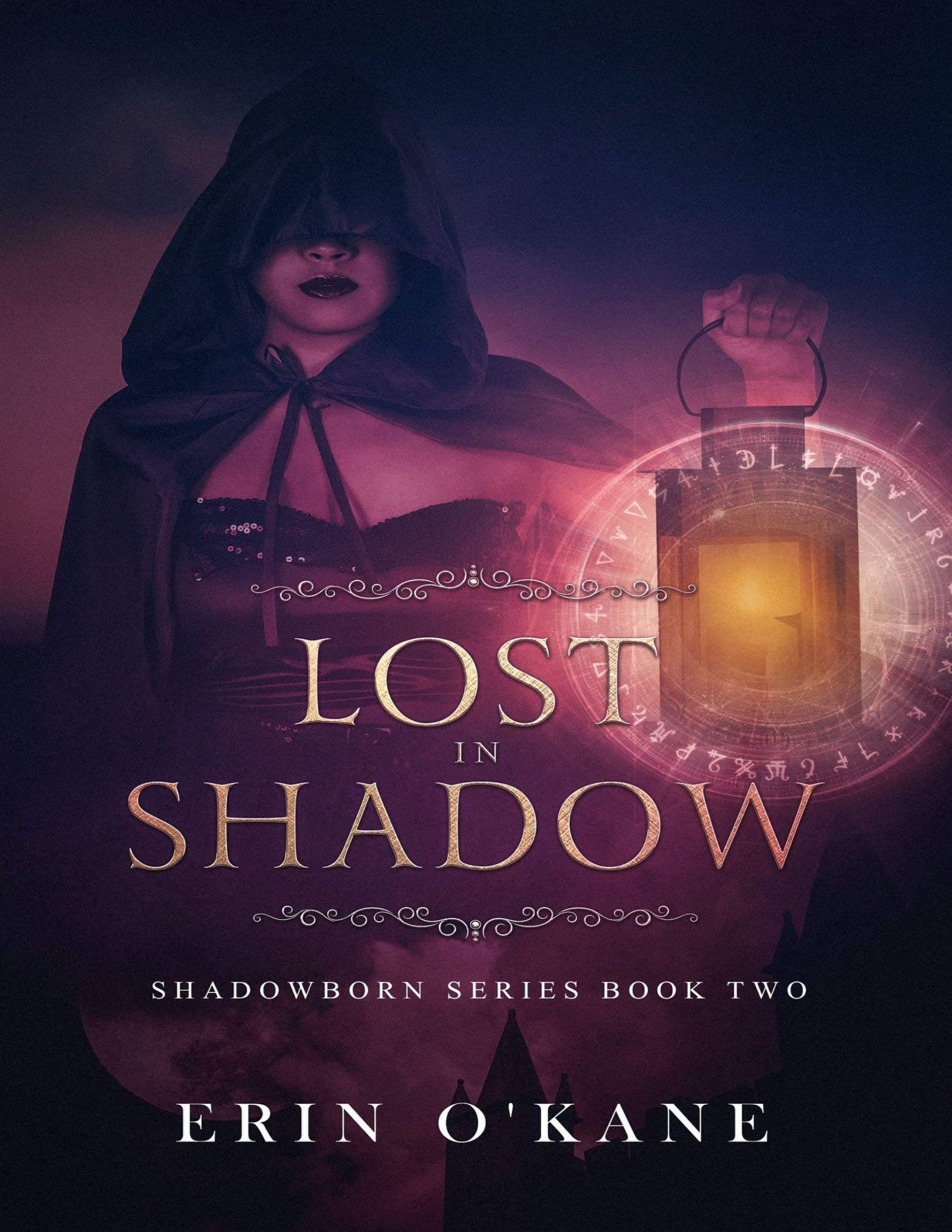
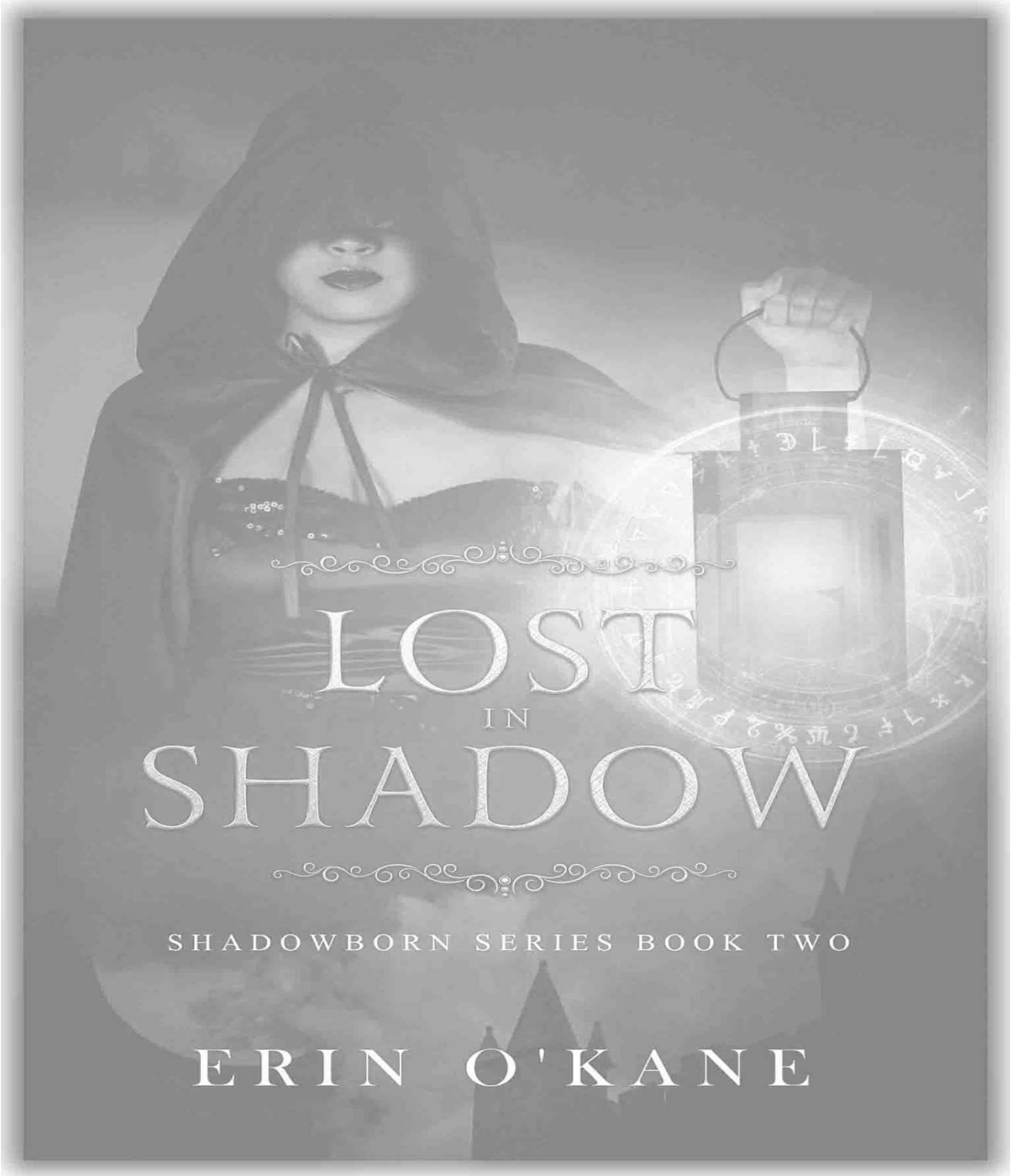


LOST IN SHADOW

SHADOWBORN SERIES BOOK TWO

ERIN O'KANE


LOST
IN
SHADOW
SHADOWBORN SERIES BOOK TWO
ERIN O'KANE

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DEDICATIONS

To my family and my co-author Katie, the sister I always wanted. I couldn't do this without you.

Her eyes are the first thing I see and my heart aches. Her beautiful amber eyes stare back at me. The rest of her face comes into focus and I start to notice details about her, like the fact she is biting her lip. She only does that when she's unsure, not that she would admit it.

Pain flashes through my skull and my vision shakes, the image of her fading. No! I need to talk to her, find out what's going on. The image strengthens again and I can fully see her. I take a step toward her, I need to know she's okay, my hand reaches out so I can touch her, but passes through as if I don't exist.

She looks lost, her arms hugging her chest as she glances around the sparse space. Turning from me, she starts to walk away and my heart squeezes painfully as she does so.

"Ari!" I shout out, my voice breaking from the concern that has been building within me.

She stops in her tracks and tilts her head as if she heard me. Turning, she stares directly at where I'm standing. I'm

not sure she can truly see that I am standing there, but her eyes bore into me.
"Help me," she pleads, her voice raspy.
Pain fills my head again and I cry out, collapsing to my knees.

I wake up on the cold floor of my apartment, my head reeling from what I just saw, pain pounding through my temples. What the hell just happened?

Chapter One

Turns out that eternal damnation is really boring. I have no idea how long I've been here for, it could have been hours, or it could have been days for all I know. Glancing down at my watch, I roll my eyes as I see it has stopped working, typical. Nothing is ever easy.

I look around again at the mostly empty landscape I'm stuck in, the forest at my back is the only thing to be seen. Everywhere I look, a grey hazy fog fills the air, covering the land around me, obscuring my view of forest, allowing me to see no further than the treeline. I stand at the fringe of the forest, and turn to look at the trees towering over me, their dark gnarled branches making the whole place look creepy. Coupled with the fog it isn't exactly welcoming. Behind me is a vast empty grey space, where nothing ever seems to move or change.

I walk along the edges of the trees again, the fog rolling against my skin and making small eddies as I move. I haven't ventured into the forest, and I don't think that I will just yet. It makes me feel uneasy, and a place deep within me is telling me not to venture in too far. Turning away, I take up my place back in the vast void of nothingness, laying back and staring up at the equally grey sky.

I wonder how I ended up here. I know that Shadowborn appear here when they die, but I don't feel dead, except I must be if I'm here. The Shadow Dimension, or Shadow Realm, as they call it. A place where bad Shadowborn like myself end up if we don't learn to control our powers. It's not a very well-known fact that Shadowborn fight against our nature on a daily basis, and that if we are not strong enough, our souls get called back. We're a rare breed, with the ability to make our bodies *become* shadow, blending in wherever shadow exists. Historically, we have been used as assassins, which is why we often don't live past childhood as we are killed off. Or, if we're untrained, we end up being pulled back to the Shadow Realm. I don't know much about Shadow Law, but I was told that when we are born, our souls come from Shadow, which is what gives us our abilities. Some say that the Shadow Realm reclaims our souls when we die.

When I used my shadow powers to save the guys, I knew I was toeing a line, using too much power. But I have to say, I had not expected death to be like this. An unending nothingness. As I glance up into the bleak sky, I wonder how the guys are getting on. I have a lot of time for reflection here and loneliness has started to set in, which surprises me.

I have always found comfort in my own company and have lived as a lone wolf for the last six years, until Alex from Moon River pack marched into my life. I needed protection and they needed a new nurse.

Moon River Pack overwhelmed me after so many years of avoiding them, but they were welcoming and they all seemed to thrive off each other's company, making it difficult not to enjoy spending time with them. I guess you never know what you're missing until you have it. But now, it's been taken away. I sigh, running my hands through my hair.

Tori, my best friend, was the only person I considered family before all this happened. She adopted me as hers when I arrived in the US from England, back when I fled my old pack. I'm not the only one with a dark past and we bonded, became each other's family, not needing anyone else. Until I met the guys. I'm still not sure what it is I feel for them, but they have forced a way into my heart whether I like it or not.

A stirring in the distance rouses me from my musing, my heightened senses on alert. To my right, the grey fog is moving and the area is lighter, like it's creating a pathway. Well, this is different. Standing up, I hesitantly walk towards it, I have no idea what is happening or if I should be

following this unknown ‘path.’ Aren’t you supposed to avoid walking into the light? What do I do?

Closing my eyes, I try to focus on my wolf and the power that resides within me, my instincts have never let me down so far. My problem is, I often don’t *listen* to those instincts. My wolf has been very quiet since I’ve been here, and I find that I miss her presence. It’s like missing a part of yourself. I hadn’t realised how much a part of me she was. I have always had a love-hate relationship with my wolf, like a sibling who’s annoying as hell but one you couldn’t live without. I can still feel her, but it’s like our bond is muted. I open my eyes again and watch the swirling, misty path. My instincts are telling me to follow it, and for once, I decide to listen. I’ve already lost everything, what’s the worst that can happen? I stand up and start walking slowly towards the light. A strange feeling comes over me the further I walk, like opposing forces—one pulling me towards the light, and the other holding me back. Indecision wars in me, do I stay or keep going? Determination fills me and I push forward, following the tugging sensation. The light is so bright I have to close my eyes as it becomes blinding. I start to hear voices, but they are muffled so I can’t make out what they are saying. The light is still too bright for me to look around, but the voices are getting louder, until suddenly I know who is speaking.

“Why hasn’t she woken up yet?” Killian’s angry voice makes my eyes shoot open.

I’m back? My eyes flash around the room, my heart filling with an emotion I can’t place as I see all of my men in my bedroom at Moon River Pack. I start to cry out, my emotions making it difficult for me to express my feelings in words, and I go to step forward when I notice a figure in my bed. I stop in my tracks. It’s not just any figure. It’s me. I peer around the room again, dread filling me before I stare back down at myself. I look like I’m in my shadow form, so while no one else can see me, I am still able to see my body, some weird quirk of being a Shadowborn. I try to take a step towards my body and the guys, when something brings me to an abrupt stop. Frowning, I glance around and see that I’m standing in shadow against the back wall of the room, and a sinking suspicion fills me. This suspicion is confirmed when I try to take a step directly into the light, and I feel like I’ve walked into a wall. I’m trapped in the Shadows.

I gaze over at my prone form again, horror filling me as I see my wasted body. My skin is pale and I’ve lost weight, looking like I’ve been unwell for

a long period of time. This has never happened before, when a Shadowborn uses their shadow form, their whole body turns to shadow without a trace they were ever there. Yet my body is laying there telling a different story.

"We don't know Kill, but you getting angry and smashing things is not going to help this." Alex's voice stops me from staring at my body and has me looking around the room again.

Killian is pacing the room, and his long silvery blond hair is a mess, like he has ran his hands through it multiple times. His usually clean-shaven jaw is covered in stubble and he looks like his wolf is about to jump out of his skin. I can feel his Alpha power from here. He bares his teeth at Alex in a snarl, but it lacks the usual harshness that I'm used to associating with Killian. He appears genuinely worried.

Movement next to the bed has me turning my gaze to the other guys. Garett is sitting up by my head and is brushing my hair gently, my usually glossy golden-brown locks look dull and limp in his large hands.

"We need to stay calm, shouting is not going to help Ari. If you want to fight, take it out of the room," my bear shifter says, his voice quiet and gentle despite his words, his eyes never leaving my still form.

I shouldn't be surprised that Garett is here, since he's always had my best interests at heart and has been my protector since I arrived in this country. But as a Bear surrounded by a Wolf pack, he must be feeling outnumbered.

On the other side of my body, holding my limp hand, is Seb. My heart breaks a little at his broken expression as he gazes down at me. He's smaller than the other guys in the room, and is physically less powerful than them, but his happiness is what draws you to him. Not to mention his model worthy looks and boyish charm. I almost don't recognise him.

"You're talking like she's ill and will get better. She has been like this for two weeks and is wasting away! Her soul is gone! She sacrificed herself for us and now she's *gone*!" Killian's words are harsh and get louder as his pacing becomes more erratic, his voice breaking on his last word.

This seems to trigger something in Seb and my gentle wolf does something I never thought he would. He pushes up from his place at my side so fast that his chair falls back with a bang. Killian stops his pacing and turns to look at Seb with a look of shock, not from the sudden loud noise, but the burst of power that's coming from him.

“Do *not* talk about her that way. She *will* be back.” Seb’s voice is low, but laced with a power that I’ve never felt before.

Despite his show of power, Seb has always been one of the lower level wolves within the pack… or so I thought.

There is a hierarchical system within most shifter communities, with an Alpha, Beta, and Gamma at the top. All shifters are born with a certain amount of power, and someone may be born with Alpha power but never actually become an Alpha. Alex is an example of this, being in the position of Beta but possessing bucketloads of Alpha power. You can’t change your level of power, you are stuck with what you’re born with. However, the pulsing waves of power coming off Seb are new. The powers coming off of him are the strength of a Beta, which shouldn’t be possible. The guys share a look of concern as Seb’s power fades and he turns to look at my prone form again, returning to my side, holding my hand once more.

I watch the four of them, surprised that they are all in the same room and not tearing into each other. Alex pushes away from the wall where he’d been leaning to walk closer to Killian.

“Killian, you mentioned before that you had been trained by your previous Alpha about Shadowborn, did they mention anything about this?” Alex probes. I can tell he wants to demand the answers, but in the mood Killian is in, that would be a bad idea.

“Don’t you think I would have said something already?” he retorts with a slight snarl, his pacing picks up speed as he runs his hands through his long hair.

Alex, to his credit, doesn’t rise to the comment as many Alpha level wolves would.

“Tell us what you know,” he responds calmly, although I can tell from the slight tick in his eye that Killian’s behaviour is bothering him.

“Shadowborn come from Shadow. They have the ability to *become* shadow, but it comes with a cost. If they are well trained and strong willed, they can control the shadow, if not *it* controls *them*. We all know that Ari hated her abilities and refused to use them,” Killian explains, and a hush falls over the room as they take in what he’s implying.

“The stronger the Shadowborn, the worse the potential consequences, which is why it is essential they are well trained. I assumed Ari was weak because I never saw her use her powers, until the night of the rescue.”

Killian stops pacing and leans against a wall, sliding down it until he's sitting on the ground, staring up at my body.

Garett lifts his gaze from my face to look across at Killian, his hand still playing with my hair.

"I've never seen anything like it before. One minute she was there, and then she was gone. In that moment she was strong. She didn't look like the Shadow was controlling her. It was only after that asshole, Black, was dead that it happened." He looks down at me as his voice quiets and a sorrow fills his eyes. "She looked scared, but like she knew what was going to happen. Like she was accepting what was happening. Then she was gone," Garett chokes out.

The urge to go to Garett and wrap my arms around him is so strong, it's like a physical pain within me, and the sorrow and anguish in his voice is tearing at me. I try to step forward, fuck the Shadow Realm and it's claims over me! I push against my invisible bonds and try to force my way further into the room. Pain rips through my body and I'm thrown back into the darkened corner with a cry.

Panting from the effort and with pain zipping through me, I glance back up at the guys. All of them are the same, except for Killian who's looking into my corner with a confused expression on his face, and his hand rubbing at his chest as if it hurts. I freeze, does he know I'm here? Shaking his head as if to clear his thoughts he sighs, running a hand over his handsome features. The scar down the side of his face looks stark in this light, and his severe frown doesn't help with the rough warrior look he has going on.

"From what I was told, weak Shadowborn who can't control their powers, or those who use too much, can get consumed by them. I saw it once, but their body went with them, they were enveloped by the shadows and they never returned." Killian pauses, his face twisting into a pained expression before he continues. "Which is why I don't understand why her body is still here."

I push up from where I'm curled up on the floor. Fuck this. It's time for them to know I'm still here, haunting their asses. I lean forward, growling as the pain starts spreading through my body, tingling at first before becoming blinding as I push harder against my shadowy cage. My wolf shifts inside me for the first time since I was taken by the shadows, and I urge her to help me. With her strength, I'm able to take a step before I feel shadowy tendrils start to wrap around me and tug at my body, trying to pull

me back to the Shadow Realm. I shout in frustration and throw everything I have into staying, but I can feel that it's not enough.

"No! I'm still here! Help me!" is my last desperate cry before, with an almighty tug, I'm pulled away once again from the guys I call family.

Ari's usually beautiful face is twisted into a painful grimace.
Shadows twist up her arms and legs, claiming her like a controlling partner, pulling her back into the darkness. I can feel her pain, her panic, and frustration as she tries to get away from the inevitable.
I watch in horror, unable to do anything as she fights for the upper hand and is beaten.
The last thing I hear is her voice.
"No! I'm still here! Help me!"

My breath comes in pants and my body is stiff from lying on the floor. The vision plays over in my head again.

I push up from the ground with shaky legs and run my hand though my hair. These visions have been coming more and more frequently. This is all I can think to call them, visions. Something is going on, but I can't figure it out.

I need to speak to a witch. They aren't very forthcoming to those who aren't their kind, but luckily, I happen to know one. Plan made, I release a breath I didn't know I was holding.

Ari is alive, but trapped.

I have to help her.

Chapter Two

Son of a bitch, that hurt. Lying back in the dull grass of the Shadow Realm, I stare up at the blank grey sky and wait for the pain to leave my body. Well, that went great. Twisting a piece of grass through my fingers, I think back over what just happened.

Somehow, I managed to get back to the real world, but in my Shadow form. No one had been able to see me or sense me, except for the weird moment where Killian seemed to look towards me. I would expect this in my Shadow form, except my body had been left behind and I was unable to control my powers. As Killian had explained, Shadowborns usually just cease to exist when they are overwhelmed by their powers, their souls claimed by the shadow. So, how have I ended up stuck half in the real world and half here in the Shadow Realm?

My body has been in the real world for two weeks, without my soul. So, this means I can't be dead, right? Sure, I looked pretty terrible, but I had seen myself breathing and dead people don't do that. Although, I'm not sure how well a body can survive without its soul for that amount of time. I have to figure out a way to get back. I have unfinished business to deal with before the shadows can take me. Specifically, the men I've left behind.

Garett, my bear shifter and protector. I've known him for years, although I only recently found out that he's been in love with me for most

of that time. Well, that's what I keep telling myself anyway. I have been pushing away any romantic intentions from him until recently, not ready to get into a relationship or wanting to ruin our friendship. I finally gave into my suppressed feelings for him and had sex with him. I know I hurt him a lot when I tried to push him away, not willing to admit to my feelings like he had. The only love I've ever known had either been a lie or only lead to pain. I've been used and betrayed most of my life, so giving up that kind of control and allowing someone to care for me, to love me, was difficult for me to allow. When I pushed him away after we slept together, I knew I would be causing him pain, but I thought I was saving him. I have done terrible things and he deserves better than me. I finally realised how I felt about Garett when he was taken by my former pack and tormentors, the Shadow Pack. Only when I had truly believed that Garett was going to be killed, did those feelings to make themselves clear to me.

I have learnt the hard way that love and trust are only something that will end up hurting you. The Shadow Pack had taught me that, my supposed family being a perfect example of this. As such, it takes a lot for someone to earn my trust. Garett has proven himself over and over again, but now I can finally see that. Just as I'm taken away from him.

Killian has been a constant source of surprise for me. Dark and brooding, he's an Alpha male with trust issues nearly as bad as mine. He was the leader of a prosperous pack until he trusted the wrong people, and then the entire pack was killed by a Shadowborn. Lost and with nowhere else to go, he found refuge with the Moon River Pack. Although his Alpha power was strong, he didn't choose to fight for the leadership of the Moon River Pack. Instead, he chose to remain separated from the others, living half a life as he mourned his mate and pack that were brutally taken from him. Then I came barrelling into his life, disrupting the solitary existence he'd created for himself.

It's safe to say that we didn't get along, and we still argue like cats and dogs. I smile when I think of how he would react to me calling him a dog, then I stop myself. Why am I feeling warm and fuzzy when thinking of Killian? The most stubborn and overprotective male I've ever met? Is it because I've come to truly care about him, or is it because of our 'true Mated pair' bond that was triggered not long ago? This rare bond is only triggered when you've found your 'soulmate.' Things got very complicated as Killian fought off his prejudices against Shadowborn and the protective

instincts the bond ignited in him. Especially because although I feel something for him, something that seems to be growing, I also feel for others…

Cue Seb. My adorable, flirty friend who welcomed me into his family with open arms. This is exactly what we were, friends, until he was threatened at a pack meet and I realised that my feelings went deeper than just that. I'm still not sure what I feel for him, but seeing him standing up for me and fighting to protect his family, even though he knew he was the weaker wolf made me, and my wolf, realise we couldn't live without him.

I wonder what Seb is up to now. Probably bugging the hell out of Alex. I sigh as my thoughts turn to the Beta. There has always been sexual tension between us, and perhaps that's all there is, and a good shag is all I need to get him out my system. But a part of me says there's more to it than that. However, he's confusing. His moods go from hot to cold, giving me whiplash. One moment he's the pack Beta, the protector and enforcer who takes his role very seriously. The next, he's playful and flirty, which makes me weary about taking things any further with him. Who is the real Alex?

I sit upright with a sigh. I've gone from no love life to this complicated mess. A humourless laugh leaves my lips and I absentmindedly start braiding my shoulder-length golden brown hair. Uneasiness fills me, the skin on my arms breaking out into gooseflesh. I feel my wolf sluggishly stir within me, trying to assess if there's a threat. I lean forward, straining my ears for any unusual sounds in this usually silent, unmoving place. My eyes scan the unchanging horizon, looking for the cause of my discomfort. I stand, not feeling safe for the first time since I arrived here. Sure, I have felt a range of emotions, from pissed off to mournful, but I have never felt scared here, just accepting of my fate. I had always known that a happy ever after was never in the future for me. Slowly circling around, I come to a stop, facing the dark, dead forest, and a feeling of dread overtakes me as I stare into the trees.

Although part of me is screaming not to, I start walking slowly towards the towering trees. Something is tugging me, like I have no control over my legs and a ghostly tether is reeling me in. My wolf, feeling my fear, seems to wake up and starts to fight for control of my body to pull us away. It's no good, however, and I can feel her getting weaker the closer we get to the forest.

We reach the edge of the tree line and I'm able to force my body to a stop as the invisible power wanes, and I strain against the imperceptible bonds that anchor my feet to the ground. The feeling of dread hits me again as I'm forced into the forest, and I get the feeling that I'm being toyed with. They allowed me to stop at the edge of the plains because *they* allowed me to, not because of any strength of mine. An eerie fog begins to fill the woods, twisting around the dark, almost black bark of the trees. It's cold, which is strange as there is no weather here, nothing changes. The further I'm pulled into the forest, the more I get the feeling that I'm being watched, but when I look, all I can see are the towering trees. I don't know how long I've been walking when a movement draws my eyes. At first all I see is what looks like the flickering of shadow. I would have written it off as my overactive imagination if I didn't sense the malice pouring from that direction. My body comes to a stop and I find I'm in control of myself again. A spine-tingling noise that sounds suspiciously like a howl splits the air, making my metaphorical hackles stand on end. Delving deep, I try to rouse my wolf and discover my connection with her is all but gone. I curse. Looks like I'm on my own. A thought crosses my mind that shocks me. I'm like a human, with no access to my Shadowborn powers and no wolf. In a twisted turn of fate, I got what I wished for, to be human. Stupid Ari.

The shadows flicker again and I realise they are forming into a humanoid shape. It seems to focus on me and starts taking predatory steps in my direction. Don't ask me how a shadow can focus on someone, but this 'being' has its sights set on me. Falling into a fighting stance, I try to remember my training from Killian—look for its weaknesses and use them against it.

The shadowy being pauses, watching me, and I can't help but feel like it's amused at my show of defence. Then, a feeling of someone dragging an icy finger down my back alerts me to the arrival of another shadowy bastard. Throwing a look over my shoulder I see that I'm right, and in unison, they step towards me with eerie synchrony.

"Join us." A hissed voice fills the air around me, coming from every direction. It's not loud, but it seems to fill the space.

I shudder, the voice reminding me of every horror movie I've ever watched. I look from one of the shadows to the other, and see a third has decided to join the party. Well, that's just great. I put on what I like to think is my politest face, and give them an ironic smile.

“That’s very kind, but I’m going to have to say no,” I reply, starting to slowly back away from the three beings.

I have no idea which direction I’ve come from, as they all look the same, and spinning to look at the bastards stalking me has thrown off my sense of direction.

“Join usss,” the voice demands again, the tone the same, but louder this time.

They are persistent, I’ll give them that.

“I don’t think you understood me, but I will say it again. *Hell. No*.”

Way to go Ari, just piss off the ghostly guys who have seemingly led you into the middle of a haunted wood. It’s difficult to tell from their expression, seeing as their faces are made of shadow, but I get the distinct impression that I’ve upset them. Their fluid movements become stiffer and more aggressive looking as they stride towards me.

“You can come willingly or we will make you. We will feed on everything you are, every good piece of you, until only the darkness is left. We shall enjoy it, we have not fed for a long time.” The united voice fills the air again, coming not from one of them, but *all* of them.

This doesn’t sound like a fate I want. I’m starting to get pissed off now. Some bloody man is always trying to claim me or possess me, even in the fucking Shadow Realm it’s the same.

“Well jokes on you, asshole. There is nothing good left about me,” I snarl with a feral grin.

If I had hoped that the shadow figures would be put off by my show of aggression, I would have been disappointed. In fact, the feeling of malice increases, but I can’t help but feel like the figure directly in front of me is amused. I stand my ground as they start to float towards me, their forms flickering in and out of shadow. My fear spikes and I feel a pang, as I realise that neither my wolf nor my Shadowborn powers are reacting to my panic, I truly am on my own.

The first shadowy form launches itself at me, stopping my internal panic and making me focus on the fight. They are fast, faster than most shifters, and I thank my lucky stars that even though my wolf isn’t responding to me, I still have my supernatural speed. Ducking the arm thrown towards my face, I counter with a punch towards its head, only for my fist to go straight through its form. *Fuck!* If I can’t touch it, does that mean that it can’t hurt me? A sharp burning sensation flares up my arm, and

I glance over to see a wicked pair of talons gleaming from the hand of the second shadow, who has now joined the fight. Guess that answers that question, they seem to be able to materialise parts of themselves at will.

Now with two of them attacking me, I have to focus purely on defence, ducking and weaving the dagger like claws being aimed at me. I try to use some of the self-defence moves Killian taught me, but they are no use on someone who doesn't have a solid form.

I can't defeat these guys, not here, and not with this many of them. They only showed up once I entered the tree line, if I managed to get back, would they be able to follow me? Deciding it's better to try that than end up skewered on their talons, I start to back up. Ducking another swipe to the head, I spin on my heels and run back the way I came. They don't make a sound, but I know they are following me. I can't help but look over my shoulder to see what's happening behind me. Two of them are following me, and the one who first appeared is standing still, watching me as I run away.

I face the way I'm running, trying to throw off the sense of satisfaction that I felt from the shadow. I have to focus all of my attention on avoiding obstacles as I jump over fallen logs and duck low branches, my breath ripping out of me in harsh pants. Death by being mauled from shadow beasts is not the way I want to go.

A pulsing light catches my attention and I hurry towards it. Shining through the thick, dark branches of forest, it barely lights the area, but I see it as a beacon. Nearly sobbing in relief as I see the edge of the tree line, I hurl myself forward. Just as the light comes within touching distance, something sharp drags down my arm, a searing pain following in its wake. I can't hold back the scream that tears out of me, but I keep running, trying to keep my footsteps sure as I hurtle through the forest. I can feel my energy draining, my arm is throbbing now and I clutch it to my chest, feeling the blood run through my fingers.

The creatures behind me give a chilling howl to which is met by more howls in the distance. There are more of these things and I need to get out of here, *now*. The light flashes again, and I don't know if it's just my pain muddled brain, but I know I have to make it to the light. I risk a look over my shoulder and wish I hadn't, the two monsters following me are just behind me and gaining ground by the second. I throw the last of my energy into reaching the light, I can almost feel it on my face.

I make it back into the grey fields and stumble to a stop as I hear snarls and growls behind me. Turning to look, I see the two creatures, their bodies of shadow twisting and churning as if connected to their agitation. The leader lifts its arm to point at me, its sharp claw extended. The arm shudders and the creature looks like it's in pain, but it holds steady.

"This is not the end. We will have you," it hisses, and I know those words will haunt my dreams. Well, they will if I ever get back to the real world where I can actually dream.

The beacon of light that guided me out flashes brightly again and the creatures scream, finally disappearing into the trees and out of sight. I walk a few steps further away from the trees before collapsing onto the ground, adrenaline and the pain from my wound finally winning out. I turn my arm and grimace at the sight that greets me. There are three slashes, the longest running from the top of my arm to my elbow. They aren't particularly deep, but they are seeping blood and serious fluid. This could be bad news for me, as I don't have anything to clean the wound and it could easily become infected. I take the bottom of my shirt and tear it, attempting to make a makeshift dressing. Finished with my task, my attention is drawn by the light which is now moving in my direction. I try to stand, but find I don't have the energy, so I settle for frowning.

I don't think it means me harm, but as it gets closer, I can see the outline of what looks like… a man.

"Stop, don't come any closer," I demand, pleased that my voice doesn't show my exhaustion.

To my surprise the light does as I said, and I get the impression he's amused.

"You have just made my existence all the more interesting," it says before disappearing.

What the hell is going on? A wave of exhaustion hits me and I'm dragged under, my arm throbbing in time with my heartbeat.

I'm back at the Moon River compound again, in my corner of shadow. I don't know how I got here, but I didn't get tugged like I did last time. I passed out in the Shadow Realm and then I was simply here. I'm alone in the room with my body and Killian. He's staring at my still form and I can almost feel his angst and tension. He's sitting in the chair next to my corner, close enough where I could almost touch him, but I know my hand will just go through him.

"Hey man. How's it hanging?" I ask, tipping my head to him in greeting. I know he won't respond, and that he can't hear me, but I need to talk to someone after my attack. "I've had a shitty day, and I never thought I would say this, but I'm glad to see you," I admit, leaning against the wall and glancing over at my body.

I frown as I do, taking in the room. My hair is longer, and I look... thinner? I turn to look at Killian and see his hair is longer too, and he also has the beginnings of a beard on his usually clean-shaven face—I have to admit that it suits him. He is also wearing different clothes and the bed sheets have been changed.

"How long have I been gone?! I only saw you guys this morning!" I whisper shout, not sure why I'm whispering. After all, the 'sleeping' body is me, and no one can hear me anyway!

Killian suddenly stiffens in his seat, his eyes narrowing as he tilts his head back and sniffs the room, his supernatural senses picking something up. For a second, I wonder if it's me he can sense, and a thrill of hope fills me, which is quickly dashed as he stands up and hurries to my body's side. Of course, he can't sense me, I'm a shadow.

“Alex!” Killian roars, something akin to panic in his voice as he stares down at my body.

Soft murmurings from downstairs, which I hadn’t even registered before, stop, followed by hurried footsteps pounding up the stairs.

“What’s happening?” I hear Alex’s voice before I see him, his muscled form filling the doorway, a look of concern creasing his features. His eyes narrow as he takes in the scene in the room, his nostrils widening as he also scents something.

“Is Ari okay?” Seb’s voice comes from behind Alex, and I can see him trying to squeeze into the room.

Killian is crouched protectively by my body, his hand on my arm as he examines something carefully.

“She has a wound. It wasn’t there before, it just appeared.” His voice is tight, his words clipped.

Swearing under his breath, Alex comes closer to my body, only to stop when Killian growls at him, his protective instincts riding high. Keeping very still, Alex glances over his shoulder at Seb, who is watching with a resigned look on his face, making me wonder how often this happens.

“Seb, grab Alpha Mortlock and Nurse Beth.” His words are soft, but the command is obvious. After Seb leaves the room, he turns his attention back on the Alpha wolf who’s being greatly affected by the mating bond. I had not accepted the true Mated pair bond before the attack on the pack, but we had agreed to get to know one another.

We don’t know why I don’t experience the pull of the bond as much as Killian does, but I can’t deny that I am developing feelings for him and the other others.

“Killian, I need to see Ari to be able to help her. You are not the only one who cares for her, brother.” Alex’s voice is still soft, but his words are firm, reminding me once again why he’s pack Beta.

