



RIDING
THE *Shifter*
SHADOWS
COLBIE CLARKE

Rebel Shifter's Redemption

**An Enemies to Lovers Paranormal
Romance**

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Chapter One



Aliyah

“I DON'T THINK SHE'S here.”

We're standing outside on the sidewalk, looking at the petite ranch-style house. Cash is sucking his teeth as he says this. He's tapping his vape against his belt, the tinny sound annoying me and putting me more on edge. The tapping and the sucking and the negative talk. He's getting on my nerves with that shit. I swear, sometimes he self-sabotages on purpose.

“You never think they are gonna be where we find them.”

I take a look around the neighborhood, both as a needed distraction from Cash and because being situationally aware is especially critical when we're on a takedown job. It's a typical low-income setup. Tiny houses with chain link fences and large warg dog mixes barking in the yards, beady red eyes and silvery teeth visible even from a distance. The day is overcast, threatening a downpour any minute, and I don't really see anyone on the street right now, which is good. It's early in the morning, and many times if someone sniffs us out, they warn the targets before we can get to them.

Cash takes one final puff from his vape, then sticks it in his pocket. He always looks like a cowboy out of uniform to me. Tall and thin in jeans that fit him too tight, his pale skin flushing under the warm morning sun. We've been doing this

bounty-hunting gig a long time and he never seems to change much. I guess he just likes the whole ‘Texas Ranger’ aesthetic.

“Let’s get this over with,” he says. Patience never has been his strength.

He takes the lead and I follow, watching his back. When we knock, a woman comes to the door; she fits the description of our bounty. White female wolf shifter, long dark hair, and eyes, somewhere between five foot five and five foot seven. And that’s it. We didn’t even get a photo this time.

I hate it when the descriptions are vague. This woman really could be anybody.

“Misty Cole,” Cash speaks loudly, with all the confidence in the world, his drawl conveniently missing as always when he’s using his ‘on the job’ voice. “You missed your court date. You’re going to have to come—“

She turns and bolts.

We both take off after her, rushing through the front door and into the living room. Cash manages to tackle her before she gets too far.

She’s screaming something in some other language that I don’t recognize. *Oshay! Oshay Notahlee!*

Her skin starts to take on a scaly quality as she leans back and roars, displaying rows of sharp teeth as she struggles with Cash.

I pull out my gun. “Watch it, Cash. She’s shifting.”

“I got it,” he says. In a flash, he pulls out his handcuffs and slaps them over her wrists. They glow blue as she cries out in anguish, her form reverting back fully to human.

“Nice try, Ms. Cole,” says Cash, “but running makes it worse.”

I continue covering my partner as he secures the prisoner and realize something’s not right. There is one critical part of the description of the woman we are looking for and this woman does not fit it. Misty’s supposed to be a wolf. A few seconds ago, this woman was clearly about to shift into some kind of giant gator or croc.

“Hey, Cash?” I move back a bit and look casually around the living room leaving my gun on point as I scan the area. “I don’t think we’ve got the right—“

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch movement and turn to the open doorway leading to the kitchen just in time to see a figure run across the doorway and out of the back door.

“Shit.”

I run into the kitchen and through the back door in time to see a young girl shift into a wolf, bound over the fence, and into the alley. I have a second when I want to yell to Cash to have him back me up, but there isn’t time. Our actual bounty is getting away.

“Runner!” I shout over my shoulder as I take off after her, using magic to lift myself up and clear the high fence. I land with a stumble on the dirty concrete and spot my bounty

sprinting away on four legs, a medium-sized black wolf with a white stripe on the edge of her tail.

I swear I hate chasing wolves. Trying to run down a four-legged creature on my two legs alone is a no-go, so I lift myself a few feet off the ground with a swirl of air under my feet and push after her, hover-gliding swiftly down the alleyway. The distance closes between us quickly, and she must realize it because the second I get close enough, she takes a sharp turn and leaps over one of the neighbor's fences and into their backyard.

"Stop!" I shout as I reach the fence and vault myself over.

She's still running, leaping in long strides until she gets around the house and over the gate into the street.

The paralyze spell I hurl at her zips over her head as she clears the top of the gate and it misses.

"Dammit!" I'm still cursing as I glide through the yard and over the gate. By the time the front yard is visible, I'm just in time to see her run across the street and into another fenced-in yard.

"You got it, Champ?"

I look and see Cash standing on the porch a few houses down. He's hanging out of the front door like he's down with leaving the woman harboring Misty to offer his help.

I should take the support he's offering but leaving a caught fish unguarded is always a bad idea. The lizard woman is a shifter and probably has a bounty or two on her head. We can

still cash in if we lose Misty. I'm not giving up on Misty, though.

"I got it!" I shout back as I glide across the road after her. As I skim over the gate, I spot her make a left turn and leap into another yard. This chase is ridiculous and annoying, and I'm running out of steam. Maintaining the spell to keep up with her is wearing me out.

I cancel the floating spell and cast a short-range teleportation spell, which proves to be a terrible idea as it zaps more energy from me than the hover spell. It works, however, as I rematerialize in front of her, blocking her way over to the next yard.

She skids to a halt, almost tripping over herself to stop. She gains her footing and moves towards me, hackles up, showing her teeth. I pull out my revolver and point it at her.

"Don't make me use this, Misty," I warn. "Bounty law says I can take you back dead or alive. Don't make me choose."

She continues to growl at me but doesn't make any more advances. It's hard to gauge the age of a shifter, but I can tell she's just a kid, barely out of high school, in fact. Teenagers are the hardest to bring in. Full of enough energy to flee, or fight if they need to, and not enough wisdom to avoid getting hurt. I've never shot an underage shifter and I don't want to start now. And I know the last thing she wants to do is get gunned down either, but if it's about to be her or me...

We both hear a hissing, tinkling tone cut through the air. It's the unmistakable sound of a portal opening somewhere nearby.

Was this Cash's doing? It had to be. I didn't know Cash's power use was at a high enough level to cast portal magic. We both look toward the noise and before I can react, she's bolting in that direction. It's almost like she expected the portal to open, like she had been running toward it all along.

I follow after her as she jumps over the back fence. I'm right on her heels, so I push open the gate moments after she lands on the other side and runs into the alley. No more yards and fences, thank goodness. The glowing portal is open and blocking the alley ahead of us. As she runs toward freedom, I gear up to throw another paralyze spell at her—then I stop, frozen by what I see.

