed the spark. It didn’t have to be the raging forest fire that Shadow created, but at least a small flicker.

Dammit. I was broken, and it certainly looked like I was not going to win the bet now.

Wouldn't put it past Shadow to have orchestrated this entire event to ensure I'd be stuck in Faerie for the rest of the days of the bet.

The rest of my afternoon—it *was* afternoon, right?—was spent in Len’s garden. Turned out this was his private land, cultivated over the past thousand years, and no one was allowed to enter without his permission. The plants would literally eat them if they did.

Two sentinels sat at his front entrance. Massive flowers with a huge opening in the center, their pistils basically a full row of razor-sharp teeth. They reminded me of jacked-up, ogre versions of the Venus Fly Trap, and apparently, if they snatched you up into their huge mouths, you were done for. Not even Len could release you before they’d crush your body.

“But they won’t eat me now?” I asked again for the tenth time when we wandered a little close for my comfort.

“You’ll be fine with me.”

Len’s smile was relaxed, and I would normally take that as a good sign, but I was coming to learn that he didn’t stress about much. A being who was basically immortal, had lived a thousand plus years of life, and was a powerful prince, didn’t worry about killer plants.

Unlike me, who did not want to die via plant mouth. As a virgin, to boot. Like... fuck no.

When I was done with the botanical garden adventure, I stopped walking, and Len looked back with raised eyebrows. “Can I eat food here?” I asked, hungry and irritated that I was being forced into

another prison courtesy of Shadow. Whether it was to keep me safe or not, I was a grown-ass shifter and should be consulted before some caveman-fucker dragged me off by my hair.

The least they could do was feed me.

“I’m curious to see how our food affects you,” he finally said, silvery eyes examining my face, like he was searching for a flaw. “But let’s not risk it. I’ll venture back to the library and procure some sustenance.”

Do not roll your eyes at the overly dramatic fae prince. He has plant sentinels.

“I would appreciate that, kind sir.” I half-bowed with a chuckle.

He didn’t laugh as I expected. Instead, his face serious, he stepped toward me and dropped his head down to press a brief kiss to my cheek. When he pulled away, I blinked at how stunning he truly was. The silver shimmer of his magic, the perfect planes of his face, and the charm he exuded with little to no effort made him quite devastating on hormone-riddled females.

“Stay safe, gorgeous,” he said softly. “Don’t touch the plants.”

He moved like one of his leaves, drifting along a brisk wind. In a single graceful leap, he left, and I was alone in this garden of... well, Eden. Killer plants and all.

Tiptoeing my way back to the stone bench that I was almost certain wouldn’t devour me, I decided to wait there to save myself from accidentally being murdered via plant. It was softer than I remembered, and as I stretched out, leaning back on my arms, I closed my eyes and let the warmth of this world embrace me. It was the perfect temperature, not humid or too hot, but like a spring day. As nice as it was, though, there was this undercurrent of magic in the air, and that told me that this climate—just like the plants—wasn’t quite real.

Was all of Faerie like that? A world so infused with magic that the natural aspect was lost to whatever the fae wanted to create? And did it really matter? Humans tried to control their world with technology, most of which didn’t work out too positively, if their general unhappiness was any indication. Maybe the magic in Faerie was more successful with its end results.

The calm of the air had me closing my eyes and stretching out across the platform. I shouldn't have been tired, but the urge to nap overcame me, and even though it was probably a ploy of this garden so it could consume me, I decided to give in to the temptation and let the haziness wash through me.

Naps were a god's work. What god, I had no idea, but surely, even Shadow loved to nap. I had to believe that even sociopathic beasts needed downtime too.

For an unknown period of time, I remained in my cozy snooze fest, and it wasn't until a warm hand pressed to my cheeks that consciousness returned. Still disoriented, I groaned softly as that hand moved along my neck, down the center of my chest, and over the planes of my stomach, stroking the bare skin where my shirt had risen.

Fire burned along with that touch, heating me to my core, and as my back arched, a breathy groan escaped. In the same instant, my brain clicked on to the fact that I was being touched by someone... or *something* unknown.

My eyes jerked open and in the second it took me to look around, I found I was completely alone. Or... I choked back a gasp as Shadow came into sight. He was nowhere near me, and even as fast as he was, I didn't think he could have moved that quickly. He was back at the entrance, sheltered between the sentinel plants, his hands pressed to each of their trunks, like he was greeting his favorite puppy.

What was it with those guys treating these plants like favorite pets?

"Shadow," I called out breathlessly, my body still burning and aching. It felt deprived, like we had gotten so close to the good part just as it had been stolen from us. "What are you doing here?"

With a final pat on the killer plants, he strode toward me. It took him a couple of minutes to reach me, cementing my thoughts that he couldn't have touched me.

Since he was in his most giant height, I had to crane my neck back to see his face. It felt like weeks since I'd glimpsed his darkly masculine features, and just the sight of his mop of hair and full lips

had me getting up to my knees and throwing myself forward toward him.

“I thought you were dead,” I said, my voice husky and muffled as I collided with his chest. “The fire was out.”

Shadow remained statue-still as I held him, and a moment later, sanity caught up to me—I was hugging the fucking Shadow Beast. Just as I went to jerk back, his arms moved, and he enclosed me in a hug.

Wait... what?

My soul screamed as he squeezed me in his firm grip, and I found myself a little choked up. A hug from Shadow was like finding the rarest, most desirable stone in the world, and for the briefest moment, I'd held it in my hand.

He pulled away just as fast, but it had happened, and as my heart pounded against my chest, I knew there was no way I could deny being affected by him. I mean, he'd always been the cause of a raging fire in my body, hormones going buck wild at his mere presence. In the early days, I'd written it off as Shadow being the most badass, sexy ass dude I'd ever seen. I mean, anyone would be into that, but it had been a superficial interest.

What I was feeling right now was more. Deeper.

The hug meant something to me.

How stupid was I to care about a fucking god who could never care about me outside of my usefulness to open the doorway to his realm? Yeah. Super stupid.

Surely, once he went back to being a total asshole—and we all knew he would—I could return him to a place of hate in my heart. That was safer and healthier for everyone involved.

Shadow appeared to be watching me as closely as I was watching him, but hopefully none of my softer feelings for him were showing on my face; he already had too much power over me, based solely on our station in the world. God versus shifter was a no-brainer. Everyone would put their money on Shadow. It was logic.

And the absolute last thing he needed to know was that my emotions were now involved. Emotions made people do stupid shit and sacrifice their morals... I'd never give him that power. Never.

“You noticed the fire was gone from the library?” he asked finally.

“Of course I did,” I exclaimed, ready to jump into this topic. “The lair is positively cold and barren without it.”

My words surprised him, if the slight flare of his pupils followed by those sinful lips pressing together was any indication. “I needed to use it for a spell,” he said, and I paid close attention because when Shadow was in a sharing mood, I learned a lot from him. “The flames will call the shadow creatures to one place, saving me the energy of tracking them individually. Easiest way to minimize the damage.”

Whoopsie. I really had to stop damaging shit. “Why didn’t you use the fire the first time I touched the shadows?”

Enigmatic stare.

Should have guessed that was all I’d get, but this time I didn’t let him get away with it, setting my face and crossing my arms—I was serious about wanting an answer.

Shadow released a breath before he shocked the crap out of me—again—by sitting next to me on the stone ledge. Was this the real Shadow Beast? Should I have been asking him some security questions only he’d know the answer to? Maybe we needed a secret code word, because he was acting way out of character.

“The fire protects my lair when I’m not there,” he said, his accent deeper in his rumbly voice. “I’ve never let it go free, especially in a situation I could handle on my own. This new development is a little more complex, though, and to save time and energy, I decided to break out the big guns.”

“And why are you here and not following up on the fire?” I pushed, hoping his sharing mood would continue.

He focused on me in that disconcerting way of his. “The spell to draw all creatures from the Shadow Realm would affect me as well. It’ll infiltrate almost every world, except for Faerie. Shadows are not welcome here, so here we’ll remain until the spell has run its course.”

A chuckle escaped from me. “Are you telling me that you could have been swept up in the spell as well, even though you cast it?”

His lips tilted up. “Yep. The power of my flames is beyond all others. None are immune, and even though their energy is keyed to my own, I would have not been able to resist their pull.”

Interesting.

“Didn’t know you had any weaknesses when it came to magic,” I said, sounding like I was joking, but it was the truth.

Shadow shook his head. “Everyone and everything in this world has weaknesses. Some have more than others.” I got a pointed look, like he thought I was the most fragile flower in the world. What he had to remember, though, was like this garden, sometimes the most delicate flower had the strongest bite.

“Do you have a lot of weaknesses?”

He laughed, a throaty sound that genuinely seemed amused. “You’re refreshing in your directness.”

I’d never been called “refreshing” before, and he didn’t say it like a compliment, but coming from Shadow, I was taking it as one.

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

A spark of fire flamed in his eyes. “Not a chance, Sunshine. Two beings in this world know my weakness, and I’m not adding a third.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Fair enough.”

If all five of his best friends didn’t know, then I sure as fuck wasn’t getting on that Christmas card list.

My stomach chose that moment to grumble, reminding me I was hungry.

“Len went for food,” I said defensively when Shadow eyed my midsection, like it was about to grow legs and start walking around.

“I know. I relieved him of guard duty, so now it’s up to me to keep you alive.”

My smile faded as I stared him down. “I mean, are you really qualified for that job? You’ve basically tried to murder me daily since we first met. And that’s not even counting the days you locked me in my room without food.”

Shadow draped his arm around me, a sudden movement, and then I was surrounded by his warmth. It should have been too much, but it was weirdly perfect.

“You’re only alive because of me, Mera,” he said, no jest in those words. “I could have killed you at any moment, and despite my judgment insisting that it is you who might be a facet in my downfall, you’re still breathing.”

It was only as he all but swept me off the table that I realized something kind of huge. I’d hugged him before. Me making the first

move, and there had been no pain. This wasn't the first time recently that had happened—I'd dismissed the others, thinking he'd seen me coming and stopped the pain. But this time, I'd taken him completely by surprise, and still no fire raged across my nerve endings.

What did that mean?

Before I could ask, he set me on my feet. "Come on. Let's get some food. We have a day or two before we can leave Faerie, so we're going to have to make ourselves at home."

That was my sole focus then. "Can I survive here outside of this garden?"

Shadow was back to wearing his mask of mystery, nothing on his face except a resigned acceptance of being stuck with me.

"I'll keep you alive, Sunshine."

For some reason, that felt like a promise.

A promise, for once, I actually believed in.

Unlike Len, Shadow didn't seem to stress about us leaving the magically hidden garden.

When we stepped out to find Inky on the other side of the sentinels, I understood why. Between Shadow and Inky, nothing was going to take us on. Even the surrounding flowers appeared to be leaning back from us, creating a nice, clear path.

"What *is* Inky?" I asked Shadow as we stepped onto a garden path that appeared to have a massive house right at the end of it. Well, actually, *house* wasn't right... it was a mega mansion. And it was floating. The fae knew how to do this living thing right... if ultimate luxury and magic was your *thing*, of course.

Shadow side-eyed me. "You can't possibly think I'm going to tell you that. It's tied to me, and I won't give you any weapons against me."

Hmm. So Inky might hold information about his weaknesses, somehow...

It was clear from Shadow's expression that I wouldn't be finding out one more thing about either of them today, so I gave up worrying and focused on seeing every part of Faerie that I could. Ever since I'd opened the doorway and heard that music, a need to come here had taken root inside me. Like that music had seeped into my soul when I hadn't been looking.

"How can I be here without suffering any ill effects?" I asked Shadow when we stopped before the floating palace. I wanted to

examine the building so badly, but my focus was locked on the enigmatic beast beside me. As always, his mere presence eclipsed all else.

“You didn’t enter of your own free will, so Faerie can’t keep you.”