Alex actually has the potential to be an Alpha, the power flowing strongly through his veins, but he has no desire to challenge Alpha Mortlock for the position, or start a pack of his own. I was also born with Alpha power, not that it has ever done me any favours having been born into a chauvinist pack.

A shift in the room brings my attention back to what’s going on by the bed. Killian has moved, so he’s sitting up by my head, and tension ripples through his body as he watches Alex with narrowed eyes. Alex is gently

extending my arm and the whole room erupts into growls and snarls as the wound is exposed. Seb comes into the room, looking graver than I have ever seen him. I miss my happy-go-lucky Seb.

Alpha Mortlock walks into the room, followed by Isa, his Gamma, and Nurse Beth, who had been helping out with the pack before the attack. The pack is very protective, and they were weary of allowing outsiders onto pack land, so I'm glad they've allowed her to stay and help. Alpha Mortlock looks around the room before his gaze lands on my body, his face turning grave as he sees the wound on my arm.

"What happened?" he asks, coming closer to have a better look, but wisely staying a respectful distance from Killian, who still looks like he may snap at any moment.

Killian tears his eyes away from my prone form and looks at the Alpha, confusion, and what could be pain, flashing in his eyes.

"I was sitting with her when I felt like I'd been punched in the chest. Then I felt panic, like I have never known before. I realised it wasn't coming from me, but from Ari. I can feel it down the bond." His eyes fall back to my body, his words rough with unshed emotions. "Then I felt this pain, a blinding pain. I didn't know what was going on until I smelled the blood coming from her. Then I shouted for Alex," he concludes, a sort of hopelessness settling over him.

Nurse Beth approaches my body slowly, looking to Killian and Alex for permission to start examining me. They both nod and she starts a thorough examination. Seb, Alex, and a reluctant Killian leave my side to give her space. They stand by the door together, positioned so they can still see my body.

I'm blown away by this show of support. More time has obviously passed here than it has in the Shadow Realm, so this vigil that they seem to be holding both flatters and worries me. What if I can't get back? Are they going to continue to pine for me? I'm sure that Seb and Alex could move on with time. Garett would mourn me, but he has his pack and Tori would look after him. Killian, on the other hand, is worrying me. I run my eyes over him, and he doesn't look well, his skin looks pale, like he hasn't seen the sun in a really long time. The grey bags under his eyes tell me he hasn't been sleeping, and he looks like he hasn't eaten a good meal in a while. When I first found out about 'true Mated pairs,' I did some research to see if there was a way out without accepting the bond. What I found during my

reading was that often, when one of the pair died, the other died as well. If the bond had been rejected then one wouldn't die from the loss of the other, but it would hurt like hell. In the one documented case where one had died and the bond hadn't been accepted or rejected, like in the case with Killian and I, the shifter had fallen into a state of madness, eternally trying to find his missing mate.

"How has your research been going? Any news?" Alex's voice brings me back to the room, his question addressed to Isa who is shaking her head, her expression dour.

"No. No one wishes to talk of the Shadowborn." Her thickly accented words are tight with anger.

"Then make them talk," Killian growls, his eyes flashing as his wolf pushes to the surface. Alpha Mortlock takes a step closer to Killian, placing a comforting but firm hand on his arm.

"Friend, I know you are hurting, and we will do whatever we can to help Ari, she's one of us now. She proved that after what she did for the pack, to save all of you. But we don't hurt others to get answers, we will not become like the Shadow Pack."

My respect for the Alpha shoots up, and I am again reminded how different he is from my old pack that I grew up in. I'm also shocked at how much I am affected by his proclamation that I'm one of them. I have never wanted to belong to a pack, and fought fiercely for my independence for years. Even when I agreed to help them it was reluctantly, only out of my sense of duty as a nurse to help those who needed it.

Nurse Beth stands from her place at my side and walks over to where everyone is gathered, and her face is a careful mask. Uh oh, I know that look and have worn it on many occasions when I had to break bad news to a family.

"Any news for us Beth?" Mortlock asks, although from his tone I can tell he's expecting bad news. Beth sighs and brushes a strand of hair back behind her ear.

"I've dressed the wound. I have no idea what caused it, but it looks like she's been slashed by claws. It's oozing a substance I've never seen before," she informs the group with a sigh, before glancing back at my body. "But she is getting weaker. Whatever you are doing to get her back, we need to be quicker. Her body is dying."

I feel the familiar tug of shadow around my body as the Shadow Realm tries to claim me once again. I don’t try to fight it this time and I watch blankly as the shouting in the room begins, and Nurse Beth is escorted out of the room, while the others try to calm an irate Killian down.

I stop in my tracks as I realise I'm in a vision again. Terrifying beasts of shadow stalk along a dark tree line, their wicked talons almost reaching the ground, and even from here I can tell they are sharp enough to cut. Although their faces are in shadow, what I can see is terrifying.

My position in the vision changes until I'm looking at Ari. I have found I have no control over what I see, or even what I'm looking at, only that the vision will show me what it wants me to see. Struggling against it only makes it more difficult on my human form when I wake up.
Ari is laying back in the pale grass of what I assume is the Shadow Realm. One arm is thrown over her eyes as if she is resting, and her other arm is stretched out to the side. I wince as I see the vicious wound there, it's oozing a blackish substance and I can see black tracking lines coming off the wound as it spreads through her body.
One of the beasts howls, the eerie sound inducing a reply of howls further in the distance.
"Don't you bastards ever sleep?" Ari shouts back at them, but her voice is weak, resigned.

I awake from the vision, my head pounding, and I know from the trickle on my upper lip that my nose is bleeding again. Ignoring all of this, I grab my phone from my pocket, dialling the number I have on speed dial.

"Hello? We need to move quicker, Ari is in trouble."

Chapter Three

The next few days fall into a dull routine. Although, it's difficult to keep track of time when there is no sunrise or sunset. I hadn't realised how much I would miss something like that, or how much I would miss seeing the stars at night, or the feel of the morning sun on my skin. I sometimes find that I get confused here, I forget who I am, and the only thing that helps me remember and stops me from going mad are my visits to the 'real' world. I still have no control over them, but it breaks up the monotonous nothing of the Shadow Realm. I'm back in my room at the Moon River compound, leaning against the wall as I watch Garett gaze down at my body. Killian is also still in the room; it seems he never leaves my side. Even though I'm glad to see them, I still don't know why I keep being called back here. I suspect it has something to do with the 'true Mated pair' bond between Killian and me, but I don't understand the timings of it. So far, the only connection I can make is Killian's presence.

"Any change?" Garett asks from his position at my side. His hand is twined with mine, and I find myself looking down at my shadowy form, wishing I could feel his touch.

"No. She's getting weaker, and the wound is spreading," Killian replies. He's actually sitting next to my shadow form, not that he knows it. He

gravitated over here one day and now whenever I 'arrive,' I find him sitting here.

"Tell me about it." I join in the conversation, not that they can hear me, but it helps keep me sane. I glance down at my arm, which is now a mess of black veins running up and down my arm. I'm getting weaker by the day, and my 'visits' are getting shorter. I've only been here for a few minutes and I can already feel the shadows calling me back.

"Have you heard anything from Tori?" Killian's question grabs my attention. What does he mean by that? Garett shakes his head and I feel a knot in my stomach.

"No. There's been no word from her. I even reached out to the witch community, but no one will speak to me." The frustration in Garett's voice is easy to hear.

Wait. What's happening with Tori? Why is Garett trying to talk to the witch council? I step away from the wall, feeling the shadows tighten their grip on me, becoming suffocating. I try to fight against the shadows, knowing it's futile but having to try anyway.

"You would have thought that the witch community would be concerned that one of their own is missing."

My world comes to a standstill at Killian's words, my shock causing me to stop fighting the shadows, and I'm abruptly pulled back into the Shadow Realm.

Tori is missing. The words keep running through my head. This news only fuels my anger and determination. I *need* to get out of the Shadow Realm. I pace through the empty field, restless after the revelation of my last 'visit.' Closing my eyes, I try to focus, attempting to narrow down the place where my Shadowborn powers come from. I feel nothing, not even a stirring from my wolf, which is worrying me. I try again, digging deep, but I can only feel shadows and every time I try to grasp them, they slip out of my grip. I scream in frustration.

"I have to get out of here!" I shout, knowing no one is going to answer me.

"Well, it's about time." A dry, drawling voice has me spinning around, only to be greeted by a man made of light.

I squint and bring my hand up to shield my eyes as I try to see the person before me. He dims enough so I can make out his frowning features and I drop my hand, confusion running through me. Who is this? And

wasn't I just trying to do something? I look around me for answers, my fuzzy head is making it difficult for me to think. My gaze is brought back to the man and I frown again.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"We met before, don't you remember?" he asks, and I frown, shaking my head. You would think I would remember a man made of light.

"What is your name?" the stranger of light asks, taking pity on me.

I open my mouth to reply, only to find that I don't know the answer. I frown again, feeling panic rising through me. I look at the stranger desperately.

"Why don't I know that?" I demand.

"You have been here too long. I'm surprised you have lasted this long here. When I first met you, I thought that you had control over your powers, you were so strong. You survived the creatures in the forest! You couldn't have done that if you weren't strong," he says, his voice fading off with his thoughts, although I'm not sure if he's talking to me or himself.

I tilt my head at his words, confusion obvious in my expression.

"We've met before?" My voice is uncertain, and inside I'm still reeling that I can't remember my name. I should know this, how could I forget who I am?

"Yes. Do you remember being attacked in the forest? Do you remember the light?" he questions patiently, like he's talking to a child. I frown, a vague memory of a pulsing light forms in my mind and a stinging on my arm brings back the memory. I glance at my arm, the wound throbbing as if to remind me of what happened.

"The light." The stranger nods at my answer. I squint up at him, trying to make out his features, but the light is too bright for my eyes. "Who are you?" I ask again, needing some answers.

"I am a friend, and I'm here to help," he tells me. I know he's avoiding answering my question, but I'm too caught up on his last words.

"How can you help me?"

"You are trapped here. I'm going to help you get back to the real world, and then I am going to train you. Having someone with your strength untrained is just a waste. Besides, you're going to get someone killed, I'm surprised you haven't already," he continues, then mutters under his breath about irresponsible mentors.

Pushing to stand on shaky feet, I step towards him, my hope beginning to grow.

"How?" I challenge, my voice strengthening, my posture becoming stronger as I realise that I might be able to get my old life back. The man before me makes a face, as if annoyed at my demanding tone, but just shrugs.

"Close your eyes." I do as he says, which surprises me since I'm not usually so quick to trust strangers, but I know I'm not in a position to argue. "Look inside yourself for your shadow powers." Again, I do as he says, flinching as I feel his hand on my shoulder. My eyes shoot open, and I see that his eyes are also closed and he's frowning as a consciousness joins mine. "Concentrate," he commands, and I quickly shut my eyes again.

Focusing, I find the shadow within me, and what I sense shocks me. I usually keep a tight lock on my shadow abilities, and whenever I visualise it within me, it looks like a small, tight pulsing ball. Now it has spread, and shadow is coating everything, including my shifting abilities. No wonder I couldn't feel my wolf, she's being suffocated. I start to feel panicked until the presence on the edge of my consciousness chimes in.

"Stay calm. I was right, your powers are incredibly strong, but you have been here too long, it's eroding you and changing your abilities." I can sense his concern and a sense of urgency fills me. "Imagine the light within you."

"I don't have any light, that has never been my power, I'm Shadowborn," I explain out loud, unsure how to communicate to the presence in my mind. I can almost feel him rolling his eyes at my comment.

"Did your parents teach you nothing?" I can feel his anger and frustration, and I push away the feelings that threaten to overwhelm me at the mention of my parents. He tries to calm himself as images pass through my mind, memories I would rather not relive. "I'm sorry," he replies and I sense him focusing on the task at hand once more.

"There can be no shadow without light, how do you control your shadow otherwise?" His comment astounds me.

"I try not to use it, and I force it to do what I want," I reply and his mirth fills my mind.

"You have only gotten away with that for this long because you're so powerful. Imagine a bright light within you, it will be there, a small spark. Kindle that spark, make it grow and push back the shadows."

The presence from my mind disappears and I open my eyes to see he has stepped back. He holds his hand out to me, and there's something small sitting in his palm. I reach out and accept it, holding the item up to inspect it.

It's a pendant, or to be more precise, it's an old golden coin on a delicate chain. I look back up at him with a raised eyebrow. I don't need to voice my question though.

"You will need training if you wish to stay in the mortal world. Use this coin to call me and I will meet you here."

"How do I get back home? And how would I get back here?" The questions tumble from my lips in a hurry, since his form is fading and I know I have limited time with him left.

"Your shadow will lead you back here, if you don't control it then it will control you, remember that. And you know how to get back, focus on that light, you already have a path home. The light is all you need, but your bonds will help you." And with those parting words he fades into nothing, vanishing from sight.

I look around me dumbly, as if he might appear again. Glancing down at the coin in my hand I let out a sigh, I guess I have to figure this out by myself then.

Light. It's as simple as that? Imagine a light? I snort and start pacing the empty space, running my hands through my hair in frustration. I take a deep breath and try to focus, eager to get out of here. Closing my eyes I go to my place of power. When I get there I and left reeling from the shadow which is smothering everything within me.

Light. There can be no shadow without light. I fumble and grasp at my power, frustration rising as nothing materialises. I *need* to get back. The guys need me, Tori needs me. Some distant part of me wonders why I can remember their names and not my own, but I don't have time to dwell on that. I feel a throb within me as I think of the guys waiting for me. Killian keeping vigil at my bedside, Garett visiting and brushing my hair, updating me on what I'm missing, Alex looking after them all, making sure they are taking care of themselves, and Seb, my heart gives a painful throb at the blank look I last saw in his face, the prospect of losing me is causing him physical pain.

Focus. I berate myself, searching for the light within me again, thinking of the reasons why I need to get back. The nurse said that I'm running out

of time, that my body is dying, is that why I'm forgetting who I am? Their faces flash through my mind again. A bright burst of light has my focus thrown out of my body, my awareness back in the plains of the Shadow Realm. I did it. Quickly closing my eyes, I concentration again, seeing a small ball of light within the mass of shadows. I try to grasp the light but fall back with a gasp, as a burning sensation spreads through my body. Okay, so that didn't work. Anxiety starts to build within me. The words from the nurse running through my head.

Her body is dying. Her body is dying. Dying.

My breath begins to speed up, my chest tight as panic threatens to choke me. Stop. Think.

The light responded when I thought about the guys. I bring their images up in my mind and the light starts to grow. It's not easy. Several times I lose my focus and lose the light, having to start all over again. It's irritating, but I push those feelings aside.

Finally, the light within me is so bright it's blinding, and pushing to be released. I don't know what will happen if I let it loose, it feels like it's going to rip me apart, but the stranger of light said to follow it, that I had a path leading home. I don't have many other options. I release the light and tug at the knot within me, hoping it will lead me home.

Light fills my sight and I know I'm in another vision. I'm beginning to tell the difference now. At first it was difficult to tell what was real and what wasn't.

Ari stands before me, looking nervous, but a wave of determination and hope reaches me as she closes her eyes. I wait for a while, wondering what's happening as her face screws up in frustration.
Just as I think she's going to give up on whatever it is she's trying to achieve, her body starts to glow, softly at first, and then so brightly I have to cover my eyes with my hand to protect them. Her shocked gasp has me opening my eyes, only to find her gone, not a trace of her to be found.

My breath is coming in pants as I push up from my crouched position on the floor, where I must have fallen when the vision overtook me. I think over what the vision has shown me, before a grin spreads across my lips. I grab my phone and dial the number I've memorised.

"Hello?" the voice on the other end answers.

"She's back," I reply, as I walk to the window, looking out at the city below me while I start to plan my next move.

Chapter Four

I groan as my body is racked with pain. Curling up on my side, I screw my eyelids shut against the bright light that's burning my eyes. Bloody hell that hurts.

"Ari?" The shocked voice has me opening my eyes, seeing an unbelieving Seb at my side.

I'm briefly disoriented, as I'm not in my usual shadowy corner of shame. "Where am I?" I ask, my eyes roaming around the room, not having the energy to move any more than that. I only then realise I'm laying down, and not just that, but I can *feel* the bed beneath me, and the heat of Seb's hand holding mine. My eyes shoot up to meet his shocked gaze, before he bursts into a blinding smile.

"Kill, Alex! She's back!" I wince at his shout, the volume making my sensitive ears hurt. In fact, everything hurts. "You're back at Moon River Pack. You came back to us."

Seb's eyes line with unshed tears as he looks over me, like he can't believe I'm here. Frankly, I don't blame him, I don't quite believe it myself.

"Am I really here? This is real?" I question, hope burning in me and making my voice break. I don't think I could cope if this isn't real. Seb is about to answer, but thundering footsteps sound outside of the door before two dominating presences fill the room. Removing my eyes from Seb, I

look over to the doorway and see a frozen Killian and Alex staring at me in shock. Alex is the first to break out of his daze, grinning at me before fishing his phone from his pocket, pressing a button before putting the phone to his ear.

"Garett?" I hear him begin, before he walks down the corridor and out of hearing range to finish the call. I'm grateful that he would think to call Garett, knowing how worried he would be about me.

The annoying sensation that has been bugging me since I entered the Shadow Realm pulls at me again, and if I had the energy I would be rubbing at my chest. I feel a *tug* that has me looking at Killian. His eyes are locked on me with an intensity I've come to expect from him.

"Killian." My voice seems to break whatever spell he's in and he strides over to me, an air of violence following him.

"Kill," Seb mutters, trying to stand and block his path to me, but Killian snarls at him, and a whip of his Alpha power settles over Seb, forcing him to sit down. Seb fights against his magical restraint, his growl ferocious. I'm briefly surprised at Seb's show of dominance against someone as powerful as Killian, but I don't have time to dwell on it before Killian reaches my side. Dropping to his knees beside me, he grabs my shoulders and pulls me to him, smashing his lips against mine in a searing kiss. Stunned, I freeze in his grip before returning his brutal kiss, the feral side of me coming out to play. My desperation and fear of never seeing them again pushes to the surface, resulting in desperate, heavy kisses. A cough at the door causes me to pull away, and a slight growl comes from Killian with my actions.

"Oi, none of that Alpha macho bullshit," I scold, leaning back against the pillows as Killian releases me with an eye roll.

Laughter reaches me and I look around the room, and I notice it was Alex who coughed to get our attention.

"Yup, she's back alright," he says with his signature smile, his eyes sparkling with repressed emotions. "We missed you, Ari." My chest tightens at his confession. Of all of my guys, I'm the least close with Alex. I still don't really know what, if anything, is going on there, but I can't deny the attraction I feel towards him. He bugs the crap out of me, but there is something about him that pulls me to him, and it's more than just his looks.

I drop my head back on the pillow as a wave of exhaustion washes over me. I don't miss the look Seb and Alex share between them. Killian,

however, hasn't moved his eyes from me since he entered the room, almost as if he's worried I might disappear again. Frowning, I wonder if that's possible. Could I get pulled back to the Shadow Realm?

"Ari, what's wrong?" Alex asks as he comes closer, perching on the edge of the bed. I shrug in response to his question, so much has happened that my mind is spinning. I'm just so tired. As if to prove my point a yawn overtakes me. Pushing up from the bed, Alex gestures to the others.

"Let her sleep for a bit, she's exhausted. We can't do much until Garett gets here anyway." The suggestion has Killian frowning and his gaze finally leaves me to stare at Alex.

"I'm not leaving her, she might go again." Killian's comment confirms my suspicions, and his voice firm, leaving no room for argument.

"She needs to rest, she can't with you staring at her," Seb pipes up, earning a snarl from Killian. Ignoring the overbearing Alpha, he stands and goes to leave the room. It's obvious that Killian doesn't plan on leaving, based on his protective stance next to me, but Seb is right. There's no way I'll be able to rest with all the Alpha power and frustration that's pouring out of Killian right now. It's too distracting. I rub the bridge of my nose as I feel a headache coming on.

"Seb, you stay, but you two can go downstairs and wait for Garett. Seb can keep an eye on me until then." Neither Killian or Alex look pleased about being dismissed, but I hold up my hand to stop their protests. "Both of you are throwing out power. I can feel your frustration and I won't be able to rest like that." Looking suitably mollified they nod and head towards the door. Killian stops and looks over me once more, before glaring at Seb.

"Call me if anything happens. I mean it." His last words end on a growl as Seb rolls his eyes, making a little shooing motion that causes me to chuckle weakly. Killian's eyes shoot to me when I laugh, some of the tension around his eyes easing a little at the sound, before he nods solemnly and leaves the room. So dramatic.

Alone in the room, just to two of us, I smile softly at Seb. I had an ulterior motive in getting the others out of the room. He's still sitting in the chair next to the bed, looking unsure what to do.

My soft, "Hey," causes Seb to smile back at me, and some of that innate cheekiness he has shines through his expression. I bite my lip, hesitating, before I ask, "Can I have a hug?" My words are spoken so quietly that he has to lean forward to hear me, and once he does, his small smile turns into

a wide grin. He immediately moves over so he's lying on top of the covers on the bed. Facing me, he smiles again, his eyes sparkling with humour.

"You didn't have to disappear on us to get me into bed, Ari. All you had to do was ask." I snort at his comment. I missed this. As his arms wrap around me, I close my eyes, letting his warmth seep into me. I hadn't realised how much I needed this, the physical contact. Although the guys seem to come to some sort of truce, I knew that asking Seb to hold me in front of the others would be pushing things, and not fair to any of them. I shuffle closer, pressing my face into the crook of his neck, inhaling his sweet, almost vanilla like scent. His arm settles over my waist, and as he holds me close, I let myself relax in his embrace. I shift as the movement causes pain in my arm, something pulls at my memory, something I need to remember, but Seb starts running a hand through my hair, causing the thought to slip from my mind.

"Sleep Ari, I've got you." His soft voice lulls me towards sleep as a feeling of contentment fills me.

At first, I'm unsure if I'll be able to fall asleep. You are at your most vulnerable when you're asleep, and I've always done everything possible to make sure I'm not vulnerable—including sleeping alone. But I find that as I lay wrapped in Seb's warm embrace, his scent surrounding me, that I don't mind sleeping next to another person. I feel safe. While I listen to the steady rhythm of his heart beating, I finally let sleep pull me into blissful oblivion.

Whispered voices bring me back into consciousness, and I bury my face in the warm chest in front of me, trying to get back to sleep. I have no idea

what the time is, but I'm too damn tired to get up.

"Guys, keep it down. You're going to wake her," a hushed voice scolds, rumbling through my body as it warns the whisperers by the door, the room falls into silence in response. This doesn't last long though.

"How is she?" Garett's quiet voice reaches me. Wait, what is Garett doing here?

Come to think of it, where am I? Why am I in bed with someone? I groan as I push away from the person holding me, forcing my gritty eyes open. What I see has me frowning. Seb is lying on the bed next to me, on top of the covers with his arm draped possessively over my body. Alex, Killian, and Garett stand in the doorway, all peering in. If I wasn't so confused it would be comical, three large men peeking through the small door frame.

"What's going on?" I ask, my voice husky from sleep.

The four of them share a look as Seb helps me into a sitting position, so I'm leaning against the headboard of the bed. My tired, achy brain struggles to put two and two together. There's something I should remember, sitting at the edge of my memory. A sharp pain in my arm has me gritting my teeth and looking down in confusion, only for me to gasp in horror. My arm has dark marks running along the length of it, with a dressing covering a large part of my upper arm. I rip off the dressing and expose the raw wound below. The lesion oozes a blackish liquid, and spreading from the nasty looking gash are black veins that track up my arm and across my shoulder.

Like a thunderbolt, my memory returns—the Shadow Realm, the creatures, the man made of light, using my light to find the path home... I'm back.

I look around me frantically, my eyes catching on the men keeping watch. They can *see* me—I'm no longer trapped in the shadows. I can feel the cool sheets as I clutch them in my fists, and the heat coming off Seb next to me. I release the sheet to raise a shaking hand in front of my face, turning it side to side. It's solid.

"Am I really back?" I whisper, not wanting to believe it.

"Ari." Garett's rumbling voice brings my attention to him, my eyes greedily running over his large muscled form like a woman starved. My words dry up in my mouth as he stalks towards me. I would never usually describe his walk as stalking, bear shifters are all muscle and raw power, but today, the look he has for me is purely predatory. Reaching the edge of

the bed, he climbs onto it and crawls up towards me, and his large body hovers over mine so he doesn't hurt me. Seb has moved out of the way, leaning up against the wall next to the others while he watches the show.

As Garett presses his forehead against mine, I can see how hard he's fighting his bear for control. His eyes have changed, glowing softly as his bear comes to the surface. Bear shifters are very predatory and protective of their females. Even those who aren't their mates, or their direct family. Bear family groups often are made up of a mix, with many members unrelated by blood. It took me a while to realise that Garett considered us as his family. It should have been obvious, but I'm a little dense when it comes to belonging, my own family has well and truly screwed me up in that department.

I raise a hand and bring it to his cheek, his eyes locked on mine.

"You sacrificed yourself for me." His voice breaks on the last word and I can feel his body start to tremble. I don't respond, there's no point, my last words to him hanging between us. *'I love you.'* I had thought I was dying, and in that moment, as I was being pulled away to the Shadow Realm, it had been a worthy sacrifice. What had surprised me was the burning need to let him know how I felt before I was taken.

"Don't ever do that to me again." His voice is husky, and I wonder for a minute if he's going to cry. My strong, fierce bear shifter, on his knees before me, and it awakens something inside me. "I know you don't value your worth, but I do. We do. I don't think I could live through that again."

I'm left raw from his words. This is too much for me to process. My usual fight or flight response for this kind of situation starts to rise, but I have to fight it. I'm safe here, with these guys, my family. As if sensing my inner turmoil, Garett pulls his face away from mine, sitting back on his heels. He's still close enough to touch, and his eyes are watching me wearily. I can sense the weight of the other guys' gaze on me as they wait for me to respond. I know this moment will define how we'll move forward from here, since there were a lot of unresolved issues from before the fight.

I take a deep breath and meet Garett's eyes. *Come on Ari, time to admit your feelings.*

"I meant what I said before I disappeared." *I love you,* I continue silently, and from the widening of his eyes I know he got my message. I hear the others muttering, but I ignore them. All I can see and focus on in this moment is the look of heat and love radiating from Garett's eyes. It's as

if we're the only two in the room, caught up in the pull we feel towards one another. When he surges forward, I eagerly meet him halfway as he claims my lips with his own. The kiss is powerful and raw, like he's trying to claim me and remind me why I should never leave him again. His hand cups the back of my head, keeping me in place, but it's gentle, like he's scared to hurt me. I return his kiss, pulling him closer to me as all my fear, loneliness, and regret come out in the process. I show him how much I missed him, how much he means to me.

A throat clearing brings our kiss to an end, but our eyes are still locked on each other, our breaths panting as a satisfied smile crosses his lips. I lean against the headboard of the bed and Garett sits next to me, his hand on my leg, as if he doesn't want to break the physical contact. Seb is watching us closely, arousal clear in his expression. When he sees me looking, he grins at me and winks, not at all ashamed that he's turned on from watching me kiss another man. I roll my eyes but can't help the little smile the crosses my lips. Kinky shit.

Killian looks borderline pissed off and bored, which I'm coming to learn is pretty standard for him. It's Alex's expression that surprises me most, the look of raw longing is obvious for me to see. He tries to hide it, his signature smirk quickly replacing it, but he wasn't quick enough. I need to spend some time with him to work out what's going on between us. But not now, I have enough going on without trying to figure that out as well.

"So, what happened after I… disappeared?" I finally ask, unsure how to phrase my question, but I need to know.

"You mean after you decided it was better to nearly kill yourself than let us deal with it?" Killian spits the words at me, the short leash on his temper finally breaking.

Wow. Harsh. I lean forward and cross my arms, my anger rising.

"They were about to kill Garett. I wasn't going to let that happen," I retort. I'm not going to let him make me feel guilty about my choices.

"So, you just jumped straight to self-sacrifice? Without a thought about what that might do to us?" His words make me pause. In my panic at the thought of losing Garett, I hadn't thought of anything else, just that I needed to stop it. I had accepted the darkness in that moment and didn't expect to survive it. But that hadn't mattered to me as long as the guys were safe. "What if one of us had done that to you?" he adds. I growl at that thought, my wolf finally making an appearance as she pushes to the surface. I don't

need to look in a mirror to know that my eyes are glowing with her power. Killian nods at my reaction, gesturing towards me. “Exactly, that’s exactly how we felt.”

I lean back against the headboard again, feeling deflated. I’m too tired for this. Alex obviously notices and decides to take pity on me. He places a hand on Killian’s shoulder, silently asking him to back off. For a second, I think Killian is about to protest as his eyes narrow at the hand on his shoulder, but he takes a deep breath and nods curtly at Alex.

“After you used your powers to kill Alpha Black, your father…” He pauses for a second and I know that I’m in trouble for omitting that part of my history from them. “Everything went crazy. The rest of Shadow Pack ran. We managed to track down a few of them later, but Terrance escaped. He’s now Alpha of what’s left of Shadow Pack.” His words are harsh, like they hurt him to say. A pain runs through me at the thought of Terrance getting away, but I shouldn’t be surprised, he always was as slippery as a snake.

“We thought you were dead, Ari.” Seb’s voice has me turning to look at him, the usual joker that I know and love is gone. “Killian went a little crazy and tore apart Marcus. Like, literally tore him to pieces.” I frown at the crazy comment, but I can’t find it in myself to be sorry that the pack traitor, Marcus, is dead. My only regret is that I didn’t kill him myself.

“What do you mean he went ‘a little crazy?’” I ask, making finger quotations for emphasis.

“We think it was the Mated pair bond. You were here, but your… soul wasn’t,” Garett jumps in, struggling to explain what happened. “It made him go a little… Well, it took a long time for us to calm him down,” he finishes and I look over at said “crazy” wolf. Killian is looking at me with narrowed eyes, like he blames me for his killing spree. I sigh, rubbing my tired eyes as I try to get my head around what they are telling me. I need a whiskey, and a chat with Tori.

Wait, Tori. I rack my brain for why I suddenly feel anxious at the thought of my best friend’s name. As I run my hand through my messy hair, I look around the room and my gaze stops on the corner. I remember appearing in it when I was trapped in my shadow form. I think back to those times when I was brought here, and gasp as I remember a conversation Killian and Garett had not long ago. They said they couldn’t get a hold of Tori.

“Is Tori okay?” The guys share a look again and seem to be doing some sort of silent communication thing, it makes me nervous. “Okay, what’s going on?” I ask, instantly getting worked up as the silence stretches on. “She’s missing, isn’t she?” I question, and dread lines my stomach as they all look at me in shock. This is one of those occasions when I wish I wasn’t right.

“How did you know?” Alex asks, the guys looking like they all want to know that same thing.

“I think I… came back a couple of times?” They blink at me like owls, before they all start talking at once. I hold my hand up for silence, my face scrunching at the sudden onset of noise hurting my pounding head. “It was like I was in my shadow form, but I couldn’t get out of it, I couldn’t touch or talk to you. Trust me, I tried.” My tone is dejected, and I’m frustrated at my lack of control over my abilities. “I think something kept pulling me back, I had no control over it.” I don’t say anymore, but I have my own theories about what was bringing me back. My eyes fall on that reason and he has a thoughtful look on his face, as if he might have an idea as well. “But that’s besides the point. Where is Tori?”

Garett, who’s still sitting on the bed next to me, takes my hand in his.

“We’re not sure. She just disappeared, seemingly without a trace about two weeks ago. But don’t worry, we will find her.” I can tell that not knowing Tori’s location is affecting him too. He may not be as close to her as I am, but he still considers her a good friend. I don’t doubt that he’ll find her, but there is one thing that’s bothering me about his statement.

“Wait, two weeks ago? How long have I been gone?”

Chapter Five

Two months. Two bloody months I was gone. After they had dropped that little bombshell, the guys had decided I needed more rest. No one had wanted to leave me alone in case I vanished again, so someone has remained with me constantly since then. The only peace I get is when I go to the bathroom. Overprotective shifters.

That was three days ago, and I'm about to go mad if they don't let me leave this bedroom. At first, I was flattered, but now I'm just grouchy. They left Seb here on babysitting duty today because they know I wouldn't shout at him, which is just unfair. Deciding enough is enough, I swing my legs out of the bed and stand. This is harder than I would like to admit. My body feels battered and weak, which I guess it is after not being used for two months. The first time I had looked in the mirror, I wanted to cry. I'm not vain, but seeing my withered, pale body had been a shock. Garett had pulled me into his arms and reassured me that he still found me beautiful, which was sweet, but not comforting when I looked more like a 70 year old rather than a 24 year old. It doesn't help that the wound on my arm is throbbing. It doesn't hurt as much as it did, but it's still a continual reminder of my time in the Shadow Realm.

Seb, who is rolling around on the end of the bed like a cat, sits up and frowns at me as I walk over to the wardrobe and start to get dressed. I don't

want to admit how much effort it takes for me to put clothes on, and I'm certainly not going to let him know that.

"Where are you going?" he asks, walking over to me and helps untangle me from my jumper that I am frustratingly caught up in.

"I'm going downstairs and going to carry on with my life. I'm not going to let any of this stop me. Shadow Pack may have taken away my childhood, but I'm not going to let them, or the Shadow Realm, take away the life I've built for myself here," I insist, tugging on my favourite jeans and rummaging through the drawers to try find a belt since they puddle around my waist. "I need to train, to get stronger, so we can find Tori."

I expect Seb to put up a fight, and for a moment I think he's about to, until he realises it's futile and shrugs his shoulders.

"Okay." I grin at him and pull him into a hug, grateful that he's going to let me do this. My wolf wakes up with the close proximity to Seb and a content rumble fills the room. I had hoped that once I'd settled, my wolf would 'wake up' more now that I was back from the Shadow Realm, but that hadn't happened. I've found that she only seems to react around the guys, which is both comforting and worrying. It's comforting since I know she's still there, and worrying as it makes me wonder if I can ever shift again without one of the guys being near. She has certainly made her choice clear though, she has chosen the guys as hers.

Seb stiffens in my arms and pulls back from my hug slightly so he can look me in the eye. I can see his desire, so I don't understand his reluctance to my touch.

"What's wrong?" I demand, fed up of them tiptoeing around me.

"You're so thin, Ari! I'm worried I'm going to hurt you!" he says, and tries to untangle himself from my arms.

My wolf doesn't like the implication that she isn't strong. She rushes to the surface, and I now have Seb's full attention as my eyes start to glow, my Alpha power rolling off me. I can't control it at this point, but I'm not sure I would want to even if I could.

"I am not some fragile china doll." My words are quiet, and come out as a purr as I push Seb up against the wall next to us. He gasps and his eyes dilate with arousal. I lean forward, nuzzling my nose against the crook of his neck, inhaling deeply. Seb goes to say something, but I cut him off with a gentle bite on the side of his neck, right over his pulse point. He groans and I feel his erection pressing against my leg. We both know that right now

he could probably physically overpower me, but metaphysically I'm stronger than him. I've never taken things this far with any of the guys before, aside from Garret, but the dedication they have shown when I was in the Shadow Realm, combined with nearly losing them, has revealed what is really important. Besides, wolf Ari is running the show right now and she wants Seb. We don't usually agree on much, and before the attack I probably would have fought this, but I find that right now, I don't care. I nearly lost them all, and I'm not going to risk that again.

"Yes, Alpha," he groans, his voice breathy as he leans his head to one side to stretch out his neck, giving me greater access. This is a truly subservient move, and if he wasn't holding me up, I know he would be on his knees. I graze his jugular again.

"Don't call me that," I whisper. I am not Alpha here. I don't want to be Alpha anywhere. I don't imbed any of my power into the command, but his body jerks like I have and his eyes widen. I can practically feel his desire rolling off him and it makes me feel powerful.