A man is standing on the other side of the portal waiting for her. He's big, towering at close to seven feet and he's about as muscular as he is tall. The light from behind him is brighter than here. The room he stands in is hard to make out with the haze of portal magic obscuring all but the most prominent detail, but I can almost make out tables and chairs.

I can see him just fine, though. He's wearing a black shirt with a motorcycle kutte covered in patches over the shirt. I can't make out the patches from the swirls of magic shining through the portal. I can see his arms, however, muscular arms covered in scars and folded over across his generous chest, like a Genie about to grant a wish. One jagged ring of white encircles his right forearm. His skin is not quite the color of night, but it's close. I'm mesmerized by its deep hue.

In the moment I see his eyes I know two things. First, this is not a human I'm looking at. He's a shifter. Maybe a wolf. He has a bit of a beard and that plus his size makes him look more beastly. Despite the fact that I'm in the middle of pursuing someone he's clearly protecting, I'm distracted by how handsome he is.

Second, I know he sees me and my heart skips a beat. His eyes weave an invisible thread connecting us, burning into my soul.

And then the moment is over. Misty leaps through and the portal closes with a hiss. She's gone. Both of them are gone and I'm left with a million questions.

As footsteps sound behind me, I turn to see Cash jogging up to me. "What are you doing? I said I got it." I am annoyed he's even here right now.

Cash regards me with a raised eyebrow. "Don't look like it to me."

I take a deep breath filled with disappointment. "Yeah. I lost her. Shit. Somebody called up a portal and she beat feet outa here."

"Don't punch yourself out," he said. "Wolves are hard to catch with or without magic. Especially the young ones. We'll get another hit on her soon enough."

I shake my head. I know we will, but now I'm thinking about the man in the portal.

"Honest, Lee. Don't sweat it," Cash went on.

There was a lilt in his voice I did not expect given that we'd just lost our payday.

"We fucked around and snagged a bigger fish." He pulls out his cell phone and shows me a photo of the woman we caught.

This woman in the photo stares out at me with dead green eyes, her hairline shining with silver and green scaling. Her name is Lillian Ohma. A saltwater crocodile shifter, and the suspected leader of the resistance. I look up at the credits over her name. She was worth enough to set us both up for a while.

"Holy shit."

"Holy shit is right," he says with a laugh. "And Hot Damn, too! It's not every day you go fishing for guppies and come back with a ten-pound catfish. We're about to be made in the shade, partner." And just that fast, his southern drawl was back, honey smooth and low country deep.

I smile at him. *We sure the hell are.*

As we walk back to the car where he's got her locked up in the back seat, I know I should be happy for this incredible lucky knock, but I can't help wondering about the man in the portal.

Is he a wolf or just a shifter? Either way, what I saw shouldn't be. Maybe he wasn't a wolf at all. He was just a really big mage who I'd never met before now. In this town, the mages and their families are all connected in one way or another. I'm not going to say I know them all, but I know enough of them that I can tell which family they hail from or at least what part of town they live in.

And this man? I don't know him. I've never seen him before in my life. What's more interesting is how drawn to him I felt.

"Hey," Cash asks, looking over at me from the driver's side.

"You okay?"

"Just hungry. Let's get some breakfast after we drop her off, huh?"

"Good idea," Cash rubbed his stomach and with a final sideways glance at me, focused on driving as traffic picks up significantly in this part of town.

I turn my head to look out of the window as we drive along. My physical body is in the car, but my eyes do not register anything in front of me. My mind is still on the mysterious man in the portal.

Chapter Two



Dire

WHEN I WAS AWAKENED this morning to my sigil glowing on my nightstand, I knew it was Misty before I picked it up. Misty had been missing for at least a week and when Lillian went after her a night and a half ago, I thought the worst. It was a risk to pick up Misty's distress signal, but I had to respond.

As I held the sigil in my hands and saw flashes of a location in my mind's eye, I recognized it as an area a few miles from the border. In Shantytown, a rundown neighborhood where Lillian had a house, and where she would hide if things were too hot to make for the city line.

That location was damned lucky for Misty. I can't make a portal in places where I've never been.

The second Misty leaps through, I close the portal, nearly clipping her tail in the process. Misty continues tumbling past me, across the room, hitting the back wall with a thud where she sits, slightly stunned, shaking her head and slowly morphing back to human form.

I tossed a large towel to her, the best I'd been able to do in the few moments I'd had between waking and opening the portal.

"Cover up with this until you have a chance to get to your room for clothes." She sits for a moment after, slightly

stunned, half human, half wolf silently huddling under the towel like it was a blanket.

My thoughts are not on Misty. *Who, I wonder, was that gorgeous woman?* I can't get the moment our eyes met out of my mind.

Shit! I've been seen. Who the fuck is she and now what?

Misty shakes her head and draws my attention back to the task at hand as she completes her change back to human form.

"Thanks," she says immediately, looking up at me with wild eyes. "That was right on time."

"Yeah. You cut it close, gal. Too close maybe."

As I help her to her feet, the towel crumples into a heap on the floor. Shifters have hardly any modesty when it comes to nudity. Somehow coming back from every shift buck-naked gets to be routine after a few hundred changes. Even so, I help wrap the towel tight around her slight, child-like body, and ask, "You hurt?"

"I'm fine. A little sore from the dismount, but I'm okay." Her face changes suddenly, her eyebrows turning up and her mouth dipping into a deep frown. "Lil..." Her mouth moves soundlessly for a moment, then she looks down at her feet, her cheeks turning red. "Shit, Dire. What have I done?"

My stomach tightens. I don't want to hear what she's about to say, certain it's the one fucking thing I was afraid would happen once we realized she'd run off. At the time, I told Lillian to stay put and let me and my guys find Misty for her.

After all, I have connections all through the city. She just needed to have patience. I knew better. Resistance leaders aren't known for their infinite patience and Lillian is more antsy than most.

Misty looks up at me, her dark eyes watery. I sigh. Resting a hand on her shoulder, I walk her to one of the tables in the bar and we sit. "Start from the beginning."

A young wolf-shifter, a prospect who is about a week from patching over, wanders in carrying the case of beer I told him to drive into town and get. As soon as he sees me sitting with Misty his eyes widen like he's walked in on something he shouldn't see.

"Get me a glass of water and one of those beers. Pronto."

The prospect doesn't say anything. He just nods and walks the rest of the way to the bar, setting the case on the floor next to it before walking behind the bar to get the glass of water.

I turn back to Misty, who's crying now. She's wiping tears away from her face as she looks down into her hands shamefully. "I'm so sorry, Dire," she says. "I...I didn't think she'd actually try to find me. The last time we talked she was so mad at me."