“Seriously? Len never told me that.” I thought this new information over. “Guess it explains the way he took me. He should have said something; I’d have been a lot more forgiving.” Instead, the fae had let me hit him and still apologized and admitted to a wrongdoing. Which was ... interesting.

Shadow’s smile was warm, as it often was around his friends. “Magic is a living entity, and like all that exist, it has rules. Faerie is more magic than any of the worlds, and once you know the rules, it’s a perfect location to visit. If you don’t know them, though, it will eat you alive. Len would have had his reasons for going about it the way he did.”

Shit, now I felt bad. It had been a high-tension time, firstly fighting the hunters...

Wait!

“I touched the Shadow Hunters,” I blurted out, suddenly remembering the most recent odd occurrence in regard to me and my wolf. “And they didn’t steal my soul, or whatever was supposed to happen.”

Silence. A long echoing silence.

Dammit, *say something*. Something reassuring.

Instead, expression unreadable, Shadow dismissed me, turning to press his hands on the wall of the building. It stopped shimmering and glowing, as a set of stairs appeared, leading up to a large double set of front doors.

“Shadow,” I pushed, needing some reaction from him.

He paused, one foot on the first step. “Normal rules do not govern you, Sunshine. It is growing apparent that your origin is from the realm. There’s no other explanation for what you can do.”

I wanted to scream, the tension inside of me threatening to explode as it grew in intensity. “How? The door has been locked for thousands of years! How would I get through? And I look just like my parents...?”

He turned back, staring down at me. “I have no idea what it means or how it is possible, and until we get the door open, we won’t find out.”

His eyes were telling me that this was the reason he’d been driving me so hard to stay on task, but we both knew that had been for him and no one else. Finding out *what* I was, had just turned into a fun side-adventure.

He made his way back to me, reaching out to touch my face. It was the oddest, almost gentle movement. “Don’t stress on it today. No answers will come from running it through your mind. Think of it this way... you’re still alive. Still fighting. You’ve survived what ninety percent of shifters wouldn’t, and that can’t be a bad thing. We’ll get to the truth eventually. Until then, just embrace the life you’re living.”

Fuck, I guess this ancient beast of a philosopher wasn’t wrong, and it probably wouldn’t hurt to take his advice.

For now.

Shadow started up the stairs again, and this time I followed, finally getting my chance to truly examine the stunning palace. I had to sigh as I looked over every aspect of it. It was straight from a fairytale—ironic, seeing as we were literally in a place called “Faerie”—with white stone walls, speckled through with glittering crystals, turrets, and multiple towers, topped off by various levels of elegant dark grey shingled rooves.

It was even larger than I’d thought initially, and as I followed Shadow up the stairs, I gasped at the sheer size of the double doors. They had to be twenty feet tall, and just as wide, and as both of them silently swung open to allow us entry, I was again staring around, wide-eyed.

The entrance was white, quite stark, with only a few pieces of art on the wall. The art wasn’t stationary as paintings would be on Earth, though; the images swirled and moved around, dusted with glittering magic as they depicted flowers and waterfalls and oases. They were so real, it felt like I could walk right into them and be in the image.

For all I knew, here in Faerie, that was actually possible.

“This is Len’s house?” I asked. It felt sleek and silver like he was, but also not quite right at the same time. He was modern lines and minimalistic. The outside of this was so ornate, and as we moved

deeper, the rest was like that as well. Rich tapestries, large pieces of furniture to accommodate someone used to comfort, and splashes of red and gold that reminded me of one person...

"It's mine," Shadow said, confirming my new theory. "I like to keep a residence here, and you'll be safe from the foreign magics as long as you remain inside."

He led me up the stairs, Inky beside me as we traipsed to the second floor. Here there was a library. Of course. I was starting to get the feeling that Shadow was a little bit book-obsessed, and if anything, that only increased his appeal. And *dammit*, he did not need any help in that department.

Stepping into the library, Shadow headed toward the center and a set of couches similar to the ones in his lair. Inky went with him, but I crossed to the expanse of floor-to-ceiling windows, framed in black steel, showcasing the world below.

Stopping before them, I stared out across the landscape. "We're moving!" I exclaimed, noticing the fast-shifting scenery below.

I hadn't expected Shadow to hear me—he really wasn't that close—but when I turned toward him, it was to find he was somehow at my side. It was so fast that I had to reconsider my stance on whether or not he could have been the one touching me when I'd woken from a nap. It had been such a sensual touch, though, and that made no sense, so it had probably just been a very vivid dream.

That was my delusion, and I was sticking with it.

"Nothing is stationary in Faerie," he said, and I had to jump back a few brain loops to remember what we'd been talking about. My mind had been caught on the heat pooling in my gut and dripping down to my...

"Nothing is stationary?"

Shadow's face was highlighted by a burst of golden sunlight that chose that moment to dramatically spray through the window. We had been flying through a bunch of low-hanging clouds, and as they cleared, the light was brighter than ever, and below us was...lava. Just fields of flowing red.

"The landscape here changes as often as the images that adorn my walls," Shadow explained.

Trying to wrap my head around this concept was not easy. Humans and shifters liked stationary. It was familiar, and that was comforting. “What about Len’s garden? That didn’t move.”

Shadow grinned. “You’re quick. I like that about you. Most humans take forever to catch up to the conversation.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. “Better?”

He nodded. “That’s more the level I expect from your kind. But, yes, Len’s is a small stationary section. There are many scattered about, but they are cut off from anything else, so you still need to find yourself a mode of transportation.” Hence why he had a floating house here. It was basically Faerie’s form of a campervan.

With a shake of my head, I turned back to the view, noticing a few small islands dotted among the rivers of lava. “Can we get back to the Library of Knowledge from your house here?”

Shadow shook his head. “No, there are only a few entrances from Faerie to the library. We’ll have to go back to Len’s garden in two days so we can return. It’s the closest portal on this side of the great divide.”

And just like that, I really wanted to know what this great divide was. Hopefully, I’d learn so much more in our few days here.

“Stand back, Mera,” Shadow said suddenly.

I wrinkled my brow at him, wondering what the hell he was talking...

Inky exploded, his size going to twenty times larger, and I almost got caught in its black smoke.

“Are we under attack?” I yelled, covering my head as I ducked to the side.

Shadow laughed, and I paused because that didn’t sound like someone worried. This was clearly not an attack, but what was happening?

Inky continued to swell, and the spark of lights inside grew brighter and brighter until... a box slid out from the middle of it. *What in the creepy fuck was going on here?*

Shadow seemed amused by my expression as I stared at the somewhat disturbing image. “Your food has arrived,” he said.

I rubbed a hand over my face, opening my mouth to speak before closing it again. Inky had birthed a damn box of food, and now I had

to eat it?

My stomach growled again, louder than before.

Yeah, so, okay, I probably would. But still... "How did it do that?"

Shadow, the beast of secrecy, just grinned.

Throwing my hands in the air, I spun in a huff, annoyed by everything being a secret in this world. My curious nature was driven crazy by all the unanswered questions, and it felt like Shadow was doing it deliberately at this stage.

Although now that I knew Inky was possibly linked to his weakness, maybe he was just extra cautious about revealing any information to do with his little minion.

"Inky has ties to the library that go beyond the norm," Shadow said after a few seconds of awkward silence. I had not expected him to answer, so I was genuinely shocked. "He's also connected to me, and between the two, it allows him to form a small magical portal. It comes in handy at times."

Inky wrapped around us both, and I dragged my fingertips along the darkness. At some point, just like with Shadow, I could touch it without any repercussions. How that had happened, I had no idea, but I wasn't upset. We'd made progress in the time I'd been with them. Shadow might have only trusted five beings in the world, but I was no longer the enemy I had been at one point.

To test the theory, I casually brushed through Inky and let my hand scrape across the skin of Shadow's hand that rested near his side. Just a graze. But there was no pain.

I couldn't stop the broad, triumphant grin from crossing my face. Shadow shot me a half-smirk, like he knew exactly what I was doing. "Don't get too comfortable, little wolf," he warned me. "You should take care to protect yourself at all costs."

I nodded. "Always have, Shadow. And I always will. I've been let down too many times to be any other way."

He didn't seem convinced, but that was okay. I'd been underestimated just as many times as I'd been let down in my life.

Vague warnings aside, the rest of my time with Shadow went smoothly. The box was like a picnic extravaganza, with sandwiches, salads, and some cold cuts. Shadow didn't eat with me, but he remained nearby while I dove in. When I was full and couldn't

possibly fit one more delicious morsel of food in, the box shut. I eyed it sadly and Shadow sounded amused when he said, "It's magically sealed. Everything will stay fresh and cold inside."

A relieved sigh left me. "Good, because wasting food is a sin."

Shadow, who was sprawled back on his couch across from me, grinned lazily. "Sin is my calling card, Sunshine. It's what I built my entire reputation on, and the reason I found myself kicked out of my land."

He might not have been eating, but he did have a drink in hand, twirling the glass so the amber liquid swirled. He looked relaxed, and since he currently couldn't go anywhere else to escape me, I decided to ask about the Shadow Realm.

Leaning forward, I tucked a fluffy pillow against my chest, propping my head up on it. "Tell me about the Shadow Realm," I said softly. "Why is the doorway blocked? And how the hell am I drawing beings from there to here?"

His first instinct was to deny me the information; I saw that in the closed-off expression that replaced his relaxed features.

"This involves me," I reminded him. "And you're asking me to complete a task without giving me all of the information I *need* to complete it. For the sake of all our sanities, and possibly lives, it's time to tell me now."

His face remained set, the stubborn bastard.

"Why is the fucking door barred?" I lost my shit and those words came out a bit shoutier than I'd anticipated.

"Because of me," he shot back. "I was born as the next Supreme Being, the *true heir*, and my family conspired against me, taking my crown and power. I was betrayed by the one who was supposed to have my back, and when they shot me out into the space beyond my world, they barred the door with a spell I've never been able to best."

There was a deep-seated pain buried under his cynical expression. For thousands of years, his family had kept him away from his home... his land.

Bastards.

"And I thought *my* family tragedy was bad," I murmured. "That's super fucked-up. Even if you did something terrible to deserve their wrath, no one should be barred from their home."

Shadow's flames roared to life around him, a giant fireball that turned into his flaming wolf. I'd never seen him shift into a literal beast, but this time as the flames settled into the shape of a wolf, his other features morphed as well. His face grew elongated as his arms extended, claws protruding from his fingertips.

My heart raced, a natural fear response. This was the Shadow Beast in all of his glory—or at least ninety percent of it. The shadow fire version of him was truly a sight to behold.

"Shadow," I murmured as he rose to his feet, standing twelve feet tall, the darkness of devils dancing around his body while flames soared higher.

"There will be no forgive and forget," he rumbled, and with each word, the wolf in his face and voice was more pronounced. "I need that door open so I can tear them all to shreds and dance on their graves."

I was on my feet too, feeling a great need to submit. The sheer power he was throwing off as the beast overtook the man, along with the rumble of his voice, almost sent me to my knees. This was the beast who had created shifters, the one who was feared and revered and loved by shifters the world over.

"I will help you open the doorway," I promised, meaning every word of it. "For the first time, this task truly makes sense to me. I get why you've kept me around now... I'm the only one in all this time who has been able to bypass the spell on the door. A spell keeping you from your land, family, and destiny."

He'd finally started to calm; the fire retreated, and his face returned to the darkly handsome man, versus the ferocious majestic beast. As it switched back, I could finally relax, not being drawn forward by the power of his fire wolf. Truth be told, I didn't know which side of him I preferred, and I had no idea what it meant that I was hoping to see him properly wolf out again sometime soon.

He stalked closer to me, energy riding across his skin as he shed the beast. "You are the first being in a thousand years to be able to touch the Shadow Realm," he told me in his deeper-than-should-be-possible voice. "I don't know how or why... You're like nothing I've ever found in my lifetime, and I don't know what to make of you."