"Yes, Ari," he responds, his eyes dropping to the ground as I pull away to look at him. I snake a hand up his body and grip on to his hair, pulling his head back to raise his gaze.

"Look at me." Again, I don't use any of my power, although I so easily could. His eyes instantly snap to mine, a heat that threatens to burn me lingers in his gaze.

"Do you want this? I won't force you," I whisper, our eyes locked. I mean what I say, I won't use my power to force anyone. If we are going to do this, it has to be consensual, I need to be sure that Seb wants this as much as I do. A look of shock crosses his face, like he isn't used to being asked.

"Fuck yes. This is all I've wanted for a long time, but we shouldn't." His words are strong and sure, completely in contrast to his actions, and right now I don't care about shoulds or should nots.

"Then prove it. Kiss me," I challenge, as I nibble along his jaw, letting my teeth scrape across his skin.

A slight growl leaves his throat as he raises a hand to my face, pulling me closer, and presses his lips firmly against my own. The kiss is hot, deep, and full of pent-up passion. I know he's just waiting for me to take the next step. Unlike the others, Seb won't push me. He will wait until the end of the time for me to give him the word, and I need that. I might have even taken

that step if it wasn't for a sound by the door, alerting me that we weren't alone anymore. A soft growl leaves my throat, my lips still pressed against Seb's. I know it's one of the guys, so I don't go on the defensive, but my wolf still isn't happy at the interruption.

"Don't stop on my account." Alex's voice greets me. While some might be sarcastic, I can tell from his tone that he means what he says.

Keeping my body pressed to Seb's and pinning him to the wall, I glance over my shoulder at Alex. He's leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed, a lazy grin, and an intense gaze burn into me. There is no jealousy or judgement in his eyes, just rapt interest and lust. His erection is clear to see by the bulge in his jeans, which he makes no move to hide.

"You like what you see?" I ask with a purr, my wolf fully taking over, making my voice husky and sensual.

This is obviously the response he was waiting for, as he pushes away from the doorframe and stalks over to us. Standing just behind me, to the side so I can barely see him if I crane my head, he brushes against me. Leaning forward, he presses his lips to Seb's throat, his teeth mirroring the movements I had been doing on the other side of Seb's neck just moments ago. My eyes flick to Seb, who has his eyes closed in a mixture of pleasure and pain, his desire palpable. A little grin crosses my lips before I start to kiss and nip along Seb's neck again. The tension in the room rises, and I have to say, I'm thoroughly enjoying being an Ari sandwich, with domineering Alex at my back, and submissive Seb in front.

"Alex, is Ari awake?" Garett's voice floats up the staircase and Alex lets out a sigh of frustration, dropping his head to my shoulder.

"Just as we get to the good stuff," he mutters under his breath, before calling back. "Yeah, we're just coming down!" He pulls away from me and starts to walk towards the door, letting Seb and I untangle ourselves.

We straighten our clothes in silence and try to make ourselves look like we weren't one kiss away from a threesome. You might think the silence would be tense, but it's not, it's heated, and if either of them so much as looks at me, I think I might tear their clothes off. Taking a deep breath, I start to leave the room before Alex's hand lands on my arm. I don't turn to look at him, but I feel him coming closer to me.

"This isn't over." His breath tickles my neck as he whispers, before leaving the room.

Something has changed between the three of us, and I'm not sure if it's for the better or if it will consume us all.

I need to clear my head. I've only just made it back and I'm trying to jump everyone's bones. I could blame it on my time in the Shadow Realm, but I don't think that's the case. This attraction has been building for a while. The Shadow Realm may not have changed me, but it has made me realise that life is short. Gloria had encouraged me to explore my relationships with these guys, and insisted that I should not to be ashamed that I have feelings for more than one of them, even if one was her son.

Gloria. My heart throbs in grief as I remember the woman I was beginning to think of as a mother to me. I glance over my shoulder at Seb, the son she left behind. He hasn't been the same since she was killed, and not just because he was grieving. Seb was changing. As a submissive member of the pack, he was one of the lowest in terms of power. Somehow, Seb's power seems to be changing, growing.

Feeling my heavy gaze, Seb looks over at me with a questioning smile on his face. A tension hangs over him that wasn't there before Gloria's death, like he's carrying the burden of it. Which I guess he is. Now that Gloria is gone, Seb will be the sole provider for Jessica, his young sister. Not that Moon River Pack would ever let her be uncared for. Shifters are very protective of their young and often share the rearing of their children, but I know personally what it's like growing up without a mother.

"Ari?" Seb's voice brings me out of my musing.

"How is Jessica?" The smile drops from his face at my question and the weight of responsibility settles over him again. I almost regret asking, but I need to know.

"She gets nightmares."

I nod at his words, not needing him to say anything else. It's not a surprise that she's having nightmares. No one should have to witness an attack like the one on Moon River, especially someone as young as Jessica. Guilt runs through me. I need to make sure I go and see her as soon as all this is sorted.

"Let's get this over with," I mutter, and start heading downstairs, the guys following me. My legs feel weak, my muscles protesting after not being used for months, and I have to pause at the top of the stairs to catch my breath. I seriously need to get back in shape.

“Ari...” Alex’s tone holds a warning, but I shake my head and ignore it, I can’t stay in bed and let the others sort out my problems for me.

The gentle murmur of voices reaches me as I make my way downstairs, and I pause as a wave of Alpha power washes over me. There are a lot of strong shifters down there. I walk into the communal room of the medical building where I have been staying, only to find everyone waiting for me. Expressions of disbelief, happiness, and relief greet me, causing me to stagger to a stop in the doorway.

I had known people were fond of me in the pack, but the amount of people stuffed into the room and the goodwill coming from them is overwhelming. Some of the most influential members of the pack are here, but to my surprise, many of the lower level wolves are also present, many of whom have been my patients. The noise in the room rises as everyone starts speaking at once.

“Ari! You’re back!”

“It’s so good to see you!”

“What happened? Are you okay?”

Killian comes to the front of the room and stands before me, as if to protect me from everyone. Usually I would scold him for the overprotective, possessive behaviour, but I’m grateful as I try to get my bearings. I have spent so much time on my own, not being seen, that I’m completely overwhelmed. I close my eyes and lean my forehead against his back, allowing myself this moment of weakness, not wanting to examine why this direct contact with Killian sends a jolt of happiness through me. A little voice inside protests that this is not weakness, but I push it aside, I will deal with that later. A cough comes from the corner of the room, and a familiar presence falls over me.

“Alpha Mortlock.” Pulling away from Killian, I open my eyes and greet the Alpha with a weak smile.

“Ari, it’s good to see you with us again. We weren’t sure you were going to make it, but your men never gave up hope.”

Your men. I ignore the blush the coats my cheeks at his casual mention of my little harem, if that’s even what it is. I look around the room, expecting judging stares, but I’m surprised to see several looks of approval.

“Thank you Alpha,” I reply respectfully with a dip of my head, before glancing around at the full room again. “There are a lot of people here.”

“You are popular within the pack. When they heard the news you were back, they all flooded here to welcome you back,” he says with a jovial smile. He makes it sound like I’ve been away on a holiday. His smile drops a fraction as he runs his eyes over me, taking in my thin frame and tired expression. “Alright everyone, let’s leave Ari in peace to catch up on what’s been going on.” Grumbles fill the room and he rolls his eyes, raising his arms in a ‘hush’ motion. “We will have a pack meet and run tonight, you’ll get your chance to see her then!”

Appeased, they begin to file out and several call goodbyes to me as they leave. Wow. How did this happen? Several months ago I was living a quiet life as a lone wolf with my best friend. I was desperate to live independently from a pack, fiercely fighting for my independence, but now I seem to be at the centre of a pack, surrounded by people who really do care for me. The old Ari would bolt for the hills, and I’m not ashamed to admit that the urge to run fills my body. As if knowing what I’m thinking, Garett pads towards me and I feel completed as he joins my side. He’s my rock, my point of stability. Placing one finger under my chin, he raises it so our eyes meet.

“You okay?” he asks softly. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, nodding at his question. I’m not sure that I am okay right now, but I will be. I don’t say as much, but I know he understands. He brushes his thumb softly across my cheek before planting a gentle kiss to my lips. A small sigh escapes me as he pulls away with a quirk of his brow. His eyes have dilated, and although he tries to hide it, I can see him sniffing the air. He leans into me, sniffing along my neck before grumbling into my ear.

“I can smell your arousal. And theirs.” His words are not accusatory or judgemental, only fact, and the dilation of his pupils gives away his own arousal. Okay, that’s embarrassing. Does that mean Alpha Mortlock can smell it on me too? Everyone who had just been in here? Oh man. I’m now trapped between an aroused bear and a possessive Alpha wolf. My wolf, the hussy, is perfectly happy to stay here, but human Ari? Nope, not going there right now. I give an awkward laugh and push against Garett’s chest. He moves back, but only because he lets me, we both know that if he didn’t want to move, my little push wouldn’t have done anything.

“Okay, simmer down Grizzly. Anyone want to fill me in on what’s been going on?” I use the same words that Alpha Mortlock had used. Something about them bugged me, like there was something I needed to know.

The two shifters surrounding me step away and I take a deep breath, having a look around to see who is left in the room. Alpha Mortlock and his Mate Lena are seated in one of the sofas, her hand in his with a beaming smile on her face. I'm still blown away that someone so *nice* has managed to stay in a position as high and coveted as the mate of the pack Alpha. Although, I had learned very early on that Moon River Pack was very different than the pack I was raised in. In Shadow Pack, even something as sacred as a true Mated pair wouldn't be enough to stop someone from vying for the position.

The pack Gamma, Isa, is standing just behind the Alpha, her arms crossed as she observes the room for threats. This is the reason she's the Gamma. In addition to being strong and earning the position, she is truly passionate about pack safety, even within the relative security of the pack grounds. Although when she sees me, a smile lights her face, transforming her as she walks over to me. If I didn't know better, I would have guessed she was a bear shifter from her stature alone, she rivals Garett in the muscle and bulk department.

"Ari." Her thick German accent makes me smile, I hadn't realised how much I would miss hearing it, especially since we hadn't spent much time together. When had she become someone I cared for? She pats me on the back in a welcoming gesture.

"Oomphf—" I stumble forward from the strength of her greeting before she reaches out to steady me.

"Your body is weak," she states with a frown as she looks me up and down. I'm about to protest when a fond smile crosses her face and she puts her arm around me in a semi-hug. This is the most affection I've ever seen from the mountain of a woman. "But your mind is strong, this is what counts."

"Thanks Isa. I missed you too."

I can't stifle my laugh as I see Seb watching the exchanged with his jaw hanging open. I guess I'm not the only one surprised by her actions.

"Wait. She hugged..." He grins and steps forward with his arms open wide. "Does that mean I can get a hug too, Isa?"

"No." The word is spoken bluntly and Isa returns to her position behind the Alpha, but not before I spot a small smile on her face. She quickly hides it and I don't think anyone one else saw it. Perhaps I'm not the only one who is learning to open up.

Alpha Mortlock gestures to a chair and I take a seat, grateful to be off my feet. I won't admit it out loud, but I'm exhausted. I guess being trapped in a different dimension for two months will do that to you. The Alpha clears his throat and the room goes silent, all eyes falling on him respectfully. Even Garett, who has come to sit on the arm of the chair I am seated in, falls into attention as his hand drops from my shoulder where he was playing with a piece of my hair. As an outside shifter, he's expected to follow the rules of the pack that invited him here, but the familiar smile between him and Mortlock hints that they have a closer relationship than that. Seb sits at my feet, curling around my legs and pushing his head into my lap where my hands fall to rest on his shoulders. Killian comes to my other side and rests his hand on the arm of the chair, his hand brushing against mine. To anyone watching, it would look like the contact was accidental, but the predatory look in his eyes and the tug in my chest tells me otherwise. Possessive bastard. The guys can't seem to stop touching me, random little unnecessary touches, almost as if they are trying to reassure themselves that I'm really here. Alex takes his position behind the Alpha, as expected, but his eyes are trained on me, watching my every move.

"Ari, will you tell us what happened?" the Alpha asks, and it's a genuine question. I'm pretty sure that if I said I didn't want to talk about it, he would accept that. Another difference between the packs.

I take a deep breath to gather my thoughts, a lot of what happened in the Shadow Realm is fuzzy, like a dream.

"When they were going to kill Garett, I delved deep into my Shadowborn powers, deeper than I have ever gone before. I knew there would be consequences for using that kind of power, but I didn't care if it meant Garett would live. I also knew that by killing the Shadow Pack Alpha everyone else would be safe. They threatened us. I had revealed my hand by showing that I care for you all. Once they knew that, they were always going to go after you. I brought that upon you, so it was my responsibility to put it to rights."

The words tumble out of me, my emotions a mess. I feel guilt at what I put the guys through, but also because I was the reason they were attacked in the first place. The burden of keeping this responsibility falls heavily upon me. I feel multiple hands being laid on me, in comfort or objecting to what I was saying, but I hadn't finished.

“After that, I felt the pull of the shadows and I knew it was time to pay for my actions. Both there in that warehouse and from before.” I don’t need to explain what I mean by that, they have all guessed what manner of deeds I was forced to do when I was part of the Shadow Pack. “And do you know what? As I was taken away, I knew I deserved it.” The weight of their stares has me looking into my lap as I talk, not wanting to see any judgement in their eyes.

A loud *smack* fills the room, which has me flinching instinctively before I hear the sound of footsteps storming out. I don’t need to look up to know it was Killian, a slight ache in my chest lets me know of his anger, as he strides away from me. Good. I probably deserve that anger, but I’m unused to Killian walking away. Usually he would shout at me, yell and throw his Alpha power around, so this change in character makes me nervous.

“Ari.” The words are quiet but firm, and I look up at the person who spoke them. Alpha Mortlock looks as serious as I have ever seen him and I brace myself for the backlash of my actions. “Let me make this clear once and for all. The attack upon this pack was the action of a sadist. None of this was your fault. If anything, we are in your debt. You have made a difference here, through your nursing and your interactions with the pack. We have thought of you as family for a while now, but let me remind you that there is a permanent place here for you in Moon River Pack,” he offers.

My eyes widen as he speaks and disbelief runs through me. I wait for the feeling of panic and pressure to begin at the thought of being trapped, but find that it doesn’t appear.

“There is no need to decide now, and you are still welcome to stay here for as long as you wish if you choose not to join us, you will forever be a friend of the pack. But if you want it, there’s a home here for you. You can live here in the medical building, or we will build you your own cabin.”

My throat is tight and I worry that if I speak, I’ll start to cry. My eyes burn as I nod at Mortlock’s sincere offer. I’ve never had anything that was truly *mine* before, so his offer means more to me than he knows. I won’t make this decision now, but I have been offered something I never thought I might get. A place to belong. I am aware of so many eyes on me, yes they are people I trust, but I’m unused to showing so much emotion. Sitting up straighter, I smile at Mortlock and push down on the rising emotions.

“Will you tell us what happened in this Shadow Realm?” Lena asks gently, as if worried the question will upset me. I can’t help the smile that

crosses my lips at this.

I sober as I think over what I'm going to tell them about what happened.

"You might want to take a seat," I say to Isa and the others who are still standing. "This may take a while."

I tell them about the Shadow Realm, about its lack of life and time, how I roamed for days unable to sleep, seemingly going nowhere. I tell them of the forest that exuded malevolence, the eerie pull that drew me into the dark trees, and the beasts that haunted it. I explain the wound on my arm, how, over time, it deteriorated my memory of who I was, how I lost my wolf, and the only thing that kept me going were my trips to see the men who grounded me. At some point during the explanation Killian came back into the room, cradling his fist before coming to stand beside my chair, his glare was enough to stop anyone from even looking in his direction. I know they want to ask questions, but everyone is silent as I explain. Several growls fill the room when I speak of the stranger made of light, and his promise to help me. This is the only time they interrupt me.

"Who was this stranger? How was he in the Shadow Realm with you?" Garett leans forward with a frown. Shrugging my shoulders, I turn my face to see him.

"I don't know, but I felt like I could trust him. He didn't feel dangerous like the shadow beasts did."

"You can't trust him," Killian snarls as he stalks towards me, placing his hands on either side of the chair, bracketing me in. "Besides, it doesn't matter, because you're not going back. Ever." I narrow my eyes at him, my wolf perking up with Killian's proximity to us, but not liking the possessive way he's acting. My own power reacts to his, making the hairs on my arms stand up. I'm about to respond, undoubtedly causing an argument, but Alex clears his throat.

"Killian, now is not the time." His voice is soft, but something about it causes Killian to look over at Alex. They lock eyes for a moment before Killian concedes, shocking me again when he pulls away, stalking away to glare at me from the other side of the room.

I continue my story, and before long I've finished, the room staying silent for a while as they digest what I've just told them. Looking around I see concern and frustration on their faces. I clear my throat to gain their attention, a pressing need filling me.

“Will someone tell me what’s been going on? Where is Tori?” As soon as I say her name, the Alpha’s face tightens and a sense of dread fills me. “What’s happened?” I demand. I should really watch my tone when speaking to an Alpha, but I don’t care about the repercussions, I need to know.

Alpha Mortlock sighs and rubs his hand across his weary face.

“A lot has happened since you went away.”

Chapter Six

I sit in silence as Alpha Mortlock fills me in on what has been happening over the past two months. Supernaturals are going missing. Witches, shifters, vampires, and even the fae haven't been spared. At first it started off small, some lone shifters or a renegade vampire that strayed too far from their nest going missing, and then it got worse. Now bodies were starting to show up, but the bodies were only those of shifters. Mangled and mutilated, with the stink of magic in the air and runes carved into their carcasses. ASP, the Allied Supernatural Protectors, had been called in, but they don't seem too bothered. They're only interested in covering it up to stop the humans from noticing. This is causing unease in the shifter world. Various supernatural races are going missing, but shifters are dying, torture evident in the marks on their skin.

"What do the other supernatural races think?" I ask, disbelief obvious in my tone. Surely they can't be happy with their people disappearing? "It's only a matter of time before their bodies start showing up too."

"I spoke with Damon, so far the only vampires to go missing were rogues, so they aren't taking action at the moment. In fact, the disappearances helped them out." Mortlock's tone shows his distaste at the actions of the Master Vampire.

Damon is in charge of the city's nest, and is someone I have had the unfortunate experience of meeting. Yeah, I know, a vampire named Damon, more like Demon. Let's just say our interactions always end up with me threatening to kill him and just leave it at that. I shake my head, I shouldn't be surprised that Damon is revelling in a bit of death.

"What about the fae? The witches?" I ask, my throat tightening when I mention witches, Tori's face flashing in my mind like a beacon.

"The fae have gone underground and are refusing to talk to anyone, but so far those who disappeared are wanderers, not belonging to any clan," Alex explains, his brow knotted in frustration. "The witches are also refusing to talk to us since Tori disappeared. They think she was taken because of her involvement with us."

Anger fuels me as I push up from my chair. "What? They are just using her as a scapegoat, they never cared for her. She wasn't part of any coven! They were afraid of her!" I exclaim, running my fingers through my abused hair. A thought comes to me, stilling my movements as I look over to the Alpha.

"Wait. Could they be behind it? You said magic was involved." My thoughts run a hundred miles a minute, flashing through my brain as I try to piece this together. I remember Tori telling me that the last time she checked in with them they threatened her, warning her that if she didn't join them that something would happen to her. Maybe they had finally done it. Besides, the only bodies showing up are shifters. Witches and shifters don't get on, and they make no effort to hide their dislike of us. My wolf stirs within me, finally making an appearance at the thought of Tori being taken. My eyes glow and I feel my power rise as I get more worked up.

"Ari, those are very serious accusations. You can't say things like that without any proof. You could start a war. Besides, Tori is not the only witch to go missing, others have too. Why would they harm their own?" Alpha Mortlock placates, but his voice is firm. Has he considered this as well?

I start to pace the room, my weary body protesting, but I need an outlet for my frustration before I do something stupid. None of this makes sense.

"The attacks on the shifters. Are they definitely related to the disappearances? Could this be Shadow Pack?" I ask. They wouldn't be beyond mauling innocent shifters to prove a point, especially after they lost what they wanted. Me. There was else evidence that they had a magic user helping them, could it be that they are behind everything?

Mortlock sighs and runs a hand over his face, the frustration that Shadow Pack got away alive after they killed wolves here is obviously wearing on him. Lena squeezes his hand in support, feeling the weight of his despair through their bond.

"There has been no sign of Shadow Pack since they took Garett, but it is a possibility."

"We think they're recuperating since you killed their Alpha. We killed a lot of their wolves, so their numbers will be spread thin." Alex's eyes are trained on me as he says this, judging my reaction. Everyone has been toeing around the issue. It wasn't just the Shadow Pack Alpha that I killed, but my father. Does it make me heartless that I don't care? He had no right to call me daughter, he never cared for me as one, only as a weapon and a brood mare he could use.

"I've spoken with other Alphas in the local area, they are all listening for word on the Shadow Pack, they know they are unstable, and since they attacked us unprovoked the other packs are on alert. The bears, lions and coyotes agree with us and are willing to help if we need it."

I take in the Alpha's words, digesting them as I pace. "Help in what way? Will they fight?"

Mortlock looks around the room before his eyes meet mine. "At the moment, they're offering help with information and search parties only. But I think they would fight if we asked them to. I don't want to put strain on these newly formed relationships, we have only just started to work together." His words hold a warning. He would ask them to fight for us if we needed to, but only as a last resort.

I mull over everything that has been said before groaning and rubbing my hand across my face. God my head hurts, and my arm is throbbing from the wound I got in the Shadow Realm. A large hand lands on my shoulder, and I lower my hand from my face and look up at Garett.

"Ari, come sit down. You're shaking." I look down at my body in surprise and see that he's right. A small tremor is running through my limbs. With a sigh, I allow him to lead me back to the chair I had been sitting in. He moves to stand behind me and starts rubbing my shoulders, my muscles crying in relief as he works out the tension.

"So, what about Tori? She's one of those who have disappeared?" I ask quietly, not sure I want to know the answer. Garett's hands still on my body and I feel him sigh, the weight of her disappearance is heavy on his

shoulders. Walking around the chair so he's facing me, he crouches so we are at eye level.

"We don't know for sure." I frown at his words; how can they not know? She's either missing or she isn't? I'm just about to ask this exact question when Garett puts a finger on my lips to silence me. "Let me finish. There has been no sign or contact from her for two weeks. I'd been speaking to her regularly with updates and she had been trying to find ways to get you back. Last time I spoke with her, she thought she had found someone who could help. I warned her not to trust anyone, but she waved off my concern. We haven't heard from her since. Both my pack and Moon River have sent out search parties, but there's nothing untoward and no signs of any magic like there have been at the other disappearance sites."

So, either Tori has left of her own free will or we haven't found the place that she was taken from. I can tell the others are thinking the same thing from the grim expressions on their faces. Despite this, hope starts to grow inside me. Tori is one badass motherfucker and it would take a lot to overpower her, so maybe she's just holed up somewhere waiting for all this to blow over? Yeah right. Knowing Tori, she's right in the middle of the trouble, stirring up the fire!

I look up to meet Garett's eyes. "We need to find her Garett." He nods solemnly at me, bringing his hand to my cheek.

"We will," he promises, and I trust him to keep his word. His expression is so earnest and pained, that I want to kiss the lines of tension from his face. I lean forward to do just that when Alpha Morlock's voice calls my attention.

"Ari. We're having a pack run tonight, do you think you will be strong enough to attend? We could use something good to celebrate and it will really please the pack if you could come."

“Are you ready?” Alex pokes his head around the door to my room. It’s starting to get a little cramped with all four guys in here with me. Alex had left with the Alpha after our meeting to take care of ‘pack business,’ but the other three hadn’t left my side since I woke up earlier. They even tried to come into the bathroom with me when I went for a soak in the bath.

I hadn’t minded too much, trying to be understanding that they had been really worried while I was in the Shadow Realm, but I put my foot down at that. I spent an hour trying to soak the numb feeling of the Shadow Realm from my body, but it still clings to me like a second skin. I felt it tugging at me, calling me back, but I focused on the light within me, still shining bright and keeping me here in the real world.

I nod and stand, my little posse doing the same, circling around me protectively. I sigh. They are going to have to get over this little insecurity before I go mad. I’m so used to being on my own that this feels stifling. Seb seems to understand and throws a meaningful look at Killian and Garett, before following Alex out of the room. I can hear Seb chattering away which makes me smile, grateful for the distraction. Garett sighs and comes to stand in front of me, pulling me into his arms. I automatically wrap my arms around his large frame in return, savouring this feeling of safety.

“I have to go, a bear has no place at a pack run.” I’m about to protest when he shakes his head, a small smile on his face. “Before you get all indignant, I was invited, but I know it wouldn't be right. Besides, I should check in with my own pack, the Alpha wants to see me.” He lowers his face to mine and places a gentle kiss on my lips. I’m sure if Killian wasn’t in the

room, things would have gone further, but Garett isn't the kind to rub his affections for me in another man's face. Another reason why I love him.

Love. Huh, it's a funny concept being in love with someone. I meant it then and I mean it now, but I don't really know what that makes us, or where we go from here. I guess that's a conversation that I have to look forward to…

I say my goodbyes to Garett and I make my way downstairs. Killian follows broodily behind me. He has barely spoken to me since I woke up, but I can always feel his eyes on me. He's been favouring his other hand since his little outburst in the communal room downstairs earlier. I found out from Garett that when I was explaining everything that happened, he had lost his temper and punched the wall. When I asked why he did it, Garett and Seb shared a look and told me I would have to ask Killian.

Walking in silence, I glance over my shoulder and see him staring at me. I sigh and come to a stop at the bottom of the stairs, turning to glare at him.

"Are you mad at me for something?" I ask, placing my hands on my hips. His eyes narrow at my challenging words and he bares his teeth at me in a snarl.

"Yes, I am." I take a step back from the venom in his tone before snarling right back at him, but this doesn't put him off. "You are reckless and impulsive. Do you have any idea what it would've been like for us if we lost you? And the fact that you think you deserved going to that hellish place?" He cuts off his words as I see him struggling with his control over his wolf, the alpha power in the room is stifling.

"But I'm Shadowborn, you hate us. You told me that yourself. You don't hate me, just what I am." I remind him of our conversation, of the issues he has accepting that we are fated Mates, a 'true Mated pair.'

"And I told you that you are nothing like them. You were forced to do bad things by evil people. That doesn't make you bad. I've come to realise that." He takes a deep breath, his eyes running over my face. "You know how I told you that a Shadowborn killed my Mate?" I still at his words, wondering what he's going to tell me, but nod anyway. "He had another wolf working with him, he was a sick, twisted bastard who enjoyed causing pain. Do you remember the wolf that killed Gloria, the gray one with the scar? The same one that attacked you before you came here?" Dread lines my stomach as he speaks and I start to shake my head as two and two come

together. “That was the wolf that attacked me, stopping me from getting to my Mate. He scarred me to match him, so every day when I look in the mirror, I’m reminded of him and what he did.”

We are both silent as the implications of what he’s saying settles over me.

“Shadow Pack was behind the attack on your pack.” It’s not a question, but he nods anyway.

“Guys, are you coming?” Seb runs back into the house and comes to an abrupt halt when he sees us. “Oh… Um, awkward.”

I roll my eyes at him and wait to see what Killian is going to do next. He rolls his shoulders and walks out of the door towards the woods. I stand unsure for a moment, before Seb and I follow him out. His admissions have me reeling, the implications of what he’s saying are huge. I try to shake off the gloom of his revelation, I need to focus on the pack run.

Alex and Seb had tried to explain the pack run to me earlier, and while I had never been part of one, I had heard of them. It’s a chance for the whole pack to come together and shift, running in the woods as a pack. Those who are ill, old, or pups, stay behind with a few of the pack protectors to keep them safe, but all others are expected to be present. It’s an honour for a non-pack member to attend, so it’s a big deal that both Garett and I were invited, especially seeing as Garett isn’t even a wolf. I expressed my concerns about shifting. I struggled before, but now that my wolf is so quiet, I’m worried it will be even harder. Alex assured me that with the amount of power being raised from the whole pack shifting, I would find it hard *not* to shift.

The walk into the forest is quiet, but the further we get the more people we start to see with happy smiles on their faces, and a couple call out to us, waving and wishing us well. We enter a clearing where most of the pack is gathered, and excited murmurs fill the air as people greet family and friends. Several come over to us and ask how I’m doing, which humbles me. The Alpha catches my eye, and if by some unspoken cue, the pack turns to look at him, a hush falling across the clearing.

“Tonight, we celebrate by coming together. This is the first pack run since we lost some of our own, but we will not let those heinous acts turn us towards hatred. Tonight, we honour those we have lost, and celebrate those who are still with us.” His eyes fall on me as he gives me a small smile. His gaze quickly moves away, but many people notice and turn to look at me, their own smiles lighting up their faces as they realise I’m here.

Without any further words, the Alpha turns to his mate and they begin undressing each other. I look away only to see that many other couples are undressing each other too. Some are undressing themselves or little children, but I turn and see Killian staring at me. Not wanting him to get any ideas, I start to remove my clothes, fully aware of three sets of eyes trained on my exposed flesh. In my attempt to avoid looking at the guys, my eyes fall on a woman with three males all removing her clothing. No one seems to be batting an eyelid at the fact she has three males, perhaps Gloria was right. The looks of adoration on their faces as they undress each other is intimate and I look away, feeling guilty for intruding on their moment. A little part of me whispers that I looked away because I was jealous. I squash that voice.

Before she was killed, Gloria pulled me aside to give me some advice. I had been conflicted about caring for so many people, especially after trying to avoid those type of feelings my entire life. She had seen how these feelings were tearing me apart and told me there was nothing to be ashamed of by loving multiple people. I am only just starting to accept that mind-set, but it's still difficult for me to get used to.

I keep my undone shirt around me like a shield until the last moment, letting it flutter to the ground as I drop to my knees, calling my wolf to the surface. Eyes closed, I focus on where she resides within me. She seems distant and I fight to pull her forward. I startle as I feel a hand on my shoulder, but I keep my eyes closed when I hear his voice.

"Stop fighting. Let go, she will come." Killian's tone is deep and rough, his wolf close to the surface, making him sound more beast than man. He is right though, and his nearness calls to my wolf. I take a deep breath and think back to when I had changed in these woods with Alex, how freeing it felt to give up my control to my wolf. It was difficult, the associations with my wolf had always been bad, and I had hidden that part of me for so long, only giving into my wolf impulses when I had to, that giving letting it happen willingly was hard.

The air fills with an unearthly power that has the hairs on my arms rising, and Alex was right, it pulls at my wolf, waking her fully and calling her to the surface. I drop my barriers and let her take control. For the first time the change doesn't hurt, and with the guys around me, it feels like coming home.

The world always looks different from this angle, the sights sharper and the smells stronger. I look around and find that I'm surrounded by wolves of all different colours. Funnily enough, even though I have never seen most of them in their wolf form, I still recognise them. So when a small, ash coloured wolf comes charging towards me, yipping in excitement, I know it's Jessica. I crouch down into a playful position and let her tackle me to the ground, giving her wolfy kisses as I do. I hadn't realised how much I missed her, and I'm glad to see that she's just as playful as I remembered.

A wolfy snort brings my head around to see Killian's large, white wolf choking, no, laughing. Huh. I didn't know he could do that. I then realise he's laughing *at* me. Right. My wolf narrows her eyes and we leap forward, barging our shoulder into him so he stumbles. It's my turn to start snort-laughing. I hadn't realised he would stumble, he's usually so collected and together that I assumed he would move out of the way. He gives me a playful growl before swatting at me with his front paw. I dodge it and run around to his other side, bumping into his other shoulder. As we continue to play, a feeling of elation fills me. Last time I shifted with Alex, my wolf had taken over and I had let her. This time it was different, we worked together, there was no fighting for dominance, we were simply whole. It's harder staying away from Killian in this form, the bond is almost like a tether, pulling me towards him, begging me to accept it.

Seb and Jessica are playing together right next to us, and Alex trots over now that his Beta duties are completed. He comes straight over to me, moving his muzzle to my shoulder like he's breathing me in, before pressing our foreheads together in greeting. I may be new to the whole wolf

gathering thing, but this seems awfully familiar of Alex, like the greeting of a lover rather than a friend. I might have expected it from him if it was just the two of us, but with the pack around us, it's more of a statement.

A bark from the Alpha has our ears perking up, and as one, we start to run. The forest is full of the sound of howls and footsteps as we take off. I look around me, and notice all the happy faces, even Killian looks happy in his wolf form. Seb is joking around and playing tricks on us, like the Seb from before, and Alex looks comfortable in his wolf skin, the only thing missing is Garett. Several members of the pack run up to me, brushing up against my side in greeting and I race alongside them. I don't know how long we are out there for, but my heart is full of emotions I don't have names for, and I think I finally understand what it would mean to be part of a pack.

Chapter Seven

Sitting in a coffee shop on a Sunday morning with four guys who are vying for your affections should be nice, right? Well, it would have been had it not been for the wake-up call I had received, in the form of two hellhounds snarling in my face and dribbling acid drool onto my bed sheets.

I had ended up in a puppy pile with a naked Alex and Seb after the run in the woods. We hadn't had sex, although I'm sure the guys wouldn't have protested, and I'm not even sure if Alex and I are in any place where we would have sex. Killian had been invited, and he had looked torn, but he just silently shook his head and walked back to his cabin on his own. After the high of running with the pack, I hadn't wanted that feeling of closeness to end, hence the puppy pile. It had been surprisingly comfortable, until the hellhounds that is.

At my yelp, the guys had instantly gone into attack mode, Alex snarling and pushing me behind him, Seb snarling in the corner, looking ready to change at a moments notice. I pushed up from my place on the bed and reached forward for the collar on the beast, feeling a scroll attached there. I pulled it away, rolling my eyes at the theatrics as I read the message, although the feeling of relief and annoyance started to build up within me.

With a sigh I got up, and started throwing on clothes under the bewildered stares from the guys. I explained to them that this had always been Tori's way of summoning me. When she wanted me, she would send a snarling hellhound to fetch me. It takes a huge amount of effort for her to summon these and I had always told her it was a waste of her magic, but she didn't care. Found it hilarious, her version of a joke, crazy witch. So, I called Garett and Killian, and we all got ready to meet Tori.

Which is why we are all sitting here in the human coffee shop. Her message had explained that she needed to get away from everything for a while and a 'friend' was keeping her safe. Tori didn't have many friends, and the fact that she had just up and left without so much of a word to Garett concerns me. She either knew this person and trusted them, or she was in danger and had no choice but to trust them.

We sit in a corner of the coffee shop we have commandeered as our own. Killian is sitting a little ways from the rest of us, scowling at anyone who comes close. Alex and Seb are sitting opposite me, chatting amongst themselves, but I can tell that they are on alert, their eyes flicking around the room looking for threats.

Garett had met us here, swooping me up into a fierce hug, burying his nose into my hair, breathing in my scent. I fight against the part of me that wants to pull away and tell him off for his possessive behaviour. I know how hard it must have been for him when I was in the Shadow Realm, not just because his shifter instincts would have been telling him to keep me close, but because he loves me. Not to mention my own instincts are screaming at me to keep him in my arms, to nuzzle into his warmth and strength.

Now, he sits next to me with my hand in his, calmly looking around as we wait for Tori. I know he's nervous though, by the creases around his eyes and the way his foot is tapping softly against the floor. I stare into my coffee, trying not to let my mind run away with all the possible things that could have happened to her. The *ding* of the door has me looking up from my cup, only to see Tori standing in the doorway. I nearly shatter my cup as I drop it as I jump up to my feet. The only thing that stops me from rushing to her is the iron grip around my arm and on my shoulder, preventing me from moving. Garett grips my right wrist, and I turn to glare at Killian who

stands just to my left, with a tight hold on my shoulder, keeping me in place. I bare my teeth at him in a snarl until I realise that Alex and Seb are also standing and have moved closer, surrounding me in a semi-circle of shifters. Good thing the coffee shop was almost empty, because nothing about my guys looked human right now, their auras are screaming 'supernatural.'