The prospect walks over and hands me my beer and a glass of water for Misty, then makes himself scarce. "She's your sister, Misty."

"Not blood." She says this like a correction. Like I'd called her black instead of white. She's still looking down at her hands.

Even so, I can see a mix of guilt or maybe some remnants of anger from when they argued on her face. “And she’s got to realize that I’m not a child. I can see whoever I like.”

“Right,” I know she’s referring to a boy she met in town. I don’t know the details, but I know the kid’s trouble. Lillian had every right to dig into her about him. “Was it worth getting chased down like that?”

She shakes her head without speaking.

“Didn’t think so,” I say. “Who was that chasing you, anyway? I saw a woman through the portal before you jumped through. She didn’t look like Authority.”

“No. I don’t think it was serious. Authority has no reason to be looking for me. I’m pretty sure they were local bounty hunters.”

Bounty hunters? The image of the woman I saw through the portal flashes instantly into my mind, staring back at me with wide eyes, her jaw was set and her hand raised as though she was about to cast a spell at Misty. She’d frozen as soon as she saw me. And I did the same. I don’t know who she is, but she’s easily the most beautiful woman I’ve seen in a long time. Smooth brown skin and a face framed with dark hair cut into short curls. She was wearing jeans that hugged round hips and a jacket over a t-shirt that was thin enough for me to glimpse spectacular breasts. She was definitely a woman of immense beauty.

And she’s a bounty hunter, my brain duly reminds me. Right. Stick to the subject at hand.

“What happened to Lillian?” I ask.

Her face pales even further and she takes a drink from her glass of water. “I’m pretty sure they got her. Jeez, Dire. We were almost over the border. I mean, we only stopped because it was so late and she knew the Authority drones would be patrolling after curfew.” She paused, her eyes shuttered and thoughts reliving the past where it all happened. “I didn’t think she’d find me at all. I’d been so careful not to be followed. I got pretty far into the city undetected. I almost made it into the central hub, but then Lil caught up to me and pulled me off the street.”

She looks mournful about that. I don’t know what this kid was thinking trying to make it to the hub. Maybe it had to do with whoever it was that she wanted to see.

“Anyway, we were on the move for most of the night,” she goes on, “and we decided to rest for a few hours at a place she had in Shantytown. The plan was to leave at first light. We didn’t think anyone would find us so quick.” Misty looks up at me with big watery eyes, terror hanging in them. “They’re going to figure out who she is, aren’t they? Oh, God. They’re going to turn her over to the Authority.”

“Don’t worry about it, Misty,” I say to her, patting her on the hand. “We’ll get her out. Just leave that to me, all right? In the meantime, do you have any clothes here? I’m sending you back to the camp and when you get there, I want you to *stay there*. You understand me?”

She nods her head, the tears falling down her cheeks. “I’m sorry for bolting, Dire. I didn’t mean—“

“Yeah, I know,” I interrupt, ready to be done with this conversation. “Drink your water. Then go get dressed for travel. You’re heading back to camp in a few minutes.”

“W-wait,” she says as I stand up. “Dire, I’m...I’m responsible for Lil getting caught. Maybe I can stick around and help out?”

My kneejerk reaction is to say no. After all, she’s not wrong. Lillian would be sitting pretty in her tent somewhere in the desert if it wasn’t for Misty’s thoughtlessness.

On the other hand, I know Misty. She can be impulsive and irresponsible, sure. I mean, she’s a year shy of sixteen. But she’s also quick on her feet and has a knack for blending into the shadows. She could be useful to me when we do come up with a plan to rescue Lillian.

I’m not going to let her know that right off, though. After all the trouble she’s caused, she deserves to sweat.

“I’ll bring it to the table at church,” I say. “You can stick around here until then.”

I watch her lips tighten as she swallows the bitter pill I just gave her. Still, she nods in response. “Okay.”

I leave her heading upstairs and take my beer to walk outside. I need space to think about what was next now that Lillian has been captured.

The Maztec clubhouse has a kind of patio with a roof overhang out front. On the patio, there's a card table that doubles as a chess and checkers table on one side and several pieces of furniture for people to sit around and bullshit on our off days. Behind the patio is the rest of the front yard. Our bikes are lined up near the patio and in the corner there's an old Mercedes Mac's trying to restore A high gate connects to an equally tall fence surrounding the property.

I stand out on the patio for a moment and take a breath. It's getting hot already and it's barely nine in the morning.

"Hey, Big Dog."

I look over my shoulder and see Mac sitting by the door. Mac, my best friend, even though he's older than me by about eight years, has a beer resting on the armrest of the old deck chair and looks like he's fighting a hangover. His salt and pepper gray hair is in disarray and his scruffy early morning five o'clock shadow beard looks rougher than normal. He nods at me, acknowledging my presence.

"Morning," I reply. "It's a bit early to be catching the sun, bro." He's sitting in just his jeans, no shirt or kutte. He's got a bit of a farmer's tan from long days of working on the car in the sun.

"Couldn't sleep," he says and clears his throat. "Still got that bad feeling from yesterday. I'm telling you. A bad moon is coming."

Mac isn't imbued with magic as I am. In the rest of the shifter landscape, he's one of many, but here, he's in the minority.

Most of our pack know some magic, usually kid's birthday party tricks. Mac's different. He has these 'feelings' about things. Most of the others brush him off when he starts talking the way he's talking now, but I always listen to him. Mac's feelings are never wrong.

"Yeah," I reply. "You might be onto something there."

He tilts his head at me and says, "What's up?"

"Lillian got stitched up."

Mac pauses, his face an unreadable mask. "We know who?"

"Scavs."

"Shit." Mac looks away bitterly. I can already tell what he's about to say. "Fucking kid. I knew she was trouble."

He's never liked Misty much. Always says she's hanging around too much. "She's a kid doing kid shit. She couldn't have predicted it."

"Kid doing kid shit," Mac repeats. "Right. You getting soft on us, Mr. President?"

I smirk at him and he smirks right back. "Fuck you. What's done is done. I need to get everybody to the table so we can start thinking about a rescue."

Mac grimaces. "Been a while since we tangled with the Cabal's Authorities. You sure you want to ride that train?"

"No choice."

Mac gets up and stands next to me, looking out onto our front yard kingdom. "I'll send up a crow," he says.

“Thanks.”

He starts to walk to the roost near the gate and I stop him.

“Hey, you got any ins with the local Scavs?”