Moving forward, I was unable to fight the urge any longer. Shadow had broken the control he'd had over himself, and in doing so, called me so strongly, I could not resist. His gaze was cautiously curious, watching closely but not stopping me. Right before I touched him, a low melodic tune drifted in through the library.

Shadow froze, his head jerking toward the window, where the view from what we could see was nothing but a purple haze of sky. "Fuck!" he said in snap. "Len, you idiot."

"What is it?" I got out, fear choking my voice.

He growled, his entire chest rumbling. "It's the Faerie lunar moon. Their five moons will converge into one, and upon this land, the time of fertility will begin."

Forcing a rough swallow down my parched throat, I took a shaking step toward the window. "Time of fertility?"

The music increased, louder, faster, and I groaned, my weakened knees giving out on me as I hit the floor, my body inexplicably alight with pleasure and pain. The low burn of arousal that I often felt was nothing compared to this new surge of *want* and *need* in my body.

"Gods," I cried out, my legs trembling as my hands slid down my body, heading right for my aching pussy in a desperate need to relieve the tension.

"Mera," Shadow said, stepping closer. "You must fight the temptation."

My hands shook, and I could tell when I forced myself to sit up that my panties were soaked as fuck. The material rubbed against my clit and I legitimately almost came.

"I can't fight this," I said with a whimpering cry. "It hurts."

The ache was like a stab in my stomach, and no matter how I moved or twisted, nothing eased the pain. Shadow wrenched me up into his arms, and then he was running, heading away from the windows. But there was no way to escape the music. It floated on magical winds, carried by the dust of Faerie, and had been designed to weave through the very essence of our being.

"Fae are fertile only once or twice a year," Shadow bit out, sounding like he was talking just to keep me distracted. "They use this music to encourage new growth."

“Sounds like a date rape drug,” I slurred, my head fuzzy as flames started to burn in my toes and fingertips before raging through my body.

“No,” he said bluntly. “Your mind is not able to fight as a fae would. The music is encouragement, not mind control. But clearly, it’s hitting you hard.”

I heard him mutter something about virgins and the like, but I was too far gone to care. Just as the fire was about to explode in my center, having filled the rest of me, he dumped my ass in a shower and turned the water on icy cold, soaking me completely.

“You must fight the fire, Mera,” he said seriously.

My strangled laugh told him everything. I didn’t have a damn hope in hell.

The icy shock of water *did* help me momentarily regain my composure. The fire, while still roaring through my veins and body, was muted enough that I could pull myself up and push the long, sopping strands of hair off my face. Shadow was framed in the doorway of the large, copper-lined shower, staring down at me with an unreadable expression on his face.

Normally, this would be the point that embarrassment made itself known—I'd tried to literally get myself off in front of him. But I couldn't muster up anything other than a moan as more arousal pulsed inside. The music surged stronger and my body arched in time to the beat. The cold water hurt as it hit me, but it wasn't enough to fight the pull.

"Just leave," I bit out, my hands scrambling to pull my clothing off. They were chafing against my sensitive skin. "Let me take care of this without someone staring down at me like a disapproving father."

Not that I remembered what having one of those was like.

Shadow did his rumble chest thing, sounding frustrated and annoyed.

"I'm not doing this on purpose," I screamed, and somehow tears were streaming down my cheeks at the same time. Hopefully, he couldn't tell with the water.

"You will get no relief from your own touch," he finally said, and then he was under the water with me. The moment the water ran

down his face, following the planes of his perfect features, I cried out.

“You’re not helping,” I said, sucking in air and getting a half-lung full of water. Everything about him stimulated my senses. Shadow and this music combined were lethal to me and my hormones—I couldn’t fight either individually, and together, there was no chance in hell.

“You need me or you won’t make it through tonight,” he said roughly.

That caught my attention through the haze in my head. “What do you mean?”

Eyes as red as the lava that had been outside the window met mine. Not just met but locked on to and claimed. “You know exactly what I’m saying, Sunshine. You cannot handle the entire song... It will get worse.”

“Why can’t we leave?” I cried as my back arched again, and because Shadow was in the shower with me, I ended up plastered to his leg, my body trying to contort itself to ease the pain.

“It’s too late to leave,” he said.

Before I could say another word, he sank down on his knees before me, and I gasped as he came as close as he could. “I will help you. For this one day only.”

I groaned, the tears still falling, and my hope that he hadn’t noticed was dashed as he reached forward and brushed his thumb across my cheek, wiping them away. “The pain is fleeting,” he reminded me. “And I will replace it with pleasure.”

“Please,” I begged.

“You will hate me tomorrow,” he said, “but I can live with that. What I don’t want to see is you suffering when I can stop it.”

“I’m not drugged,” I reminded him, words getting hard through the throbbing in my body. “My mind is clear. My vagina, on the other hand, is not a happy camper.” With those words, the ache in my pussy increased to the point my hands were heading that way again.

Shadow caught them in both of his as a slow grin tilted up his lips. “Let’s make her happy then.”

Thank the fucking gods.

My shirt at this point was half over my head and Shadow wasted no time ripping it off. When I was just left in a black bra, breasts heaving as I continued trying to fill my lungs with air, he stared down at me.

No doubt I looked like a drowned rat, but the flames burned hotter in his eyes, and I took that as a good sign he wasn't going to completely hate this. When I reached out for his shirt, he shook his head. "No, this is about you tonight, Sunshine. Let me do what I do best."

I didn't like that, but there was no way to fight him. He had the power, and I was desperate... I needed him. The pain was getting worse and I hadn't forgotten what he'd said—I wouldn't survive the whole song without his help.

In mere seconds, Shadow had stripped me completely, leaving me a naked tangle on the shower floor. The moment the rush of water from the showerhead hit my clit, I came, hard and fast. It was a jolt, just like being shocked with an electric fence. Pleasure and pain mingled together, stabbing at me, and when it was over, I felt more achy and worse than ever.

"You can't fix this on your own," he reminded me.

I groaned. "So, how can you fix it?"

Brilliantly red-and-gold irises and a wicked smile were my only answer, and then he lifted me with one hand, carrying me out of the shower. His fire power had us both dry by the time we reached the bed, and when he dropped me back into the soft, cool sheets, I writhed. That orgasm had not helped in the least.

As I moved around, Shadow reached out and placed one of his huge hands on my chest, holding me in place. I wanted to scream, but as he held me down, his power beyond anything I could fight, he dropped his head and, direct as always, he took no detours on his way to my clit. The second I felt the first firm stroke of his tongue, followed by his lips sucking the bundle of nerves into his mouth, I sent out a silent scream, the pleasure too much for me to handle without breaking.

The hand holding me down started to slowly move over my body, stroking in time to his tongue on my pussy and the next orgasm had me actually screaming, hands clawing at the bed, trying to find

traction. Shadow's dominance didn't ease, as he refused to allow me to move, even as I was shattered over and over by his mouth.

A finger on the hand that had been slowly tracing my body slipped inside, and I was tight, needing a few moments to adjust as he continued to eat me like I was the best fucking ice cream he'd ever tasted. In a few seconds, that finger found my favorite spot inside, and when he stroked me, the pleasure built in my stomach again.

"Motherfucker," I cried as I came again, this time wondering if I was going to pass out.

I didn't, but it was close.

He slowed up a little after that, and I thankfully felt an ease on the driving need inside me. Seemed he was right after all; the intensity of the spell was easing with his "help."

When the latest round of pleasure faded, I felt my body relax into the bed, and for the first time since the music had started, there was no overwhelming urge to claw my own skin off.

Shadow lifted his head, fingers still casually exploring my body. "It's working?"

I nodded. "Yes, it's not as bad—argh," I cried out as he hit that spot inside again. "But for the love of shifters, please don't stop."

The sight of his long body sprawled out between my legs, eyes hooded as he stared up at me, fingers bringing me pleasure like I'd never felt...

"Fuck," I cried, the next orgasm hitting me hard and fast again, dragging pleasure all the way from my spine by the feel of it.

Shadow shook his head. "Maybe I should be thanking Len after all."

My head was a soft pleasant ball of fuzziness after countless orgasms, so I didn't try to read into it too deeply. "Me too," I agreed.

Shadow's low chuckle sent hot gusts of air over my sensitive skin, and with another surge of music, I arched, and he met me halfway, his mouth once again proving this god had sure as fuck not been celibate for his many years alive.

Through the night, he never touched me in any other way, and he never allowed me to touch him. This was just about easing my pain through this spell, and he was attentive in a way that was

overwhelming. It was frustrating to have him still hold so much of himself back from me, but I wasn't surprised. This was just a duty to him. Maybe one he enjoyed, but still a duty.

It would be stupid of me to think anything else.

I groaned as light shone behind my closed eyes, and rolling over, I stopped at the feel of sheets far silkier than the ones I slept on in the lair. *What? Where am I?*

As I forced my eyes open, everything hurt, even my eyelids as I tried to lift my head. *Ugh... Why am I so exhausted?* Fatigue pressed down on me, a weight sitting on my chest, and my mouth was so dry, I felt like I'd been left to bake in the desert for a month.

The room around me was completely unfamiliar, and when I finally got up, my head spun. Unease trickled through my stomach, and as the sheets dropped to reveal a set of naked tits—*my* naked tits—the memories of yesterday flashed through my addled brain.

Holy fucking fuck.

Faerie. The song. The painful need that had turned my body into an enemy I couldn't fight.

And Shadow... oh, gods.

Shadow had given me more orgasms in one night than I'd had in my entire life. He was skilled, relentless, and utterly unstoppable when he set his mind to something. And that something had been to get me through the Faerie song.

Memories crashed into me, intense and unwavering, and my damn traitorous body wanted more. It was like we'd been conditioned now, and the mere thought of the Shadow Beast had my limbs trembling as heat and moisture pooled in my center.

That was going to be a problem I'd have to contend with at some point, but for now, mission *pretend yesterday didn't happen* was in full swing. Just had to find some clothes first. Not that it really mattered. There wasn't much of my body Shadow didn't know at this stage, except my mouth. He'd never kissed me, and I hadn't touched him. It had been all one-sided from what I remembered... the sole focus on me.

Some women might have loved that, but for me, it was a bittersweet memory.

Since there were no clothes at all in my vicinity, I wrapped the sheet around myself and dragged it from the bed as I got out. My legs took a few seconds to steady, and for a shifter to be feeling the aftereffects of the night so strongly, I knew that whatever the Faerie spell had done to me, it was still working its way out of my system.

After hobbling around like a newborn horse, I finally got my equilibrium back and was once again able to move freely without issue. A quick check of this room and the bathroom brought me up empty for clothing—no doubt because Shadow was a magical being who manifested clothing from will alone.

Which left me with one option: go out there and face the music. Maybe he could magic me up some clothing as well. I used the bathroom first, thankful that it appeared to be Earth spec. Almost everything of Shadow's was based on things I was familiar with, and that told me, that despite his blasé attitude toward it, he actually loved Earth maybe a little more than the other worlds.

When I walked into the library, it appeared to be empty. In a palace this size, there had to be a ton of other rooms where Shadow might have been, but I was a little surprised not to find him here. A quick glance out the window told me that we were still zooming across the world, and below was what looked like a tundra of green ice, with dotted patches of green water between the frozen lands.

Faerie was one extreme after another, but I felt a sense of peace being here that was oddly strong. Peace and hunger, since apparently, a night of intense pleasure was draining. Reluctantly leaving the view, I staked my claim on the box of food, finding water, fruit, and a sandwich—all chilled and fresh, as Shadow had promised—that I wolfed down.

When I was satiated, I dragged one of the couches across to the windows and sprawled back into the soft surface, propping my feet up on a large glass panel to watch the scenery zoom past. When would I ever get to experience Faerie again? I didn't want to miss a thing.

We weren't the only palace floating above the land, with many other houses, drifting islands, and grand estates dotted across the horizon. None of them came too close; magic was clearly involved in keeping everything running smoothly.

I felt Shadow before I saw him, and knowing it was going to be awkward, no matter what I did, I decided not to turn and acknowledge him first. Because I was a coward like that.