"Ari." Tori's guarded voice has my eyes shooting up again, running over her to check for injuries. She is smiling, but she looks tired and weary of the guys in front of me. That's when I notice someone is standing behind her. He hasn't come into the shop yet, but I can see his outline.

"Are you going to let me in? It's freezing out here," a male voice complains.

I know that voice.

"Demon, what business do you have here?" Killian's voice is like acid. I push past him and he drops his arm with a small snarl, but doesn't take his eyes off the figure in the doorway.

"Eric? What the hell are you doing here?" I'm shocked, and my voice conveys that. Eric Daniels, or Dr. McHotty as my brain liked to call him, was my friend and work colleague at the hospital I worked for prior to me tending the pack. I haven't seen him since before the attack on Moon River pack, where he told me that he was actually a type of incubus. Not the sex feeding type like I had thought, but feeding off emotions, specifically pain. This threw a major wrench in our relationship when I realised he had been feeding off the pain of his patients. As a nurse, this was a massive moral issue, not to mention the fact he had lied to me. After all this time we had known each other, I had thought he was human, instead he had been hiding this huge secret from me. He knew I was a wolf thanks to his powers, specifically that I was Shadowborn, but didn't trust me enough to tell me he was a type of demon. Nothing had ever happened romantically between us, and not because I didn't find him attractive, it was hard *not* to find him attractive with his short, neat blond hair and bright blue eyes like some sort of Scandinavian God. But I had thought he was human, and there was no way I was going to have a sexual relationship with a human. I would destroy them with my supernatural strength. And that was all that would ever happen, because I didn't date, ever, sex was the only option.

"Ari…" Tori's voice brings my attention back to her, and I see that she hasn't moved from Eric's side. I look over the two of them, they aren't

touching but they are standing close together. Tori looks unharmed, a little tired maybe, but given what's been going on, that's understandable. Eric, on the other, hand looks like crap. The last time I saw him he looked bad, but he looks worse, if that was even possible. His usually neat hair is long and uncombed, he has about a week's worth of stubble on his chin and his eyes are red rimmed. His cheeks are hollow and he looks like he hasn't slept in about a month. Our last conversation had ended early when I had been taken away by ASP for questioning.

My eyes slide to my best friend again and I take a step towards her, only to be stopped by Killian's hand on my shoulder again.

"I don't trust the demon." His words come out as a growl, which I meet with my own.

"Kill, if you don't remove your arm I will rip it off and shove it up your arse." My response must have surprised him, because he stops glaring at Eric to look at me with his eyebrows raised in shock. Alex and Seb snort out a laugh and even Garett smiles.

"That's our girl," I hear Alex say quietly to Seb. Tension now broken, I meet Killian's eyes and give him a small smile.

"I know him, it's okay. I need to see Tori," I explain softly, just for him. I know the others can hear me, supernatural hearing and all, but I need him to hear me and understand that I've got this. His eyes narrow slightly, and for a moment I think he's going to say no, but with the slight nod of his head his grip on me loosens. I give him a small smile, knowing how difficult it is for him to give up control, and walk over to Tori. I get halfway across the room before Tori flings herself into my arms.

"Girl, you have a lot of explaining to do," she murmurs into my ear as she squeezes me tight. Her grip is crushing but I cherish it, I thought she had been taken and didn't know if I would see her again. I pull away and narrow my eyes at her comment.

"Oh, and you don't? And what was with sending the hellhounds after me?" I accuse, but I'm not really angry and the smiles on both our faces are relieved. I pull her towards our table, gesturing to the guys. "Sit with us. You know the guys, ignore Killian, he always looks like that." I point to the scowling Alpha next to me. "Be nice!" I order jokingly at him, and I hear him mutter "I'm always nice" under his breath, which makes me smile. I take a seat, pulling Tori down onto the bench next to me where she lands with a thump, rolling her eyes at my roughhousing. I look up and see Eric

still standing by the door, his eyes glued to my face, the expression on his face close to hunger. I clear my throat and wave at the chairs next to us.

"Eric, come sit with us, I want to know how you fit into all this," I offer. I'm not sure if I forgive him for lying to me, but if he truly helped my best friend then the least I can do is hear him out. The chair next to me squeals as Killian sits and scoots it closer to me, boxing me in, and stopping Eric from getting too close. Alphas! So possessive!

"Ignore the Alpha baby. That's Killian, this is Garett." I introduce the bear shifter to my right, and then gesture to Alex and Seb who are sitting to my left on the other side of Tori. "And this is Alex and Seb." Eric glances briefly at the guys before his eyes come straight back to me, and I swear his pupils widen as his eyes lock with mine. He finally comes to join us at the table, taking the seat opposite mine, and inhales deeply as he sits. Wait. What?

"Did you just sniff me?" I blurt out before I can stop myself. I can almost *feel* Tori's eye roll at my question, but I ignore her.

Erin gives me a small, apologetic smile before clearing his throat. "Sorry about that. How are you Ari?"

"Yeah, tell us what happened," Tori jumps in, impatient as ever. It's my turn to roll my eyes as I look at her.

I spend the next 30 minutes filling them both in on how I ended up in the Shadow Realm and what happened when I was there. I didn't tell them everything, like my apparent soul link with Killian, which seemed to bring me back to the real world. Eric may recently be my friend, but he broke my trust and his Hippocratic oath. I question if he can earn that trust back. I finish my story and lean back in my chair, looking at the two of them expectantly.

"Your turn."

Tori looks towards Eric and starts biting down on her lip, that's never a good sign, and why is she looking at him?

"So, after the attack on your pack, Garett called me and warned me about everything going on. I holed up in the apartment, which was the safest place for me since no one can break through those wards. The day you disappeared, Eric called me and told me something had happened to you and that I was in danger. I thought he was crazy. I tried to call you but I couldn't get through. That afternoon there was a knock at the door, which I ignored, then the door was blown off its hinges." I gape at Tori as she

explains. What the hell kind of magic were they using against us? Something she says triggers my memory back to what the guys had told me when they were searching for her.

"But the guys said that they couldn't see any signs of magic. Surely they would have seen the door blown off?" I exclaim as I glance at the guys, who look equally as confused as I am. She furrows her brow as she thinks over what I said, before shrugging her shoulders like this is an everyday occurrence.

"Hmm, they must have used some sort of cloaking magic to hide it. I didn't recognise the witch who attacked me, she wasn't local. Anyway, they may have broken my damn door, but they couldn't cross the wards, so I climbed out the window and ran. Called Eric as soon as I was far enough away, he came and picked me up and has been keeping me safe since then." I look between the two of them, trying to understand Tori's words. The fact that it wasn't a local witch would fit with what the guys were saying about the kidnappings, and since that's obviously what they are, there's no point in beating around the bush and calling them disappearances when it's obvious that people are being taken!

Something about what Tori had said doesn't sit right with me. I look across at Eric, meeting his eyes, which are trained on me once again.

"What I don't understand is how you knew she was going to be in danger? Why would you risk outing your secret to save Tori? You don't even really know each other."

"I warned Tori because I know she's like family to you. And the rest is more complicated," Eric explains, finally breaking eye contact and looking around the coffee shop. "I'm going to get a drink before I explain. Tori, you want something?" The two of them excuse themselves and go to order drinks.

I look at my guys with a raised eyebrow before looking pointedly back at the two at the coffee bar. "Do you think something is going on there?" I ask quietly, keeping my eyes on the two of them. Eric is acting oddly, not like the guy I used to know.

"Something is going on, but I'm not sure it's what you think it might be," Garett replies, and I look at him in question. He just shrugs his shoulders in a 'we will see' way.

"I don't like the way he looks at you," Killian comments, his voice more controlled than earlier, but his scowl is firmly in place. I roll my eyes

at his comment, which seems to be a theme today.

"You don't like the way anyone looks at her," Seb quips, and Killian snarls lightly at him in response. I briefly look between the two of them, surprised by their interactions. Before the attack and Garett getting taken, if Seb had said something like that to Killian, he would have probably gone all Alpha macho on him and demanded that he submit. But his response just now was almost playful, there was still a warning growl for Seb to remember his place, but nothing like it would have been previously.

I look back over to Tori and Eric where they are discussing something in quiet voices, quiet enough that even my supernatural hearing can't pick it up. Eric's gaze turns back to me and our eyes meet again, he goes still as he sees me looking at him. With coffee in hand, they make their way back over to our table. Tori keeps shooting me looks out of the corner of her eye as she sips at her coffee.

"Okay, stop stalling. Eric, spill," I demand, fed up with all the secrets. With a resigned sigh, Eric puts his coffee cup down and fixes me with that piercing gaze again.

"Ari, you know I'm a type of incubus, that I feed from pain? It's very rare, but incubi have mates, and much like your true Mated pairs, we have fated mates too. The mate bond has to be triggered by something, usually one of their lives is at risk for the bond to make itself known. Once the bond has been 'activated,' the incubus will have visions of their mate. As some sick sense of humour from the creator, we can't feed until the bond has been accepted," Eric explains, his eyes finally leaving me to scan those sitting with us for their reactions. The guys look tense and things finally start to make sense.

"You've met your mate. You've been getting visions and that's why you knew Tori was in trouble. Is that why you look like you're starving?" I question bluntly. Tact wasn't my middle name. As he nods slowly at my suspicions, a thought comes to me. I look at Tori in shock. "Tori is your fated Mate?" I screech, my voice flying up a couple of octaves. Tori tries to hush me as people around the coffee shop glance over our way.

"No, not Tori." Eric's voice brings my attention back to him as a dawning horror settles on me. "You Ari. You're my fated Mate." My mouth drops open in shock.

Growls and snarls fill the air around me as three of my four guys react to this bombshell, even Seb looks unhappy. I can now understand why they

wanted to meet in a public space. With the humans around, my guys have to be on their best behaviour and can't beat Eric like I'm sure they want to right now.

"How can that be true Eric? How do you know?" My mind is reeling as I try to understand how this happened. Killian is my true Mate according to our law, I can't be Eric's fated Mate too, can I? Fate has a wicked sense of humour.

"The visions we have are always of our fated Mate, you were in every vision Ari. It's you. I feel stronger just sitting near you."

"Wait, so if I don't accept the bond, you'll what? Die?" Talk about putting pressure on a girl. "Eric, you lied to me! I can't just let you into my life with open arms. What the hell is fate playing at?" I exclaim, thoroughly pissed off. I feel the guys next to me relax a little as they realise I'm not going to go skipping off into the sunset with Eric.

"Ari, calm down, please. Let me explain. If I can be near you, I'll be stronger. You don't have to accept the bond, I wouldn't force that on you. But if you choose to push me away... well, I'll die."

"So what happens if I let you close to us, and I choose not to accept the bond?"

"As long as I'm with you I won't die, but I will never be as strong as I was. With the bond accepted, I'll be stronger than I ever was before." His eyes are doing that intense focus thing on me again, and I groan as I drop my head into my hands. What am I going to do?

"I guess you better come back with us then," I finally reply, lifting my head from my hands as I hear the complaints from my guys. "Look, I'm not going to let him die! I don't know if I will accept the bond, but I won't have my friend's death on my conscience just because I have commitment issues. Something is going on here. One fated Mate is rare, but two? Plus, this link with the five of us? It's not exactly normal is it?"

A heavy sense of responsibility settles over me. If I reject Killian's bond, he will live a half-life, constant longing for me. If I reject Eric, he'll die, and if we don't complete the bond, he'll never return to his full strength. I sigh as a heavy sense of responsibility settles over me. "Let's go back to the pack, we need to have a chat with the Alpha."

Chapter Eight

The next few days are difficult and full of tension. I've been trying to get stronger, training with the guys and ignoring the pulsing shadow within me. When I feel like it's going to takeover, I look inside myself for the light that the stranger in the Shadow Realm had taught me about, reinforcing it and making it stronger again to chase away the shadow. I haven't gone back to the Shadow Realm, and I haven't used the necklace coin he had given me. It had been buried in the sheets next to me, and I hadn't found it until I had gone to bed that day. To be honest, I had forgotten about it, and I hadn't told the guys about it either. I'm not sure why, but I've decided to keep it a secret for now. I know the irony behind my actions—I had been so cross at Eric for hiding things from me and now I was keeping things from all of them. I will tell them when the time is right.

Speaking of Eric…

The guys have come to an uneasy agreement. The talk with the Alpha had gone okay, he granted Eric permission to stay in the medical building that I called my home for as long as I wanted him there, on the agreement that he wouldn't feed from anyone unless they granted him permission. He had looked at me when he said that part, which had made me roll my eyes. So far, only Seb had made the effort to talk to Eric, with Alex only talking

to him when he had to. Garett hasn't been around much, he has been required to be at his own pack recently. One of their bears went missing and their mutilated body had turned up yesterday, so tensions were high. I missed him, but I understood, and he called me every day to check that I'm okay.

Killian, on the other hand, was downright hostile towards Eric, and seemed to see him as direct competition. Frankly, it was giving me a massive headache. At least Eric seemed to be looking better. While he can't feed directly until I have accepted the bond, he apparently gains some sustenance from being close to me. He hasn't had any further visions since I returned from the Shadow Realm, but he has promised that he will let me know if he does.

I groan as I look over at the alarm clock on my bedside table, time to get up. I push against the arm draped over my stomach, laughing as it just pulls me closer into the muscular chest pressed against my back.

"Seb, we need to get up."

Ignoring me, he just buries his face into my hair, taking a deep breath as he relaxes into me. I wiggle my hips to wake him up, but just succeed in waking something *else* up. Groaning, Seb pushes against me, pressing his now firm erection against me. I bite my lip to hide the smile that's trying to creep across my face. *Bad Ari, you don't have time for that.* I haven't had sex with anyone since I got back from the Shadow Realm, the closest I've gotten was that time with Alex and Seb just after I got back. However, someone had stayed in my room every night since, usually Alex or Seb. Only Garett and Seb had shared the bed for the night with me so far, apart from the occasional puppy pile. They are only two I'm comfortable letting my guard down enough to sleep next to.

"I am up," he jokes, his voice low in my ear as he leans forward and gently nibbles on my lobe. With a soft growl I sit up and spin so I'm straddling his lap, grabbing his hands I pin them above his head and look down at him with a smirk.

"Huh. Because from here it looks like you're pinned beneath me," I tease, keeping his hands pinned with one hand while I lean forward and bury my nose in the crook of his neck, breathing in his scent. I feel him shudder beneath me and I pull back, seeing that his pupils have dilated, and a look of hunger and arousal is clear on his face, but there's also something

holding him back. “What do you want? Tell me.” I try to coax it out of him. I watch as he swallows and makes a shallow laugh.

“I want you Ari, completely. But it can’t be me.”

I release his hands at his words and sit back, still straddling him, but my confusion is easy to see. “What do you mean?”

“I’m low in the pack, in our group, whatever it is. If you have sex with me first, it will change things. The only reason they let me sleep in the bed with you is because they don’t consider me a threat.” I frown at his words. They make sense, but I don’t want them to, I’m so fed up of shifter dos and don’ts.

“So, I don’t get a say in this? I can’t choose who I want to share my body with?” I growl, causing Seb to groan underneath me as my Alpha power starts to rise with my frustration.

“He’s right.” Alex’s voice from the doorway has me scowling over my shoulder at him.

“You have an uncanny sense of knowing the worst time to interrupt us,” I mutter dryly, as he stalks into the room uninvited. His eyes run over the two of us with heat and desire. Of all my guys, these two are the most open to sharing me, but it still surprises me that Alex is as open as he is. Especially when we haven’t been intimate yet, I still don’t even know what this *thing* is between us.

“The dynamic will change if you have sex with Seb before any of us with Alpha power, whether you like it or not. But if you had sex with one of us and Seb was there, that’s different. But don’t let me stop you…” His eyes are predatory as they run over us and I contemplate what he just said. I don’t understand the distinction. So, I can have sex with Seb, but only if I’ve slept with the others, or he joins in?

My eyes run over Seb again, who is practically begging me with his eyes, before flicking back to Alex. I narrow my gaze at him before leaning in to kiss Seb. I keep my head angled so I can watch Alex as I do it, so I see the moment as he stalks forward and climbs up onto the bed behind me. He also straddles Seb, who has sat up so he’s propped against the headboard. I continue to kiss Seb as Alex’s hands land on my waist, sliding around so one hand is flat against my stomach pulling me closer to him, and the other hand goes up to my right breast, squeezing it gently through the thin fabric of my sleeping top. I growl into Seb’s mouth at the action, causing him to groan.

A tug in my chest has me freezing and sitting up right. Alex's hands fall from me and Seb has a questioning look on his face. That *tug* happens again and I know Killian is behind it. I sigh and drop my forehead to Seb's in defeat. Whether he's doing it subconsciously or not, because of our bond, Killian seems to *know* when I'm getting hot and heavy with someone else. We need to figure out this bond business before it drives me mad.

"What's going on?" Alex asks me, still pressed up behind me. I glance at him over my shoulder and say one word as if it explains it all.

"Killian."

Alex sighs and climbs off the bed, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, knowing he isn't going to get anywhere with me today.

"You need to sort out that bond." I nod in agreement, but I have no idea how I'm going to do that. I sigh again and climb off Seb, and then walk to the wardrobe, selecting some clothes for the day. I haven't gone back to working as a nurse for the pack yet, so I just throw on my casual jeans and a loose white shirt.

"I'm gonna grab some breakfast, you coming?" I question, and smile as they both nod. "Seb, you might want to put some clothes on first," I add with a wink, gesturing to his half naked form clad only in a pair of boxers. Laughing, he reaches towards where he had dumped his clothes the day before.

"I'll be down in a moment, you go ahead." I nod with a smile and head down the staircase towards the kitchen.

Walking into the room, I head straight to the row of cupboards across the back wall, pulling out bowls and boxes of cereal. Turning towards the island in the centre of the room, I jump a little when I see someone sitting there eating breakfast.

"Oh, hi," I say awkwardly to Eric, my arms full of cereal. He raises his eyebrows, a small smile on his lips.

"Is that all for you?" he jokes, pointing to my overflowing bundle of food in my arms. I chuckle and put everything down on the counter before heading to the fridge to grab the juice. Returning to the island I look Eric up and down, he looks better today, healthier. He still looks gaunt, but then so do I. He has kept to himself while he's been here, but I see the hungry, lonely look in his eyes when I walk into the room. He looks like a man starving, and I'm waving a buffet in his face. In a way, I guess I am, by flaunting my relationship with the other guys in front of him but not letting

him in, despite the bond calling him to me, that's exactly what I'm doing. I sigh internally, I really need to work out what's going on with us.

"Eric—" I begin, but Seb comes bounding into the room, flinging his arms around my waist, and pressing a kiss to my cheek before helping himself to a huge overflowing bowl of cereal. Alex follows in soon after, and quickly stops, looking between Eric and I, before raising an eyebrow as if asking '*am I interrupting?*', but I shake my head and offer him a bowl with a small smile. The moment is gone now, I'll speak with Eric later. To be honest, I'm not sure what I was even going to say.

We all sit in companionable silence while eating breakfast, and I realise with a jolt how happy I am. This isn't a huge, momentous occasion, but these little moments, sitting here with my guys, I'm content. If only Garett, Killian, and Tori were here, then everything would be complete. Tori had gone to a 'safe place' after our meeting with the Alpha. She wouldn't tell me where, as she said it was better for no one to know, but she was checking in with me everyday. To be fair, she was probably the safest of all of us, with her magic she was one of the most powerful witches I had ever seen.

Just as we are finishing our breakfast there is a slight ease in my chest, which lets me know Killian is coming closer. I am in the process of getting his breakfast ready right when he walks through the door. I hold the plate out to him with a little quirk to my lips.

"Bacon sandwich, tomato sauce, brown bread," I greet him, and his surprised expression and little twitch of a smile causes my stomach to flip, stupid stomach.

"Oh. Thank you," he murmurs, surprised that I know how he likes his breakfast, making him short for words. He sits down in the seat I vacate and eats at his sandwich silently, while I putter around the kitchen with his eyes following me as I go. I can't quite decipher his expression, it's almost like a cross between confusion and indecision. I have just finished washing my bowl when I feel a gentle touch on my arm. I turn around and see it's Killian.

"Ari, can I talk with you a second?" he asks, strangely formal. I quirk an eyebrow at him but nod my agreement, gesturing for him to lead the way. This is obviously something he wants to say away from the others. He leads me into the sitting room, closing the door behind me so it's just the two of us. I lean against the back of the sofa and cross my arms expectantly. I don't

say anything, I just watch him pace the length of the sitting room. Boy, he's wound up. He suddenly stops pacing and walks up to me, his hands are clenched into fists by his side, looking like he wants to touch me but is stopping himself.

"Ari, I want to take you out. On a date. With me. Tonight."

My mouth drops open. That was not what I was expecting him to say.

"Why?" I hadn't meant for it to sound so blunt, but the word bursts out of me. Killian is not a 'dating' type of person, he's an all or nothing type of guy. I half expected for him to demand that I accept the mating bond between us like he had before the attack on the pack. He sighs and run his hand through his long pale hair, the scar on his handsome face a stark contrast to his light hair and skin.

"Because I'm trying to prove I'm not the Alpha macho baby you keep accusing me of being. I need to show you that I may be a wolf, an Alpha, but I'm also a man. I want you to get to know that man. I know we got off to a bad start, and that's due to my prejudices, I know that. If we are going to make the bond work, it needs to be about more than just sexual attraction." His eyes are locked onto mine as he says this, and damn, my wolf is responding to him being so close. I see the moment he smells my arousal as his pupils dilate and a quiet, rumbly growl emits from his chest as he takes a step closer, boxing me in as he places his hands on the sofa on either side of me. I would usually object to being trapped, but right now, I don't care. He leans in slowly, as if expecting me to tell him to stop, until his face is close and he rubs his cheek against mine.

"You would like that wouldn't you? My wolf speaks to yours. We could be great together," he whispers in my ear, before gently biting down on the place where my neck and shoulder meet. My head drops back as a moan escapes my lips. "Will you meet me tonight?" he asks, one of his hands lifting up to cup the back of my head, guiding it up until our gazes catch. He presses forward so our lips connect in a powerful kiss. It's the type of kiss where you lose yourself, and for the first time, he isn't fighting for dominance, just meeting me kiss for kiss. He pulls away and presses his forehead to mine. "Say yes."

"Yes." The word is out before I can comprehend what just happened. His satisfied smile is all Alpha, eyeing up his prey as he pulls away.

"Meet me outside at six," he orders with a wink, before walking away.

Just walks away! Damn it! I'm growling to myself the whole hike up the stairs as I head for my room. It's time for a long, cold shower. Bloody Alphas.

Chapter Nine

I spend longer on getting ready that afternoon then I would have liked. I don't even know why I was so worried about how I looked. After all, all of the guys had seen me at my worst, so it shouldn't matter what I look like tonight. At least, that's what I keep telling myself. Damn it.

When I had walked back into the kitchen, Alex and Seb had smug, knowing looks on their faces, so I knew they had overheard my conversation with Killian. I tried to ignore them and struck up a conversation with Eric until they managed to control themselves. The rest of the afternoon had carried on like the last few days, with gentle training with Alex to get my strength back up. My trip to the Shadow Realm had caused my physical body to weaken, even taking the stairs caused me to become out of breath, which I hated. Well, I say it has been gentle training, gentle compared to what I was doing previously. Laps around the Moon River compound until I feel like I'm going to vomit is part of my warm up, but I'm starting to feel like me again. I even popped in to see Mary this afternoon, who has given birth to a beautiful baby girl. It was ironic that I was brought in mostly to help with their birthing and fertility situation, and I had actually been gone for the birth of their one pregnant female. It was lovely seeing her and the pup though, and her husband was completely

smitten by his new daughter. She’s going to have her dad completely wrapped around her little finger when she grows up.

As well as training physically, I’ve been trying to get a greater connection with my wolf. That was something I have always neglected. The love-hate relationship between my wolf and I is something I’ve always struggled with. It wasn't until I nearly lost that connection when I was in the Shadow Realm, when I realised what I would be losing. Alpha Mortlock and his wife Lena have been helping me with this, trying to connect and strengthen that bond. It wasn't easy after over twenty years of pushing against it, but I knew I would be stronger for it in the long run.

In fact, everyone has been helping me, even people from the pack I hadn't dealt with previously. They had seen the impact I had on the pack and how I had defended them in the attack, and wanted to offer their assistance in helping me recover. I’ve had offers of clothing, yoga instruction, friendship, and more dishes of meatloaf than I can count. It also turns out that Seb is a fantastic cook, and has been tasked with creating meals to strengthen me up. I’ve been struggling slightly as at first I felt so trapped, like my every move was watched, I wasn't even allowed to sleep alone, but the guys have manage to back off a bit, knowing I am mostly in control of my powers and not going to disappear on them again. The sleeping is still an issue, but I’ll let that go, for now.

I look in the mirror and grimace at my appearance. I'm still so gaunt and pale, even the makeup I’ve put on can't hide it. With a sigh I tuck a loose curl of my golden brown hair behind my ear, scowling at it as it springs free again. A wolf whistle from the doorway startles me and I spin to see the perpetrator. A grinning Alex leans against the doorway, his arms crossed as his eyes travel up my body. I grin back at him, rolling my eyes before patting nervously at my clothing.

"What do you think?" I tease, giving him a spin before posing like I’m on the runway. My tone was light, like I don't care what his answer is, but the nerves in my stomach tell a different story.

"Gorgeous, Ari. Killian isn't going to know what hit him." He smiles and he walks up to me, his eyes still running over my body, making my blood heat. "You're wearing a dress. He’s a lucky guy." Alex's words make me shake my head, I’m being stupid.

"You're right, I'm being stupid. I'm going to take it off and wear something more me." My words come out fast as I reach behind my back to

undo my dress. Alex's eyes widen slightly at my sudden change of attitude and my flustered appearance.

"Whoa. Wait." He places his hands on my arms, stilling my movements. "While I don't object to you getting naked in front of me, what's caused this panic?"

His hands are still on my arms, holding them in place and keeping us close together, in fact I'm almost pressed against him. I know I could move his arms away, but I don't. Instead, I look up at him, taking in his confused smile.

"This isn't me," I confess, looking down at the dress in question. "I don't dress up for guys. I don't care what I'm wearing. Why is this such a big deal to me?" I ask, but I'm not sure he has an answer for me. It's probably not even fair of me to ask him this. I know he wants to be with me, and here I am asking him advice about another guy. "I shouldn't even be asking you this, I'm a terrible person. Sorry." Alex raises his eyebrows at my barrage of words. In the end, he just smiles at me and gently turns me so I'm facing the mirror again, stepping up close behind me, he ducks his head so he can talk quietly into my ear.

"If you want to change, then change. But you look fucking hot. I would steal you from Killian if I didn't know that he'd fight me for you tonight. While I would, and I would fight for you Ari, I don't like my odds against a true Mate bond." His words are whispered and rough, his breath tickling my ear as he speaks, chasing away my nerves and replacing them with desire. I fought my whole life to be independent. People used to fight over me in my old pack, but not for *me,* but for what I represent, for the power it would bring them. The thought of two Alpha level wolves fighting over me should anger me, frighten me, but for some reason it just stokes the fire of need that has been building in me since I came back from the Shadow Realm. His body presses firmer against my back.

"You like that idea? The thought of Killian and I fighting over you?" He drops his nose to the place where Killian had bitten me earlier, breathing in deeply. "I can smell him on you." His voice has dropped even more, and I know that if I looked at his eyes, they would be glowing with the power of his wolf. Strangely though, he doesn't sound angry, slightly possessive, but more turned on than anything. I store that thought away for later.

I can feel Killian coming closer through the tugging in my chest, I don't know if he even knows he's doing it, but he's calling to me, trying to pull

me to him. The slamming of the door downstairs announces his presence before he starts stomping up the stairs towards me. Alex sighs, dropping his forehead to my shoulder, but makes no move to pull away from my body.

Through the mirror, I see Killian the moment he walks into the room. He pauses as his eyes run over us, taking in Alex pressed against my back, before he realises what I'm wearing. A hungry look enters his eyes, and for a moment I think he’s going to become angry with Alex being so close to me. Stalking towards us, my body stiffens as I expect him to grab Alex, but he surprises me by walking straight up to me. He stands in front of me, and his hands land on my waist, pulling me against him. I place one hand on his chest to balance myself, glancing up to judge his mood. His expression is blank, but I feel his indecision. I decide to take the lead, stepping up onto tiptoe and pressing a kiss to his lips. The tension leaves his shoulders and a slight growl slips from his lips as he returns the kiss. Alex starts to kiss along the length of my neck, causing me to moan in pleasure.

Pressed between two hot werewolves I feel like I may have died and gone to wolf heaven.

"Yes! Ari time!" Seb's happy exclamation jolts us out of our make-out session, remembering where we are. Both Alex and Killian half-heartedly growl at Seb, who just laughs in response. "Ari, will you just fuck one of them already? The sexual tension in this house is enough to choke on," he says with a wink, before sauntering away from the room.

I just laugh at his antics and push away from the two guys crowding me.

"Okay, enough playing 'who can turn Ari on fastest.' I have a date to go on." I wink at Killian before sitting on the end of the bed to put on my black wedge shoes. They are high enough that they make my legs look great, but low enough so I can still run in them. Hey, a girl should always be prepared. I sling my black leather jacket over my arm and grab my handbag, before standing up and walking out of the room, glancing back over my shoulder to see Killian and Alex talking to each other in low voices.

"You coming?" I ask, eyebrows raised, and Killian just nods before following me. I call out my goodbyes to those still in the house before being guided to a black convertible car. "This is yours?" I question, surprise lining my voice.

A smug look crosses his face before he opens the door for me. Hm, he really is on his best behaviour today.

I settle myself in the car as Killian makes his way around to the driver’s side. I finally take in his appearance as he does up his belt and starts the car. He’s really scrubbed up for tonight, perhaps I wasn't the only one making an effort. He has on smart blue jeans, a crisp white button up shirt, and a smart grey jacket. His long, pale hair is tied back, exposing his chiselled jawline all the more. As he pulls out of the driveway, I glance over at him again as a thought comes to me.

"What were you saying to Alex as we left?" I wonder, watching as a smile crosses his face.

"I told him I would win." I raise my eyebrows at the comment, not sure what he’s referring to. "The 'Who can turn Ari on fastest?' game."

I chuckle, not expecting that response. Trust them to actually turn it into a game. "Oh right, and what did he have to say about that?" I shake my head at the two of them.

"He just said he doubted it," he answers, but I know from the smug smile on his face that isn’t the end of the story.

"Spit it out," I demand, not sure if I want to hear what’s coming next.

"I told him I would prove him wrong tonight." He glances over at me as he says this, his eyes landing on the stretch of thigh that's exposed from my dress.

"Oh," is all that I can think to say. I turn away to look out the window at the passing scenery, but really it's to hide the smile that’s threatening to break through, and to stop the thought that passed through my head with his comment.

Bring it.

Chewing on my breadstick, I look around the smart restaurant Killian has brought us to. I don't know where I expected him to bring me for a date, but it wasn't an expensive, romantic restaurant. He booked us a quiet table in a booth, separated from the main part of the restaurant by a partition, with a private waiter serving us. He ordered for me, which had made me narrow my gaze at him, about to protest that I was perfectly capable of ordering my own food, but he had smiled at me and told me to trust him, this food was to die for.

The smile alone was enough to disarm me, I've never seen him smile as much as he has in the last hour. I hate to admit it, but if the rest of the food was as good as the starter I just devoured, then he would be right, the food was *amazing*. I take a swig of my wine, finishing the glass and placing it down on the table. Before I can even blink the waiter has come forward and is filling my glass.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?" I tease, a small smile spreading across my lips. I don't usually drink much, it leaves you too vulnerable, but I decided that tonight I would have a little. It's a special occasion after all...

He just shrugs, and that small smile, almost a smirk, graces his lips, and his eyes have been locked on me the whole evening.

"You look... really good tonight." I almost drop my wine glass at his words, and I'm pretty sure my eyes widen in shock if his amused expression is anything to go by.

"You're complimenting me now?" I'm dumbstruck, that's probably the kindest thing he's ever said to me. He looks slightly uncomfortable at my comment, shifting in his chair and pulling at his shirt collar like it's trying to choke him.

"I'm trying to make an effort. I know that I was, well, a dick." I smile at his understatement and roll my eyes at him, causing that little smile I'm beginning to love so much to appear. "I had to make a decision when you were taken, to decide if I could live without you. I decided that I could." I frown at his words, about to call him out for being a dick again before he held up a hand and hurried on. "Wait, let me finish. I decided that I would be able to live without you, but that I didn't want to. I hated the fact that I hadn't even gotten the chance to know you better, or for you to know who I really am. The thing that ate at me the most was that I didn't want you to go still thinking of me as a dick." I lean back in my chair, wine glass in hand as I listen to his words. The sincerity of them hits me, his eyes willing me to

understand what he's saying. "I'm rough, I often say the wrong thing, and I am a dick sometimes. I miss Julie, and part of me feels like I'm betraying her by even being here with you. It's not going to be easy, especially sharing you with the others." His voice deepens as he says this bit, but he carries on regardless. "But there is a reason we were brought together."

I'm silent for a while as I let his words sink in. Killian is just as broken as me, with a past almost as dark as mine. If anyone understands the demons that I fight, it's him. If he can get over his prejudices against Shadowborn, or at least try, then I should do the same with my fear of commitment, right?

"I'm not sure I can accept the bond. Yet. But I am willing to try, us. Whatever this is," I finally answer him, and I see the tension leave his shoulders as he dips his head in acknowledgement. He understands my aversion and isn't going to push me on it tonight.

"I'll find a way to convince you." I roll my eyes at the sureness in his voice, his Alpha confidence making an appearance again, which just makes him chuckle. The rich sound makes the hairs on my arms stick up, and I find that I want to hear that sound again.

The rest of the meal passes in a blur, and he was right, the food was delicious. I got to see a different side of Killian this evening, a more relaxed guy who likes riding motorbikes through the woods, who likes woodwork and whose guilty pleasure is listening to Jessy J. Not that he would ever admit it if I told anyone. Away from the pack he's like a different person. The pack is a constant reminder of what he has lost, his pack and mate who were killed. An Alpha without a pack, always feeling like an outsider.

We arrive back at the pack and park outside the medical building. I should start calling it my home, since that's really what it is, but something is holding me back, home sounds too permanent. I look across at Killian whose eyes are tracking my every movement, every inch the predator.

"Thank you for tonight," I say to fill the silence. I had a really good time tonight, and I don't really want this to end. This peace we have between us, I feel like it will end when we return to pack life. "Did you want to come in for a coffee?" I know I'm playing a dangerous game, but I can't seem to stop myself.

Killian is silent for a moment before nodding and getting out of the car, only to come around and open my door for me, offering me an arm to help me climb out. I accept it with a smile and head into the house, straight into

the empty kitchen. Putting the kettle on to boil, I start busying myself by getting the cups and milk ready. I feel his eyes on me as I bustle around and the room heats up with sexual tension.

I sense the moment he decides to make his move by the change in the air. The next thing I know, his body is pressed up against my back, pressing me into the kitchen counter, causing me to brace my hands on the worktop. His hands come to my waist, almost hesitantly, as he drops his mouth to my neck, kissing along my shoulder. My breath comes out shakily as I tilt my head back, giving him more access to my neck. I feel his erection pressed into my leg and my wolf rushes to the surface as desire passes through our bond. When we are like this, it's hard to think what our bond would be like if we accept it fully, as this is only a fraction of how close we will feel once/if it’s accepted.