“Not since Dela left,” he said. “Why?”

I’m thinking about the woman in the snug-fit jeans and the short hair, and the vague but strangely warm feeling moving around in my chest when I see her in my mind’s eye. “Just wondering if you knew of any fresh hires.”

He pauses, his eyes looking skyward for a moment as he thinks about it. “Last I heard, they hired a few washouts from the mage academy a few years back. Don’t know too much more than that.”

I nod and Mac turns and continues his walk through the yard. I don’t know why I asked Mac about her. Even if he knows who she is, what would be the purpose? I know where all the Scavs go to collect their pay once they bring their people in.

So why am I thinking about her at all?

Chapter Three



Aliyah

CASH AND I ARE sitting at our usual table at the diner across the way from the bounty office. It's lunchtime and with the big win behind us, we're both feeling more relaxed than usual. The boss was beside himself once he found out who our catch was. I thought he was going to tell us to take the rest of the day off. And with the payout we're about to get, I'd have gladly taken it, too.

Business at the diner is slow today, which is great. When it's busy, particularly if there are a lot of humans, the waitress usually asks us to sit in the back so we're not seen. Mages are bad for business, after all. No one wants to eat at a restaurant that openly seats the subhumans alongside the normies.

As the waitress brings us our plates, Cash stops her and asks about it. "Slow day today?"

The waitress scoffs a laugh and says, "I'd rather have it slow these days. Human customers are becoming more of a pain in the ass lately ever since that government tech plant opened on eightieth."

"Government tech. Guess we better watch our mouths around here. Somebody might be listening," I say and we both chuckle.

"Not hardly. Trust me. That company's not looking for anybody with any reason or brains. They're looking for

overpaid drones who can't rub two brain cells together."

"Shame," says Cash. "Must be nice to not have to think to do your job."

We laugh and she asks if we need anything else. We say no and she goes on to her next table.

"It's progress," I say to Cash once she's gone. "Just another day in a war-torn country. I'll bet there will be plenty of other places popping up like that tech building."

He snorts a laugh. "Sure. That's just what we need."

In a way, I kind of wish we were in a crowded diner. Somehow the annoying din of a crowd would be just the diversion I need right about now. My mind has been distracted since this morning. Well, more than just distracted if I'm being honest. I can't believe I've been thinking about him all morning.

I don't know what the deal is. I keep replaying that moment over and over in my mind. Him standing in the light of the portal, one arm raised up to hold the magic in place. The kutte he was wearing was clearly from some motorcycle gang, even though I couldn't really see the patches. He was so tall and so dark against the light behind him that he looked ethereal, like some kind of ancient god.

It's strange. I know that this isn't an infatuation, though. Maybe I keep thinking about him because I happened to witness something that shouldn't be possible. He is a shifter. I'm sure of it. Shifters aren't mages and mages aren't shifters. So, how is this shifter able to make a portal?

I keep trying to tell myself I'm imagining things. He has to be a mage even though he doesn't look like one. Even though if I had to pick him out of a line-up of magical beings, I could definitively identify him as a shifter – a wolf, at that. But if he was a shifter who could do magic somehow, he'd have to be a pretty powerful guy as well. And that kind of power doesn't stay hidden.

And that's another thing. I've been a mage my entire life and I can't make portals appear. That kind of magic is reserved for particularly high-level mages. The kind who land cushy government jobs sending shifters to their deaths through the portals they make.

I don't think I was imagining things. After all, Misty Cole didn't just vanish into thin air.

"Hey," says Cash, grabbing my attention by snapping his fingers at me. "Earth to Lee. Come in, Lee. You with me over there?"

I throw him a quick smile and say, "Yeah, I'm just...thinking about stuff."

"What stuff?"

I'm still processing, so I don't really want to tell Cash about what I've seen just yet. "You wouldn't happen to know of any wolf biker clubs around here, would you?"

He chuckled. "As a matter of fact, I know about lots of wolf shifter bikers. None of them in the city, though."

I just nod and eat my salad.

Cash chews on his sandwich thoughtfully for a moment, then says, “Although there’s this one particularly tough group out in the valley. They’ve been pretty quiet for a couple of years. Maztecs I think they’re called.”

I frown and he says, “Why are you asking?”

“No reason,” I say keeping it casual. “It’s weird how the government lets some shifters alone and others are rounded up. You’d think particularly tough wolves would be reason enough to disband some of those gangs.”

He chuckled. “You’d think. But you gotta understand it’s all about fighting your battles. Plus, a lot of the shifter community is underground or hiding in plain sight anyway. Most of them aren’t stupid enough to just go running around in public. And the ones who do? Well, let’s say it takes a special task force to handle shifters of that caliber.”

That’s interesting. The shifter I saw was big and covered in scars. Maybe he was part of the rough motorcycle club or maybe just used to fighting mages. Maybe he had a lot of run-ins with the Authority and bounty hunters.

“So, this biker group. You say they’re supposed to be tough. Any idea why they’ve been quiet?”

Cash shrugs “Who knows? Maybe they went underground. Maybe they just don’t do business in the city. Whatever the reason is fine by me. They are a nasty bunch of shifters. Vicious as hell. My dad knew two mages who cornered some of their club members in a canyon back during the war. Neither of them came out of that canyon in one piece.”

I shudder. “I don’t like the sound of that. Do any of them know magic?”

He laughs. When he sees I’m not laughing with him, his eyebrows raise as his laughter dies. “You’re not serious? Lee, Shifters can’t do magic.”

“I know that,” I say, adding a chuckle to feign agreement with him. “But, like, what if they could do magic? Theoretically speaking.”

He’s shaking his head and smiling at me. He sets down the remnants of his sandwich and wipes his mouth with his napkin. “Where is this coming from?”

“Nowhere,” I say. “I was just thinking, that’s all. Like what kind of tough wolf shifter wants to use magic? I mean, you would think the tough-as-nails types would never consider it, even if it was possible, right? Magic isn’t tough enough; it doesn’t require you to get your hands dirty?”

Cash sits back in his chair for a moment, thinking about it. “I suppose that tracks,” he says. “I mean, shifters like the Maztecs would rather rip a person apart than spend any effort using magic to hurt somebody. That is assuming they even knew how in the first place. Which they don’t. Wolves in particular don’t have the brain power for that sort of thing. They’re all kind of meatheads, you know what I mean?”

I look down at my salad and take another bite. Meatheads. I’d been told that my whole life. Of the many magical races all around us, the wolves were considered to be of low intelligence. All brawn and no brains and probably the closest

things to cavemen, or at least that's what my father used to say. It was ridiculous to even suggest that any of them would use magic at all, assuming they could.