"Len is here," he rumbled, standing above me. The sound of his deep voice did something to me that I'd never experienced before. My body surged to life, every cell, synapse, and receptor standing to attention, as if their master had arrived.

No! Stand down, you disloyal bitch.

I could not give Shadow any extra power over me. I'd said it before, and it was just as important today: he had already had way too much control over me. My wolf howled in my chest, and I couldn't tell if she wanted to roll over for Shadow too, or if she was reminding me we still had a true mate. I knew part of her soul hadn't given up on Torin.

We don't need either of them, I reminded her. Her howl died off, but she was extra restless as I focused on Shadow.

"Okay, cool," I said as casually as I could, turning away from the view to finally meet his gaze. "For any reason? To warn us about another weird sex spell he forgot to tell us about?"

His eyes were blazing gold, and despite my fuzzy memories, I could tell he had not forgotten a single thing about last night. Thankfully, he didn't force me to deal with the facts of what had happened—letting me hide a little longer.

"Come. I'll show you."

I hitched the sheet up tighter. "Do you have any clothing here for me?" I asked.

The flames flared as his eyes dropped along my body. "Inky can procure some."

Of course it could.

Shadow turned away, and I didn't imagine the tic in his jaw as he did. There was no time for me to overanalyze what that meant, because he was back in minutes with a set of clothes that fit me perfectly. I used the bedroom to change into the underwear, black shirt, skinny jeans, and a pair of calf-high black biker boots, which I loved more than any shoes I'd ever owned in my life.

My hair was a hot mess after being left to dry while also being thrashed about in my throes of pleasure, so there wasn't much I could do except finger-comb through the tangled curls and leave it as a mass of insanity down my back. Not like I was trying to impress anyone, anyway. Apparently, I was nothing more than a duty to Shadow, and since it was laughable to think we could ever have more than a night of pleasure like that—he was a *freaking god*, for freak's sake—I needed to get my head back to the status quo.

When I returned to the library, Shadow and Inky were waiting for me, and together, they led me out of the room and up another set of stairs that I hadn't known was there. As Shadow's broad shoulders disappeared onto the next floor, I followed, my mouth falling open as I reassessed if the library was still my favorite room.

It was an observatory. The entire floor, as large as the one below, had floor-to-ceiling windows that went on forever. "Wow," I breathed, stepping closer. It seemed we had a much higher vantage point to see everything, even though it was only one floor above.

"Shadow is all about views and books," Len said, walking in from wherever he'd been. His eyes were twinkling, and he was once again clad in the silver cloak, his hair pulled back in a braid, showcasing the perfect planes of his face.

"Views and books," I replied. "Nothing wrong with that." They were two of my favorite things in life as well, but I refrained from admitting that out loud.

When Len reached me, he kissed my cheek like we were old friends, and Shadow's chest rumbled at the same time, which had Len chuckling. "Calm yourself, bro. I'm just saying *hello*."

Pushing through both of them, I let a scowl form on my face. "No touchie from either of you, okay? Just show me whatever you were about to do up here."

Neither missed a beat, striding away from the window toward a brightly lit back corner, where a... shiny silver chair sat.

“In the Shadow Realm,” Shadow said, standing close enough behind me that I could almost feel his touch, “we have a technique of marking our skin using energy from the creatures we control... from the mists. It’s the only ‘ink’ that circumvents our healing abilities.” He gestured to where Len was now bustling around, placing two shimmery jars on the tray table. Both jars appeared to house a mini Inky of swirling, smoky darkness. “I managed to bring a small sliver with me, and over time, it has continued to grow. So we slowly add to my piece.” He turned to his friend. “Len can infuse it into my skin using fae magic. He’s here to finish off my backpiece.”

My breathing was a little heavy. I’d always been a sucker for tattoos on men, especially when they were ripped as fuck with ink across their entire backs. I was shallow like that.

I’d caught sight of the ink on Shadow a few times, and I’d definitely wondered how he’d managed to mark his skin—looked like I was finally getting an answer to one of my questions.

Shadow looked smug as he stepped around me, his eyes taking in my facial expression, which was probably giving my thoughts away. Just as he was about to move to the chair, he leaned down and murmured near my ear, “I could scent your arousal anywhere now, Sunshine.”

Biting back a curse and a moan, I clenched my thighs and forced myself not to think about it any longer.

“Stop flirting and get your shirt off,” Len commanded. “I only have a few hours before the family requires my presence.” He grimaced when he said that, and I had a feeling he wasn’t too into family gatherings.

Shadow reached over, grabbing his shirt at the nape, yanking it up and over his head. It was one swift movement, and then all I could see was inked skin draped over muscles. While Len had lithe muscles, Shadow did not—he was big without being too bulky. With perfect abs, broad shoulders, and thick definition in his upper body, he looked like a work of art, and I meant that in more ways than the actual artwork on his skin. Being so long-limbed, it should have been

hard to build heavy muscle, but he was clearly not a human or shifter and had managed it very nicely.

I had to bite my tongue to stop the drool from escaping.

“You have a lot of ink already,” I noted, thankful I didn’t sound as breathless as I felt.

Shadow glanced down at the scripted words—at least I assumed they were words since they weren’t in English—dancing across his chest. Below them there were multiple images of what looked like beasts and monsters. “These were done back home,” he said quietly, brushing a hand over them.

The tattoos moved with his touch, the dark ink swirling. Part of me wanted to reach out, too, and see if they would do the same thing for me,

“In the chair, Beast,” Len said, interrupting. He’d adjusted the chair, making it flat, and Shadow lay face down.

When he was settled, shoulders spilling over the edge of the chair, I stepped closer and eyed up the tattoo half-done on his back.

“Amazing.”

Seriously fucking amazing.

It was a tree of death, a huge single piece that depicted a dark shadowy scene, where multiple skulls were either growing or nestled in branches of a smoke-swirled tree. There was space near the top that wasn’t completed, and it was here that Len started working.

He nestled one of the jars in his hand, and when he released the silver clasp, the smoke twirled out. It looked like it was going to escape, but Len’s magic caught it before it could, the two infusing together as he rotated his hand across Shadow’s spine. No needles or machinery were involved, just some fae magic that was clearly the key to marking shadow smoke into unmarkable skin. At least outside of Shadow Realm.

The next two hours passed in a blink for me as I watched the magic unfold. Shadow and Len chatted, the sort of old friends who knew each other so well and had a million stories of shit they’d gotten up to over the years. It was nice to just sit and watch them together, listen to their banter, and by the time Len had to leave, the image on Shadow’s back was almost finished. It was going to be beyond spectacular when completed.

“I’ll see you soon,” Len said, kissing my cheek again before he all but stepped off the side of the building. I must have looked freaked out because Shadow shook his head. “He’ll be fine.”

Somehow, I had no doubt he would be.

After that, I ate more food, took a long nap, and by the time we were due to return to the library, Shadow and I had successfully reestablished our previous relationship. No awkwardness at all.

I mean, mostly.

When we returned to the familiar garden that I’d first woken in, we silently exited, and from there, it was an easy journey back to the library. I envied the way they could call doorways. Did they even realize the power in their hands—the ability to skip between worlds and never be a prisoner? Shifters, for all of our strengths, were still much closer to humans than the gods. It hadn’t been a fact I’d truly worried about until I’d found myself living in a library filled with beings so far beyond my comprehension. But despite the fact that I was out of my depth in almost every way possible, I was still alive, and I counted that as a victory.

The library was quiet when we entered through the Faerie door; the few goblins around shot me confused stares until they saw Shadow at my side. Then they just nodded and turned back to what they were doing.

No wonder he was a smug bastard. Surrounded by sycophants.

“It’s not healthy, you know.”

He met my gaze, his eyebrows slightly raised. “You do realize that I’m not privy to your thoughts, right? The randomness in which you spout words is astonishing.”

“Whatever, dude.” I flipped him off. “I’m talking about constantly surrounding yourself with yes-people. I mean, how does that help you grow in character or learn from your mistakes?”

Shadow bared his teeth at me. “What makes you think I make mistakes?”

I sighed. “Exactly what I’m talking about. Everyone makes mistakes; it’s just how it works.”

He shrugged while continuing to lead me through the library toward the Earth hallway. “I don’t know what to tell you, Sunshine. I was designed this way by the universe, a perfect predator.”

And where was the lie? Whatever his role to fill in this world, he appeared to be doing a fantastic job at it. He'd created a damn subgroup of humans when he'd merged us with animal souls. Who else could herald a claim to fame like that?

"Just don't expect me to start kissing your ass," I muttered. "You're still the enemy."

This time it was an actual grin, wicked and tantalizing. "Oh, yeah, Sunshine. You've made that very obvious. Except last night when you were screaming my fucking name."

Jesus. My thighs clenched again, but I didn't blush—I would not give him the satisfaction. There was something that had to be said about my time in Faerie, though.

"Thanks for helping me," I told him seriously. "I don't remember everything, but the pain before was really memorable."

He paused in the white hallway. "It was my fault that I hadn't checked the Fae calendar before I decided to use it as a safe zone. It was up to me to fix my mistake."

My smile was bright enough to blind a person. "All I heard there was that you're not quite as perfect as you seem to think."

He shook his head, shoulders heaving as he let a rumble of laughter escape. "Don't push it, pup. I could still kill you if the mood struck me."

It was almost a joking threat at this stage. Not that he wouldn't kill me, but he'd at minimum feel bad about killing me now, so we were making grounds in our relationship. And thankfully, what had happened on Faerie hadn't sent us ten steps backward.

Denial was working out pretty well.

Shadow's spell had been designed to draw all the creatures to the same place. Again, in the pack mountain area of Torma. "Why here?" I asked.

"Most of them were already here, of course," he said shortly. "You being the shadow magnet that you are."

Gah, there was such a double meaning to that now, and I again forced yesterday from my mind. It had been a one-time deal. One fucking time. I needed to wrap my head around that and move the heck on. Maybe if I continued to repeat it, my traitorous body would finally get on board.

"I hope one day I figure out what it is about me that bypasses the normal rules that govern you and that land," I murmured.

Shadow just shot me an unreadable look, but there was no time to reply because we had arrived at shadow creature central.

"Holy shit balls," I said, my breath catching in my throat at the sight of dozens or more creatures captured in a huge circle of fire they couldn't seem to cross. Shadow's fire was as badass as he was. "There're so many!"

He nodded. "Yeah, it seems that this time, you opened a multitude of doorways from the realm. Thankfully, in the high echelons, you appeared to only release Igorna and the two hunters, so the rest shouldn't be too much headache."

"What happened with Igorna?"

Shadow's face wreathed in dark satisfaction. "After a little convincing, he's having a bit of a nap in one of the cells."

Nap... Yeah, sure, that sounded plausible.

"How are we going to get them back? To their world?" It was starting to become a larger issue with so many of them on this side of their door now.

Shadow's expression turned introspective. "I've been thinking about it a lot over the last few days. At first, I was focused on getting the doorway open, but now... What if we've been looking at it the wrong way? The spell on the door is clearly no barrier for you since you keep opening your own temporary portals into Shadow Realm. If we figure out how, there's a chance you can act as a conduit, and a more permanent doorway might be established. Then I can use my power to return the creatures, and maybe even follow as well."

I nodded as I let the idea marinate in my brain. "Yeah, we haven't tried that before. It feels like I might have more of an idea how to do that than getting around the spell on the door."

Shadow's lips tilted just enough to give him a sinister look. "Once I destroy the one who created the spell, the door will no longer be barred. I just have to get into the realm first."

He'd have his revenge, and I'd be thrown aside, no longer any use to him.

Hopefully, there'd be more than a shell left of me when that happened, because it was clear that Shadow would do almost anything to achieve his ultimate goal and seek his revenge.

There was no more time to stress on it, because he was striding across the rocky ground toward the creatures. It didn't really snow much in Torma, but we still had cold snaps, and judging from the iced ground, it had to be close to the winter solstice. Which meant...