I spin around in his arms so my back is pressed against the cabinets, and I put my hands around his neck, pulling him closer to me. Our mouths meet in a frantic kiss, the sexual tension from the evening finally boiling over. His hands explore my body, grazing my nipples, which are pebbled against the fabric of my dress. A shot of desire fires through me and I dig my nails into his shoulders, before biting down on his lower lip. A growl emits from his chest and it only turns me on more. My hands drop to his jeans and I try to work the buttons, desperate to feel him, but he stops me, his breath coming out in short pants.

"Are you sure this is what you want? I'm not sure I could stop myself from claiming you if we fucked. If I bite you when we fuck, then that's it, we’ll be bonded, nothing can undo that." He looks like it's painful for him to say these words, but I appreciate him doing so. He knows I would resent him if we ended up bonded accidentally because I didn't know how it worked.

"I'm not ready to bond. But I trust you, Killian." I mean it. I'm not sure when it happened, but I trust that he won't seal us together until I’m ready to accept the bond. If. If I decide to accept the bond. Keep telling yourself that Ari.

I take Killian’s hand and lead him up the stairs towards my room, although now that the heat has been broken, I find myself becoming nervous, I mean, I'm no virgin, but Killian makes me feel like an inexperienced pup half the time. As if he knows what I’m thinking, he

pushes me up against the wall as soon as we enter my room, pressing his nose into my hair, breathing me in.

"What's wrong?" he whispers, his voice soft before he nibbles on my earlobe.

"You make me nervous, like you're going to consume me," I admit, closing my eyes against the barrage of sensations.

"Open your eyes," he demands and I obey. "Sit on the edge of the bed." I narrow my eyes at him, I don't usually like being told what to do, but my wolf is demanding that I follow these orders.

I do as I'm told, perching at the edge of the bed, watching as he prowls towards me, and sinks to his knees before me.

"You have an Alpha on his knees for you. I think it’s you who is consuming me," he tells me, before leaning in to kiss me. These kisses are slower and more passionate than the ones in the kitchen, but they build until I feel like I’m going to combust from need. Gently pushing against my shoulders, he gets me to lay back and starts kissing a trail along my body, sliding his hand up my leg and under the skirt of my dress until he reaches my centre, groaning when he realises I’m not wearing any underwear beneath it. Falling back to his knees he gently pushes my knees apart until he presses his mouth against me. My head falls back as he starts licking, kissing, and sucking, while wordless cries and pants slip from my lips. Just as I feel myself building up to the point of orgasm he pulls away, a smug smile on his face as I cry out at the loss of contact.

"No, not yet. I want you falling apart around me." He grins as he pulls me up to sitting, my legs automatically wrapping around his waist before he picks me up. He walks us up to one of the walls, leaning my back against it, with my arms locked around his neck. I can feel the power in his muscles as he holds me up.

"You're a dick," I mutter, glaring at him as he teases me. Deciding to get back at him, I lean forward and bite down on his lip, dragging my nail over his shirtless back. Wait, when did he remove that? Growling, he fumbles with his jeans, finally freeing himself, all the while holding me up against the wall with his other arm.

I feel him pressing up against my entrance and he shoves into me as he claims my lips. The feel of him inside me, so tight, is almost enough to send me over the edge as he pummels into me. He’s rough, and as I dig my nails along his back, it only seems to spur him on more, growling and snarling

from both of us fills the room. We bring out each other's inner animal, like when we're together we don't have to keep our human appearances up, we can fully be who we are, beastly traits and all. Being with him like this, I can feel the bond waiting to be claimed, like a dull golden thread between us, binding us. I know my wolf has taken over as my nails are longer and sharper, my senses stronger. I bring my mouth to his shoulder as he continues to pound into me, my pleasure starting to spiral up. My canines have lengthened and I gently bite his shoulder. I feel him shudder beneath me.

"Ari if you bite me now, you claim me. I won't be able to stop myself from claiming you if you bite me," Killian warns, his words rough as he fights against his instincts.

Part of me, the human part, hears what he says, but my wolf side is fully in control, and as he pushes me higher and I reach climax, I bite down on his neck. I feel him roar beneath me, finding his own release as he plunges his fangs into my neck. A blinding light fills my vision and I feel as the connection between us is sealed, before another wave of pleasure washes over the both of us.

As the surge of pleasure fades, our foreheads are pressed together and our breathing is rapid. A small trail of blood trickles down Killian's shoulder, and I'm pretty sure that my shoulder is the same.

Killian gently lowers me from his waist, but steadies me as I lose my balance. His eyes are locked on mine, and a deep contentment is emanating from him, a gentle purring comes from his chest as he brushes a lock of hair from my face. His eyes drop to my shoulder and he turns to walk to the small ensuite bathroom.

"Let's get that cleaned up, Mate."

Oh shit.

Chapter Ten

The gentle breathing of someone sleeping is the first thing I notice as I wake. There is the comforting weight of an arm around my waist and the warmth of a male body pressed against my back. Even if I didn't remember who was sharing my bed with me, the warmth within me tells me that the person cocooned around me is Killian. He makes a sound in his sleep and buries his face into my hair, inhaling my scent.

I glance at the clock on my bedside table, but I'm in no rush to get up today. A sense of trepidation fills me. I'm not sure I'm ready to face the consequences of the last few days.

After I accidentally claimed Killian and he had returned the claim, sealing us together and affirming our 'true pair' bond, a kind of frenzy had descended upon us. We couldn't get enough of each other, the thought of even leaving the room and seeing other people had set off a jealousy in us both so strongly, that we had been confined to my bedroom. We had fucked pretty much throughout the first day, and that's exactly what it was, fucking. Making love came later, that first day was wild and animalistic, scratching and biting, our wolves trying to assert their dominance. As we settled down, we took the time to get to know each other's bodies better.

I roll over in the bed and run my eyes over the man I am now bonded to. I’ve had a lot of time over the last few days to think over it, and my feelings are mixed. A slither of sunlight creeps in through a parting in the curtains and falls on Killian, lighting up his features. A feeling of contentment warms me as I watch him sleeping. I pull a face. Urgh, have I really turned into one of *those people*? Soppy has never been a word in my vocabulary.

"Stop staring at me." Killian's voice is deep from sleep, making me smile and roll my eyes in the process.

"I can't help it, you're pretty," I tease, and I mean it as I reach forward and play with a strand of his pale hair. He looks serene when he sleeps, all the stress and tension that he carries around with him falls away, and he just looks peaceful. He snorts at my comment and opens one eye, scowling at me.

"I think the bond has addled your senses, Mate." My insides clench at his used of the term Mate. He’s been using it at every opportunity, as if he relishes being able to call me it. His words were teasing, but a frown mars my face as I remember that we are going to have to face the reactions of the others regarding our actions soon enough. The others must have realised what was going on since we haven't been bothered, and little food packages have been arriving outside my door, so we haven't had to leave my room.

Killian sits up as he sees my frown, although he would have been able to feel my turbulent emotions through our newly formed bond anyway. He reaches for me and pulls me into his arms, pressing his forehead to mine, as a sigh leaves his lips.

"Look, I know this isn’t what we planned, but what's done is done, we need to make the best of this. The others will understand." I bite my lips as he finds the root of my worries. I can deal with the uncomfortable fact that I’m tied to Killian for life at a later date, what I’m most worried about is how the guys are going to take it. It think Alex and Seb thought this was inevitable. They are wolf shifters, they understand how the pull of the true Mate bond is difficult to resist. Garett is the one I am most worried about. How is this going to work between us, between *all* of us? Is Killian going to feel more entitled than the others? I don't love him more than the others, hell, I don't even know if what I’m feeling *is* love. Is what I’m feeling for him just fate taking away my choices and deciding for me? No. Fuck fate. I acknowledge that what I have with Killian is intense and different, but I will not let that affect my relationship with the others.

Trying not to focus on that, I press a kiss to his full lips, paying particular attention to where his scar crosses his lip. I had spent one of the nights we shared together kissing along every scar on his body. He doesn't say as much, but I know his appearance bothers him. He hides behind it, this hard exterior, and I think he believes he deserves it because of his failings to his pack. I've been trying to convince him that his scars do not define him. Hell, I'm covered in scars, and they don't stop me. The look on Killian's face when he realised that the marks were scars inflicted from my old pack was murderous, and it had taken me along time to calm him down, the protective instinct from the bond was riding him hard.

He rumbles in satisfaction as my kisses become firmer and I crawl into his lap, wrapping my arms around his neck. Damn, this bond is going to make it difficult to get anything done.

"We need to go speak to everyone," I say, but the bond is screaming out to me to stay here with my mate. Urgh. Mate.

We eventually manage to leave the room and make our way over to the main house where the Alpha lives. Killian had grabbed hold of my hand as we walked over, and his eyes kept flicking to me. As we reached the main house, as if they knew we would need to see them, Alex and Seb appear in the doorway, Alpha Mortlock pushing past the two of them to walk towards us. I feel Killian tense up and we come to a stop a few meters away from the house. I glance over at him and give his hand a gentle squeeze.

"Ari, Killian. Congratulations on your Mating. It came as a bit of a surprise to us." Alpha Mortlock strolls towards us slowly, and while he's

smiling and his words are genuine, he is carefully eyeing up Killian, trying to judge his reaction.

"Yes, it came as a surprise to us too," I joke, and shrug my shoulders as if it was no big deal. I can feel Alex's eyes on me, and when I look his way, he looks concerned, like he wants to say something but thinks better of it. I just smile and shake my head, hoping my gesture reassures him for now, we can talk properly later.

Killian looks at me as I speak and he visibly relaxes, and even goes so far as dropping my hand and going forward to greet the Alpha, shaking his hand and accepting his congratulations.

"Thank you Alpha, your acceptance of our Mating means a lot to us."

Movement from within the house brings my attention back up as I see a figure making his way to the door.

"Hey Ari," Garett calls out softly, his expression weary, but I notice his despair as he sees Killian and I together.

"Garett!" I cry out. My happiness at seeing him must light my face, as his expression turns bright and he takes a step towards me. I start to hurry towards him when I feel an iron band clamp down around my wrist, halting me in my tracks. I look down at the hand wrapped around my arm and frown up at Killian, who’s holding me in place. His face is set in a scowl and his lips pull back over his teeth as he snarls, but he isn't looking at me. Garrett's expression darkens as he takes a menacing step towards us, his bear coming to the surface as his power floats through the air.

"Let go of her." His already deep voice deepens as he fights for control against his bear.

"She is mine," Killian growls out. Oh no, not this nonsense again. I rip my hand out of his grip and glare at him, smacking him on the chest until he pulls his glare from Garett to look at me.

"Oi, Mr. She's Mine. 'She' belongs to herself, we've spoken about this before. Get your possessive Mate addled head out of your ass."

"Ari..." Alpha Mortlock warns, ready to pull me out of the way if Killian shifts, but I see his pupils start to return to normal at my insults. Huh, guess that works then. He nods curtly at me and takes a step away. Alpha Mortlock goes over and starts talking to him quietly, Killian nodding at whatever he’s saying. I wait for a few moments to check that he’s calm, before turning back to Garett. He’s staring at Killian, his arms crossed, until he feels my attention on him. He smiles at me and opens his arms wide. I

hurry over and wrap my arms around him, breathing in his scent as he drops a kiss on the top of my head. Reaching down, he places a finger on my chin and brings my face up to look at him. His expression is serious and I know what he’s going to say.

"You have a Mate now, huh?" I let out a sigh, I had hoped to enjoy a bit of time with my guys before all this got brought up, but there is no point putting off the inevitable.

"Yeah. We didn't mean to accept the bond. I'm sorry Garett." I start to look away, not wanting to see the hurt on his face, but he stops me with his finger on my chin again.

"Don't be sorry Ari, I'm not mad at you." He sighs and gives me a rueful smile. "I'm jealous. I wish it were me you bonded with. I always knew I was going to have to share you, but I always thought that we had a special bond. Instead, it's with that dickhead."

I can't help but laugh at his words and the annoyance in his tone.

"Garett, we don't need fate to tell us what can and can't be. You know I love you." Garett wraps his arms around me even tighter, holding me close to him as I say this quietly.

A loud snarl has me spinning around, and I see Killian being held back by Alpha Mortlock who is frantically talking to him.

"How's that bond treating you Kill?" Alex chimes in, snapping what little control Killian had left. In a flash of claws and fur Killian shifts into his wolf form, snarling and growling at Garett, who happens to be behind me. Garett starts to lose control and pushes me behind him, as he falls to his knees and shifts into his bear form. I’m always taken aback at how large he is in his animal form, I shouldn't be because of how large he is as a human, but he’s even bigger as a bear.

"Thanks Alex, that was real helpful," I drawl at Alex who just winks at me.

"Will you three just fuck already? This is getting repetitive," Seb jokes, pushing his way towards me, wrapping his arm around me. I half-heartedly return his hug, but my attention is on the two shifters who are battling it out. I wince as Garett gets bitten on the forearm and start forward to step between them.

"Not a good idea Ari," Alex says as he pulls me back. "They won’t be able to stop themselves if you get between them, and then think how badly they will feel."

"They are going to kill each other!" I practically shout, as I wave a hand at the fight in front of us.

"They won't, and Alpha Mortlock will keep an eye on them. The last thing we need is a dead bear on our property," Alex jokes, but I just look at him horrified. "Okay, that was in bad taste."

"Ari, let's go inside, your presence is just making things worse," Seb suggests gently, before slipping his hand in mine and pulling me away from the two shifters who have a piece of my heart.

You better not kill him Kill. I will shred this bond if you injure him, I threaten down the newly formed bond. I'm not sure if he can hear my words, or if he just gets a hint of my feelings, but I mean every word. I know Garett wouldn't kill Killian, he isn't the type of person. Fiercely protective of me? Yes. But he wouldn't kill him out of spite. Killian, on the other hand, is a wild card.

The two of them lead me inside the house and into the kitchen, where I find Eric at the coffee pot, with cups and a plate of doughnuts spread out before him. He smiles at me as we enter, passes me a steaming cup, and gestures to the plate.

"I thought you could use some caffeine." He grins when I sigh in appreciation, as I inhale the smell of the coffee and reach forward for a doughnut.

"Oh man, I love you," I joke before stuffing half of the heavenly doughnut in my mouth. Pausing, I realise what I just said before frowning at him. "I mean…" I try to explain around the doughnut, looking as ladylike as ever. Eric just laughs, his blue eyes creasing at the sides as he smiles, his eyes running over me.

"I know what you mean, Ari." He takes a sip of his own coffee before leaning back against the kitchen counter. "I haven't seen you in a while. I hear you've had an interesting couple of days." I run my eyes over him as I realise he's right, I haven't seen him in a couple of days. He doesn't seem to be too affected by being away from me. He obviously sees my inspections of him and smiles slightly. "Just being on the compound is close enough to you to sustain me." What is that supposed to mean? My raised eyebrow has him chuckling. "There is a lot of… sexual energy around you, I absorb it without realising it. I still can't feed properly, but I'm not starving," he reassures me.

"How have you been?" I ask him, unsure how to move our friendship/relationship any further. He must be lonely here, I haven't exactly been keeping him company, and being around all of my men in a strange pack can't exactly be easy.

"I'm fine Ari. I've been keeping busy. The pack has been letting me work here as their doctor for the last few days, it seems they have an opening." He smiles at me and I can see he is truly happy he can help out. I'm surprised that Mortlock is allowing him to help though, when it took so much convincing to get help from other packs when we needed a second nurse. I would have to speak to Alpha Mortlock later, but I know that Eric would never hurt any of the wolves here, and he is brilliant at his job. It's just his morals when it comes to feeding that I have a problem with. I smile at his comments, happy he has found purpose here, at least until we figure out what's going on between us.

There is a tension in the room that's building, and I look around between the three guys.

"Okay, what aren't you telling me?" I demand, placing my coffee down to cross my arms and glare.

"Perhaps it's best if we wait for the others to come back?" Seb suggests, trying to placate me, but I shake my head. I have a bad feeling inside, and I have a suspicion that it has to do with the disappearances.

"No, tell me now. Please." I look around at them and hear Alex groan, before he pulls his phone out of his pocket.

"Killian isn't going to be please that we started without him," he warns, pressing something on his phone before he places it on the kitchen counter between us.

"I'll deal with Killian," I mutter as the phone rings and the loudspeaker fills the room with the tone.

"Hello?" Tori's voice saturates the room and a part of me relaxes. I know they would have said something if Tori was in trouble, but now I could be sure she is safe.

"Tori, it's Alex. I've got Ari, Seb, and Eric here," he explains, and we all call out our 'hellos.'

"Hey girl! Ari, you have a lot of explaining to do." Her tone is jokey, but I know she means business, there is no getting out of telling her *every last detail*. "You always seem to miss all the action!" she comments, and I narrow my eyes at the guys in the room.

"Why? What's been happening?" I glance at Eric whose expression is dark, but he doesn't give anything away. Seb is staring at Alex, so I turn my gaze to him, a questioning look on my face.

"There have been more disappearances. Two vampires, a fae traveller, a dwarf and a troll." My eyes widen, five disappearances in three days. They are getting worse.

"How the hell did they take a troll without anyone noticing?" I demand, those guys were big and wouldn't go down without a fight. I think over the disappearances again and frown. "No shifters this time?"

The mood in the room goes darker, but the tight knot in my chest loosens as I hear footsteps heading towards the building. Killian and Garett are in human form as they walk in, a few cuts and bruises mar their faces and arms, but they don't look too badly damaged.

"What was that about the disappearances?" Killian asks, his voice rough from the recent shift. Alex fills him in on what they just told me as I run my eyes over the two of them. They seem calmer now, both of them keep shooting me little glances, and I keep seeing Killian's hands clench into fists as if he’s stopping himself from reaching out for me. I appreciate him trying, since the bond is also urging me to be closer to him, touch him. It’s taking a lot for me to resist, but we have a more urgent matter at hand.

"Shifters have also been taken, but like before, their bodies are showing up. At least some of them are. Over the last three days, ten shifters have disappeared the same way as before, and traces of magic and runes show they were taken by force, but only seven bodies have shown up. We don't know why only the bodies of shifters are coming back, nor do we know why supernaturals are being taken," Alpha Mortlock explains as he walks into the kitchen, catching the end of our conversation, and gratefully receiving a mug of coffee from Eric.

"It's a message. It has to be. Are the bodies still mutilated?" I probe, grimacing as Mortlock, Garett, and Alex nod.

"A bear was taken from our pack and I was asked to go look at the body. I found this carved into the base of his neck." Garett passes me his phone and shows me a photo. My coffee turns to lead in my stomach as I recognise the symbol, the same symbol as the tattoo on my back.

"Shadow Pack."

"We thought they were involved, we just didn't have any proof until now," Tori chimes in from the speaker phone. "We just don't know why they

have started marking the bodies until now. I've been looking into the disappearance sites, and other than proving magic has been used, I'm struggling to track down the users. They have a very strong magic user, they're blocking me," Tori explains, and I hear the frustration in her voice. She isn't used to being out powered.

"It's a message to me. Just like the human that was carved up and sent to my hospital. They want me." I sigh in frustration and rub my hands across my face. I feel multiple hands reach for me, and I'm grateful for the support without them fighting amongst themselves. "What about ASP? What do they have to say about this?" As our supernatural police force, they should be out there dealing with this. The faces in the room turn even darker and Tori makes a rude noise down the phone.

"They aren't doing anything. They are trying to keep the shifter disappearances quiet, although they are looking into the other ones. It's causing unrest. There's talk of the Alphas meeting up to discuss what we should do since ASP clearly doesn't care about us," Alex spits out, and I look over to Mortlock for confirmation. His expression is heavy, but he nods in agreement.

"We must be careful not to rush into things we may regret in the future," he tells the room, but he seems to be aiming his words at Alex.

A sense of dread settles over me as I come to a realisation. ASP aren't going to help us, we are going to have to look after ourselves. Which means I have to be able to protect myself. Shadow Pack clearly isn't going to give up and they're still after me. I have to embrace the part of me that I hate, the part they want me for, if I have a hope of surviving this. I sigh and clear my throat, getting the attention of the room, uttering words I never thought I would say.

"I need to go back to the Shadow Realm."

Chapter Eleven

The rest of that conversation in the kitchen of Alpha Mortlock's house went about as well as you can imagine. Lots of shouting and cursing had ensued. Killian had nearly started a fight with Alex, who was furious at the thought of me going back to the Shadow Realm. Not because Killian wanted me to go, but because Alex was trying to throw his weight around, telling Killian he had to stop me from going. Macho bullshit, which wound up an already tense Killian. Garett was trying to find out why I wanted to go back, but kept being interrupted. Seb had just looked worried and sat back, watching the whole argument with a frown on his face. In the end it was Eric who alleviated the whole situation.

"Ari, why do you need to go back?" Eric calmly asked. The others were still weary of him and his powers, so they paid him a weary respect that they don't seem to show to each other, treating each other more like brothers.

I then had to explain about the coin necklace the stranger made of light had given me in the Shadow Realm. That had started another argument, nobody trusted the stranger, especially with my safety. They didn't trust his motives.

"Why would he help you? What's in it for him?"

Eventually, I had convinced them that I was going. Well, it was more of a, 'I'm going and you can't stop me,' but they know why I have to do it. I need to master these powers. I've been fought over, tortured, and abused for this power my whole life, and I've been running from it. I'm tired of it. I need to embrace this side of me, like I have embraced my wolf, if I'm to ever be free of the shadow that's been hanging over me my whole life.

They wanted me to wait until tomorrow before I went back to the Shadow Realm, but I don't see any point in putting it off, not when waiting could mean that another supernatural gets taken. We are gathered in my room, with my guys and Eric around me, ready if I need them. This is more for their comfort than mine, since when I'm in the Shadow Realm they won't be able to help me, but they can care for my physical body. I don't plan on being there long, but time works differently there.

Walking up to my desk, I open the drawer and pull out the necklace that was given to me, placing it around my neck. I turn to look at the guys, there's no point in dragging this out, and I can already feel the pull of the Shadow Realm calling me. It's been getting louder and louder over the last few days, but I've managed to chase away the shadows. Now, I look inside myself at the light, which is holding the shadows at bay. Sending out a quiet call for help, I hope the stranger made of light hears my call and finds me in the Shadow Realm.

"Here goes nothing. I'll see you soon," I call out with a confident smile, before I shutter out the light inside me.

I'm instantly dragged away with a ripping sensation, and a cry of pain leaves my lips as I land in the Shadow Realm with a bang. I can still hear Garett shouting my name and Killian's roar of agony as I was ripped away, and they ring in my ears.

"Well that was dramatic. It seems to be a talent of yours," a familiar voice greets me.

My eyes fly open and I see the stranger made of light standing above me. Although I can't see his features properly, I get the distinct impression that he's smiling at me.

"You came." It's not a question but he nods anyway.

"You called, so I came." He holds his hand out towards me and helps me to my feet.

I look around and see that the Shadow Realm hasn't changed at all since I was last here, and the feeling of nothingness falls upon me, causing me to

shudder.

"I don't miss being here." I wrap my arms around myself. It's not cold, but my memories of being trapped here fill my mind and I miss the physical comforts of having my guys with me. "Nothing has changed."

"Well, that's not true now, is it?" he says with a nod to my chest, where a golden thread leaves my torso and trails behind me. I look at it with a frown until I feel a tug. Killian.

"The bond," I exclaim with clarity, as I look back up at my guide. We had theorised that the bond was the reason I kept finding myself back in the real world before, and now I guess we know for real.

"I think that bond, even though it was only half formed, was the only reason you lasted here so long on your own without training. You should always be able to find your way back now if you ever get lost in the shadows again."

We walk together in silence for a while as I take in the revelations of the day. He seems happy just to walk quietly and let me sort my thoughts. I look up at the stranger again.

"Who are you? I keep calling you the 'stranger made of light' in my head. I can't keep calling you that. Yoda perhaps?" I joke, and I get that feeling that he’s smiling again, despite me not being able to see his features.

"Hm, I like the idea of being Yoda, your wise and ancient teacher. Although, perhaps less of the ancient part, young student." I snort out a laugh at his joke, loving that he gets my Star Wars reference. "You may call me Em." I raise my eyebrows, not expecting that to be his name, but nod in agreement.

"Okay... Em. You said I would come back here, how did you know?" He snorts at my question, his impression of an all knowing, benevolent teacher disappearing in a moment.

"Because you have no idea how to use your powers. Sooner or later you would get into trouble and end up back here again. I told you to return here and call me because you need to learn to master your powers. You are incredibly powerful, but there are not enough Shadowborn around anymore to teach you, which is why I offered."

I come to a stop and stare at him in shock, the implications of what he’s saying astounds me, although it probably shouldn’t given the circumstances.

"Wait, you're Shadowborn? How did I not know about you? I thought all the Shadowborn were dead." He stops in his tracks and turns back to look at me, I get the distinct impression he's rolling his eyes at me.

"How do you think I got here or knew so much about your powers?" He sighs, as if what he's going to say next pains him, and takes a seat on the ground, gesturing for me to sit beside to him. "You're not the only Shadowborn, but the rest of us are in hiding. We didn't know that you existed. The Shadow Pack kept you hidden from us, and for that, we are sorry, we would not have let them subject you to those kinds of torture if we had known."

There are more Shadowborn, a whole group of them by the sound of it. The information is overwhelming, but hope starts to bloom inside me. If I can find them, they can train me to control my powers, make sure I'm not dangerous, but a formidable opponent not to be messed with. I turn to Em, but he's already shaking his head.

"Where are you in the real world? I'll come find you and train with you…" My voice trails off and I narrow my eyes at him. "You're not going to help me?"

"The others won't take the risk to meet you. You have some dangerous people after you, not just the Shadow Pack, and they have worked for centuries to stay hidden. Once things have settled down, perhaps then..." He trails off as he sees my cloudy expression.

They find out about me, give me a spiel about how they wish they had known about me, would have helped me, and when they can actually help me, they won't take the risk. Bull shit.

"Ari. I want to help you, I'm willing to help you, but I'm somewhere where you can't get to me. I'm not free to wander around as I wish, which is why I am meeting you here like this." I look away, contemplating whether or not to believe him, when I feel a hand on my knee. I look up and see that Em has dimmed his light enough where I can almost see his expression through the brightness. It looks full of regret.

"When the time is right, I will tell you where I am. Remember that trust goes both ways." I narrow my eyes at him as I mull this over. I'm putting a lot on the line here, but I have to trust that he isn't going to sell me out. I don't think he's doing this just out the kindness of his heart, there has to be something he is getting out of this, but I don't have much of an option, he's

right, I need to learn and there is no one else to teach me. I let out a sigh and nod, I guess that's the best I'm going to get out of him.

"Okay Yoda, what's the first lesson?"

For what feels like about five days, but must have only been about an hour, I work with Em on calling my shadow powers to the surface. Other than the time where I killed Alpha Black, and the fight with Marcus at Moon River Pack, when I've used my shadow powers they have taken over my whole body, enveloping me completely in shadow. Em has been trying to teach my to control it, making only certain parts of my body disappear. It's hard work and I get frustrated that I'm finding it so difficult.

"Aarh! Why don't I *get* this?" I cry out, as I force my body to reappear in front of Em, who's giving off a distinctly amused attitude. "Well I'm glad you're finding this entertaining," I snarl. Frustratingly, this is supposed to be *easier* in the Shadow Realm, and while I seem to have no problem calling my power forth here, controlling it seems to be the issue. No surprise there, control of my powers has always been my issue.

"Okay Ari, that's enough for today. Try and practice calling the shadows in the real world as well. When you are ready to meet with me again, just wear the necklace and call out to me. I will be here," he says, before he disappears in a flash of light so bright, I have to close my eyes.

I slump to the ground with a sigh, what a day. Right, I guess I better try and get back home. Anxiety swirls in my stomach at the thought of being stuck here again, but I focus on what Em said, that as long as I am bonded to Killian I will always have a way home. I focus on the golden line and tug, at the same time I find the light within me and will it to flare to life, banishing away the shadows.

I slam back into my body and cry out in shock. I look around and see that I'm in my bed, in a puppy pile of all my guys, and even Garett is curled up next to me. They are all shielding their eyes, as if I brought my light back with me.

"What the fuck?" someone mutters.

"Ari, you're back." Killian's rich voice rolls over me and he nuzzles into my neck, the other guys call out my name softly and try to get closer to me. I glance over at the alarm clock and see it's 1am.

"How long was I gone for?" I'm almost afraid to ask, but I need to know.

"You left yesterday afternoon, so you've been gone for about 9 hours," Seb tells me, his hand rubbing up and down my leg, his voice groggy with sleep as he settles his head back on my hip.

"Anyone want to talk about the fact that Ari was a human torchlight now, or deal with it in the morning?" Alex mutters.

"In the morning," come several replies, which brings a small smile to my lips. Garett sits up slightly and runs his eyes over me, checking if I'm okay.

"Are you okay?" he asks, and I just smile, then lean forward to press a kiss to his lips gently. He makes a happy grumble in his chest and returns the kiss.

"I'm going to take that as a yes." He winks at me before laying back down, pulling my back against his chest.

I know that in the morning we'll need to deal with everything going on, and what I learnt in the Shadow Realm, but for now, with my guys surrounding me, I feel safe and I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter Twelve

The gentle sounds of the radio babbling away to itself fills the air, as we drive from the compound into town. It's not a far journey, about twenty minutes, but I enjoy the quiet of the countryside for as long as I can before the outskirts of the city start to show. The silence in the car is comfortable, and Garett's hand on my thigh is soothing. I try not to let my nerves get the better of me as we drive towards the bear compound, which is based in the centre of the city. The Alpha of Garett's pack, Alpha Philips, has requested to meet me.

Bear shifter packs run differently than the wolves. They tend to live in small family groups, as opposed to one big pack, but they're often nearby and work together closely. Garett, as an unmated male, lives alone and chose not to work within the pack, but regularly helps out and keeps in touch. This might have been why I liked him, he wasn't continually under the thumb of his pack.

I worry about why Alpha Philips might want to meet with me. Garett seems calm, and he wouldn't knowingly lead me into a dangerous situation. I'm looking forward to seeing where he comes from though. I've only ever seen his bar, and I won't lie, I'm curious to see more about him and how he grew up. As the countryside disappears and we enter the more built up areas of the city, I can't keep quiet anymore.

"So, what does the Alpha want to see me about?" Garett chuckles at my question and gives my knee a squeeze.

"Ari, I've told you already. He just wants to meet you, he's intrigued by the woman who is keeping me away from the pack so often," he jokes, but I can't help feeling uneasy. He was very upfront with me that he was going to tell his Alpha about our relationship, and it made me nervous. While mating outside of your shifter species wasn't uncommon, it wasn't exactly approved of.

We pull up outside of the gym the Long Claw Pack is based out of. The Long Claw Pack has a series of successful gyms throughout the country, but their headquarters is based here and most of their pack business is also run from this location.

I take a deep breath and climb out of the car, it's time to face the music. Garett comes around to meet me and links our arms, guiding me inside the building. From the outside, the gym looks like an unassuming warehouse, and if it wasn't for the large sign outside on the wall stating 'LC Gyms,' then I wouldn't have known there was a gym here. The car park is packed, so they must gain a good amount of customers. As we walk inside and I see all of the latest, state of the art equipment I can understand why it's so busy.

"Garett!" a pretty, well muscled lady calls out from behind the reception desk. Definitely a bear shifter with a build like that.

"Hey Sue, I'm here to see Philips. Are my brothers here?" he asks, his voice is relaxed and friendly as he slings his arm around my shoulders. The woman from behind the desk, Sue, eyes up his arm, and as her eyes slide to me I expect to see some judgement, but instead she just smiles broadly.

"Well welcome! It's nice to see you smiling Garett. Philips will come join you in the training room. And of course your brothers are here, they are always here," she jokes with an eye roll. Garett laughs and waves goodbye to her as he steers me through the large gym.

"I didn't know you had brothers," I comment lightly, and I don't know why it's bothering me so much that I didn't know about his family. I try to hide the fact that this annoys me, but he gives my hand a squeeze and his next response lets me know he's noticed it bugs me.

"I don't talk about my family much, don't feel bad. You will get to meet them today, and you'll soon wish you didn't know about them." I laugh at his comments, feeling a little better, although I hadn't realised that I would

meet his family today, perhaps I should have worn something a little nicer than my old jeans and turquoise knit jumper.

"Stop fretting over your clothes, you look beautiful," he says to me in a low voice and pulls at my hand, which I hadn't even realised was playing with the hem of my jumper. "This is why I didn't warn you that we might bump into them here. I didn't want you to worry." I'm about to retort when we round the corner and see the three biggest guys I have ever seen.

"Gare-bear!" one calls out as he sees us, his shout getting the attention of the other two who are clearly brothers. My mouth drops open a little at the sight. One of them, the one who called out to us, is a little older, but the other two have to be twins, they look identical. It's obvious that they are all related to Garett, they all have the same bronze skin tone and shaggy brown hair, stubble covering their chins. The twins have green eyes, but the older brother has the same eye colour as Garett. While Garett is muscled, these guys are huge! I had thought that Garett was one of the biggest guys I've ever seen, turns out I just hadn't met his family yet. They drop the weights they were casually lifting with a bang and make their way over to us, their smiles huge as they see Garett's arm around my shoulders.

"Gare-bear?" I ask quietly, trying to stifle the grin that's threatening to burst out of me. His mouth twitches as he fights a wry smile.

"Yeah, I can't shake that fucking nickname."

I do laugh this time, trying not to let my nerves show as these huge bear shifters stalk towards us. Their grins are predatory as they come to stop a short distance away, eyeing me up and down before looking to Garett. He stiffens as they look me over, before giving them a terse nod. This seems to be some sort of signal they were waiting for, as they let out a whoop then swoop in. Before I know what's going on, I'm swept into a bear hug, literally, before being passed on to another brother.

"Little sister! It's good to finally meet you!"

"Jake, you're hogging her! I want to meet her!"

"Back off, I haven't finished yet."

I struggle to work out who is saying what as I'm passed around the group, and a laugh escapes me.

"Guys, you're being too rough, back off." A deeper voice cut's through the chatter and the twins roll their eyes before taking a step back, but their excitement is still clear to see in their movements. I realise the guy with the deep voice is the older brother, as he takes a step forward and holds out his

hand for me to shake. "I'm sorry about my younger brothers, they're like excitable pups. We have been waiting for a while to meet the wolf that has captured my brother's heart. I'm Max," he introduces and I can't help but smile, he reminds me of Garett.

"Nice to meet you Max. I am surprised to meet you though," I say with a pointed glance at Garett, who at least has the decency to look abashed.

"I didn't want you to worry," he explains, before gesturing to his brothers who are still jostling for who's going to hug me first. "They're a bit overwhelming. I thought it best to just rip it off, like a band aid."

"Are you saying meeting us is painful?"

"We are a delight!" the twins say at once, before pouncing on Garett. At first I thought they were attacking him, but at their laughter I can see that they're just playing.

"Please excuse my brothers. Jake and Ben act like children, but they are actually older than Garett," he comments with a shake of his head, but his smile is fond as he watches his three younger brothers.

"Any other surprise family meetings I should be expecting?" I joke, but when he doesn't answer me, I turn away from watching Garett to look up at Max. His expression is a cross between amusement and pain. "No. No no no. If you tell me I'm meeting your parents—" I'm cut off mid threat as the back door slams open and a couple walk through.

"Garett! Son, it's good to see you!" an older version of Garett calls out, as he and an older, happy looking woman bustle towards us.

"Nooooo," I groan quietly, before throwing a death glare at Garett, he will pay for this later. I can't believe he blindsided me into meeting his entire bloody family, I thought I was here to meet the Alpha!

"Sorry Ari, I didn't know they were coming." Garett breaks away from his brothers and puts his arm around me, pulling me in close as he whispers to me.