I'm aware of the irony of this kind of thinking among mage-kin. The humans have classified us as a 'sub-human' species for a lot of the same reasons we look down our noses at shifters and wolf shifters in particular.

And yet, our original bounty still got away through a portal this morning, seemingly created by a wolf. As much as I was trying to put it together logically, the math just isn't mathing.

"It's a good thing that they are quiet still," Cash says. "Hope it stays that way. I wouldn't want to have to square off with one of those guys anytime soon. Or ever, really."

I change the subject and the rest of our lunch goes as planned. After lunch, I tell Cash that I'm going to go back to the office and catch up on paperwork. The truth is that I need to find out more information about these Maztecs.

The office is empty right now. Everyone's still out to lunch, which suits me just fine. I figure I've got maybe thirty minutes or so before someone comes back in, so I'll be fine to take a peek at the outstanding bounty sheets. I sit down at my desk and start looking through our database.

Cash didn't give me a lot to work with, but I used what he did tell me anyway. It doesn't take me long before I have a list of known outlaw biker clubs of all sorts. Some are even human, but most are shifters of some sort. Bears and wolves, and even a couple of big cat groups. (I thought most of that population

had been wiped out completely.) I narrow the search down to wolves and start looking at each file carefully.

The faces are those of shifters I've never seen before, but all had the same kind of look. These were rough men with burly faces and messy hair or even *no* hair at all. Almost every single one had tattoos or scars or both. Some were visible on their faces or heads and others were listed in their demo sheets. Some of the wolves were muscular and others were thin as rails. All of them looked like they'd spent more than a few nights fighting it out in bars around the city. A small percentage were older; they would have been contemporaries of my dad before he passed on. I wonder if any of those wolves fought in the war.

And then I land on his file. I laid eyes on him in the portal for only a few seconds, but looking at his picture now, I know this is him. His dark mahogany skin and deeply dark eyes with a golden spark are etched into my mind. He's looking out at me from the photo, a crooked smile on his face as if he knows I'm looking at him. In this picture, he doesn't have a beard. Maybe he's younger in the photo than when I saw him this morning. But it's him. It's definitely him.

I'm trying not to look at him lustfully, but I really can't help it. He is a magnificently beautiful man. I tear my eyes away from his mug shot so I can read his rap sheet. Six foot five, close to three hundred pounds of muscle, and a wolf shifter. Definitely. His name is Christopher Opal, but he's known by Dire. *What a name...*

Dire Opal had been arrested several times during the war and every time he managed to escape. He's wanted on so many charges. Theft, vandalism, trafficking, assault. Lots of assault.

He's even killed a mage or two or at least been accused of it. All these charges and he's never been tried. But then, if he ever had, I doubt I'd have seen him today.

I start looking through the reports with the main idea in mind to find clues surrounding any magical abilities he might have. I know it's a long shot. I mean, if any other mage happened to witness what I did, they'd probably be hesitant to speak on it, too. The Authority wouldn't be too happy to find out that shifters know magic. Putting that info into a report is the kind of detail that could cost someone their job, particularly if they had no proof.

There's nothing in these files mentioning anything about magic. At least not magic wielded by Opal. After looking over the account of the last thing he'd been caught for, I lean back in my chair and think for a moment.

I know what I saw. I'm not insane. My bounty didn't turn down an alley and disappear into thin air. I am a sane person and I'm sure what I saw is real.

But what does that mean then? If somehow there are shifters who can wield magic, has everything I've been taught about wolves and maybe all shifters been completely wrong?

I look back at the demographics. At the time of this mugshot, he was only nineteen...only nineteen with so many arrests. Who *was* this man?

Chapter Four



Dire

I'M ALREADY IN THE room when the members start filing in. The crow came back to the roost within a few hours or so by mid-afternoon. All the members were in the clubhouse, ready to attend church.

I'm not out in the bar to greet any of them. Not this time. I've got a lot on my mind. This matter of rescuing Lillian is a big deal and I'll need everybody to be on their game to pull off a jailbreak. But also, and I'm hesitant to admit it, *she's* still floating around in my mind.

I saw her for a few seconds, and I've been thinking about her all morning. I don't know what the hell is wrong with me. Women have never occupied my mind this way. Not for this long. I don't know. Maybe this whole being alone thing for so many years is finally getting to me.

Mac pokes his head through the door and says, "Everybody's here."

"Good. Let's get this thing started."

A few stragglers are still filing in, pausing to drop off their phones with the prospect manning the door. As they take their places around the table, I can feel their apprehension. Church is typically held once a week as a way for us to keep updated on club happenings. This meeting is out of cycle, so everybody knows something is up. They're chatting with one

another across the table and making jokes, but I know they feel something in the air.

“Settle down,” I say, bringing them all to order. “I want to get right into why I called you all here. Lillian was snatched up by bounty hunters this morning.”

A cloud washes over the room and all casual expressions change to seriousness. “That’s bad news, boss,” says Lou, my Sargeant at Arms. Lou is thin and wiry with a patchy beard, but he is probably one of the fiercest wolves I’ve ever met. After stating the obvious, he adds, “What do you need us to do?”

“I don’t have to tell you guys how important Lillian and the rebels are to our operations and while I’m not down with fucking with the Cabal’s Authority brutes, we all know sometimes it’s unavoidable. This is one of those times. I need a plan, gentlemen.”

Silence at first as they all absorb what’s been said. Then Mac says, “First things first. We find out where she’s being held and case the joint.”

Lou snorts a laugh. “Nobody with the Authority’s going to let a shifter into a holding center without keeping him there.”

“No shit. That’s why we send somebody they don’t know. Somebody under the radar.”

“Maybe one of Lillian’s kids?” says Flip, short, wide-eyed he looks like he’s no older than twelve, even though he’s in his mid-twenties.

I shake my head. “We need a human, I think. Those places have genetic sensors. They’d pick us out before we even got to the gate.”

Flip pauses, then says, “My old lady would probably do it.” Everyone looks at him with different shades of surprise and confusion.

“Your old lady?” Mac asks. “Since when is your girl human?”

“Since always.” I could see Flip’s face flushing. “I didn’t mention it before because I didn’t want you guys fucking with me about it.”

“Touching,” says Mac. “We’re still gonna fuck with you, though.”

A ripple of laughter and I pull the group back to the subject at hand, “How smart is your girl, Flip? Smart enough to get in, have a look around and get out without raising suspicion?”