Simone was about to undertake her first shift.

I needed to see her before that happened, even if she would probably beat the crap out of me for not trying to get back sooner. I also needed to see Dannie and make sure that she was safe and well. Shadow had said she would be taken care of, but again, I needed to see it with my own eyes.

As we walked, my wolf's grace stopped me from slipping on the ice and falling on my ass, and I eventually made it to Shadow's side

in one piece. Both of us stood just outside of the ring of flames that was keeping the growling, prowling, fighting creatures at bay.

“Did you want me to try to open the path here?” I asked.

Shadow shook his head. “No. I want to send them all back in one go, and that means the hunters, Igorna, and the others we have trapped.”

“Angel killed the hunters,” I reminded him.

“You can’t kill us with weapons not born of the Shadow Realm,” he reminded me. “Angel’s blades are formidable, but they’re not born of shadow. She just disrupted their physical structure, and here, without the mists, it’s harder to find energy for us to reform. I got them locked away before they managed to regain full power.”

Right. Right. That was the reason he hadn’t killed the creatures in the first place, just locked them away. His mention of “the mists” reminded me of his tattoos, and it stimulated my curiosity in a way that was entirely new and all-encompassing.

The name, it almost felt... familiar. But the flash of *déjà vu* couldn’t have been more than a random jolt of energy because I had no knowledge of these mists he referred to.

Shadow grasped on to the flames, and unlike a regular mortal, he wasn’t burned to death by handling fire. Instead, it appeared to leap into his palms and lovingly caress him.

Turning from me, he focused all of his attention on the fire. “Thank you,” he murmured to it, followed by a lot of words that were not in English. They sounded almost like a song, the words a soothing rhythmic tune, and magic followed each beat.

It took me a second to understand what he was doing: wrapping up his spell. Shadow stepped back and the flames surged, encasing the creatures completely in a fireball. It was silent in the field now, their braying and roars cut off by the magic of this spell.

The ball rose in the air with the creatures on board, following as we started to walk. When we neared the edge of a rocky outcropping, the doorway to the library appeared, and I briefly caught movement out of the corner of my eye, but it was gone when I looked closer.

Probably a rabbit or fox—these forests were filled with animals, despite the presence of shifters in their midst. I briefly wished it had

been a shifter so I could pass a message on to my friends. Once again, I was leaving without seeing them, and every time that happened, a little piece of my soul shriveled up. Even if it didn't feel like it, it had been a year. A year without knowing they were okay.

"Shadow," I said abruptly, stopping him in his tracks. "I can't leave without checking on my friends. I know you said you'd take care of Dannie... Do you promise she's okay?"

I was watching him closely, searching for the truth in his eyes. "She was gone when I paid Torma a visit," he told me. "Rumors were flowing that she escaped, and I could not scent her nearby or feel her energy." His eyes weren't lying, but I also didn't feel reassured by this information. Or lack thereof, really. "She's a crafty one," he added, like he knew her, "and something tells me they only held her in the first place because she allowed them to. She'll be fine. You'll see her again."

I held his gaze, but he didn't waver. Not that my stare was going to break Shadow, but I had to show how serious I was. He nodded like he respected the fact, and I wondered if this was another step forward in our relationship. The lines were blurring, and I didn't know how to manage my emotions about that.

"Let's get these creatures back to the library," Shadow said, reminding me what we'd actually been here for.

"Yep," I said, taking one last breath of familiar air, a mild longing for my pack sliding through me before I shed it as easily as I shed my wolf when we were done with a shift. Part of me couldn't even remember being in Torma, but my wolf missed her pack, and truth be told, a tiny slice of me did, too.

As we stepped into the white hall, leaving behind the wintery lands of Earth, I followed Shadow, who didn't waste any time. Fire filled the hall with light and heat until eventually we reached the next prison. Shadow released the creatures into an extra-large room, and after they tumbled from the fire, he sealed the door with his energy. Energy that looked a lot like Inky—a smoke cloud settling over the entrance. Shadow and Inky's energy were the same, and that didn't surprise me one bit. I'd already figured out that whatever Inky was, it was tied irrevocably to the Shadow Beast, and they could never be separated entirely.

“I’ll have dinner brought to the lair,” Shadow said once our task was complete.

I couldn’t help my chuckle. “What did you call all of your shit before you met me?”

He didn’t laugh, but his expression was amused. “It’s a human trait to want to label everything. Some things just are, without need of title or proper noun.”

That felt weird to me, but I didn’t argue because it probably was a human trait. When we entered the library of knowledge, it was business as usual. Various inhabitants from the worlds scattered about, researching everything and giving me a small glimpse into cultures I’d probably never get to see myself.

The familiarity was nice, though, like the shadow creature business might have finally been behind us, and we even had a solid game plan going forward.

Everything was looking up. For once.

Before we reached the lair, we were ambushed by Gaster. The goblin was overly enthusiastic by the news that the shadow problem was over for now, and that we had a plan to return them to the realm.

Shadow remained reserved with the goblin, giving short answers... if he answered at all. No one but me pushed the big brute, happy to accept that whatever he said was law. If the goblin knew that Shadow's sole focus was really getting *himself* back to the Shadow Realm, to enact revenge on those who had wronged him, some of his enthusiasm might fade.

Or... probably not.

The blind trust they all had in Shadow was astonishing.

When we were about to step through to the lair, I heard my name echo through the room, and when I turned, I gasped at Angel, who was decked out like a fucking warrior. Girl was head-to-toe in what had to be custom-made silver and red armor molded to her body, fixed around the wings, with so many blades on her person, I lost count of the handles sticking out of various places.

"What happened?" I burst out, hurrying toward her. "Did Honor Meadows break out in war?"

She didn't say a word, just threw her arms around me, hugging me like she thought she'd never see me again. I couldn't breathe, but I didn't care because this was one of the best hugs I'd ever had. I sank into her and held on for life, needing the emotional connection

that only a female friend could give you. Dudes and sex were great and all, but if you'd never had a ride-or-die bestie, you were missing out on a connection that couldn't be replicated.

One we needed for survival.

"You were gone," she said when she pulled away, her voice broken even if her eyes were dry. "I searched the lands and questioned them all, but no one knew what had happened. And our damn bond... It better start maturing because I can't handle the stress of you wandering around on your own."

Shadow joined us then, and in an instant, the grieving friend was gone, replaced by a badass warrior. Weapons were in her hands so fast, I couldn't track the movement, and she didn't even hesitate to attack him. What I took from this, and appreciated the most, was that Shadow didn't act like it was a laughable matter to have her as an opponent. He paid her the sort of attention she deserved, treating her like a worthy adversary, as the pair sparred.

Shadow procured a black and smoky blade from thin air, and I wondered briefly if it was Inky, manifested into another form. Usually, it would be close by, but I couldn't see it anywhere else.

Angel fought with single-minded focus, attacking over and over, never relenting or giving him an inch. She was beyond spectacular, and I honestly didn't know who I was rooting for by the end. I kind of wanted them both to win, to be honest, but since I half-loved Angel and didn't hate Shadow today, it was probably best to break it up.

"Guys," I started, in an attempt to interrupt their intense need to stab holes into each other. "Let's talk about it over dinner. I'm fine."

No answer or pause. We were starting to draw a crowd, and I didn't need this to turn into anything more than it was. Knowing Shadow, he'd want to prove a point when he had all of his minions watching. I had to stop them before it got to that.

With a deep breath, I did the stupidest thing I could think of, but also the one sure action to stop them in their tracks. I leapt between the two of them, just as Angel spun and struck with her massive, super sharp blade. She saw me in the last instance, screaming out a "Nooooo," but it was too late to stop the strike. Hoping I wasn't about to be sliced into two, I lifted an arm and braced myself for the pain.

Everything after that moved in slow motion, and even though my destruction was closing in, I watched the rest of it go down with an almost detached curiosity. Shadow's roar deafened everyone in the room, sending most of them to their knees, and when the spark of his power bit into my shoulders, I was jerked out of the way just as the blade sliced by my arm.

"Enough!" Shadow bellowed, not releasing me. His voice lowered dramatically. "I kept her safe, Melalekin." Only Angel and I could have heard those words. "You have no quarrel with me."

Her chest heaved, eyes still filled with horror at what she'd almost done. "Next time I won't be so lenient, Darkor," she murmured, also very low. This was a conversation between the three of us only. "Remember that."

Then with one soft look at me, she spun and stormed off.

My breathing was still rapid, the sense I'd been closer to death than ever before hanging over me. Shadow had saved me, and I couldn't think of anything else. Except maybe... Had I just learned their real names?

It was such an insignificant piece of knowledge, and yet it felt absolutely breathtakingly huge to me. Like I'd been inducted into a club that only a few ever get to experience. I felt quite privileged to have another small piece of the two beings I spent the most time with here.

It took me a moment to notice the heat pouring off Shadow Beast. He was raging, even if no one else knew because his face was impassive. He didn't release me from his hold, turning to enter the lair. I had no idea why he was still holding me to his chest like he was, but the traitorous part of me that was a tiny bit into him didn't want to argue about it. It was the sort of possessive hold that messed with my head. Mine and my wolf's. Both of us wanted to roll over and purr like a damn kitten.

When Shadow reached the barrier to his lair, and just as he started to step through, the lights flickered. I'd never seen that happen before, but it wasn't immediately alarming... at least not for me.

Shadow paused, his gaze tilting up to search above us. I was gently set on my feet as he slid me in behind him. "The fire has been

restored,” he said softly. “Head into the lair.”

“No,” I said, placing my hand against his back. The muscles were firm under my touch—he was tense, and that worried me. “What is happening?”

The flicker of lights must have been a pressing concern for him to react as he was.

“Sunshine, for once in your damn life, listen to me. You need to get away now—”

His words were cut off as the library plunged into darkness. A split second later, Shadow’s fire roared to life around him, the heat all but shooting me back.

He started forward, but he was too late. Whoever had shut off the lights attacked us, two dark figures appearing. Before the beast could murder them where they stood, an arc of dark, glittering powder hit us both, and as I choked on the dust, Shadow dropped to his knees beside me.

Disoriented by whatever was in the powder, I barely even registered that I’d been grabbed, heavy hands lifting and carrying me across the pitch-black library.

“No!” I coughed, more of the dust lodged in my throat. I was fighting against the hold, badly, but it was better than nothing.

“Sunny, stop. It’s me.”

I paused at the familiar voice: *Jaxson*.

How the fuck was Jaxson here? And what had he done to the library and Shadow? No way could this dumbass shifter have managed to throw one over them without some serious help.

“Let me go, dammit,” I snarled before coughing again. The powder was sticky in my throat, clinging with an intensity.

“We’re rescuing you, you dumb bitch.” This was from Torin, who was apparently here for this fuck-up too.

“Shadow is going to rip you both into a million pieces,” I said, my voice hoarse. “It’s in your best interest to get out of here now and hope he never finds out it was you.”

Jaxson, still carrying me, didn’t slow at all. “We’re going to block the doorway,” he said in a rush. “We’ll be able to keep him out for an indefinite period of time. You’ll be safe.”

“I was never in any danger, you dumb fucking fucks,” I snarled. “Release me now or Shadow will be the least of your worries.”

I drew on my wolf and she came snarling to the surface as parts of us transformed so we could slice out at the ones holding us. “Use more of the morrow powder,” Torin snapped. “Knock her stupid ass out. The Shadow Beast got to her; we’ll need to break her back home.”

Break me back home? Oh, man, I was going to show him just how wrong he was—

In the darkness, a slap of the powder hit me in the face, worse than before, and I choked and spluttered on the mildewy substance. My will to fight faded to nothing, and as I breathed in more of the disgusting concoction, my lights went out completely.

Leaving me vulnerable with the two males I hated most in the world.

The sensation of coming awake in an unknown place and situation was one of the worst I'd ever experienced, and it had been happening far too much lately. I needed to change my life choices stat—because this was not fucking healthy.