The couple stops a short distance from us and waits for some signal from Garett before they come forward. Garett's dad is the spitting image of him, just an older version with slightly greying hair, but still just as handsome. The woman at his side, who I'm assuming is Garett's mum, is a pretty woman about my height with gently greying brown hair and deep brown eyes. Her face is lined with laughter lines and it's easy to see why with the amount she's smiling right now.

"Garett, honey. It's so good to see you!" she coos, as she sweeps him into a hug. She may be smaller than him, but I have no doubt that she's fierce if you cross her. Never mess with a female bear shifter if you want to escape with your life, especially if her cubs are involved. Garett's smile is warm and genuine as he embraces his mother. His dad steps forward to greet him and his mum turns towards me. Her happiness is easy to see in her eyes and I can tell that she wants to hug me. I smile and take a small step forward, holding out my arms a little, and this is all the encouragement she needs to hurry forward and wrap her arms around me.

"Oh, it's so good to finally meet you Ari. I'm Molly, Garett's mom and that's Simon, his dad. I've never seen Garett so happy since the two of you mated." I stiffen at her words, but she doesn't seem to notice my sudden tension. "The two of you will join us for dinner tonight, right? I'll cook Garett's favourite!"

"Okay Mom, we will be there," he says with a smile, but he keeps shooting me worried glances out the corner of his eye, knowing something is bothering me. "Guys, we need to go meet with the Alpha, we can catch up tonight, okay?" he tells them, before giving his mum another hug and patting his brothers and dad on the back. I take a step back and give them a little wave, needing a bit of space. His family is amazing, but they are a little full on.

"I'm sorry Ari, I didn't know my parents would be here, my brothers must have told them that we were coming. Are you okay? I know they can be a bit overwhelming." He runs his hand along my arm, leading me towards the area where we are meeting the Alpha.

"Your mum said we had mated. What did she mean by that? We haven't had a mating ceremony."

There are two types of matings in the shifter community, true Mated pairs and voluntary bonds. True Mated pairs, who are like 'soulmates,' your fated other half who you were designed to love. The most common form of mating in the shifter community is a voluntary bond, which is formed between two shifters, and once made, it's for life. While there is a connection between them, it's nothing like the power of a true Mate bond. It is more like marriage, but it's not entered into lightly because the only way out of it is death.

Garett winces slightly but nods at my comment. "You're right. Within bear communities, we don't date. We only settle down with the person we

intend to Mate with. My family has assumed mating is our intention. I think they believe we are here to get permission from the Alpha to confirm the mating."

I stop in the middle of the corridor and look him in the eye, shocked that they would believe this. They don't even know me, and they think we are getting mated? I have more than enough 'mates,' I'm not going to jump straight into another mating.

"You're going to set them straight though, right?"

"Yes, of course," he assures me gently, as he steers me towards a set of double doors, which I'm sure is the training room we were told to meet the Alpha in. He's quiet and I can tell something is bothering him. I wonder if I sounded too harsh. With a sigh I pull him to a stop and force him to face me.

"Garett, what—"

"Garett! Come through! And you must be Ari, welcome to Long Claw!" a booming voice greets us. I guess this conversation will have to wait until later. Squeezing my hand, Garett leads me into the training room and I gape at the huge open space. Mirrors line the room and a large rack of weights is covering one wall, it's like a hard-core ballet studio. The thought brings a smile to my face as I imagine Garett and his brothers wearing a tutu. A gentle hand on my lower back returns me to the present and I smile up at the Alpha.

"Alpha Philips, it's a pleasure to meet you," I say, as I hold my hand out to greet him. His large hand engulfs mine, but he shakes it with care, his smile in return is genuine and reaches his eyes.

I take a step back and run my eyes over the Alpha. He has that typical bear shifter build, looking like he presses fire engines for fun and making most bodybuilders look like children in comparison. He appears to be in his late thirties but shifters age well, so I place him to be in his late forties. His short, cropped dark hair has a military look about it, and his tank top shows off a myriad of tattoos across his upper arms.

He shuts the doors behind us and smiles at me again, gesturing around the room.

"This room is soundproof, so don't worry about anyone overhearing us," he says, and a nervous chuckle escapes my lips.

"Okay, that sounded a little like you plan to abduct me." Philips laughs and Garett smiles as he runs his hand down my arm, trying to comfort me.

I'm feeling a little overwhelmed from meeting Garett's family, and now his Alpha is making a big scene about us not being overheard, it's making me flighty.

"Sorry if this sounds rude, but why am I here?" I cut straight to the point, wanting to know what the heck is going on. That would be enough for some Alphas to discipline me, hell, Shadow Pack would have me whipped for a remark like that, but I get the feeling that Garett's pack is different. Philips tilts his head as if he’s re-evaluating me, before barking out a short laugh.

"You picked one with spirit, Garett. Good choice." I’m about to protest at being talked about when I’m right in front of them, but Philips turns to address me. "I had two reasons for bringing you here. First, I did want to meet the woman that Garett was so enamoured with. We have all heard so much about you, and what you did for him after Shadow Pack took him..." His voice trails off in a deep growl, which seems to fill the room. "You have earned our trust and respect. You sacrificed yourself for him, for a bear your pack had no ties to."

"I love him," I say with a shrug, the only answer I have as to why I did it. I don't need to go into why I would save someone as good as Garett, the guy who has tried to protect me since day one. Philips seems to understand this and just nods at my answer, accepting it as truth.

"Well, we wanted to extend our gratitude to you, and if you ever need us, or you ever need somewhere to stay, you are welcome. You are part of Long Claw now." I stare at him in shock. This type of thing doesn't happen across different shifter species, it's unheard of. I glance at Garett and even he looks shocked. I've gone from being packless to having two, one of those with the bears. My chest feels tight with all the feelings that are overwhelming me, and all I can do is nod at Philips and hope the gesture portrays my gratitude.

"Unfortunately, the other reason I needed to see you is less pleasant." Philips sighs and rubs his hand across his face, causing me to frown at his change in attitude. "As Garett has probably told you, one of our bears was kidnapped and the body was left at the spot he was taken from, mutilated with Shadow Pack’s symbol. We have followed all the laws, we took this to ASP and let them handle it, even though our nature is screaming at us for vengeance. But going to ASP is not getting us anywhere, and now they are denying having the body of our pack member. They refuse to give it back,

we need to bury him properly, put him to rest, but they refuse. We will not stand for it. They have always been less active in investigating crimes against shifters."

Unfortunately what he's saying doesn't surprise me. ASP are quick to investigate when the person committing the crime is a shifter, but their prejudices against us runs deep. I had always hoped though, that if someone was mass murdering shifters that they would step in, especially seeing as other supernaturals are being affected. Instead, they're completely denying that shifters are being taken and killed. If they aren't careful, they will have an uprising on their hands, or perhaps that's what they want? It would give them an excuse to hunt us all down. I try to clear these dark thoughts away, they are not helpful.

"How can I help Alpha?" I ask, wondering how I fit into this turn of conversation.

"The other Alphas are going to be meeting to discuss this, and we wanted you to come as the peacekeeper."

I laugh at the Alphas comment. I know it's rude and I should be more respectful, but he really doesn't know me well if he thinks I can be the peacekeeper. I'm the opposite! I cause more fights than I fix!

"Hear the Alpha out Ari," Garett's urges quietly, but I can hear the smile in his voice.

"Ari, you have connections with not only the wolves, but the bears too. Plus your best friend is a witch and you have an incubus living with you." I wonder where he got the information about Eric living with us, but I choose to ignore that for the time being and try to focus on the Alpha's words. "You are living proof that we can intermingle and still thrive. Plus, you have extensive knowledge on the Shadow Pack. We know they are involved now, we just don't know how they fit in with all this. We need your help."

I close my eyes and rub the bridge of my nose as I think over his words. He's right, they do need to know more about the Shadow Pack, and it's a good idea for them to be united, sharing information. ASP clearly isn't helping them. But do I really want to get involved in politics when I have worked so hard to stay out of it? I blow out a deep breath at glance at Garett who is smiling softly at me. I know he will accept whatever decision I make and won't make me feel bad if I decide not to help. I bite my lip, knowing what I *should* do, but not wanting to do it.

"Okay, I'll help you."

The house we pull up in front of looks cosy and just like any other in this suburban area. It's two stories and has a neat little garden with colourful flowers lining the flowerbeds along the front of the house. I don't know what I expected, but this wasn't it. However the more I look at it, the more I can imagine a little Garett and his brothers growing up here. I chuckle as I glance at him now, I guess I had expected a larger house after meeting his brothers earlier. I step out of the car and smile at Garett as he comes to my side, holding his hand out to me.

"Don't be nervous, they already love you," he whispers in my ear, pressing a gentle kiss to the side of my head. I smile at him and nod, but I can't deny that I am nervous. Throw me up against Shadow beasts and evil Alphas and I'm fine, but being invited to Garett's parents' house for dinner has me quaking in my boots.

Arm in arm we walk towards the front door and Garett knocks before letting himself in.

"We're here!" he calls out, before helping me take off my coat and hanging it on the rack. After we met with the Alpha, we went back to Moon River so I could get changed. There was no way I was turning up to Garett's family home in my casual jeans and jumper. This is the second time in a week that I've worn a dress, I hope this isn't becoming a habit. I play with the skirt feeling uncomfortable, but what else was I going to wear to meet his family. Seb and Alex had teased me all afternoon about being nervous. Garett, trying to put me at ease, told me that they had already met me and couldn't care less what I was wearing, as long as we were happy.

I hear cheerful chatter and laughter from within the house as a voice calls out to us.

"We're in the kitchen love, come on through!" Molly shouts.

I look around the hallway as Garett leads me through the house. It's warm and cosy, and photographs of Garett and his brothers line the walls. Walking into the large, open kitchen I can see where all the noise is coming from, and I grin at the scene in front of me. Simon and Max are setting the table, talking about some football game that had been on today. Molly was trying to serve dinner and the twins kept stealing bits of food and garlic bread from the plates, and generally causing havoc. I would have expected Molly to be shouting at them, but she’s smiling as she scolds them. It's like I’m watching one of those soap dramas and I’m watching the happy family scene. I've never once thought that something like this would be possible for me, but as Garett squeezes my hand and pulls me into the room, I wonder if it might be possible. Everyone turns around as we enter and calls out a greeting.

Chapter Thirteen

The meal was delicious and the company was great. They are full on, but I haven't laughed that much in years. The twins are hilarious and seem to make it their life mission to cause chaos. Molly is lovely and keeps trying to find out more about me, but I manage to get away with saying as little as possible without seeming rude. Garett has been throwing me heated looks over the table all evening and it's been boiling my blood. We are just finishing our coffee when Garett squeezes my hand under the table.

"Come back to my place tonight?" I whisper, as we start gathering the plates up to help clean up. Desire shoots through me, I know exactly what will happen if Garett stays with me tonight.

The rest of the evening passes quickly with hugs and goodbyes, as well as Molly getting us to promise that we'll come for dinner again soon. I promise that we will and surprise myself when I actually mean it.

The journey to the pack is full of heated glances, and once we have made it into the house all pretense drops. Pressing me up against the wall, Garett presses his lips to mine and slowly devours me, our kisses are deep and unhurried, his hands skimming up my body until one of them reaches my breast. I'm not worried that someone else might see us, even though I know for sure there are others in the house, and we aren't exactly being

discreet. I can hear them moving around upstairs and in the kitchen, but if anything, the risk of being caught only turns me on more.

As Garett is palming my breast, a spark of desire shoots straight to my core, making me groan into his mouth. A quiet growl filling the hallway alerts me to the presence of someone else watching, and the tug in my chest tells me it's Killian. I know Garett is aware of him too by the tension now in his shoulders, which are rigid under my hands. I pull my mouth from his and drop it to his neck, kissing along the line between his neck and shoulders, trying to kiss away the tension. I feel him fighting for control, knowing he wants to continue, but waiting to see what I wish to do. I raise my eyes and meet Killian's as I continue kissing Garett's neck, biting down gently, I enjoy the hitch in his breathing. I need to show Killian that I am not going to stop just because he's here. He raises his eyebrow at me and a small smile crosses his lips, and I get an impression straight down the bond between us.

Challenge accepted.

He jerks his head towards the stairs and heads up without another word. Garett watched the whole exchange in silence with a small frown.

"Do you want me to leave you to it?" he asks, hurt and desire evident in his voice, and I know it's paining him to ask this.

I shake my head and kiss him firmly, before pushing against his chest so he moves away, letting me move away from the wall. I grab his hand and start to walk upstairs, pulling him along behind me. Desire and confusion lines his eyes, but he follows me without question. We enter my room and it's empty, I have no idea where Killian has gone, but right now I only care about the guy in front of me. I pull him closer and start working on the buttons on his shirt, needing to feel his skin against mine. I groan as his shirt comes off and I lean forward to kiss across the hard lines of his chest, nibbling along his collarbone until he's growling. He reaches up and rips along the seam of my dress, leaving me standing in just my underwear. I gasp, not used to this kind of behaviour from him. Killian, perhaps. But my gentle bear? Never, although I can't deny that seeing him worked up like this is sexy as hell. Pushing the strap of my bra over my shoulder, he starts kissing a line from my shoulder down to my nipple, sucking it into his mouth as his other hand moves to my other breast, causing my nipples to pebble under the attention. My hand drops to Garett's waistband and I fiddle with the buttons until I'm able to free his rapidly growing erection, and

groans slip from both our lips as I wrap my hand around him. Garett's groan around my sensitive nipple has my toes clenching as the vibrations cause little shocks of pleasure to run through me.

I am so caught up in desire that I don't notice Killian is behind me until I feel him pressed against my back, running his hands over my hips and humming in approval. Garett tweaks my nipple, causing a little gasp to escape my lips before standing up and raising his eyebrows at Killian, who is possessively running his hands over my body.

"This isn't about us. This is about giving Ari pleasure," Garett demands, this is the first time I've seen him truly stand up to Killian, and it's fucking hot to watch. There is tension in the air, and it could go either way.

"Don't tell me what to do, bear," Killian retorts, but there is no real anger in his voice as he drops his mouth to my neck, biting down where he claimed me.

"Fuck!" I cry out, waves of pleasure shoot through me as he continues to lick and suck on the claiming mark. I can feel the sly smile that crosses his lips against my skin. It's a possessive and dirty move to pull, seeing as he's rubbing our bond in Garett's face. Enough is enough.

"Right, we are doing this differently," I say as I push them both away from me, completely flustered that I have two smoking hot guys fighting over my body. I can't think with them both touching me. "Kill, if you can't play nicely you can watch, and if you behave you can join in later."

Killian bares his teeth at me in a snarl, his erection straining against his jeans as he goes to take a step towards me. He sees my gaze and stops moving, before raising his eyebrows as a smirk crosses his face when he realises I mean business.

"Fine, two can play that game. Go ahead," he says and I frown at him, wondering what he's up to.

I don't have much time to think about it as Garett puts his arms around me and throws me over his shoulder, causing a small shriek to leave my lips. Carrying me over to the bed, he gently places me down before lowering his body over mine. I can see he's pleased that I picked him over Killian, even if for the moment, and he's going to make the most of it. Garett is careful to keep most of his weight off me, so I'm able to reach into his underwear and stroke along the length of his cock. He presses kisses to my forehead, before making his way down my body until he's at the waistband of my underwear, kissing along my body as he goes. Pulling

away my knickers, he wastes no time and starts kissing my centre, gently at first and then with more force. His tongue shoots out and flicks against my clit, causing me to jerk with pleasure under him. He chuckles, sending vibrations through me. A noise from the corner of the room has me looking, only to see Killian sitting in the corner with his cock in his hand, lazily stroking it as he watches Garett tongue fuck me. I hadn't realised how much of a turn on it would be, and he knows it, if the grin on his face is anything to go by.

"Eyes on me Ari, I want to see that pretty face as Garett makes you come apart," he calls, and my eyes snap back to him as Garett slips a finger into my centre, causing my head to fall back with a moan. He eases another finger into me, and then another, timing his thrusts with his kissing and sucking against my clit. The pleasure builds within me and I know I'm about to come, so I bring my gaze back to Killian. Seeing the look of pure need on his face as he strokes his cock is enough to bring me to orgasm.

As the waves of pleasure start to fade, Garett crawls up my body and presses hot kisses to my mouth. I shouldn't still want them, but I do. Both of them.

"I need you. Fuck me," I demand, and I see the desire flare in Garett's eyes as a rumbling growl leaves his chest. I look across at Killian and an idea comes to me. Positioning myself so I'm on all fours, I see Garett's eyebrows rise in surprise until I smile at him. He moves behind me and I feel him press his cock against my entrance.

"Killian. Come here." He scowls at me, not used to being ordered around, but he does as I ask. Making sure I don't lose my balance, I use one hand to grasp his cock, causing his eyes to roll back in his head, before taking him into my mouth. Garett uses my distraction and slips into me, causing me to groan around Killian's cock.

"Fuck Ari, don't do that unless you want me to come already." Killian grabs a fistful of my hair and guides me. I expect him to be rough, but he's unexpectedly gentle. We fall into a rhythm, our pants and groans filling the room before Killian pulls away.

"No, I want to come inside you," he says, as he takes a step back, watching as Garett fucks me. Garett pulls out of me suddenly and I make a noise of protest, before he lays back on the bed and pulls me to straddle him.

"I want to see your face," he tells me breathlessly, and I can tell he had been holding on for this. I slide down onto his length and I ride him hard, gripping his shoulders. The look of love that he has for me is intense, and it's not long before we reach our climax with a cry. I fall to the bed next to Garett and look over at Killian who looks wrecked. I'm knackered, but seeing him desperate with need, I gesture over to him with a smile.

"About fucking time," he grumbles with a smile as he crawls up my body, pressing kisses to my claim mark, instantly causing those delicious sparks of pleasure along my body again. I wrap my legs around him and he pushes into me.

I expected him to be rough, since that's his style, but he takes his time, kissing and caressing me, all the while Garett lies next to me, stroking along my arms and legs. Killian doesn't rush, knowing that I'm a little tender, instead he makes love to me until I'm gasping and shuddering in his arms, and I feel him finally allow his own release.

Collapsing in a mess of limbs, I curl around my two guys with a smile on my face as I fall asleep.

"You fucked both of them at the same time?" Tori screeches gleefully, as we pick up our coffee order to go, her grin fills her face. The barista the other side of the counter nearly drops our coffee as he goes to hand it over to us. He re-evaluates me as his eyes travel up and down my body, a sensual smile appearing on his face. I snort out a laugh and nudge Tori in the ribs.

"Bloody hell woman, you don't have to tell the whole city," I hiss, but I can't keep the traitorous smile off my face. I walk away from the counter, ignoring the appraising looks from the barista as I walk to where the sugars and stirrers are kept. A cackling Tori follows behind, finding my embarrassment hilarious. "Well, I'm glad you're getting some amusement out of this," I jibe, but I sling my arm around her shoulders to reduce the sting of my words. She just grins at me and shakes my arm off so she can start pouring sugar packets into her coffee. I shake my head at her in mock disgust as she proceeds to pour her fifth sugar into the drink.

"I still don't know how you can drink it that sweet. You've ruined it," I tease, scrunching my nose up in disgust. What a waste of perfectly good coffee.

This is the one thing that the two of us have always disagreed on ever since I moved in with her all those years ago. I still remember when I sat on

her sofa and she told me I was moving in. I wasn't given an option, not that I had many other choices. I'd been sleeping on the streets those first few weeks and I had bumped into Tori, quite literally bumped into her. She had taken one look at my scrawny body and feral appearance, and had taken me to a burger joint. I hadn't trusted her, hell, I didn't trust anyone, but I was starving and she was offering free food. She had explained what she was, and that she knew what I was, and that I was going to be staying with her. I can't tell you why I decided to trust her, but I just had this feeling, and that gut instinct had never lead me astray before. So, when I was sitting in her apartment as she was explaining how everything would work, she had given me a drink with more sugar than coffee in it. We had then bonded over our opposing views on coffee.

I shake my head as I watch her take a drink of the monstrosity she has created with a happy smile on her lips.

"I don't know how you can drink it like that." I frown, taking a sip of my own coffee, savouring the rich, slightly bitter taste. "Ahh, now this is proper coffee," I comment, grinning at her look of disgust.

"Stop stalling. Tell me, tell me, *tell me*," she chants, and I know she won't let this drop until I tell her all the gory details.

"Well, I didn't have sex with both of them at the same time... Just one after the other... While the other was watching..." Tori's eyes get bigger as I continue to talk, her grin growing as a knowing look enters her eyes. "Okay, fine. I gave Killian a blowjob while Garett was fucking me," I admit quietly, as we walk out of the coffee shop, my smile scandalous.

I almost can't believe it happened myself, but when I had woken up this morning they were both still sharing the bed with me, one on either side of me, with possessive arms thrown over my waist. I had worried that Garett would have been upset about sharing me, but I pulled him aside this morning before he left to talk to him.

Garett steps out of the bathroom with a towel slung around his hips, water dripping from his hair and trailing down his body. I've never been jealous of a towel before, but I have a ridiculous urge to rip the towel from his body. I'm not sure what expression I'm wearing, but whatever Garett sees causes his eyes to light up as he leans against the door frame, crossing his arms with a smile as I walk towards him. Pressing my hands to his bare chest, I let my fingers walk down to where the towel is knotted, hooking my fingers over the edge, before gently pulling the towel a little lower. I glance

up at him and smile at the look of utter adoration he's giving me. It makes my heart hurt a little, knowing that someone as good as Garett loves me, and I wonder what I did right to deserve it.

"Are you okay with everything that happened last night?" I ask softly, I'm afraid of the answer, but I have to ask. Seeing my face tighten with worry, Garett wraps his arms around me, and pulls me in close to his body. I don't care that I'm getting wet, I'm just thankful he's holding me. He wouldn't do that if he was about to reject me, right?

"Well, it didn't exactly go how I had imagined it," he says wryly, making guilt course through me. "Killian isn't exactly my favourite guy, but I understand you guys share this bond. I'm not always going to want to share you, but it was unexpectedly hot." I pull away at his words so I can look up at him, gauging his mood. He's smiling and I know he's telling the truth. Pushing up onto my tiptoes I brush my lips against his, moaning as his hands drop down to my ass, picking me up as I wrap my legs around his waist...

"Earth to Ari!" Tori's amused expression lets me know I've been caught out having a sex daydream. "Man, here you are with your very own little harem and having sex with multiple guys each night, and my poor vagina is seeing less action than a nun. It's as dry as the Sahara down there—"

"Tori, will you stop talking about your vagina in public?" I laugh, not at all surprised with what she's saying. She doesn't seem to have a filter, and she certainly has no shame. Red-faced members of the public, who have obviously overheard what she was saying, are hurrying by with grins or looks of shock on their faces. "What happened to that guy from the pack. Mark was it?" I ask, ashamed to admit I had completely forgotten about him until now. Tori had gone on a few dates with one of the lower level wolves, and I know for a fact that they had been sleeping together. With a dramatic sigh she links arms with me, as we walk down the street towards the park we had agreed to check out together.

"Oh, little Mark. I broke his heart, you know? You wolves are really possessive and overprotective. I just wanted some fun but he wanted to settle down." She does sound regretful as she says this, but I know she can be quite harsh when ending relationships. Poor Mark.

"So what's going on with you and Eric?" She sounds hesitant as she asks this and I narrow my eyes at her. "What? He's a good guy! You should give

him a chance. He is literally starving while you're trying to make up your mind, but he’s too nice of a guy to say anything."

I huff out a sigh, knowing that she’s right, I just don't want to accept it.

"Don't I have enough guys without fate coming and messing with my life again?"

"So, you don't have any feelings for him?" Tori inquires with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, no. I didn't say that. I don't know what I feel. I mean, sure, he’s attractive, but I never thought that we could have a relationship, so it's weird to think about being in one with him now," I explain, biting my lip as I run through it in my mind. Eric has been the perfect gentleman since he arrived at the pack, and the guys seem to get on with him, except Killian, but that's no surprise. I can’t deny that I am beginning to have feelings for him, but how can I trust if these are my own feelings or just the bond we’re supposed to share? I felt an attraction to him before, when I thought he was human, but had never thought that going forward with my feelings was an option for me.

We fall into silence as we mull over everything that’s been said, the reason behind why we are both here weighing heavily on our minds.

We enter the park and Tori glances around before nodding in a certain direction. We’re in the park where the latest 'kidnapping' happened. We received a call from the avian shifters’ Alpha this morning, telling us that one of their falcons had been taken and the body was dumped here in the early hours. The body had been mutilated again.

“Have you found anything? Are your bloodhound senses working?” I tease, knowing Tori hates it when I compare her to a magic sniffing bloodhound. Her rare ability makes her very useful for things like this, but she hates it when I use that analogy. She glares at me, pointing at me threateningly.

“If you don’t cut it out with the dog jokes, I will hunt down another mate for you.” Her tone is teasing, so I know I’m not really in trouble. I mock gasp, clutching at my chest. I don’t think I could cope with another mate.

Following Tori to an open spot in the park, I watch her silently as she makes some sort of gesture with her hands and then drops to her knees, feeling for something on the ground.

"Tor, what are you doing?" I mutter under my breath and look around us, the humans are sure to start asking questions if two people are rummaging around in the grass.

"Relax, I placed a spell. The norms can't see us. Get down here, will you?" she instructs, and I roll my eyes as I crouch down to her level, looking at the plain grass, wondering what the hell she's looking for since it just looks like grass to me. It feels like a weird place for a crime scene, and although she has assured me that the humans, or norms as she calls them, can't see us, it feels like we're exposed. Mumbling under her breath, she's frowning as she runs her hands over the ground.

"They have a really strong magic user," she mutters, her eyes narrowed as she continues whispering before sitting back on her heels with a smug grin. "But not as strong as me. Got ya!" Her face is lit up, but soon drops to a frown again as she looks at the ground. I look down at what has her attention and gasp, falling back a little when I see that we're surrounded by a ring of glowing, purple runes. I have the heebie-jeebies just looking at them, but Tori doesn't seem worried, so I guess they aren't dangerous.

"Chill out Ari, they aren't active, the magic has been used up. This is just like a fingerprint. You can't use magic without leaving an imprint behind. I used my magic to make it visible," she says distractedly, as she looks closer at the runes, running her fingers over them.

"Do you know what the spell was?" I ask quietly. I don't know why I'm whispering, but my hackles have risen and my wolf is prowling under my skin. I glance around us to check no one is watching. There are only a few people in the park with us, and no one seems to be paying us any attention. Tori's spell will stop the humans from seeing us, but any supernaturals walking by would be able to see what we're doing. Alex had wanted us to bring the others to make sure we were protected, but I had said no. Tori and I can look after ourselves, plus we are in a public place during the middle of the day.

"Hm, there are runes of holding, silence, and invisibility here. So, they wanted to keep hold of the shifter for a while, and make sure no one saw or heard anything. There are some more complicated ones I need more time to explore. I'll draw them and research them later."

"Can't you just come back?" I question, confused by her hurriedly scribbling in a notebook she has produced with a flick of her hand.

"The imprint fades with time, which is why I said we needed to come here today. We needed to make sure we got here while it was still fresh," she explains, but I can tell she isn't really paying attention, her gaze firmly on the runes, which now that I'm looking at them, I can see that they are fading.

My wolf jumps to the surface again, ready to protect me, trying to alert me to danger. The hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention and I know we are being watched. I try to glance around surreptitiously so not to give the game away, and out of the corner of my eye I see someone just outside of the park, watching us. They aren't even trying to be inconspicuous so I decide *fuck it*, I'm going to let them know I'm aware they are watching us. Turning to face the stalker, I glare at them before realising I recognise him. He was one of the agents from ASP that took me in for questioning, the one who warned me that my pack was going to be attacked. I don't remember his name, but he was the friendlier of the two agents. I narrow my eyes when he doesn't move, and he just keeps watching us. After a moment, he turns and walks away. I take a step forward to follow after him, needing answers.

"Ari, everything okay?" I glance back down at my best friend. I'm getting a bad feeling, and I can't just leave her here on her own. I grumble internally but smile at her anxiously.

"We were being watched, but they have gone now. Can we hurry this up?" I ask, watching as she looks around with a frown before nodding and closing her notebook, and it disappears again with a wave of her hand.

"Yeah, I'm done now anyway."

Standing up, she waves her hand over the ground and the glowing runes disappear.

"I'm going to drop the shield, so the norms will be able to see us. Just start walking like we were here all along," she explains in a low voice, as she links arms with me before snapping her fingers and pulling me into a walk. No one seems to notice anything, and the two of us talk about inane things just like two best friends walking together would. We leave the park and start heading down the street. We had planned to grab some dinner together and are now on the lookout for somewhere to eat. My appetite has soured after what we discovered and being watched, but I'm determined to enjoy my time with Tori. We see so little of each other now that I'm living with the Pack and she's staying somewhere safe. We had decided it was best

if I didn't know where she was staying, in fact, no one does. This makes me nervous, since I won't know where to go if anything happens to her, but it's safer that no one knows.

We walk through town towards the quieter, industrial area. It's a little known secret that one of the best Italian restaurants in the city is out here, and while it's a little way out, it's worth the walk. The sun is beginning to set, but it's still bright enough where we can see everything, the view around us is bathed in a warm, orange glow.

"There's no way you can fit a whole slice of pizza in your mouth," I scoff at my best friend as we walk, my shoulders shaking with laughter. That laughter just increases at the indignant look on her face.

"Ari, my friend, you seriously underestimate me. I could totally—" Tori's argument is cut off when we hear a strange noise. Frowning, we stop walking to see if we can hear it again, glancing around us.

My adrenaline causes my wolf to perk up within me, putting me on high alert again. Tori looks green, like something is making her ill.

"Someone is using magic," she gasps out, like it's choking her. "Strong magic."

For a moment I think they are using it on her, I've not seen her react to magic being used like this before and it makes panic rise inside me. She points towards an alley further down the road, and I realise she's showing me where the magic is being used. I strain my ears to see if I can catch anything, but all I can hear is our breathing and quiet footsteps as we creep forward.

As we reach the mouth of the alleyway, I look over at Tori. I want to tell her to go somewhere safe, but I know she would just be insulted, besides, she can probably protect herself better than I can with the amount of fire power she has with her magic. A feeling of menace is rolling from alley, and I know whatever is happening is evil. With a deep breath I take a step into the alleyway and feel my stomach drop at the sight before me.

A male shifter is pinned to the ground, with glowing spikes of what I assume is magic. I can see that he's screaming from the look of agony in his face and the way he's thrashing around on the ground, but no sounds are coming from his mouth. I remember what Tori said about the runes we found in the park, marks of silence and holding. They were keeping him silent while they tortured him, so no one heard him and came looking. Three guys surround the shifter, they are wearing cloaks with the hoods up

like something out of a sick movie, but I can tell from the power coming off one of them that he's a wolf. Crouched over the poor male pinned to the floor, the shifter twists in his position, slicing into the bare chest of the male with his partially turned hand. As he turns, part of his face becomes visible, and a sick smirk greets me as he enjoys the screams of the shifter. I recognise that sick smile, I've suffered under the hands of that twisted fucker. Terrance. The now Alpha of Shadow Pack.

"*Just do as we say Ari. It's simple. One little job and you can come and join us in the main house." Terrance's voice washes over me from where I kneel in the dark, grimy room. I've heard this all before, this little routine where he acts like what he's about to do pains him.*

"I'll treat you like a princess, you'll have whatever you want. All the food you could eat. All you need to do is a little job for us." I shudder at the mention of him treating me like a princess, I know how he treats his women. My stomach betrays me at the mention of food and growls loudly, twisting painfully, reminding me that it must have been at least a day since I last ate anything.

"I hate treating you like this." Liar. "Just say yes."

I usually just stay silent, but today feels different, maybe madness has finally hit me. I lift my head to look at him, the gentle shift of my body makes the chain around my ankle rattle. They don't usually chain me, but I tried to attack them last time, so this is my punishment. Terrance's face lights up as he sees me lift my head, especially when I give him a small smile.

"Go fuck yourself Terrance." The words are rough and raspy, I haven't spoken to anyone in a while, so the words break from my dry throat. It's worth it for the look of fury that crosses his face though. He sighs and takes off his suit jacket, the one he always wears since he thinks it makes him look 'cultured.' Rolling up his shirtsleeves he walks towards me, fists raised. I know I'll suffer all the more for my remark, but I can't help it.

"I don't want to do this Ari, but your actions make me." His regretful tone is ruined by the bloodthirsty look on his face, and the eager anticipation that flashes in his eyes.

I'm dragged back out of the memory when Tori shakes my arm roughly. Now is not the time for a trip down memory lane. Rage fills me as I run my eyes over the bastard that made my life a misery, and my wolf pushes to the surface. I'm tempted to shift and let her tear through Terrance and the

bastards torturing the poor shifter on the ground, but I don't know what effect the runes they have cast will have on me. Besides, my shadow powers might be more useful here. If I can control them, that is. One of the robed dickheads must sense we're here as he spins around to face us, his mouth opening in a shout, no doubt to warn the others that someone watching them. They are all looking at us now, even the poor sod pinned to the ground is straining to look at us, and even though his voice is silenced, I can see the words he pleads at us.

Help me.

I look at Tori and I'm sure my expression matches hers, fury like I've never known is etched across her face, and her eyes glow purple in what I know means she's about to let loose a whole bucketload of magic.

"Let's fuck shit up," she eloquently says, before stepping into the alley, her hands now glowing with her unearthly power. Her hands flick, and I see the same circle of glowing runes surrounding the end of the alley where the shifter and his attackers stand. "Avoid stepping over the circle, the magic is still active." She grits out as I see her fingers moving in complex patterns. I have no idea what magic she's using but I trust her, she will deal with any magic users. Terrance, however, is mine.

As if he can hear me, Terrance stands up and pushes back the hood of his cloak, a look of sick joy crossing his face. His hands are covered with the blood of the trapped shifter, and as he steps over the rune circle, I can smell it on him. He reeks of Alpha power, blood, and fear.

"Ari, what a delight that you're here! I hadn't anticipated getting my hands on you today, must be my lucky day." Glee dances in his eyes as he steps towards me. There are flashes and bangs of magic being used around me, but when I glance over, I see Tori and one of the robed guys locked in a battle of wills, silently staring each other, only their lips and hands moving. The coward hasn't moved from his protective circle of runes, and I see that Tori is struggling to break through it.

I need to end this. I close my eyes and focus on that power within me, rage making it easier for me to find. I concentrate on my body, and let the shadow come forward, making my body go invisible. I watch, with pleasure, the furious look the falls over Terrance's face, before his eyes light up.

"You've been working on your powers. You are so strong, fit to be the mate of the Shadow Pack Alpha. Come home with me Ari, see the world I

am creating for us."

I shudder at his voice and the implications behind what he's saying, he truly believes that what he's doing is right. A cry from Tori has me looking around, seeing her on one knee, with blood dripping from a wound on her shoulder. Her eyes flash red and the air around her starts steaming as she calls her hellhounds to her.

I ghost toward Terrance, aiming right behind him so I can become corporeal behind his back. Just as I arrive behind him, the other robed dickhead who's been silent and unmoving until now, steps into my path. I'm so focused on pushing back my shadow that I don't notice. Pain, light, and screams of agony reach my ears. I look around in shock, the alley is coated in blood, and Terrance has spun to look at me, his face glowing with adoration and glee. I look around me in confusion, what the hell just happened. I'm covered in blood, but I can't see any wounds.

Loud snarls fill the alley and Terrance has the decency to look nervous at the presence of hellhounds. He runs back into the rune circle, nodding towards the magic user who makes some gestures, causing a blinding light to cover them. Once the light fades, they're gone, including the shifter who was staked to the floor. Although I couldn't hear Terrance after he crossed the runes, his message was clear. *Soon,* he had mouthed to me.