Flip shrugs. “Sure. I mean, how hard can it be? We send prospects in for this kind of thing for bank jobs. It’s no different.”

“Sure, it’s not,” said Mac with a chuckle. “It’s only the Authority, the badass strongarm of the fucking Global Cabal.”

“Unless anybody has any other human girlfriends I should know about, looks like she’s our scout,” I say. “Flip, find out which facility they’ve got Lillian in. Once we’ve got that, bring your girl by the club and we’ll brief her on what she needs to do.”

There are nods all around and it's good to see we're all on the same page. This is not the kind of operation to undertake with a divided team. "I want to know everything about what we could be walking into before we get there. I'm not going to bullshit you. This probably isn't going to be an easy jailbreak. We need to operate under the assumption that they know exactly who Lillian is, so they're going to do whatever they can to hold onto her. And they will want to break her. I want in and out quickly before that happens."

"Why don't you just do your magic portal thing and get her yourself?"

The question came from the back of the room. Topper. He's a newly patched member with a smart-ass mouth. You'd think a guy like that would know to keep his trap shut while grown folks are talking. I glare at him and everybody else glares with me. I swear the air just got as thick as gravy in here.

Topper looks around himself nervously.

He should be nervous. Disrespect is a game I don't play

"It's not an option," is all I say and that's all that needs to be said.

"Anything else anybody wants to add?" No one says anything.

"All right. You have your assignments."

I bang the gavel, and everyone gets up from the table. I grab Mac and say, "Make sure Topper gets a lesson in humility when he's at the table."

"Already on it."

“And do me a favor. Find Misty for me. I want to talk to her.”

Mac nods and leaves. At the moment, I’m thinking of asking her more questions about what happened. I’m also thinking of asking her about the bounty hunter who chased her.

I leave the room and head out to the bar. I see Mac talking to Misty at the bar and a moment later she comes walking up to me, her shoulders hunched guiltily as she shoves her hands in her pockets.

“Walk with me,” I say to her, and lead her outside. We walk across the yard, away from curious ears. “Tell me about the bounty hunter this morning.”

“Not much to tell,” she says with a nervous laugh. “She and another Scav came to the house me and Lil were in and one of them chased me through the streets until you showed up.” She pauses, looking up at me with hopeful eyes. “Do you think she’ll know where they’re keeping Lil?”

“I don’t know yet,” I admit, “but I think maybe I should keep an eye out for her just the same. If you crossed with her scent again, could you point her out?”

“I think so.”

“Good.” I lead her over to my bike. “Hop on. We’re going hunting.”

She smiles, but I can’t tell if she’s thrilled to be included or just to get on the back of my bike. Either way, she hops on eagerly, wrapping her arms around my broad chest. I start the bike and back out, then I’m off.

We're going back to the neighborhood where she was chased down. It's been a bunch of hours and scent can be a fickle thing. It's entirely possible that her scent has been muddled with the rest of the neighborhood smells. I'm really hoping that's not the case, though.

I don't know what the hell I'm doing going after this woman. All I know is that I need to find her. It's important that I find her.

As soon as we get to the block Misty was on, I feel her tap my chest. I slow the bike down and pull over. "You picking up something?" I ask her over my shoulder. I see her lift her nose to the air.

"Yeah," she says. "The one that chased me has a particular smell. I smell her stronger than her partner."

I lift my head and sniff the air as well. Immediately, I smell grass and asphalt. The heated metal of the chain link fences. Dog shit, someone's lunch through one of the open windows somewhere...

And cinnamon. It's faint, but it's there. "Mm," Misty says with a nod. "Apple pie. Yeah, that's her."

I can't help but smile. "Apple pie, huh?"

She nods. "Like they have at over Cee-cee's Bakery on Fifth. They use a little too much cinnamon in the crust."

Yeah, we're smelling the same thing. Her senses are sharper than mine, but then, she's younger. She could probably scent out vanilla in a field of garlic.

But now that I know what I'm smelling, I'm sure I can follow this scent. This isn't the kind of thing I do on my bike. The gas fumes usually drown out soft scents. I don't have a choice today, though. She was here early this morning. It's a wonder there's any scent left at all.

We ride on, keeping our noses to the wind and letting the soft cinnamon smell guide us. We ride until we're well into the city and before long, I realize we're heading into the central hub. A lot of Authority out here. I need to be careful or else we'll both get snatched.

We find the scent ends at a diner, which so happens to be across from an office building with a sign that reads *Bountiful Bounty Services*.

Wow. That is a terrible name for a bounty-hunting agency.

I turn the bike around and start heading back.

I've got to drop Misty off. Then I can make my way back alone before dark. I know where she works now. Maybe if I keep an eye on the building, I can get another glimpse of her.

It takes me about an hour and a half for the round trip.

Once I'm back at the bounty office, I slide my bike down an alleyway, staying in the shadows. Bike parked, I get off and walk to the edge of the alley and wait.

Lucky for me, I'm not waiting long. Within a few minutes, the front door opens and out she walks. Short hair, round hips, leather jacket, and blue jeans. In the sunlight, her brown skin

looks radiant and seems to shimmer against the glow of the sun. As I watch her walk, I am completely mesmerized.

She doesn't know I'm watching her from my place across the street, so I know that she doesn't have me under a spell or anything like that. And yet, I completely feel like that's what's happening. As she's walking away, I feel compelled to follow her. I start after her as she turns the corner at the end of the block.

Chapter Five



Aliyah

THE SECOND I STEP outside, I sense him, which, if he really is a Shifter, is weird, but also, the magic around him is stronger than I'm normally used to. The office is near the center of town and in the Holyland district, where most of the mages live and work. So, I'm always sensing magic all around me whenever I'm here.

But this is different somehow. It's powerful magic. I can feel it reaching out to me like arms, warm and inviting. It makes the hairs on my arms stand up and chills like soft fingers run up my spine. I've never felt anything like this before in my life.

I know it's him. I don't know how I know, but I can't ignore this feeling. There's a spot, deep inside me that flares when he's close. I recognize him, I feel him. I am drawn to him and know exactly where he is, lounging in the shadows across the street. No eyes are needed. I don't have to turn around and look. I knew before I left the building. I keep walking, looking straight ahead like I don't notice he's there.

A part of my mind starts to think I'm imagining this. Maybe it's a weird paranoia from reading files detailing all the awful things shifters have done. As I round the corner and hear footsteps behind me, it's like a confirmation of what I feel.