Whatever the alpha and his beta had hit me with had left behind a raging hangover, and once I finished throwing up bile and whatever dregs had been in my stomach, I rolled over to find myself chained to a bed. Just by one ankle, but it was a silver chain that was reinforced and too strong for me to break—something I knew after several attempts to get free.

When the pounding in my head eased a touch, I pulled myself up to see my surroundings better. I was in Torin's room. I had a terrible feeling about what this meant; the alpha hadn't minced his words the last time when he'd all but inserted me into a harem with Sisily. I had to end the bond now—permanently. I just needed to wait until he was in the room and close enough to ensure it would work.

Another throb of pain clamped across my head as I again wondered what was in the powder they'd hit us with. What sort of substance could do that to Shadow and the Library of Knowledge? I mean, how the fuck was it even possible that shifters could sneak into the library without help in the first place?

Or had they followed us?

There had been that movement I'd seen as we'd been leaving Torma with the fireball. I'd written it off as a fox or rabbit, noticing fur

in the bushes, but it could have been more. It could have been two lunkhead shifters thinking they were saving me. All the while getting one over on Shadow.

The bedroom door slammed open before I could think about it any further, Torin entering with his bullshit swagger. My wolf stirred in my chest, but it wasn't like the last time she'd reacted to him. The longing and need were gone. The urge to submit to her alpha and mate had faded against our fury at what he'd done to us. After all the years of bullying and torment, after rejecting me, the fact that he thought he could stroll into my life and make any decisions for me had my body burning with fury.

I craved his blood. Under my nails and in my mouth as I ripped his throat out.

"Hello, mate," he said cheerfully. "I'm here to release you now that I know you're not going to suffer any aftereffects of the powder."

I didn't say a word, just stared him down with the sort of look that would have worried a more intelligent shifter. This dumbass was too self-involved to even bother looking close enough to see the murder in my eyes.

As his hands wrapped around my ankle, he caressed it slowly, and I forced myself to continue breathing evenly. "Are you happy to be back, babe?" he asked, clearly still stupid.

My jaw was clenched so hard, I couldn't speak, but I managed to lie with a head nod, and he was happy enough with that. "You'll forget about your time with Shadow Beast soon enough," he added as the chain finally clinked and my leg was released.

The moment that happened, my wolf took control. I hadn't realized in my own fury how absolutely out of control she was, and in seconds, we'd shifted. As a wolf, I did exactly what my father had attempted and attacked the alpha of Torma. I hadn't expected Torin to anticipate the attack, but somehow the asshole knew.

"Stop!"

It was a command with alpha power behind it, and unlike last time in my human form, his command did actually control my wolf. We snarled and fought, but since technically this was still my pack, I was forced to follow the rules of pack law. Although his control did feel flimsy at best.

“Let’s go for a run,” he added, and he shifted into his wolf so fast that I would have been impressed if he wasn’t such a dickbag.

My wolf tried to attack again, but he kept her locked down with his magic, our legs only able to move when we were following him as he intended. She didn’t fight again, and I knew deep down that my wolf still held out a small hope of claiming her mate, no matter how pissed she was today.

Human me, on the other hand, would never stop trying to rip this fuck’s face off.

Torin kept his power locked over us for the entire run, and it was bittersweet to cross pack lands with my mate, but once again, be a damn prisoner. A time better arise soon in which I wasn’t a victim to every powerful asshole who thought he could push his will onto me.

Right now I hated them all.

When Torin was done, we returned to the pack house, and he bounced around me like a playful puppy. My wolf didn’t respond, both of us done with him. Eventually, he shifted back, disappearing to return dressed with Jaxson by his side. They sat in front of me, and I stared at my oldest friend—turned enemy. Even with my wolf vision, he looked tired; the year apart had aged him.

“What can we do to prove that this is where you’re supposed to be?” he asked, leaning forward as he appealed to me. “Torin is in charge now and he’ll make sure no one blames you for your dad’s mistake any longer. You have no idea what we went through to get you back. I don’t understand why you’re not more grateful.”

My wolf growled, the sound deeper than any I’d ever made before as she tapped into a base anger simmering for years inside of us. If these two fucks weren’t careful, I would bring the entirety of the Shadow Realm down on our heads in my fury.

“What do you want from us?” Torin pushed, a stupid smirk on his face. “What if I give you something first to show how serious I am about cementing the bond?”

I needed to be back in human form so I could yell at them, but that would leave me naked in front of these two assholes, and then I’d have a whole new set of problems.

Thankfully, before I had to choose between a rock and a hard place, someone new arrived, tearing across the grass, clothing in

hand, and tears streaming down her face. Simone dropped down in front of me, her face shattered, her hands trembling as she held the clothing out toward me.

“I can make your life better than you could ever imagine,” Torin said, and when I tore my eyes from my friend, it was to find him all smug and secure in his amazingness. Thinking he had me exactly where he wanted me by dangling my best friend in front of me.

Worst part was, he was right. I would give up a lot for this moment with Simone. A lot.

“We’ll leave you to catch up,” Jaxson said, knowing me far better than Torin could ever hope to. My independence had always been important, even before my family had fucked our place in the pack, and I hated being hovered over.

Torin wanted to argue, but when Jaxson uttered something close to his ear, he let out a sigh and followed his friend without further disagreement. When they were out of sight, the energy holding me eased so I could change back. I pulled on the sweats Simone had brought for me, my body and hands shaking as I fought to get my shit together.

“Mera,” she breathed, still on her knees in the middle of the pack field. It was like she couldn’t quite make her legs work, shock rendering her motionless.

With my heart slamming against my chest, the intensity of this moment even stronger than I’d expected, I dropped to my knees as well. I had no idea how this was all going to go. Despite her dark locks, Simone had the temper of a redhead, just like me, and she was likely to react one of two ways: either she’d lose her shit and scream at me until she passed out. Or she’d—

She launched herself forward, her arms wrapping tightly around me as sobs choked her. “They told me you were alive,” she spluttered, “but I don’t trust any of those bastards.”

I returned her hug with just as much force, if not more, breathing in her scent, the aniseed particularly strong today. Before I knew it, both of us were bawling our eyes out and trying to talk at a million miles an hour.

“I’ve missed you so much!”

“Been the longest year without you!”

“Going to kill those fucking shifters!”

“How could you leave me here with them!”

On and on, until we got most of our anger and angst out, all while never letting go of the other. When the tears finally subsided, we sprawled back side by side, and I took my first real breath since I’d been stolen away from Shadow. A deep, cleansing sort of inhale.

“I can’t stay here,” I told her quietly. “I have missed you every single day, worried about you, and cried because I wasn’t sure I’d see you again, but not even for you will I stay in Torma with this pack.”

Simone’s face was fierce. “I would never expect that. I’m more than willing to leave here forever. Even my parents... They refused to do anything to help me find you. Not one thing!”

I reached for her hand, squeezing it tightly. “You’re the best friend I could have ever hoped for. You’ve stuck by me through so much bullshit that honestly, I can never repay you. But this journey I’m on now...” I sighed. “It’s dangerous and I don’t want you to regret the decision to come with me. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Simone straightened, gesturing to the near-perfect braid in her hair. “If I can learn to braid my hair, I can do any freaking thing. I’ve shifted twice now. I’m vibing well with my wolf. You don’t have to worry about me.”

She didn’t understand. She would never be able to understand unless she experienced the world as I had in the past year. Shadow’s life was not for the faint of heart, and as much as she was full of fire and bravado, my friend had been more sheltered than me. She’d been babied by her parents, no matter how much she was hating on them right now.

I couldn’t steal her away, even if that was what she thought she wanted today.

“I love you,” I said. “And right now, I have no choice but to stay because I don’t know how to open the doorway to the library, but when I figure it out, I’ll be gone. I’m helping Shadow with something fairly important, and he can’t do it without me.”

She blinked at me. “Shadow?”

Fuck. How did I explain this to her?

“Shadow Beast,” I started, “is not exactly as the tales say. He’s definitely scary and powerful. He’s alpha, more than a little possessive, and multiple times over the past year, I’ve dreamed of stabbing him in the chest. But there’s also something... more about him. A deeper destiny that I didn’t expect. He’s surprisingly noble and good—when you’re not pissing him off.”

Her mouth was ajar, her eyes as wide as saucers as she silently stared at me. “You’re in love with the Shadow Beast?” she finally choked out. “The demon of our nightmares? The god who created shifters?” Leaning over, she placed a hand on my forehead to check for a temperature.

With a chuckle, I gently waved her off. “I’m not in love with him. That would be the height of fucking stupid. But I do need to finish this task.”

She screwed her nose up. “Surely, he can’t need *you* for anything. I mean, I don’t blame you for wanting to stick around, girl. According to the members of the pack who saw him, he’s about the sexiest thing on two legs that this world has ever seen.”

“Not just *this* world,” I muttered, irrationally annoyed that others had been discussing him that way.

Simone paled. “I don’t want to know. I’m barely wrapping my head around the fact that you’re finally here. Alive. After this long.”

My smile was genuine, and it felt weird to actually have a moment of happiness, while the rest of me was in a mini-panic over what had happened to Shadow and library...

Turning to Simone, I lowered my voice. “Do you have any idea what they did to get me away from Shadow? They used some sort of powder.”

Simone looked around quickly, her gaze darting left and right before she scooted even closer and whispered as fast as she could. “I know nothing for sure. They keep me out of discussions because I’ve shown time and again I’m Team Mera. But it has something to do with Dannie. They were holding her for ages, and I tried to break in and help her, but by the time I figured out a way through their guards, she was gone.” Her voice wavered as she breathed rapidly. “There was blood everywhere, though, Mera. So much blood that I’m not sure even a shifter could have survived.”

Everything stilled around me as white noise filled my head. Shadow had said Dannie had escaped, but from what Simone had seen...

She had not escaped unscathed.

Simone held on to me while I had my mini-breakdown, and when I was done, I got to my feet, my wolf raging in my chest. In normal circumstances, after a run, she would have been tired, but the news of Dannie being hurt at the hands of this pack had us both ready to try round two of murdering their asses.

The only thing holding me back was the fact that if I pushed them too far today, they might kill me, and I couldn't let that happen before I knew Shadow and the library were okay. Not to mention everyone else in the Solaris System I'd grown quite fond of.

Simone jumped to her feet, energy animating her face as she nodded. Whatever she'd been mulling in her head, she'd come to a conclusion, and was now ready to share her plan.

Leaning close to my ear, she acted like she was hugging me again. "There's a secret pack meeting tonight for enforcers and the top pack members," she whispered. "I think it's going to be about you and everything that happened. I didn't want to tell you because I'm scared you're going to get yourself killed fighting them, but we definitely have to figure out what they did."

I clutched her shirt, holding on to her. "Yes. I need to get to that meeting. Maybe just give me the coordinates, and you can stay home, where it's safe..."

She shook her head, pulling back from me. "Not a fucking chance, bitch. I'll be at your side, just like I should have been when you were taken."

I grimaced. “Did you not hear what Shadow did to Alpha Victor? He’s absolutely ruthless and without mercy when he’s angry. If you got in his way, you’d have done nothing other than die. And if you’d done that for me, I would have been so angry that at least two lifetimes would have had to pass before I’d forgive you.”

Her eyes sprinkled with tears as she shook her head again. “When I realized you’d run from Torma just before your shift, I blamed myself. If I’d been a more supportive friend, I’d have been with you.”

I swallowed as my eyes burned. “I’m so sorry for leaving like that, girl. Especially after telling you I wouldn’t.”

Her voice was fierce as she shook me a little. “It wasn’t your fault. I’ve had a lot of time to think about... well, everything. You lived through hell, and I did nothing to help. Not really.”

That wasn’t remotely true. Her love and support had definitely saved my life more than once. Simone continued before I could. “When you were taken by Shadow Beast, I promised that if you ever returned to me, I’d never let you go. I can’t break that promise... please don’t make me.”