Turning my attention to Tori and the two snarling hellhounds standing guard in front of her, I eye her for wounds. Other than being exhausted and having the wound on her shoulder, she looks okay. I know calling the hounds takes a lot of her energy, so she will have to wait a bit before she sends them back.

"What the hell happened?" I ask, slumping to the ground next to her, leaning against the wall of the alley.

"I was going to ask you the same fucking question!" she responds, gesturing to my blood soaked body. "You disappeared, and then you reappeared behind dickhead number one, who I assume you knew. But then you fucking ripped the other guy apart when you reappeared inside him!" My eyes widen at Tori's explanation, and I look down at my body in disgust, now understanding what the strange bits stuck to me are. Bits of body. I shudder. I didn't realise it was possible to reappear inside someone! I lean forward and vomit as reality sets in. I just killed someone. I keep vomiting until all that's coming out is stomach acid, burning at my throat, while tears stream down my face. I'm dimly aware of a hand on my back

and Tori's voice in the distance. The only thought going through my head was the look of excited delight as Terrance realised what I'd done.

Like I am exactly the monster they hoped I would be.

Chapter fifteen

I'm lead into the shower of my ensuite silently. I haven't said a word since what happened in the alley. Tori must have been talking to someone on the phone because before I knew it, I was surrounded by my guys. Apparently they had already been on their way, Killian had sensed we were in danger through the bond. There had been lots of shouting and panicking, and I was being touched all over, so many hands. I had lost it a bit then, I didn't want anyone touching me, I was a monster and covered in the blood and body parts of the person I just killed. They have never seen me lose it like that before, and were unsure what to do, just looking at each other.

Eventually, I allowed Tori to lead me the to the car where she climbed in with me, her arms wrapped around me as she whispered nonsense in my ear. I don't remember the journey back, only that Tori held me. When we arrived at the Pack, she remained with me, and now she's helping me into the shower. I'm still fully clothed when she turns the hot water on in the shower. She gets caught in the flow, but she doesn't look like she cares. Smiling at me sadly, she shuts the glass door and starts walking out of the room.

"Please don't go. I don't want to be alone," I whisper, barely loud enough to be heard over the spray of the shower, but I know she hears me as

she turns back to look at me. She nods at me and steps out of the room, causing my heart to sink even more. Even she left me.

I lean my head against the cold tiles of the shower, taking deep breaths as I try not to think about what happened, about what coats my skin. I scrub at my arms, watching the water turn red. My scrubbing becomes more vigorous as I scratch at my arms, desperate to feel clean. I hear his screams in my head as I tear his body apart. I feel my stomach lurch as it tries to empty itself again, but nothing comes out, my retching loud in the empty bathroom.

The door opens, but I don't turn to look, I scrub at my hair. I can feel *bits* of him on me, evidence of my evil on my body for all to see. I hear the person removing clothing and feel a blast of cool air as the shower door is opened. I continue to scrub and pull at my hair, the tangles and knots making it painful.

"Ari. Stop. You'll hurt yourself." Seb's voice rushes over me. I close my eyes and press my forehead against the cool tiles again. Of all of the guys they could send in after me, they send Seb? My innocent, gentle Seb?

"You shouldn't be in here. I could hurt you." My voice is broken as I open my eyes and focus on the blood tinged water swirling around our feet.

"You would never hurt me Ari," he says with such confidence that I look up, glancing over my shoulder to meet his blazing eyes. "Besides, I'm not as weak as I used to be." So it's not just me who noticed that then, these waves of power that keep emitting from him. "Face the wall," he commands, and it breaks through my painful fog of despair enough for me to raise an eyebrow at him. He lifts the bottle of shampoo that has appeared in his hands. "Face the wall," he repeats with a gentle push on my shoulder, some of that unnatural power filling the shower.

I do as he says and close my eyes when his hands touch my scalp. He gently works though the knots in my hair, not mentioning the blood or bits of gore that are stuck to it. I'm not sure how long we're like this for, but his gentle administrations relax me enough that I'm feeling more like myself again. He guides my head so it's under the spray of the shower, and I sigh as his fingers run through my hair, making sure it's clean.

"We need to get you out of those wet clothes." His quiet voice has me opening my eyes, looking down at my body. He's right, the clothes are sticking to my skin from being under the water for so long.

With Seb's help, I strip from my ruined clothing, wincing at the feeling and trying to ignore the blood that drips from it as I peel it away. I hear a bottle open, and soon we are surrounded by the smell of jasmine from my favourite shower gel. I feel Seb's hands on my skin, and relax into him as he works on my muscles, washing the carnage from me. His hands pause as his fingers brush the underside of my breasts, his slight growl filling the small space. I find that I want his hands all over me, to make me feel love, to help me stop feeling like a monster. Placing my hands over his, I guide them up so they are on my breasts.

"Ari..." His voice is strained, like he’s trying to hold himself back.

I turn around so I’m facing him, realising for the first time that he’s naked, and raise an eyebrow. His eyes are locked on my body and I know he wants me. Without saying anything I pull him to me, pressing our bodies together. Our kiss starts off gentle, like the Seb I know, nipping at my lips as his hands skim my body, exploring, but soon the kisses become harder and more demanding. I meet him kiss for kiss, my hand dropping between us to his cock, pleased to find it hard and eager. His breath comes out in a hiss, and he pulls away and presses his forehead to mine, closing his eyes as if he's in pain. I use his distraction to stroke up and down his length, a growl leaving his chest and making me clench my thighs together in anticipation.

"Alex," he calls out, sounding torn as he continues to growl quietly. His power pulses through the room, it's odd, not natural, but it's heady and calling to me. Part of me wonders why he called Alex, but the rest of me doesn't care.

Alex pushes the door open and stops in his tracks when he sees us, his eyes widening as he feels a wave of power rolling from Seb. I start kissing along Seb's neck, causing him to spasm slightly, and he grabs onto my shoulders hard enough to bruise. I keep my eyes on Alex the whole time, his arousal obvious from seeing the two of us together like this. He starts peeling off his clothes and opens the door to the shower. I should be surprised, but I'm not. For some reason, Seb needs Alex here. I had thought it was the whole, 'you have to sleep with the Alphas first' thing, but I suspect it has something to do with all this extra power that's rolling off him. He looks like he’s struggling to stay in control. Alex seems to see this too, since he takes a step closer, putting his hand on Seb's shoulder.

"Take a step back," he orders, some of his Alpha power slipping in there. Seb's eyes narrow and a slight growl leaves his lips again, but he does

as he’s told, stepping back until he’s pressed against the shower tiles. Alex turns to me, a gentle smile on his face as he brushes a strand of my hair behind my ear, leaning forward and pressing a kiss against my lips. Seb's snarl fills the shower and Alex spins around with a furious look on his face.

"Do not snarl at your Alpha!" he commands, and for a moment I think he is talking about himself, until I realise he’s pointing at me.

Seb bows his head under the force of the command, slowly sinking to his knees. I would have thought he was upset from his position, but I can see the gleam in his eyes and the way his cock sits proud. This is exciting him. Kinky little shit.

"Sorry Alpha," he addresses me, glancing up before dropping his gaze back down. I go to walk to him, to pull him up, but a hand on my chest makes me stop. I look at Alex questioningly.

"Seb, show your Alpha how sorry you are," Alex commands again, his voice is harsh, but he has dropped his power enough that Seb didn't have to carry out the order if he didn't want to.

Seb, however, obliges, crawling forward on all fours until he reaches me, his hands sliding up my legs as he trails kisses along the way. Alex comes to stand behind me, pulling me against him and kicking my legs apart so Seb has better access. I gasp at Seb's first kiss against my core, his tongue running along my slit, then coming to rest against my clit, flicking it with a swipe of his tongue. If it weren’t for Alex holding me up, I would have collapsed into a puddle on the ground. I moan as Seb slides a finger into my core, and turn my head to lock eyes with Alex. A rumble of pleasure comes from Alex as he captures my lips in a searing kiss, keeping my body still as Seb worships me. Pulling away from our kiss, Alex looks down to see Seb watching us with undisguised desire in his eyes. He nods at Seb who stands up, and runs a predatory gaze over my body. I reach for him, wanting to run my hand over his cock again, but I don't get a chance before he’s pressed against me, his cock nudging against my entrance. I feel him hesitate and pull back to look at me, a question in his eyes.

"If you don't fuck me, I will bite you," I tell him, half joking. As his eyes widen and heat up at my words, I wonder if I threatened the wrong thing, Seb would probably enjoy me biting him.

Thankfully, I don't have to say anything else as he thrusts up into me.

I wrap my arms around his shoulder as he pounds into me, our breath mingling as we kiss. I feel Alex harden behind me, his erection pressing

against my back, and his strong arms holding me in place. We fall into a rhythm, the hot water running down our bodies, my mouth tracking some of the drops of water along Seb's shoulder and collarbone, nibbling trails along it, savouring his moans as it bite him gently.

"Look at him, he is completely at your mercy. We both are," Alex whispers in my ear, his voice husky and soft, at odds to his hard body holding me firmly in place. He bites down on my earlobe at the same moment Seb slides his hand between us, pressing down on my clit in time to his thrusts. This sends me over the edge, pleasure making me cry out as I bite down on Seb's shoulder. I feel the moment he lets himself go, shuddering against me as he comes. When the pleasure started to wane, Alex releases me and starts running his finger along my skin, making patterns in the water clinging to my skin, kissing along my shoulder. His erection is pressed against me, and knowing that he had been there the whole time, holding me up while Seb fucked me, is a major turn on. I wiggle against him, smiling at the growl that rumbles through his chest. Before I know it, both Seb and I have been spun, so Seb is pressed against the shower wall and Alex is pushed against my back.

"You want to play that game, huh?" He bites my earlobe again and I arch against him. I shouldn't be this ready for him, but need is swirling within me.

"Fuck me," I demand, and I feel him moving his cock to my entrance, gasping as he fills me with one thrust. Seb makes a noise in front of me and I meet his eyes, worried he would feel uncomfortable pinned against the wall while Alex fucks me, but his eyes are heavy lidded with satisfaction, and he’s aroused by what’s happening. Alex continues to pound into me from behind, his hand wrapping in my hair, pulling my head back as Seb starts to kiss along my skin, and his hand goes to my nipple that’s now exposed since I arched my back into Alex. I feel my orgasm start to build again, and I look at Seb, love shining in his eyes as he smiles at me, pressing a kiss to my lips. Alex grumbles and pulls gently on my hair so my head twists to meet his kiss. This is enough to undo me, and I tumble into my second orgasm, gasping into Alex’s mouth. He follows me over the edge, gasping with his own orgasm, before resting his forehead against my shoulder. We stay there, pressed together under the hot water from the shower for a while, our heavy breaths intermingling. We eventually pull apart and make use of the shower to clean ourselves off.

Later, we curl up on my bed, with Alex curled behind me and Seb in front of me, his head resting against my shoulder as he plays with a strand of my hair. Something has been bothering me for a while, and now that we're snuggled together, I can't fight the need to get it off my chest.

"You should hate me. I'm a monster," I mutter quietly, my face buried into Seb's chest as they curl around me. They are quiet for a moment and I know they are thinking about what I did today, what I'm capable of, but their hands continuing to stroke patterns on my arms. Seb is frowning the whole time and he pulls my gaze to meet his.

"We all carry darkness within us, and we don't judge you for what happened. We love you Ari, darkness and all."

Alex makes a noise of agreement before turning me around in his arms so I'm facing him, pressing a gentle kiss to my lips.

"Don't let them win. If you believe you're a monster, then Shadow Pack has achieved their goal," Alex says gently, but there's fire in his eyes. I frown as I digest what he said, before meeting his gaze again, and nodding. He's right, I won't let Shadow Pack win.

For the rest of the night, they show me how much they love me, worshipping my body into the early hours of the morning.

Chapter Sixteen

Today is going to be full of meetings and me repeating myself for what feels like the hundredth time. Alpha Mortlock needs me to tell him what happened, and the other Alphas have called a meeting. I'm surprised I was left alone yesterday evening anyway, given the seriousness of what happened. I found out at breakfast that the Alpha had ordered I be left in peace last night, although this had caused a strain with the other shifter packs, since everyone wanted answers and were not prepared to wait. I'm filled with gratitude that Alpha Mortlock allowed me those hours to come to terms with what I did and what we saw. I think he allowed that time for Alex and Seb too, we all needed to be together last night. Apparently Killian went a little crazy when he saw me covered in blood, not realising it wasn't mine, and had to spend some time in his wolf form to blow off steam.

I sit on the edge of the bed and try to tame my hair, the brush catching on the tangles and causing me to snarl at my appearance in the mirror. Seb is just walking out of the bathroom, a towel tied around his waist, and he pauses when he sees me struggling with the brush.

"Let me," he says softly and he climbs onto the bed behind me, taking the brush and working gently through my hair. The movements are soothing

and I close my eyes as he works, enjoying his soft touch. "Perfect," he announces and I open my eyes and smile up at him.

"Thank you."

There is a knock at the door downstairs and I hear someone open it. Thanks to my supernatural hearing, I can hear the quiet greetings and the guests being lead into the living room, so I know Alpha Mortlock, Isa, and Alex are downstairs. I knew this meeting was coming, Alex had warned me this morning that he would have to speak with Alpha Mortlock, and that the other packs would need to know about what I saw. It affected us all, so it was only fair that we shared the information. The question was, how much is the Alpha going to tell the other packs? The reason Shadow Pack is after me is because of my Shadowborn abilities, so do I reveal this to the shifter community? On a separate, selfish level, I'm also dreading admitting to the others downstairs what I am capable of, that I killed someone last night.

With a sigh I push up from the edge of the bed and make my way downstairs, Seb following behind me. No point putting this off. As I walk into the room I see everyone is here, Eric included, all except Garett who is with his Pack, explaining what happened to his Alpha. Tori sits on one of the sofas and pats the seat next to her when she sees me.

"Good morning Alpha Mortlock, Alex, Isa," I greet them, and give them a slight nod of my head before sitting next to Tori, who's smiling as she immediately wraps her arms around me. She stayed here in one of the spare rooms last night, wanting to be close to me, not to mention the fact her magic had been drained from calling the hellhounds. I pull away from her quickly when I remember she had been injured, and guilt runs through me because I had forgotten.

"Is your arm okay?" I ask, pulling at her jumper to try and see the skin on her shoulder, but she laughs and bats my hands away.

"I'm fine, I used a healing spell when we got here," she tells me, and then matches my expression and boops me on the nose when she sees my frown. "No. Stop feeling guilty. You had your own issues going on. You don't have to be super Ari, saving everyone. You have to focus on you sometimes." I roll my eyes at her lecture, having heard it a hundred times before, and I know she's right.

"Ari," the Alpha calls, and my gaze immediately goes to him. He's smiling at the two of us, and his expression looks apologetic, like he's sorry he has to break up our conversation, but I understand this is important. "Can

you tell me what happened yesterday?" he requests, and the room goes quiet as everyone turns their attention to me.

"As you know, Tori and I went to look at the most recent disappearance scene yesterday." Nods fill the room and I glance at Tori to see if she's okay with me speaking of her involvement. She nods, so I continue. "Tori used her magic to find the scene and identify what magic is being used. We found runes to capture a shifter, and keep them silent and invisible. Tori didn't recognise some of the runes and is going to look into them. When we were there I felt someone watching us, and when I turned around I saw someone from ASP staring at me. It was the same agent from before." There are growls and hisses of anger in the room, which causes me to stop. Killian is pacing up and down the room, his fists clenching and unclenching the whole time. Alex and the Alpha are sharing a significant look, and Isa stays silent, but her expression is grim. Eric stays silent in the corner of the room, his gaze not leaving me, while Seb's upper lip is pulled back in a snarl. It's his reaction that surprises me the most. In a room full of dominant shifters, he would normally be quiet and subservient, but he looks like he's struggling to control his wolf. I glance at Mortlock and notice that he has seen the same thing I have. He meets my gaze and nods for me to continue.

"He left when he saw me looking at him. Tori and I then went to get some food, and on our way to the restaurant Tori felt someone using magic, a lot of it. We followed it and found someone, a shifter, trapped in a ring of runes, pinned to the ground." I continue to describe the three robed people in the ring with him, how we couldn't hear and touch them past the runes. When I mention that Terrance was in the circle, I'm met with more snarls and growls. Even Eric looks affected by this piece of information, his expression becoming dark and his eyes becoming almost black, as unnatural power starts to emit from his corner of the room.

"Enough!" Alpha Mortlock commands, his power filling the room and grabbing the attention of the snarling males. "Ari is safe, she's here with us. We need to know the facts, if you can't control yourself then leave." He looks around the room, meeting the eyes of each of the guys, particularly Seb, who I notice is nodding his head in acknowledgement. "Ari, can you continue please?"

"Terrance tried to get me to fight him. The magic user in the circle started attacking Tori, so she was working on getting through the runes. I used my shadow powers to ghost past Terrance and it worked, but when I

tried to reappear behind him someone walked into my path as I was reappearing, and I couldn't stop it." My voice goes quiet as I explain, until I finish and drop my eyes in shame, waiting for the judgement to come my way.

"You exploded a man with your power?" Isa's strong German accent greets me, and I look up to meet her usually stoic face, which is graced with a small smile. "I've met a few men that I have wanted to make explode in my time."

I snort out a laugh, unable to hold it back in my surprise, and Tori giggles beside me. The tension in the room has been broken, and for some reason my eyes are drawn towards Eric who has an understanding look on his face. I can tell there is something he wants to say to me, but not with everyone around.

"So what happens next? I assume we need to let the other Alphas know?" I turn to address the Alpha directly, since it will be his decision as to what we do next. Mortlock leans back in his seat and nods at me with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"I've already told them a little of what we know. They wanted to speak with you, but I told them you needed to heal after the attack. I've told them nothing of your Shadowborn abilities and I will leave it up to you what you say." My heart warms at the Alpha's words, and he must see the surprise in my expression, because he frowns and gestures towards me. "Did you think I was going to make you reveal yourself? I won't ever force you to do that unless the sake of the pack depends on it, and even then, I would consult with you first. This is your decision, and I know it's not official, but you are part of this pack now, whether you admit it or not," he finishes with a little smile, and I have to fight the tears that threaten to fall. I nod at his words, not trusting my voice. Tori squeezes my hand and I turn to her with a smile. She knows how difficult it is for me to open up to others and accept people into my life, so she understands this is a big moment for me.

"We have something else you need to know." Alex's tone is guarded, so I know it's not good news. I look over and see both the Alpha and Beta are frowning, as if they don't want to tell me. "The shifter that was taken was found dead this morning, just outside of their packs boundaries. The words *'See you soon'* were carved into his back. We think they were aimed at you."

My vision spins and my ears start to ring. I need to get some fresh air so I get to my feet, it feels like the walls are closing in on me.

"Ari?" someone calls, but I'm so focused on getting out of the room that I don't register who it is.

"Give her a moment, she needs some air," a deep voice answers.

I hurry out of the room, blindly pushing at the front door before falling to my knees in the grass outside the house. I'm going to vomit. I lean forward and retch, my breakfast threatening to make a reappearance. Images of the shifter we were unable to save keep floating in my head, him mouthing the words *help me* over and over again. I groan, bringing my hands to my head as I take deep breaths. After a few minutes the feeling of nausea starts to recede, and I realise someone is sitting with me, not touching, but close enough that if I were to reach back our hands would be touching. I should have realised from the humming in my chest that it was Killian.

"I know what it's like to feel responsible for the death of others." His voice is deeper than usual as he remembers his pack and the fate that befell them. I turn to see him sitting on the steps leading up to the porch, looking off at the trees that border the house, but I can tell he isn't really seeing them. I reach out and take hold of his hand, knowing his guilt will always be a burden he carries around with him. He didn't kill his wolves, but he trusted someone who betrayed them, resulting in all but Killian dying, his mate included. He blows out a deep breath and turns to meet my gaze. I'm hit by the agony I can see in his eyes, and I crawl forward until out foreheads are pressed together. We don't always agree and we fight like cats and dogs, but Killian understands the dark part of me I fight with, and the guilt I carry with me.

"None of it's your fault. Not that he walked into you reappearing, and not the shifter they killed."

"But if I had told you guys the details sooner, we might have been able to find him, to save him!"

"The moment he was captured his hours were numbered, you know that. The actions of the Shadow Pack, and whoever is working with them, are not your fault, nor your sole responsibility." I look away as he speaks, but he gently pulls my face back to look at him "You are part of the pack, even if we have to leave and create our very own pack with the seven of us."

"Seven?" I ask, confused. Had I adopted more people to my rapidly growing harem?

"You, me, Garett, Alex, Seb, Eric, and Tori." I blink at him in surprise, and he smiles at my expression, chuckling slightly.

"You include Eric and Tori?" I thought he hated Eric, since he ignored him all the time, often refusing to acknowledge his presence in the room.

"Well, Eric is just as much a part of this as I am. Fate is bringing us together for some reason, we just need to figure out what." His expression has adopted his typical scowl and his voice is resigned. There's the Killian I know and love. "And Tori is part of your family, so she is part of ours."

"You would accept a witch into our pack, for me?" I stumble over the words *our pack* as I ask the question, gobsmacked he would do that for me. I don't want to focus on the fact that he's offering to start our own pack just yet, I'm not ready to think about that, but the fact that he *has* thought about it warms my heart.

"You don't get it, do you?" he questions, his voice teasing as he pushes to his feet, and reaches his hand down to help me up. Standing, I look up at him, the confusion must be evident in my face as he just smiles and presses a kiss to my lips. It's not the searing, possessive kiss I'm used to from Killian, but a sweet peck on the lips that leaves me wanting more. He just smirks and walks back into the house. Bastard.

"What don't I get?" I call after him, but he ignores me and walks back into the main room. I'm about to follow after him and demand he answers me, when Eric walks through the door with a steaming cup of coffee in his hands. His stunning blue eyes are kind and show empathy as he walks towards me.

"You've had a tough couple of days, I thought you could use this." He hands me the coffee and I smile at him gratefully. I'm still not sure how he fits in with everything here, but I can't deny the pull I feel towards him. It's different than the feeling I have for the other guys. It's more like I *need* to be near him. With the true Mated pair bond with Killian, it's a constant tugging sensation when we're apart, like he has a part of me and has taken it with him, making being apart difficult. Whereas with Eric, it's more like being with him soothes a part of me, being together just feels *right*.

I bring the mug to my lips and inhale the comforting smell of coffee, blowing on it before taking a drink. It's too hot to drink really, but I can't help but take small sips.

"Thank you. How are you?" I ask, feeling ashamed that I haven't been asking that much lately, in fact, I've barely had the chance to talk to him

since that day in the coffee shop, guilt fills me. He smiles and gestures towards the house.

"I'm about to have a visit from a patient, I believe you know them already, do you want to assist me? I imagine you miss being hands on with your patients," he offers, and a smile lights my face, I do miss seeing my patients.

"I would like that." He nods at me with a smile and we walk together into the house, and through the corridor to the rooms in the back, which act as a medical practice. There are two examination rooms, as well as a room with a set of beds, acting as a small ward should we need it. Thankfully, since I've been here we only needed to use that room once after the attack on the pack, and luckily the injuries were only minor and we used it as a waiting room. Following Eric into one of the rooms, I'm surprised to see my name has been painted on the other door to the room I use as my consultation room. Sneaky buggers, I haven't agreed to stay here, but they have obviously decided that I will be. I smile and shake my head. Eric gestures for me to take the seat behind the desk as he moves around the room, getting it ready to see his first patient, before washing his hands in the sink.

"To answer your earlier question, I'm okay. Better since I moved in here and I can be close to you. But it's difficult not being able to feed." He meets my eyes, and I know what he's saying. I haven't accepted the bond with him, not yet. I struggled with the idea of Killian as my mate, and now Eric is supposed to be my fated Mate too? It's a lot to comprehend. He hasn't once tried to make me feel guilty or force the bond on me though, which I appreciate, but I know we'll need to have this conversation sooner or later. I put my coffee mug down with a sigh and walk over to him, placing my hand on his arm.

However, as soon as I touch him he gasps like he's in pain, his face twisting as he falls towards me. I reach out to try and catch him, but he knocks into me and we both fall to the ground. Pain flashes through my head when my skull smashes into the counter on the way down. Eric lands on top of me, his heavy weight pinning me to the group. Usually I would be strong enough to move him off me, but the whack to my head has my vision doubling. For the second time in the last hour I feel like I'm going to vomit, as I wait for the dizziness to recede.

"Eric?" I rasp out, turning my head to look at his face, which is close to mine.

His eyes are wide open, and his pupils seem to fill his whole eye, only black is visible, and all traces of blue are gone. His body is rigid and a trickle of blood drops from his nose.

The scent of blood, both mine and his, fills the air, and I hear a commotion further in the house as the shifters' sense of smell picks it up.

"Ari!" I hear someone shout before several sets of feet start running towards us. The door slams open and Killian, Alex, and Tori come crowding into the room.

"Careful! Eric is having some sort of seizure!" I call out, worried they might accidentally hurt him if they aren't careful with him. Tori comes forward and crouches down to observe his face, looking solemn and nodding her head.

"He is having a vision," she confirms, and I scrunch up my face.

"I thought those stopped once he came to live with us because he's near me now? He knows that we're fated and I'm not in danger, so why is he having a vision?" Eric had told me how visions worked for incubi and their mates. Something triggers the bond and they get visions of their destined mate. Once they meet them, the visions stop.

"That's what we thought too. Come on Ari, you're bleeding, let's get you up." She looks to Killian and Alex who nod, and come further into the room. They help move Eric off me, picking him up and placing him onto the examination bed in the room. Tori moves forward to help me up and I groan as I stand, putting my hand to my head. I wince as I feel a wetness running down my neck.

"Ari!" Eric shouts, his eyes wide in panic. The blue of his irises are back now as he frantically looks around the room for me. As soon as he sees me, he throws his legs off the side of the bed and tries to hurry to my side, although Alex has to grab him when his legs start to give way.

"Dude, just sit down for a second. Ari is fine," Alex tells him, helping him sit on the edge of the bed. Eric leans forward and put his head in his hands.

"Eric, are you okay? What happened?" I ask softly, not wanting to panic him again.

"I had a vision when you touched me." We had assumed that already, but he carries on before I can ask more. "It's unusual, because the visions

usually stop when you find your mate, but then the bond is usually accepted straight away, so this is an unusual situation anyway. Further visions sometimes happen when your mate is in danger." He sits back as he says this, his entire focus on me. I take a deep breath, before leaning back against the counter that is supporting me.

"So, I'm in danger?" No surprise there, I always seem to be in danger nowadays. He surprises me when he shakes his head though, looking at the others around the room.

"We all are. They are coming for us."

"Us? You mean Moon River pack?" Alex steps forward, a frown on his face as he tries to work out the threat. Eric just shakes his head again, looking like he's about to vomit.

"No, all of us. They are coming for all the shifters and those associated with them."

"Shit. Fuck!" Alex shouts. "Okay, Ari, are you okay here? I need to go speak with the Alpha. Killian, can you come with me? I could use your expertise." Killian just nods at Alex's request before leaning over to me, placing his hand on my cheek and pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead, before the two of them leave the room.

"I'll call Garett. I'll just be in the next room, you'll be okay?" Tori asks, as she fishes her phone from her pocket. I nod, waving her away, my eyes still on Eric. He's eyeing me up like I'm his next snack and my pulse speeds up. I don't think I'm in danger with him, but I'm suddenly reminded that he is a demon.

"Ari, we are all in danger. A fight is coming and I need to be strong enough to help keep you and the pack safe. I need to feed." I frown at his words, about to say no, we would have to accept the bond for that, wouldn't we? He sees my hesitation and shakes his head, holding his hand out to me. "I know you're not ready to accept the bond, but if you let me feed from you, I'll be strong enough to help. Please." I walk over to him wearily, and he raises his hand to the back of my head where I hit it from the fall. I wince when his fingertips brush it, and stare at the blood on his fingers as he pulls his hand away.

"You are already in pain, I can use that. I don't want to push you, but I need to be at full strength, or as close as I can get. Do you trust me?"

I look into his eyes, the eyes of a friend I've known and trusted for years. That friendship had been rocked by lies, but he's proven himself

since. I bite my lip in indecision, but there isn't really an option. If him feeding from my pain is going to help protect others, then I'll do it. I nod, trepidation filling me as a small smile appears on his face.

"You will feel a bit of pain, but I can make it pleasurable," he whispers into my ear as he pulls me closer, placing one hand on my waist, as the other comes up to touch the back of my head.

His fingers brush my wound and I feel a sharp bolt of pain before a strange pulling feeling fills me. The pain starts to tingle, the tingle spreading all over my body as I feel Eric press up against me. Need overtakes me as arousal spreads through my body, and the pain becomes pleasure running all along my skin. I feel like I'm on fire and I gasp as Eric presses a kiss to my forehead, the pleasure pain intensifying. I'm not sure how long this goes on for, time loses all meaning as I become absorbed in the sensation. This could become addictive. Eric pulls away from me and I gasp as the intense feeling leaves my body, leaving only a slight tingling running along my skin.

When I open my eyes, which I hadn't even realised I'd closed, I gasp as I look at Eric. He's practically glowing. He was good looking before, but his features have sharpened, making him even more handsome. His eyes *are* glowing, an eerie reddish glow comes from them as they focus on me. He raises his hand, which is glistening with my blood, and brings it to his lips, putting one finger in his mouth before sucking my blood from the appendage. I should be disgusted, but with the afterglow of whatever Eric just did to me, I find that it's a major turn on. I take a deep breath and step back. I need some space from the handsome demon in front of me before I make a decision that I'll regret.

Chapter Seventeen

After Eric's vision and premonitions of an attack, it was more important than ever to meet with the other Alphas. I feel responsible for what's happening. I know I'm not the one capturing, torturing, and killing these shifters, but somehow the Shadow Pack are involved. Not to mention the message that was carved into the back of the shifter I failed to save. Although the guys say otherwise, I will carry the weight of his death with me until the day I die. Knowing the Shadow Pack, they would have done that to him while he was still alive, just to inflict as much pain as possible.

The rest of the day is spent organising the meeting. Apparently a meeting with all of the shifter packs hasn't been called in over twenty years, so getting everyone together is proving to be difficult. Old rivalries and disputes are getting in the way of the organisation of a peaceful meeting. The local lion pride doesn't trust anyone, and the only reason they agreed to come was because the Alpha personally knows Alpha Mortlock. People seemed to think we were plotting for a war. This both helped and hindered our progress. The coyotes and the other wolf pack are eager to meet, since their losses are some of the highest. Some of the packs, such as the avian shifters and some of the collective groups of more uncommon shifters, like the otters and foxes, are more reluctant as they don't have large protective

groups like others do. I know we can count on Long Claw Bear Pack coming to the meeting.

Tori had been in touch with a couple of her friends in the witch community who aren't affiliated with any of the covens, and a few agreed to come to the meeting, just to listen. They were anxious because of the tension between wolves and the witches, but Tori assured them that they would be safe. Eric had even spoken with a couple of his demon friends who promised they would attend the meeting. Alpha Mortlock invited representatives from the fae and vampire communities, but we don't think they will come, since they believe issues such as these are below them. We warned them that they could be the next to experience the deaths.

The main issue causing problems is that although supernaturals from all species are disappearing, only the shifters are turning up dead after they had been taken. It's assumed that the others who were taken are also dead, but why were only the bodies of shifters being left?

That night, I'm surrounded by Seb and Alex in bed, who are wrapped around me, fast asleep, but I can't sleep. My thoughts keep going back to the shifter who was taken, and when I do finally fall asleep, I have dreams of being pinned to the ground as Terrance crouches over me, drawing runes into my skin as I scream. I wake up in a cold sweat, finding a blinking Alex and Seb looking around in confusion, before realising the noise that woke them up was me. They try to comfort me, but in the end there is no point in me staying in bed, so I get up, shower, and make breakfast for everyone. Eric is the only one awake this early in the morning, so we sit and talk about everything and anything to pass the time, as long as it has nothing to do with Shadow Pack or the meeting today. It's nice and I get to know him a bit better other than as just a doctor or an incubus. But our time together is over too soon, as everyone starts waking up and joining us in the kitchen, and before I know it, Alpha Mortlock arrived with a grim smile and the words I had been dreading.

"It's time."

The location that had been agreed upon for the meeting was a large, empty warehouse. I'm starting to hate warehouses, since only bad things have happened to me in them, but it was one of the only places large enough and with no humans around to see us. Tori and one of her friends had already been to the building and warded it so if there are and people around, they wouldn't get suspicious when they see lots of people arriving at the abandoned building. The last thing we need is for a bunch of humans to discover us having a meeting inside, plus we need protection. With this many shifters turning up in the same place, it makes us a target, especially when there are people who are trying to kill us anyway.

I walk inside the building and am surprised to see that it’s been decked out inside like a meeting hall, and is more cosy than I had thought it would be. The walls have been boarded and painted cream with wooden accents, chairs fill the space and a table is laid out at the back with refreshments. I raise my eyebrows at Alex as we walk in and he smiles.

"This is already a common meeting space for groups of shifters, just not usually *all* the groups of shifters. Besides, it's not a proper meeting without tea and coffee." I nod in acknowledgement of his comment, that makes sense. I knew there was some neutral territory in the city, I've just never used it before. The rest of the representatives from Moon River Pack file in behind me, and only the Alpha, Alex, and Isa had walked in before me. Killian should have been next, but he insisted that we walk in together, Seb following in last. I had objected, but Alex had told me about the importance of following protocol here. Seb insisted that he comes in last, explaining

that he didn't mind, but it doesn't sit right with me, he is just as important as the others and power levels shouldn't dictate that.

The bear pack is already here, and I immediately see Garett and his brothers standing next to their Alpha. I want to run over and throw my arms around him, but I know that would be frowned upon. I've missed having my bear around, all of the problems recently had meant that he was needed back with his pack, which I understand, it's just not easy being separated. Alpha Mortlock starts to walk over and greets the bear pack warmly. Each Alpha of the packs was allowed to bring their Beta and Gammas for protection, plus three representatives. Standing next to Alpha Philips is Garrett's oldest brother and another guy who looks like he belongs in a biker bar. In fact, all of the bears seemed to have that look about them, I would have to ask Garett later if having long hair was a requirement for being in their pack. A small smile crosses my lips at that thought. Introductions are made, and I learn that the guy I've not met before is Kurt, the Long Claw Beta. I turn to Max and raise my eyebrow.

"I didn't know you were the pack Gamma," I say with a smile. His position means he's strong. I knew Garett was strong, and when I met the rest of the family I had gotten the general impression that strength ran in the family, but I hadn't realised his brother was so strong. "You didn't tell me that your brother was the Gamma," I accuse in a teasing voice to Garett, who just rolls his eyes at me.

"Oh, think you've picked the wrong brother now? Besides, I didn't even tell you I had brothers until the other day, are you really that surprised?" he teases. That's true. I stick my tongue out at him and Alpha Philips chuckles before turning away with Alpha Mortlock, locked in conversation.

Some people might be bothered that they didn't know stuff about their partners, but honestly, I don't mind I only just found out. It's not like we have been dating and he was hiding me from his family. His family were fully aware of me, apparently, and things have only just recently settled down where we could begin exploring our relationship.

I glance around the room again, a lot of the shifter groups are here already, standing separately from each other. The Alphas are obvious, not just for their physical stature, but the power that is coming from them. I shake my head slightly, everyone is posturing and on edge. We should be supporting each other, but instead they seem alert, almost waiting for an attack from one of the other packs. I notice some of the Alphas are greeting

each other, old alliances, but there is a definite air of unease. I hope this meeting will help combat that.