Am I going crazy? Is this some new manifestation of my power? My father has always said I block my magic, accusing

me of holding back and not living up to the power level he sees in me.

How am I feeling this shifter this way?

This is real. It is his footsteps I hear behind me. I can even hear his breath as he follows me. When did my hearing become so fantastic?

I dip into the first alleyway I come to and hide behind a trashcan, peeking out. I'm feeling an edge of panic and really need to see if my instincts are right. Sure enough, a few seconds later he walks past the entryway.

Then stops, lifting his nose to the wind.

I reach into my boot for my dagger, not taking my eyes off his location, even though I can actually still *feel* precisely where he stands. The space of the alley is too small to risk using my gun, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let him have his way with me. I don't care how much bigger he is than me.

He turns to the alley and takes slow steps toward my hiding place. His head moves side to side almost imperceptibly as my narrowed eyes scan the shadows of the alleyway. From my crouched angle, I can probably wound him in the calf, sending him tumbling down. Once he's on the ground, I can cuff him and bring him in. Sounds easy in theory.

He draws even and takes a step to walk past where I'm hiding. My palms are sweaty, but I don't dare move to wipe off the moisture, gripping the knife tighter instead. I'm only going to have one shot at this. If I miss? Well, I'd just better not miss.

He is inches away, moving slowly past the area in front of me and I take my shot. I jab hard at his calf with my dagger. Faster than my arm moves, literally microseconds before my arm strikes, he moves, a spry step out of the way, and leaving me to nearly fall flat on my face.

I am equally nimble and catch myself, and leap, landing on my feet, holding the dagger up to him.

He puts his hands up and smiles at me and I feel my insides melt under his crooked grin.

“Christopher Opal,” I say as confidently as I can. “You’re coming with me.”

He puts his hands down and points to my dagger. “Not if you’re threatening me with a butter knife.”

“I have a gun,” I hear the shakiness in my voice betraying me. “Don’t make me use it.”

“Alley’s too small.” He takes a step toward me. “You won’t use it here.”

I hate the confidence in his voice and even more, know he’s right as I step back, keeping the distance between us. “Put your hands up.” Falling back on my training, I continue issuing orders even though I clearly am not in charge. “Lace your fingers together behind your head and kneel down.”

“I don’t think so.” He takes another step toward me, and he’s close now. So close I can feel the heat of his body. *God, he smells really good.*

An inch short of my dagger's blade tip, he stops. Tiny tendrils of smoke rise, coming through the fabric of his shirt as the dagger's silver draws uncomfortably close to his body, but he's not even flinching. The scars on his muscular arms are a testimony to this wolf's familiarity with pain. Hurting him enough to get him to submit, even with a silver dagger, is going to be a challenge.

But I'm not about to let him walk all over me. I jab the knife forward and the point pierces his shirt. He twists out of the way as the blade tears a line through his shirt and digs into the skin of one of his pecs. He grabs me by the wrist, and I yank back before he can react, bringing my knee up high, and hitting him in the center of his chest. He stumbles, letting go of my wrist. I bring the knife back around and slash at him, just missing his face as he again dodges my attack.

I take another swing and this time he brings his arm up, knocking the blade out of my hand as if the silver in contact with his skin was a kiss instead of a burning cut. Quick as lightning, he grabs my wrists and pins them behind me, then pulls me into him, his arms bear-hugging the breath out of me.

"You're a fiery little thing." He's lifting me off my feet until they're dangling in the air. A deep chuckle reinforces the minimal effort he seems to require to control me as I struggle against him.

"Put me down," I growl at him. He just holds me in the air, a stupid grin on his face.

"Nope."

I'm angry, but more because I'm embarrassed. He picked me up like I was nothing. This is so humiliating. I'm swinging my legs and I recognize an opening. One of my legs is near his crotch. It's a cheap move, but dammit, so is holding me in the air like a toddler.

I swing my knee forward and it connects between his legs. His arms loosen immediately, and he drops me, leaning down and grabbing himself. I get to my feet and pull out my gun.

"Put your hands up," I say loudly. He looks up at me and despite the knee I just gave him, he's still smiling. Almost laughing now.

"That's enough foreplay," he says and before I know it, he's got me by the arms. Again. He pushes me back, pulling both my arms over my head and pinning me against the wall. The gun flies out of my hand and my ears tell me it lands somewhere down the alley.

He's leaning into me, and we're face to face. He's got my wrists pinned above my head and we're staring into each other's eyes. His are so deep and dark as to appear nearly black, except for flashes of gold with hints of blue radiating around the iris.

The intensity of the moment is unbearable and as I remind myself to breathe, I feel myself getting warm between my legs.

The heat from his body is engulfing me. He's so close that we're breathing each other's air. For this moment, I've forgotten everything, I know nothing except him.

His dark eyes drift to my lips and I long for his kiss with a desperation I've never imagined or felt. I ache for his mouth to connect with mine.

It's like he's reading my mind because in the next moment, he's kissing me. His warm tongue twists with mine as I lean into him, my heart pounding hard. I bite his bottom lip and I feel him growling, the preternatural vibration like a rumble against my lips. Everything inside me wants him. I'm ravenous for his touch.

He releases me and my hands slide down to his chest as he stands over me, our lips parting. I'm disoriented and delighted. I'm filled with a warm tingling all over my body as he looks down at me with lust in his eyes.

What...the hell...am I doing?

The realization sweeps over me like a splash of cold water, and I push him away as hard as I can. He takes a couple of steps backward, giving me enough room to move. I spot my gun a few feet away and I make for it, grabbing it as I roll onto the ground. When I come back up again, he's gone. Magicked or portaled away somehow.

Dammit. I stand up, looking back and forth before running out of the alley in the hopes that he took off running, but he's gone. Not only do I not see him, but I also don't feel him anymore. I still smell him, though. On my skin and on my clothes. He smells like summer and sweet maple. I'm thinking of his dark skin under my hands, and I get all tingly again.

I take a deep breath, trying to take in the warm air around me in an effort to wash away his scent on me. I don't know what came over me or why I kissed him. I've never behaved so out of pocket before in my life.

On the drive home, I focus on the real reason I looked him up. The magic. The way he disappeared in the alley. Even this weird connection I have with him. Can I claim the whole thing was just a hallucination? Some sign that I'm finally cracking up at my job? Maybe. That seems oddly reasonable. Yet equally unlikely. It happened.