Our gazes were locked for what felt like an eternity, and eventually, I nodded, seeing in her face the same determination I’d seen in my own for years. In truth, me making decisions for her was just as bad as Shadow doing it for me. I was no stronger or smarter than Simone, and as long as she knew all the risks, it wasn’t my job to stand in her way.

“Okay. Just be aware that I’ve almost died twenty times since I was taken from here,” I told her. “If you’re okay with living on the edge of death, I won’t stand in your way.”

She scoffed. “We’ve got this. Pretty sure being in Torma is living on the devil’s gate anyway.” There was a pause, and we chuckled.

“I’ve literally been living with the devil,” I snorted.

Simone shot me a smirk. “I know.”

Both of us laughed and I had to shake my head at the irony of my last year. To shifters, Shadow was god, devil, beast, sinner, and saint. He was the complete package of yin and yang. Dark and light. Good and bad. I’d been living in the devil’s house for a year, and if

anything, had come out stronger and more independent than I'd ever been here under the pack rule.

"We will stop them," I said with conviction.

Simone's face was fierce, her lips pursed as she narrowed her eyes. "We will. I need to go home now so I can follow my parents. I'll text you the coordinates."

I grimaced. "I have no phone."

She smiled. "I kept an old one of yours." From her pocket, she pulled out my phone, fully charged and in pristine condition. For an old piece of crap. "I hoped that one day you'd call your number, so I never let the charge go out."

My throat was tight as I hugged her once more. "I love you. Be careful following your parents and text me as soon as you know the location."

"I will," she whispered, squeezing me as she spun and took off.

I slipped the phone in my pocket just as Jaxson and Torin got back to me—they'd clearly been hanging close by.

"See?" Torin's first and only word as he smirked at me.

I played dumb. "See what?"

His smile faded, darkness rolling through his eyes. "See what I can offer you if you just stop fighting me? You will not be a prisoner with me. You'll be an alpha female, mated to the alpha of all alphas."

I tilted my head to the side, like I couldn't quite wrap my head around what he was saying. Truth be told, I couldn't wrap it around his arrogant stupidity, but thankfully, he couldn't read my thoughts.

"I just need some time," I lied. "And being totally honest, I'm getting fairly annoyed by men thinking they can throw their weight and power around and drag me off by my hair. You should really think about your approach going forward; I mean, if you want the sort of powerhouse relationship that you're dangling in front of me."

Keeping them happy until the meeting was my new motto. Hopefully tonight, I'd get all the information I needed about Shadow and the library, and equally importantly, about Dannie. I needed to know if I had a friend to avenge or not. If they had hurt Dannie, I would figure out how to make them beg for death.

The thought of that brought a smile to my face. Of course, Torin, the stupid fuck he was, thought I was smiling at him. "You got it,

babe. We are going to rule this damn world and have the most beautiful pups.”

My stomach churned at the mere thought of touching him. His dick was probably half-rotted from being inside so many shifters. Especially Sisily. Speaking of, I wondered where that bitch even was. Did she know I was back? Did she know Torin wanted to claim the bond now? Why wasn't she here to scratch my eyes out?

“How's my mom?” I asked them suddenly. Not because I really cared—she'd been nothing to me for years—but it felt like I should at least ask.

Jaxson stepped forward, taking my hand. The revulsion I felt around Torin wasn't there with him, but I still didn't want his touch. When I removed my hand, he seemed surprised but recovered quickly enough. “Your mom fell into depression when you were taken by Shadow Beast,” he said slowly, softly, and my stomach clenched at his tone. I knew that tone. It was his *bad news is forthcoming* voice.

“Get to the point, Jax!” I snapped.

“I went to check on her, and she was unconscious,” he said in a rush.

Torin cut in. “I had the best healers take her case, but there was nothing they could do. The abuse on her body was just too great. Not even shifter genetics could save her.”

“I'm so sorry, Sunny,” Jaxson added.

The pain was a dull thud in my chest at the knowledge the last member of my family was finally gone. I was more alone than I'd ever been... a blow I hadn't been expecting when I'd asked about her.

“What happened to her body?” I breathed.

Shifter ritual was to burn the body, but only after a family member sent them off to the Shadow Beast with their blessings. My mother had no family without me, so I wasn't sure what they'd done.

“My father blessed her to the afterlife,” Jaxson said.

Anger swelled against the dull pain, and it was sharper, more colorful than my grief ever would be. “The father who murdered her true mate? *That* was the shifter you thought was a great choice to send her into the next life?”

I silently added another name to my list: Dean Heathcliffe.

Each of them would pay, even if it took me my entire life. It wasn't about revenge... It was about righting wrongs that shouldn't have been allowed to happen.

Eh, maybe that was the same thing, but whatever, no one said I was perfect.

"We're sorry, Mera," Jaxson said. "Torin and I have wanted to say it for a long time."

Torin crossed his arms, not bothering to even open his stupid mouth as he let his beta talk for him. What the fuck had I done wrong to get this mongrel dog as a mate? I needed to ask Shadow about that... if I ever saw him again.

"How about you make it up to me?" I said, once again lying through my teeth. "By telling me what exactly happened when you all snuck into the Library of Knowledge."

The friends exchanged a look before they turned back to me. "Do you really need to know, though?" Torin smarmed. "I mean, all that matters is you're back. Tomorrow we'll call a pack meeting and introduce you as the alpha-mate. This is exactly what you've been working toward, right?"

I couldn't stop the snort from escaping; Torin didn't miss it, his expression darkening. But what did he expect? The last thing I ever wanted was to be his mate. I'd wanted to get the hell away from this pack as soon as I could, so this was a little like my worst nightmare.

Keep the peace. Keep the peace.

Just a few more hours.

Jaxson had to take off after this for pack duties, leaving me alone with Torin. Now that his friend was gone, the alpha had lost some of his cockiness, his face unsure as he asked, “Would you maybe... like to go for a walk?”

My wolf cocked her head, her interest there. Mine was non-existent, but I was playing the long game now, so I couldn't falter.

“Sure. That would be nice.”

Like getting a Brazilian wax. While wolfed out.

He didn't touch me as we walked, but he was closer than I wanted, especially when a tiny part of me enjoyed the buzz of mate bond between us. “Were you surprised?” he asked, and it shocked me enough that I stopped walking.

“About what?”

My mind was constantly spinning between him, Jaxson, and Shadow, and I had no idea what specifically he was asking.

“That I was your true mate?”

Oh. I forced myself to move again, and he caught up to me. “I thought it would be Jaxson,” I finally admitted, being honest with him for probably the first time since I'd tried to rip his throat out. “We've always had a bond that went deeper than the ordinary. I mean, after my dad, that connection went to shit, but before that... he was my guy. And I honestly thought if it was anyone here, it would be Jax.”

Torin's chuckle was strangled. “Yeah, the massive fight we got into after you left kind of indicated he had the same feeling. You

were almost the breaking point in our lifetime of friendship. Again.”

“You still made him your beta,” I said with a shrug.

Torin nodded. “Jaxson is the best fucking shifter I’ve ever known. He deserves to be alpha and he’s definitely the better man for you, but fate obviously decided it wasn’t going to happen this time around, so it’s up to me to be...” He hesitated. “What you deserve. You and Torma.”

I managed to cover my disbelief with a cough.

Torin didn’t miss it, though, and surprisingly, he ducked his head and smiled. “Yeah, I might not have been off to a flying start on that, but I honestly didn’t expect you to fight me so hard. We were rescuing you, and I’ve spent half a year trying to work out my plan, so it was a little anticlimactic to know you didn’t even want to be rescued.”

Yeah, I guess from their perspective, I might have acted a little out of character. Maybe they just never knew the true depth of my hatred for them. How they could have thought any other way after the pack’s treatment of me, I’d never know, but they were dumbass dudes, after all.

“You said before that I almost ended your friendship with Jaxson again. *Why again?*”

I’d never known them to fight and I couldn’t crush my curiosity of what that meant.

For the first time since we’d started this tête-à-tête, Torin looked cagey, but to his credit, he didn’t try to lie to me. “When your father first attacked mine”—his eyes were pained at the mention of his executed father—“I warned Jaxson that he had to let you go. He refused, but his entire life was on the line. It was clear that your standing in this pack was gone, and if he wanted to be beta, he couldn’t lose respect like the Callahans had. He had no other choice.”

My head was spinning, and there was the weirdest ache in my chest, like indigestion. “I didn’t know that. He fought to stay friends with me?”

Torin nodded. “Yep. We didn’t talk for a month, and at almost every opportunity, he attempted to punch my fucking lights out.”

I'd been living in a world of hurt and grief and fear back then, so it was all very murky, but I kind of remembered Jaxson still being around for a short time after my father's death.

"Why did he give up on his mission to stick it out with me?"

Torin's face was set, hard and unyielding, the alpha in him shining clear as fucking day. "His father and mine got together and taught Jaxson a few life lessons. He almost didn't survive, and if it wasn't for my intervention, they might have killed him. They still managed to break something in my friend that day, and I haven't seen it again until recently. His strength and will has returned with vengeance, and I doubt there's anything in this world that could tear him away from you now."

I sucked down a sob... No way would I cry in front of Torin. But this little story, one that was almost unbelievable and yet explained so much, was like a whole new dagger in my chest.

"What tangled webs we weave," I murmured. "I had no idea Jaxson went through so much to try to save me." It didn't negate the shit he'd put me through, but it did help me understand, and that helped me somewhat forgive him.

Torin laughed, and in the same instant, leaned forward and wrapped his hands around my forearms, pulling me to a stop as he forced me to face him. "He's not going to easily let you go. And here's my proposition... I will fight side by side with him to win you over, and you can decide who is the best mate for you. I heard you before about choices being made for you, and I think I have enough to offer that I'll gladly take my chances competing with Jax."

My eyes were so wide now that I was genuinely worried about my eyeballs falling right the fuck out of my head. I'd never seen Torin like this—so open and vulnerable. Wearing his emotions on his face.

My disbelief must have shone through like a spotlight.

"I know I've done very little to convince you of this, but I've changed in the past year," he said softly. "Got my priorities straight. Faced a few hard truths that I'd been shielded from in my youth. I'm not the same shifter or man you knew, Mera. I am many steps closer to being worthy of you. Just give me a chance to prove it."

My wolf howled, and she wanted to take the chance because this was our true mate. The one who would complete our souls in a way

no other ever could. But I didn't trust this new Torin, no matter what he was saying. There was still so much unsaid, so many secrets, and I had zero idea what had happened to Dannie.

Not to mention, part of me was still waiting for Shadow to make his appearance. Maybe stupidly, but it was what it was.

Swallowing down my softer emotions, I pulled away from the alpha. "It's going to take a hell of a lot more than perfect words, Torin," I said shortly, my voice trembling despite my resolution to not be affected. "I'm also not the same shifter I was a year ago, and now, you're going to have one hell of a job proving your worth."

He smiled, and for once, it was not a smirk. "Challenge accepted, sweetheart. You're going to be wooed like you've never been before."

My heart fluttered again, but I shut that bitch down. We had a mission, and I would not be deterred from it, no matter what happened. Torin might have turned over a new leaf, but I had my doubts. Did a wolf ever really change their pelt? Would I be around long enough to find out?

My afternoon with Torin was enlightening, and honestly, if there hadn't been many years of fucked-up history between us, I'd have been charmed as hell by the alpha of Torma. He did seem different: mature, calm, and intuitive. He'd done some real growing up since his father's death had thrust him into the position of alpha, but I was apparently not a forgiving sort of chick, because my burning anger was still an endless pool he'd barely dented.

But I didn't completely hate the day.

Torin had stayed with me right up until the end of dinner before excusing himself, saying he had pack business to deal with. I just smiled and nodded, not bothering to hold him up. This was a great sign. It meant the meeting was a go, and I just had to wait for Simone's text. She'd sent one earlier with "*on it*" and an emoji as the content. No doubt being vague in case either of our phones fell into the wrong hands.