Tori enters the building and when I see her grin at me, I release a breath I hadn't realised I'd been holding. She looks fierce tonight, dressed in tight black jeans and a deep purple blouse that shows off her deep tan skin. To top off the look, she has on a long leather jacket that falls to her knees and black leather boots. She looks like she's come to fight. I raise my eyebrow at her outfit and grin, shaking my head slightly at her. She gives me an innocent look and only then do I notice the guy following behind her, looking at our group nervously. He would probably look tall if he wasn't in a room full of shifters. The nervous glance at the wolves would have tipped me off that he's a witch, if it hadn't been for the amount of power surrounding him. Tori sees me looking and shakes her head just enough for me to catch. Okay, I would meet up with her about that later.

"Ari!" she greets, putting her arms around me in a hug. We had only seen each other a few hours ago, but I know this is to show the others in the room that different races and species could get on.

"Hey, Tori. Who's your friend?" I pull away from the hug and smile slightly at the nervous guy standing behind her. Tori looks back and smiles at him, and gesturing him forward, she placing a hand on his shoulder.

"This is James. He's another rebel witch like me who doesn't fit in with the city covens," she says with a bright smile, and James finally cracks a grin. A tiny one, but it's a start. I'm about to ask the two witches about the protection they have put around the building, when a commotion behind me catches my attention. I turn and see that Garett's brothers are staring our way, more specifically, at Tori. Max, Garett's oldest brother, looks like someone has just smacked him in the face with a shovel, and his brothers have frozen completely. It would be comical if it wasn't for the growl that starts emitting from Max's chest. I turn to look at Garett and start to worry when I see his stunned expression.

"Um, Garett, what's happening?" I ask quietly, and this seems to snap him out of whatever shock he's in. Cursing, he runs over to his brother and stands in front of him, with his hand placed on his chest as if to keep him in place. Jake and Ben, his twin brothers, are completely still, their eyes locked on Tori. Garett starts talking to them in a quiet voice and I can't make out what he's saying. Alpha Philips has realised something is wrong and strides over to the brothers, although after a moment of conversation he

pulls away sharply and stares at Tori, before taking Garett's place and holding Max back. The growling in his chest has raised a level and people in the room are starting to notice that something is going on. Garett jogs back over to us, a pained expression on his face as he reaches our sides.

"Tori, can you please take your hand off James?" he asks, causing me to look sharply at him. Tori, to her credit, does as he says and the growling in the room gets noticeably quieter.

"Garett, what the hell is going on?" I'm trying to keep my voice low, aware we are surrounded with beings that have supernatural hearing. Garett sighs and glances between Tori and me, before rubbing the back of his neck.

"Tori has set off a mating bond with my brothers."

"Wait, what?" Tori demands, before looking over Garett's shoulder at the guys who are staring intently at her. "How? I'm a witch!" Garett blows out a deep breath and shrugs.

"It has been known to happen. It's rare though," he explains, and I fight the need to roll my eyes. That's something I've been hearing a lot of recently. Tori keeps glancing over at Max and the twins, an intense look in her eyes.

"Is that why I feel like I want to fuck them here in the middle of the room with everyone watching?" Garett snorts out a laugh and looks adorably awkward at the turn of the conversation. "Is that what you feel with Killian all the time?" She shoots me a look and waggles her eyebrows at me suggestively. She’s taking this remarkably well, which causes me to frown.

"Doesn’t this bother you?" I ask, and I have to snap my fingers in her face to pull her attention back to me.

"I have three hot shifters who are made to fight for me, love me, and fuck me whenever I want. Why would I be bothered?" she retorts, her hands coming to her hips, and I have to laugh. When she puts it like that…

"Now is not the time for this. Just... stay with Ari, stay out of trouble, and we’ll try sort this out after the meeting," Garett pleads, turning to walk back to his brothers, before glancing over his shoulder at us again. "And please, to avoid any heads being ripped off, don't touch any guys." Tori just grins evilly and Garett groans, knowing he has his work cut out for him this evening. Staying out of trouble has never been something Tori and I have been good at.

The room has filled up now, almost so much so that the separate groups have to mingle a little. I try to keep an eye on Garett and his brothers out of the corner of my eye. He’s taken them to one side and is talking to them in a low voice. Their eyes are still locked on Tori, but they look a little more relaxed now. Tori keeps shifting her weight and her eyes repeatedly flicking to the bears, and I can't help the little smile that creeps onto my face.

"Welcome to having a mate," I say quietly, the evil little smile growing at her frustrated look.

"Does it always feel like this?" she mutters, shifting her weight again. "I feel like my vagina is about to explode." I snort out a laugh at her unexpected comment, and I know from the chuckles around us that the others heard her too.

"Yup. And I have five of them," I answer drily. She gives me a sympathetic look before her gaze is pulled back to the bears.

Alex walks over to me and places his hand on my shoulder to get my attention. I smile at him and realise he’s in Beta mode. There are two definite sides to Alex's personality: the fun, flirty side and the serious Beta, protector of the Pack. He’s standing tall and his eyes are moving around the room, open but also on the lookout for threats. Alex, as well as Pack protector, is my guide for the evening. I have no idea who most of the people in the room are, and as I have been asked to be a peacekeeper for the meeting, I need to know who everyone is.

"You see the group of shifters standing by the door?" He nods towards them discreetly and I make a noise of acknowledgement. "Those are the avian shifters, they have always been a bit flighty, excuse the pun, so they will probably be the first to leave. I'm actually surprised they came, they don't like to mix with others." On the way over, Alex had explained to me that the avian pack was made up of lots of different species of bird shifters, but they kept together in one larger pack for protection, since separately there wasn't enough of them to form a strong pack. "There are representatives from different species here tonight. There is Trina, an eagle shifter who generally acts as Alpha." He nods towards the group again, there are six of them, and I can instantly tell who Trina is. She’s holding herself with more confidence, and a man stands behind her and is looking around like he’s hunting for his next meal. A slight, pretty young woman stands next to Trina, eyeing everything nervously as if looking for all the exits. "Vlad, standing behind Trina, is a vulture, and the nervous looking

woman is Amy, she’s a sparrow." I raise my eyebrows at his explanations. I’m not at all surprised that Vlad is a vulture, he gives off a creepy scavenger feel, but I am surprised that a Sparrow shifter has been included in the representatives. Shifters that are classified as prey tend not to mix with the predators, since generally these shifter types are weaker and don't have as much power, so they avoid us.

Alex moves onto the other shifter groups around the room, coyotes, the other local wolf pack, and even the lions came.

Conversation in the room suddenly drops, and I turn to the door to see that Eric has arrived with a beautiful woman gliding in behind him. This woman oozes sex, everything about her screams it from her clothes, down to the way she walks. I would bet everything I own that she’s a succubus, and I realise what Eric was trying to explain to me when he said he isn’t a true incubus. Eric is good looking in an unearthly way, but this woman makes me want to rip my clothes off and throw myself at her feet. I notice that half the room is looking at her in disgust, and the other half in rapt longing, but the attention of the whole room is on her. From the look on her face I can tell she’s enjoying it. I raise an eyebrow at him and he walks over to us, his features schooled into his professional doctor’s mask, which I recognise from working with him at the hospital.

"Ari, this is Vella, she has come to listen and offer aid." I turn to look at the succubus, surprised she’s offered to help.

"Welcome Vella. The only aid we need at the moment is information, we are not looking for a fight." This point was reiterated to the packs when we were arranging this meeting; this was an opportunity to share information and plan, strength in numbers. We are not trying to fight. There may come a point where that is unavoidable, but until then, we need to know what we are up against. Vella tilts her head as she listens to me talk, her black silken hair tumbling forward, covering her mostly exposed chest. Up close, I can see that her eyes are almost entirely black, making her appear more demon than human. She takes hold of my fingers and raises them to her lips, kissing the back of my hand. I stiffen and have to fight not to pull my hand away from her grip.

"This is a shame. They have taken one of my girls, and I wish to return the favour." Her voice is soft and sultry, and I see several heads turn to listen as she talks.

"I’m sorry they have taken someone from you. We will try and aid you in finding her where we can." I gently pull my hand from her grasp. She turns to smile at Eric, and a small part of me wants to claw her eyes out for looking at him like that. I know it's stupid to feel this way, but I can't help the snarl that escapes my lips as she brushes her hand up his arm. Her eyes flick to me, and then back to Eric, her smile widening.

"You picked a strong heart Mate Eric," she says to him, and they walk away to greet the Alphas in the room, with Eric throwing me an apologetic look as they go.

"You know I didn't choose this Vella," he responds quietly. I don't catch her response before Seb shudders.

"Well, she gives me the creeps," he declares loudly, and I can't help the laugh building up in me from escaping.

"Succubus and incubus are the same, which is probably why you didn't know Eric was part incubus, he doesn't give off that feeling. Although once they reach a certain age and power level, they can suppress that otherworldly feeling, most of them just choose not to," Alex explains with an eye roll.

I glance at the clock, it's nearly eight, the time we had arranged from the meeting. It had initially been agreed to meet during the day, but then the vampires wouldn’t be able to attend, and it was decided that they should be given the opportunity to come, not that anyone thought they would show. The Alphas of each group, and Tori and Eric, have all gathered at the end of the room, discussing how the meeting is going to be run. I’m standing with them, just outside of their little circle, alongside the Betas who are looking anxiously at their Alphas. They must be finding it difficult to be in a room with so many potential threats to their leaders, and not being right by their side. Max, the bear Beta and Garett's brother, is standing on my right, and although he’s fighting to keep his eyes on Alpha Philips and on the lookout for threats, I can see his gaze keeps being drawn to Tori. Tori, on the other hand, looks focused, and I know it’s driving Max crazy. If he knew Tori, he would have known from the way she’s playing with the hem of her shirt that she isn't paying attention to anything that’s being said, despite her nodding along in all the right places.

Alex is standing on my left, his hand keeps brushing mine, and at first I thought it was by accident, but it has happened too many times now for it to be a coincidence.

The circle of Alphas breaks apart and I notice Alpha Mortlock look over for me. I'm just about to go over to join him when the doors open, and a group of shifters slink in. It's obvious they are shifters from their energy and the power they're throwing off, but I can't tell what type of shifters they are.

"They came," Alex comments, his tone shows his surprise as the group positions themselves by the doorway.

"Who are they?" I ask, keeping my eyes on the group. They are shifty, and they're looking around like they are expecting us to attack them.

"They call themselves Pack Unite." I raise my eyes at the name but he just shrugs. "They're one of the collective groups of shifters the Alpha was telling you about. So Murry there, the guys who's in charge?" He points to a guy who is talking quietly to the others, and they all seem to be looking to him for direction. "He's a fox shifter and he's the current Alpha of the group. Next to him is Louie, the badger shifter, and Lottie who is an otter shifter."

"How do they have an Alpha of different species?" I can't even imagine how that works, as the power levels are different across species, not to mention the fact that Alpha bonds don't work across species. I can feel the power of another species Alpha and choose to submit because I know they are strong, but I won't be compelled to obey like I would a wolf Alpha.

"They elect an Alpha." My mouth drops open in surprise, that actually works? "They run as Alpha for a set amount of time, and then another will be elected. It's the same with the avian shifters." I run what he's saying over in my mind, struggling with the idea of an elected alpha.

"So they are more like presidents?" I ask for clarification. Alex smiles and nods slightly.

"I guess, but don't let them hear you say that."

Everyone seems to have settled now that Pack Unite made their surprise entry, and I glance up when I hear my name called, seeing Alpha Mortlock gesturing for me to join him at the front of the room. I take a deep breath, time to get this over with.

As if by some unspoken signal, people begin to take their seats. I make my way over to Alpha Mortlock in the front of the room, my heart pounding at the thought of speaking before so many people. The doors open again and three beings glide in. The room is filled with hissing and growling, and I realise who has entered the warehouse.

"They are not to be harmed, they were invited here," I say loudly, looking to the Alphas to pass on the message, some do so instantly, while others look dubious, but the hissing quiets down. I look across at the three strangers, vampires if their undead energy is anything to go by. They have the typical runway model looks with sharp features that vampires tend to possess, and if you have any doubt they're undead, the unnatural stillness they have about them is enough to convince you otherwise.

"Damon sends his best wishes," the leader says, and although he doesn't raise his voice, it carries across the room. He's tall, and his appearance would suggest he was originally from Scandinavia, with his blue eyes and cropped blond hair, his voice has a hint of an accent that could attest for this. The woman to his left is short, and you would be forgiven if you were to say she looked 'cute,' especially since she's wearing a light blue dress that makes her look like a doll, but the hungry look in her eyes as she glances around the room takes away from that. Her crystal blonde hair falls in

ringlets, only adding to the innocent doll-like look. I have to fight to hide the shudder that fills me as I watch her. The three of them move further into the room, choosing to sit with Eric and Vella. It’s only then that I notice the last woman with the newcomers isn’t a vampire at all. Beneath her skirts are not two feet, but hooves. Now that I’m looking, I notice two very small horns poking out from the top of her long brown hair. Her facial features are human, but her eyes are lilac in colour, and are rimmed with the longest eyelashes I have ever seen. She’s wearing a floaty dress that falls to mid calf, and her upper body is entirely human in appearance. I know from experience that below her waist she will have goat legs. I had a fae phase when I first moved to the US, so I got um, well, acquainted with some of the local fae populations.

"She's a fawn," I mutter in shock, causing Alpha Mortlock to sharply inhale as he eyes up the new arrival. Her head flicks around to look straight at me, and I know she heard me. In fact, I now see the very tip of her pointed ears poking from the side of her hair. I nod respectfully at her, I don't want to piss off the fae. She turns back to her companions and this raises a question—are the fae and the vampires allies? What does this mean for us? Looking around at the other Alphas, I know they’re thinking the same thing from their worried expressions.

I get a look from Alpha Mortlock and I know this is my signal to begin the meeting, so I take a deep breath and look around the room. I have Killian on one side of me, and Garett on the other. There was a lot of debate about who would stand with me. I need to appear strong, so it was decided that Killian, as my fated Mate and an Alpha, would give the impression of strength to others who might think to threaten us. Killian also doesn't belong to any pack, and although he’s staying with Moon River, he is a guest. Alex and Seb had wanted to stand with me also, but Alex, as Beta for Moon River, needs to protect the Alpha, and Seb would not be taken seriously as a lower level pack member. Although it pains me, I agree that we need to appear strong. Strength is everything in the shifter community. Garett insisted on being by my side, and is a good choice since he isn't part of Moon River, so it makes us look more open to other packs, and being a bear also shows that different races of shifters can live together.

"Thank you for all coming today. I’m Ari, a lone wolf who has recently been staying with the Moon River Pack. I have been asked to be peacekeeper and run the meeting since I don't belong to any particular pack,

but I have ties with many of the groups here tonight," I introduce myself, hearing some grumbles as I explain my ties to those in the room. I've chosen not to reveal my relationship status, but I will if it will help the course of the meeting. "We are meeting to discuss the recent disappearances and murders of supernaturals."

"Why are the blood suckers and witches here?" someone in the room shouts. "None of them are being murdered, only shifter bodies are turning up dead," someone spits, and I realise it's one of the lion shifters.

"We have lost people too, lion. We deserve to be involved in this meeting as much as you do," the blond Scandinavian Vampire responds, he doesn't move a muscle, but his eyes flash with disdain at the shifters' comments, the only sign that he's bothered by what has been said. The lion looks like he's going to respond, if he had been in animal form his hackles would have been raised, his whole body bristling with anger. This guy is out to start a fight, and I need to calm things down fast.

"We are all here because our people are being taken against their will. Just because only the bodies of shifters are turning up, doesn't mean that the others are still alive. Given the time that they have been gone for, it's unlikely that they still live."

There are grumbles around me and I raise my hands to quiet them. I get some hard looks from the vampires and I notice that the witch Tori brought with her has lowered his head. The fawn, however, is just watching me with an interested look on her face. She makes me nervous. I clear my throat and look around the room again. I'm no public speaker, and I'm sure there is a softer way to say this, but they asked me here because of my ties and people might trust me. "I know that's probably not what anyone wants to hear, but it's the truth. We need to work together to figure out what's happening." I glance over at Alpha Philips, feeling encouraged by his small nod. "Alpha Philips, how many bears have you lost?"

"Five have been taken, and the bodies of all five have returned mutilated. One was just a cub." His voice is calm, but I can see the rage in his eyes at the loss of his people. There are outraged calls at the fact a child was taken. Rage runs through me, I hadn't realised that *children* were being taken.

"How was a child taken?" someone shouts out. I had been wondering the same thing, but I would not have asked it so callously. It's obvious that the bears are suffering from their losses. I see the Alpha bristle, as does

Max and the other bears. Even Garett looks ready to hit someone, but at a look from Philips, they all stay in place.

"The cub was with her mother at the time. We think that the mother was attacked, and the cub was taken as well."

We go around the room and the other packs share how many they have had go missing. Over twenty-five have been taken, and all of them have turned up dead, traces of magic found at all of the scenes.

"Have these all be reported to ASP?" I ask, gobsmacked by the amount of shifters taken, I hadn't realised it was on this big of a scale.

"Yeah, but ASP don't give a shit about us," someone shouts out.

"The only disappearances they have investigated are the vamps and witches. It's almost like they want a war on their hands," the Alpha from the coyotes chimes in. He’s been quiet up until now, and I can't help but wonder if that’s exactly what ASP is after. Based on the tension in the room and the hate towards ASP, they aren't far off from an all out war.

"Ari, will you explain what you saw the other day, please?" Alpha Mortlock prompts, and I take a deep breath to explain. We had already decided that I was going to tell them everything about how I had seen the ASP agent while we were investigating, and then about the attack. The only thing I left out was about how I had used my shadow powers and accidentally killed one of the cloaked guys. There’s silence in the room until I finish my story, and then the room erupts.

"ASP must be behind it, they were watching you!"

"Why didn't you stop it?"

"Shadow Pack were involved! Weren't they behind the attacks on Moon River?"

Killian sighs behind me as we watch everyone shouting. "Quiet!" he yells, and everyone listens, turning to look at us. Many look ready to start fighting again, but no one dares antagonise Killian, knowing his reputation.

"Ari, weren't you from Shadow Pack?" the fawn asks in a crystal clear voice, her eyes wide and innocent as she asks the question. The whole room turns from her to me, with accusing expressions on their faces, and as they do, a little smirk crosses her lips before falling back into a perfectly innocent look.

I raise my eyebrows at her, and continue addressing the room, heading off any more shouting.

"Yes, I was, which was why I was invited here. I know how they work and what their sick little minds are like." I turn around and lift the bottom of my shirt so they can see some of the scars on my back. "This is what Shadow Pack does to their pups, I was only six when I received my first punishments. I hold them no allegiance."

The room is silent after my admission, and several shifters in the room are looking at me with respect.

"Why would Shadow Pack be doing this?" the Coyote Alpha asks again, and I see the intelligence in his eyes as he works through what information he has.

"Shadow Pack aren't clever enough to be doing this on their own. I believe someone else is behind this and they are using Shadow Pack to do their dirty work. Shadow Pack has their own agenda as well. Me."

The room erupts into shouting again, but my attention is on the person who just entered the doorway in the back.

“What are we going to do?” someone asks, voices filling the room as people shout out ideas, but my focus is on the new arrival. They look around until their gaze lands on me.

“We should go to ASP again, show them how many shifters have gone missing now. Give them a reason to start looking.” The suggestion comes from the corner of the room, and voices rise to offer solutions.

“We need to do this carefully, show ASP we are being peaceful, that we just want to stop our people from being taken.” Alpha Mortlock’s voice rises above the murmur of voices.

I narrow my eyes on the stranger, who glances down at his watch before looking back up at me, and then mouths a word at me before silently slipping from the room again. I turn to look at Killian who’s glaring at the door where the person just left.

"That was the ASP agent who was watching me in the park with Tori." Killian looks at me sharply.

"Did you see what he said?" he asks, a grim look on his face.

"He said '*Run,*'" I whisper, dread lining my stomach at Killian's nod. I turn to look around, my eyes locking with Alex's. He just sees the panic in my eyes when the doors at the back of the room slam open.

"Everybody stop! ASP officers! I said stop moving!"

The room erupts with snarls and a flurry of activity. Before I know it, I’m surrounded by my guys and the Moon River representatives, as well as

Garett and the bear pack. Tori is by my side in a flash, Max and the twins surrounding her, glaring at anyone who comes close. The witch she brought with her, and Eric and the succubus, have joined us, forming a ring of supernaturals facing out at the threat.

The other packs have done similar things, surrounding their Alphas to protect them. The room is suddenly swarming with officers, all holding up guns, aiming at the Alphas in the room. The snarls and growls get louder as the leaders of the packs are threatened.

"You are breaking the law by organising plots against ASP. Those that leave peacefully now will be taken in for questioning before being released to their packs, you will not get into trouble as long as you comply," an ASP agent orders, looking around the room, his eyes landing on me. Many of the shifters move nervously from one foot to the other, particularly the avian shifters and the Unite shifters, who are eyeing the door. There's a moment of silence before a few break off and head for the door, being lead away by a couple of agents. Growls and cries of "traitor" get shouted as they leave. I use this time to watch the agents here, none of them are the agent who had been watching us in the park, who appeared to be warning us. But why would he do that?

"No law has been broken here. We are just meeting to discuss the disappearances." Alpha Philips steps forward to explain, raising his hands in a placating gesture.

"Stop moving!" the lead agent shouts, his gun aimed squarely at the Alpha.

"Yeah, the disappearances that you guys are doing *nothing about*," the mouthy lion shifter growls, his body shaking with anger and the effort it's taking him to hold back his lion, stalking forward towards the agent.

Everything seems to go in slow motion then. Guns are raised towards the lion shifter, warnings are shouted, but the guns are shot before the warnings have even been finished. My eyes are trained on the lead agent, who's still pointing his gun at Alpha Philips, the glint in his eyes is almost feral, like everything he wanted has come to pass. Although the Alpha hasn't moved a step, the gun is fired, going straight towards his heart. Without thinking I ghost forward, the shadows swallowing me and propelling me towards the Alpha, pushing him out of the pathway of the bullet. I'm not quite fast enough and the bullet pierces his shoulder. He falls to his knees with a shout. That's when the chaos really begins.

The room is filled with snarling and growling, the sound of bones popping, and gunshots fill the air as shifters give in to their animal forms, attacking the ASP agents.

"Do not attack! Defend only!" Alpha Mortlock is shouting out to us, as we pull back into a huddle. I look around to check that we still have everyone. Killian is next to me, watching the battle ahead carefully. Alex, Isa, and Seb are in wolf form, surrounding us and snarling at anyone who comes close. Eric and Vella are talking in quiet voices just to our right. Tori and James are standing close together, both of their hands glowing and moving in complicated patterns as they mutter under their breath, presumably working on some sort of protective spell. The bear pack has joined with us, and Garett is kneeling next to Alpha Philips, putting pressure on the wound, while Max, the twins, and the bear Beta are surrounding us, facing out towards the threat.

"We need to get out of here," Killian mutters, ducking as a stray bullet whizzes past his head. "They aren't actively shooting at us at the moment because we aren't attacking, but I don't trust that lead agent." I agree with him, I saw the look in his eyes as he aimed at Alpha Philips.

I crouch down and look at the bear Alpha's shoulder.

"Garett, can you move your hand please?" I ask, and the Alpha moans as the wound is exposed. I can see the bullet, but there doesn't appear to be too much damage, and his shifter genes are already causing the wound the heal. "I need to get you back to pack land so I can get this bullet out. We need to go, and I'm going to need your people to help us. Do you trust us to get you out of here?" I move my gaze from the wound to his face, and I'm startled by his expression of trust.

"With my life." He nods at me before looking over at his Gamma. "Max. We're getting out of here with Moon River Pack. Protect them like you would protect our own, we are in this together, got it?" Nods all around. The bear Beta and one of the twins helps Alpha Philips up to standing. With a look from his Alpha, the Beta turns into his bear form. Eric comes to my side, his face grim. I look around and see that Vella is gone, at my frown he shakes his head.

"I can't hold Vella back. She's gone to hunt." Screams meet his words and I glance over his shoulder to see an agent in Vella's arms, twitching in her embrace as she kisses him, his body shrivelling before my eyes. She drops his body with a satisfied look on her beautiful, gleaming face before

she calmly stalks off to find her next victim. I shudder and look at Eric, feeling sick.

"I won’t use my powers unless it’s to defend myself or protect you," he tells me solemnly, understanding what I was going ask without me having to say anything.

"Right, we stick together, protect each other’s back, but don't attack unless they attack you first. We don't want them having anything over us," Alpha Mortlock commands, his Alpha power washing over us, and I’m reminded again why he’s Alpha of the pack. The screaming and snarling is making it difficult to concentrate, but we all nod, agreeing to the plan.

As a unit we start making our way towards the exit. A couple of agents attempt to stop us, but the three wolves and the bear keep them away. As long as we stay together we are strong, and they can’t stop us.

Almost as soon as I think that, I see an agent throw something towards our group and a sinking feeling fill me. Stun grenades. Devices that were developed to take out a group of supernaturals by stunning them and neutralizing their gifts.

"Stun grenades!" I shout and run towards Tori, tackling her to the ground. The others have supernatural speed, they can move out of the way fast enough, Tori on the other hand…

I look around us, dismay sinking in as I see we are now spread out across the large room, fighting our way towards the exit. Thankfully no one is alone and they’re working together to get out. I can see my guys trying to make their way back over to me, but there are too many people between us. I don't know where they’re all coming from! They seem to be everywhere and the warehouse looks like a battleground.

"Ari, are you okay? What the hell was that?" Tori's voice cuts through the haze and I turn to look at her. She looks a bit bruised and battered, but okay, and motivates me to get the hell out of here.

"Okay, I’m fine. Right, stay behind me. We’re going to get out of here. Can you call your hellhounds?" I ask hopefully, but Tori just shakes her head at me, looking down at her hands in frustration.

"I can't access my magic, they have done something to nullify it."

"Shit!" I curse, before nodding and helping her to her feet.

We start moving across the room, Tori holding onto the back of my shirt so I don't lose her, dodging bodies and people fighting as we go. I’m torn, I want to help the shifters here, but I don't have an alliance with them, and I

could unknowingly start a war if I was to help one shifter group and not another. I hear a bear roar in pain and stop in my tracks, my heart stutters when I see Garett is okay, battling his way towards us, but his brother, Max, is in trouble, surrounded by several agents. Garett looks back over at me and he’s torn.

"Go! Help him!" I shout, and he nods before running over to help his brother.

We are nearly at the door when someone tackles me, sending me flying to the ground. Someone straddles my waist and a fist flies towards my face, and I narrowly miss it by trying to twist away. I can't tell if the agent trying to pin me to the ground is a man or a woman, because of the balaclava type mask covering their face. I buck my hips to try and throw them off, and I manage to catch them off guard and scrabble to my feet. They jump up with speed only granted by being a shifter. My wolf pushes to the surface in disgust and rage. Gunshots and screams are filling the air, but I focus on my attacker. A shifter siding with ASP against us is enough to make me feel sick. Killian and Alex's training runs through my head as the agent tries to tackle me again and pin my arms. I raise my knee and smash it against their groin, realizing my attacker is a man when he groans and crouches forward to protect his now crushed nuts. Kicking forward, I knock him to the ground. I wait for a few seconds to see if he’s going to get back up.

A shot nearby has me quickly standing to my full height and I look around for Tori. She’s staring at a bullet hole in the wall just to her left, before looking back at me, a nervous laugh escaping her.

"Fucking hell, that was close!" She steps towards me and the agent I just fought sits up and aims a gun at Tori. Everything seems to move in slow motion again as I run towards Tori, except this time my shadows don't respond to me. The gunshot goes off, shockingly loud, and pierces Tori in the forehead.

I watch as the shock briefly registers on her face, before her eyes go blank and her face drops. Her body soon follows, landing on the ground with a thud. In the background I hear what sounds like bellowing, but all I can focus on is Tori's lifeless body. Something registers within me and the world speeds back up to normal.

"No." I shake my head and run to her side, dropping to my knees. I can't look at the wound, if I do I’ll have to admit that Tori is dead. "No, no, no, no, no, this isn't happening," I mutter under my breath, my breathing

becoming faster and more erratic as I try to take her pulse. Nothing. Not a single heartbeat. I finally look up at Tori's face and the tiny bullet hole in the centre of her head. I try not to look at the back of her head, but I can smell the blood and I know it’s pointless. Hot tears pool in my eyes and a wordless scream rips out of my body, full of rage, hopelessness, and grief. I’m aware of my guys running towards me, my name is being shouted out, but all I can focus on is Tori's expressionless face.

"Target number four has been neutralized." The agent is far enough away that I shouldn't have been able to hear him talking into his radio over all of the noise in the room, but I do. His raspy voice snaps me out of my daze and I stand up, my rage pushing me past grief into something else. I turn to face the man that murdered my best friend. I give into my wolf, letting her take over my body, and that dark shadowy place inside me begs to be let unleashed. I glance at Tori again, all traces of mercy wiped away at the sight of her body. I close my eyes and unleash the darkness within me, and in a whirr of shadows, claws, and fangs, me and my wolf tear the agent to shreds.

Epilogue

I know before I have even opened my eyes that I'm in the Shadow Realm. The lack of sound in the atmosphere around me is a dead giveaway, not to mention that my arm is throbbing from where the shadow beasts wounded me the first time I was here. I glance around dully, yup, nothing's changed. I close my eyes again, curling up on my side.

Tori is dead.

In the warehouse my wolf form had become shadow, seamlessly using the shadows to ghost from place to place, ripping the agents to pieces. I know I should feel regret or remorse for killing them, but the only thing I feel is numb. I hadn't known that my wolf form and my shadow powers worked together. If only I had known that sooner, I may have been able to save Tori.

"I suspected I would find you here." Em's voice flows over me, but I don't open my eyes, I don't even move. "I'm sorry. I heard about what happened," he says quietly, and it's his tone that makes me open my eyes, not his words, but the pain and grief in them reaches me.

"How do you know what happened?" I ask, looking up at him from my curled position on the ground.

“You are tied to the Shadow Realm with your powers, as am I. I can sense when you use your powers,” he explains, and I suspect he isn’t telling the whole truth, but I don’t have the energy to argue with him. Sighing, I push myself off the ground and look up at him again. His body is still in his light form, but he seems dimmer today, like the life has been sucked from him.

“You know that my best friend is dead?” My voice cracks on the last word. Although I can’t fully see his features because of the light, I sense his empathy for me as he nods.

“Losing someone is never easy.”

“Why are you here?” My words are quiet, lost.

“I wanted to check that you were okay.” He’s silent for a moment before he sighs and sits down in front of me. “And I have something to tell you.” I look up at him expectantly, is now really the time? “You need some answers, and I can help. It’s time to come and find me.” I frown at him, wondering where this has come from all of a sudden. “It’s to do with the disappearances and shifter deaths. But you’re not going to like it, and it won’t be easy to get to me.” He rubs his hand across his face.

“Okay, where are you?” Perhaps if I can focus on something other than Tori’s death, it will stop me from feeling like my heart has been ripped out of my chest.

“Don’t get mad at me, just hear me out.” I frown at his words, what is he talking about?

“I work for ASP.”

THE END

Continue reading below for an exclusive short from Tori, on the moment she met Ari and how they became friends.

EXCLUSIVE SHORT

Six years ago
Tori

I sink the shot and savour the burning sensation of the fae alcohol as it travels down my throat. I grin at the summer fae who are watching me with narrowed eyes. They say never challenge the fair folk to a drinking game, but I can't help it, I've never been one to turn down a challenge. Fae alcohol packs a punch, so I will probably regret this in the morning, but thankfully it takes a lot of alcohol to affect me.

"Garett, get us another one will ya?" I call out to the cute bartender. The bear shifter and I have been acquaintances for a while now, and while he's attractive, I stay away from dating shifters, too possessive for me.

"Tori, you want to switch to the human stuff?" he asks, his voice might be rough and assertive, but I can see his concern for me in his eyes. Rolling my own I shake my head, pushing the glass towards him again.

"Nah, I have a bet to win!" I reply with a grin, and although he doesn't agree with my choice, his lips turn up in a slight smile at my exuberance before filling my glass with the fluorescent blue alcohol. Turning a glare on the fae sitting next to me, he growls at them.

"If anything happens to her, I will rip you limb from limb," he threatens, and I watch as they pale and nod quickly in agreement. I grin at Garett and wink at him, there are benefits to having a bear shifter as a friend.

The bell above the bar door dings as someone walks in and I freeze as a wave of powerful energy rolls over me. Turning on my bar stool, I search

for the source of power and my eyebrows rise at what a see. A young woman, about my age, is walking towards the bar. Her face is set in a glare and anyone who looks her way gets a snarl. Her expression may be fierce, but something inside her is broken. Her body is pale and thin, she looks like she hasn't eaten a proper meal in years. Her hair is hanging limply around her shoulders, and I think that she could be beautiful if she smiled, but her severe expression gives off a *'fuck off'* vibe. The thing that attracts my attention the most though, is the energy she's giving off. She's a shifter, I can tell that much, but she is also *more*. I think I know what she is, but that could be dangerous for the both of us if I say anything.

I decide to just watch and stay out of her way, which is difficult when she takes the bar stool next to me. Garett walks over, his eyes softening as he takes in her bedraggled state.

"What can I get you?" he asks, his voice bringing her eyes up as she assess him, as if to see if he's a threat.

"Just a glass of water," she responds, her British accent clear to hear. Huh, I guess it's not true what they say about Brit's being polite. Garett nods and pours her a glass while running his eyes over her, a frown forming between his brows.

"Sure I can't get you any food?" I hear her stomach growl at his question and her face goes blank for a second before she shakes her head.

She can't be serious, she looks like she's starving. I glance at the glass of water and a thought comes to me. This girl isn't going to accept any pity or food from me, so I've got to make her accept. A plan starts forming in my mind and I try to hide my grin as I swallow back my shot. Turning to the Summer fae next to me, I lean forward and press a kiss to his cheek before hopping off the bar stool and walking to the exit.

"Sorry hun, I've got to go, we'll finish this up another day."

"Wait, you can't leave, we're in the middle of a challenge!" the fae sputters, outraged. Well, he'll be even more outraged when he realises I've been magicking the alcohol so it's essentially water. I grin to myself and flip him off as I step out of the bar.

I don’t have to wait outside the bar for long before the girl leaves. Making sure I time it right, I hurry from the alley and smack straight into her.

“Oh my, I’m so sorry!” I cry out as I reach out to steady her. Growling at me she takes a step back, swatting at my reaching hand.

“Watch where you’re going!” she snarls, her eyes glowing with her inner animal, wolf I think. My powers are fairly good at sniffing out people’s gifts, and she’s screaming wolf.

“I’m really sorry,” I say again, trying to sound like I mean it. “Look, let me make it up to you. I’m going to the burger joint around the corner to eat as much as I can physically stuff in my face, why don’t I get you something?” I see her eyes narrow at me in suspicion, but I know she wants to say yes. Her stomach growling again makes the decision for her, and I nod as if she’s answered me out loud.

“Good. Let’s go!” I declare, and start walking towards the restaurant, not giving her a chance to say no. I feel her hesitation, but I keep walking and I smile the moment I hear her following me. When she reaches my side I look over at her again. I don’t know why I feel such a connection to this girl, it’s not that I pity her, it’s like I feel a kinship to her. Perhaps we share a similar history, I remember having the same lost look in my eyes not that long ago.

“What’s your name?” I ask, not sure if she will answer me, especially as the silence stretches. Her eyes flick to me before going back to watching our surroundings.

“Ari. Yours?” I’m so surprised that she answered me that I nearly stumble, but I manage to keep my footing.

“Tori,” I reply, smiling again as a realisation dawns on me. “You know what Ari, I think we’re going to be good friends.”

The barrier of distrust she holds around herself is going to take a lot to break through. I know she doesn’t believe me when she rolls her eyes, but her lips twitch up into the semblance of a smile. I was right, she is beautiful when she smiles.

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