Torin left me in the pack house, which had been empty for most of the day but was now filled with enforcers, who were no doubt here to keep track of me. This new development would make it a touch harder to escape, but I had a lot of experience slipping in and out of this place, and I knew some exits that I was fairly certain none of these meatheads would be aware of. It would be fine, as long as Simone sent the location to me ASAP.

A few minutes before 8:00 P.M., my phone buzzed in my pocket. I wasn't alone, so I didn't even react. Instead, I spent another five minutes chatting to everyone who had greeted me like I was a long-lost valued member of this pack. Not the one they'd all tried to break at one point or another.

Luckily, I was an excellent actor because none of my hatred for them made an appearance.

With a phone burning in my pocket, I eventually yawned my way to bed. When I'd said I wanted to go to Torin's room, I got satisfied grins from some of his sycophants. Easy to see who was on Team Torin. Unfortunately for him, I was on Team Mera, and I'd be doing whatever the fuck was best for me. Gotta love yourselves first, ladies.

Three shifters escorted me to his room, and I noted that almost all of them were male. This wasn't how it usually worked—females were just as tough as the men and often had positions in security, but Torin was clearly rocking the dick club during his reign.

Probably something Sisily had insisted on. Except... she was MIA, just like Dannie. Some serious shit had gone down in my absence, and I was going to have to work overtime to catch up on all the news.

As soon as I was safely secured in Torin's room, I ripped the phone out to find four words from Simone. *School. Theater. Fifteen minutes.* Right, well that was going to take me at least fifteen minutes to sprint to in human form, but if I went as a wolf, I'd get there in half the time.

As I started to plan, I sent a return text to Simone. *Be there in ten. Distraction first.*

Her reply was instant. *Distraction forthcoming.*

I paused. Well, that would make this even easier if I didn't have to figure out both steps of my plan. Simone had more than a few little tricks in her fur, so I'd let her have the shot first.

To prepare, I searched through Torin's room, finding a small backpack that I used to hold a set of clothing, making sure it was zipped up tight—wolves struggled with zippers. By the time I was prepped, Simone had come through with a distraction, the perimeter alarms blaring in the distance. I knew how the enforcers worked,

though, so first I crawled into bed, fully dressed as I pretended to be half-asleep. The door slammed open, and I jerked upright, blinking as I rubbed my eyes against the light. “What’s happening?” I cried, clutching the sheets to my chest, just like a damsel in distress.

The two dudes glanced around, following protocol to maintain the room’s safety. “Stay here, alpha-mate,” said a tall Black man with a serious face. I didn’t know him personally, and I wondered if he was a new member of the pack. Not that I really cared.

He was clearly good at his job, though. Quick and efficient, but since I’d given him no reason to distrust me, he didn’t. “Can I help?” I asked as they turned away.

Someone hand me a fucking Oscar for Best Actress in a Pack.

They both shook their heads. “No, please. It’s our job to keep you safe. It was most probably just animals setting the alarms off.”

Yeah, maybe. Animals sent here by my feisty best friend. She was a freaking keeper, just like Angel was proving to be as well. Two fierce, fearless, badass female friends. That almost made up for me being Torin’s true mate.

I nodded, forcing a smile. “Okay. Well, please keep me updated.”

They saluted as they left, and when the door closed, I shed the nice girl persona, rolling out of bed. The backpack was placed where my wolf could easily grab it, front door opened just a touch, and then I called my beast’s energy to the surface, hoping that my shift would be silent against the chaos outside.

The reshaping of bones was never going to be pleasant, but as more of the magic infused into my soul, it took only a blip in time, and then I was a wolf. In this form, we had laser focus, grabbing the small bag in our mouth and easing out the door. The hallway was empty, as I’d expected. The alpha and his family were always on the most expansive side of the estate, leaving the entrance on the other side to be guarded by their minions.

Once again, their cowardice was going to cost them as I snuck out like a thief in the night. This old house was full of secret entrances, small closets that led to alleys, and a laundry chute I’d used more than once to slip away from assholes chasing me. My smaller stature both in human and wolf form had done me right a couple of times.

No one crossed my path by the time I reached the rarely used laundry room. Of course, when I pushed against the door, it was firmly closed, and as much strength as my wolf had, thumbs and the ability to open doors were not part of them.

Fuck. It would require me to shift back, and then back again, but three shifts in such a short time would exhaust me to the point I'd be fairly useless if a fight broke out.

I wasted a few precious minutes contemplating other options, only to hear shifters returning to this side of the building. The distraction was over and pretty soon, I'd be trapped. Which left me with no other option. My wolf, understanding the plan, didn't fight the shift, allowing me to slip back into our human skin. I opened the door in a flash, rushing inside and closing it firmly again.

Sucking in a deep breath as I searched for the energy to shift again, I just let go of all control and hoped my wolf would respond, doing at least half the work for me. She didn't let me down, and when the shift hit again, the pain was worse, but it was over just as fast. I did have to pant on the ground for a minute or so to recover, but there was strength in our body as we pushed up, grabbed the bag, and headed to the wall with the exit. It was one of those old-school metal chutes, rough in places, but I'd used it enough times to know the spots to avoid.

When the fresh air hit, even more energy returned, and I moved quickly toward the creek. The water was my go-to in covering my scent and tracks, and after a few miles along this creekbank, I'd end up on a main road, ready to head straight to the school.

Fuck, I loved when a plan came together.

The school was shrouded in darkness. No sign of life from the outside. But my senses were stronger than that, and when I found the main theater empty, I sniffed those bastards out, finding them in a subbasement of the building. This was the room where props, costumes, and lighting were kept.

Shifters were not really into acting or school plays, but they always had one production a year. After which everything was promptly discarded to this room.

And scattered amongst it now were the upper echelons in the Torma pack.

I crawled my way along one of the rafters, following Simone's scent. She was crouched on a platform high above the room—one of those lever-pulled wood planks that they used to move characters around the stage.

It was the perfect vantage point to observe, without being close enough that they would scent us. I couldn't smell anyone below, not even in wolf form, so I knew we'd be safe.

"You made it just in time," Simone murmured, reaching out to take the bag from my mouth. My change back was tough. Firstly, because my wolf didn't want to let go when we were in a room of enemies, secondly, because my energy was depleted badly, and thirdly, because we had to do it in almost complete silence.

Simone looked on in concern as I huffed on the floor. "Had to change twice." I groaned softly, pushing myself up. She shot me a

sympathetic stare as she helped me get the clothes out and pull them over my trembling limbs. Just a pair of too-big-for-me sweats, but I felt better when I was covered.

There was no more time for me to recover, because the shifters down below were getting started. Torin stepped aside to let Dean Heathcliffe have the floor, and this motherfucker had some interesting shit to say.

“The powder procured from the explorer proved to be fruitful,” he started, and there were cheers ringing throughout the room as those bastards celebrated their victory. “One virgin sacrifice and the magic of a shadow-whore meant we could interrupt the energy of their little magical portal, and now they’re blocked from ever returning.”

More cheers.

Torin and Jaxson both remained silent, though, arms crossed as they stood side by side. I found myself trying to read every minute expression on their faces, anything which might indicate if they’d been part of... or maybe even instigated this plan. But their expressions were impassive.

A shifter lifted their hand before shouting out a question. “Will this weaken the beast? Will he still be able to punish us?”

Dean grinned, looking manic as he glanced around the room. “According to the wanderer, right before we destroyed her body for the spell, that’s exactly what it means.”

My gasp—and Simone’s—was hidden by raucous laughter and excitement, but I heard nothing else that was said as my body heated like I’d just jumped into a pot of boiling water. “Mera!” Simone cried, but it was an insignificant whisper against the rising fury inside of me.

My vision started to double over as fire raced across my body, like I was channeling Shadow’s power. I felt his presence the moment Dean let out a raucous laugh. “And we’d never have been able to kill that wandering shadow bitch if it hadn’t been for the Shadow Beast himself. He laid the foundation to build his own destruction.”

They all laughed again, but my world dropped out from under me as an unearthly howl rang out through the room.

Shadow had helped them kill her?

Shadow had lied to me and betrayed me for his own means, just when I'd started trusting him.

Shadow, whom I sensed was here now because I'd reached out to touch the Shadow Realm again.

There was no time to contemplate that, though, because the shifters below had fallen silent as they scented the destruction marching his way toward them. Another roar cut through the night and sent the wolves to their knees. The sound was beautiful in its terror, and as the light slithered from the room, shadows creeping in through the room, air heavy and thick, I let a bitter smile cross my face.

The devil had finally arrived. And he wasn't alone.

With the fire of a million avenging angels riding on my skin, flames dancing high above my body, I stepped off the edge of the platform. Simone's screams rang in my ears as I fell.

It was like stepping off one small rock as I gracefully hit the ground, straightening to come face to face with the devil. We wore twin flames, and his expression was a hollow portal of death. As our eyes met, I let a slow smile cross my face. Beside Shadow, Lucien cleared his throat, but he appeared too unsure to speak. Reece as well.

Because they saw the truth of what was happening here. There was a new terror waiting in the wings for Shadow. A terror he'd never seen coming.

Me.



To FIND out what happens next, don't forget to pre-order Reclaimed here: <http://smarturl.it/ShadowBeast2> (to release 1st February 2021 or earlier).

STAY CONNECTED

The best way to stay up to date with the Shadow Beast Shifters world and all new releases, is to join my Facebook group here:

www.facebook/groups/jayminevenerdherd

We share lots of book releases, fun posts, sexy dudes, and generally it's a happy place to exist.

Next best place is my newsletter at www.jaymineve.com and www.facebook.com/JayminEve.Author

And lastly, if you're looking for more delicious demon type guys and bookish babes, this is the group for you:

facebook.com/groups/bookbabesandlordsofdarkness

So many amazing authors to read!

AFTERWORD

Ahhhhhhhh!! Okay, so, I'm really hoping you didn't throw your kindle at the end, because yes, it left off with a bit of a cliffy. But the thought behind that was... get book 2 out quickly so you all don't track me down and murder me. Hah!

So for now: Don't hate me. Don't throw your kindle. Don't summon Lucifer in a bid to destroy me... or do, I mean, that sounds kind of okay.

In truth, I hope you loved this story with a little darkness and a whole lot of intrigue. It started with a single image. A demon holding a woman. It was hard to tell the intention for sure, but I saw possessiveness and shadowy beings and the sort of epic romance that could destroy worlds.

And even though we are only one book into the trilogy, I'm so in love with my characters. I just want to bask in their fire and watch this unfold.

Anyway, thanks for reading, I appreciate you all so much, and when the demon shows up, just send him my way. I'll take one for the team.

ALSO BY JAYMIN EVE

JAYMIN EVE

Shadow Beast Shifters (Urban Fantasy/ PNR)

Book One: Rejected

Book Two: Reclaimed (mid-Jan/start-Feb 2021)

Book Three: Reborn (March 1 st 2021)

Royals of Arbon Academy (Dark, complete Contemporary Romance)

Book One: Princess Ballot

Book Two: Playboy Princes

Book Three: Poison Throne

Titan's Saga (PNR/UF. Sexy and humorous)

Book One: Releasing the Gods

Book Two: Wrath of the Gods

Book Three: Revenge of the Gods

Supernatural Academy (Complete Urban Fantasy/PNR)

Year One

Year Two

Year Three

Dark Legacy (Complete Dark Contemporary high school romance)

Book One: Broken Wings

Book Two: Broken Trust

Book Three: Broken Legacy

Secret Keepers Series (Complete PNR/Urban Fantasy)

Book One: House of Darken

Book Two: House of Imperial
Book Three: House of Leights
Book Four: House of Royale

Storm Princess Saga (Complete High Fantasy)

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Book Three: The Princess Must Reign

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Book Seven: Earth

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Book Three: Dragon Mated

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Book Six: Louis

Book Seven: Elemental Compass

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Sinclair Stories (Standalone Contemporary Romance)

Songbird