The first thing I do when I get home is take a shower. I need to get as much of him off me as I can. It's not until I'm well in the shower that I realize what a mistake I made by kissing him. The warm water over my skin, running down my breasts and hips, trickling between my legs is feeding thoughts of him, remembering, and imagining his large, rough hands sliding gently over my wet skin. I can almost feel him holding me in his arms, low whispers promising himself to me.

I cut the shower short, barely taking time to get clean and as I towel off, staring at myself in the mirror, I realize I must be losing my mind. What other explanation can there be? I have to be losing it. I've never acted like this before. I've never felt this kind of core-deep connection before about anyone. The closest that I'd ever come was...

Great. Now I'm thinking about Orest and our summer fling so many years ago. Well...it was more than just a fling, but that's neither here nor there now, is it?

I push aside thoughts of any man and focus on me today, on Aliyah, my reflection in the mirror. Big brown eyes and smooth brown skin. Curly hair cut short, still mildly damp from the moisture of the shower even though I didn't wash it. I decide to leave all this emotion alone.

My job is to catch the bad guys. Given what this shifter is doing to me tells me I should back away before I get neck-deep in something I can't handle. Let someone else catch this particular bad guy. Maybe there's a reason he has so many charges and never a conviction. Maybe he makes everyone feel the way I do, so we all just back off in favor of keeping our sanity. My mind is made up. I am going to pretend I never saw this shifter and for certain never kissed him.

As I dress in comfy sweats and head to the kitchen to scrounge up a meal, my phone rings and I note the name on the caller ID.

"Hey, Cash."

"Hey, Lee. I Need some help rounding up a couple of bear shifters tomorrow. You want in?"

"Of course, I do," I say. "Wait, why are you asking and not the boss?"

"Apparently, he thinks I can handle two bear shifters by myself." He's got a bitter tone to his voice. He and our boss haven't been getting on too well lately. "It's not a lot of money. They're petty thieves, but whatever I bring in I'll split down the middle with you."

“Okay,” I say. “What time do you want to do this?”

“Let’s do it early. I like catching them before they’ve had their first cup of coffee.”

I chuckle. He’s got a stupid sense of humor. “All right,” I say, “Meet you at the diner for breakfast, then?”

“It’s a date.”

I hang up and I feel better. That was all I needed. To get back to work and shake off the weirdness. That’s all it’ll take. A few more jobs and I’ll forget Christopher Opal, or Dire, or whatever he calls himself, ever existed.

Chapter Six



Dire

I HAVE GOT TO be completely insane. I just have to be. I hadn't meant to kiss her. I don't know what came over me. Standing in the alleyway, taunting her while she held a knife, then a gun to my chest. She should have shot me. If I had any sense, I would have backed off long before that point. I should never have entered that alley where I knew she waited.

Hell, if I had any damn sense, I'd never have followed her in the first place. I followed and cornered a bounty hunter, then kissed her like we were lovers. I don't even know her name.

As I sip the tongue-searing hot coffee fresh from the pot I just brewed, the first hints of dawn spread across the sky. It's quiet, my favorite time of day before the household wakes up. I didn't sleep well. My dreams were plagued with images of her. Me holding her against the wall, my lips on hers, my dick pressing against the zipper of my jeans. What the hell would have happened if she hadn't pushed me away when she did?

I'm sitting out on the club patio, alone with my confused thoughts. Most of the crew were either asleep in one of the spare rooms in the clubhouse or at their own places. It's too damn early in the morning for most of us.

I can't seem to get her out of my mind.

I look up as the front door opens and Mac comes out. He's not paying attention to me. He's lighting a cigarette and he's shirtless, as he often is, his ink dark and prominent on his pale skin. He takes a drag from his cigarette, then nearly jumps out of his skin when he sees me.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," he swears. "You scared the fuck out of me."

I want to laugh at him, but I can't. My mind is too muddled. I nod toward the coffee pot and the smell of his cigarette makes me want one, but I quit many years ago, so I inhale and enjoy the brief pleasure of his secondhand smoke. He sets his freshly filled mug of coffee on the side table and flops into the lawn chair beside my own.

"What are you doing out here so early?"

"Thinking," I say. "I got a lot on my mind I guess."

He frowns at me. "Not about this Lillian deal?"

I shake my head, "No. Surprisingly enough, I ain't worried about that."

"Then what's eating at you?"

Do I tell him? I mean, none of us are known for sharing our feelings or anything like that. I've got to tell somebody about this, though.

"Kinda got girl problems, man."

He smiles so wide that the dimples in his thin face almost disappear. "No kidding? Aw, that's great. I mean, it sucks that

you've got problems, but—well, I ain't heard you talk about no chicks since, you know. We're all starting to wonder about you."

"It's not what you think. Something, I'm not sure how to describe this. Something weird happened yesterday."

I tell him about the bounty hunter. About how from the moment I saw her she was on my mind for the rest of the day and about how I'd tracked her down and I wasn't sure why.

Mac listens to me go on without saying a word. He sits there drinking his coffee, while I prattle on about it. When I get to the part where I kiss her, he looks at me, that stupid smile completely gone. Then he takes a drag from his cigarette and says, "Sounds like *Celestia*."

"Celestia? What the fuck's Celestia?"

He snickers, tendrils of smoke escaping from between his teeth. "It's an old mage thing. My moms used to talk about it when I was a kid. It's when two people are fated to be together."

"Get the fuck out of here with that shit, man."

"I'm serious," he says. "Mages believe we live more than one lifetime and sometimes we fall in love with someone we're supposed to be with for all eternity in one of those lifetimes. After we die, we're separated from them until we meet again and then it's like we never fell out of love."

I'm glaring at him. "What are you talking about? Like, soulmates or something?"

“Yeah, like that.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Come on, man. That shit isn’t real. That’s fairytale crap they tell kids.”

“Yeah, okay. I got a fucking wolf telling me about fairytales, now.”

We both laugh at that.

“Look, the point is this. Moms told me if it happens to you, you’re helpless to fight against it because you’re already fated to be one with whoever you’re connecting with. Nothing for it but to go with the flow.”

I swallow the last bit of my now cold coffee and rise to refill the mug. “So, what are you saying? I need to hook up with a bounty hunter? Doesn’t that sound nutty to you?”

“Yeah, it does,” Mac chuckles softly. “I don’t make the rules. Normally, I’d say go with it, you know? But since she’s a scav, I’d do my level best to stay away from her if I was you.”

I roll my eyes, refilling both of our mugs and easing back into the lawn chair, stretching my legs out and digging my bare heels into the sandy dirt. “I’ll do my best.”

We fall into silence, and I start thinking about her again. “Maybe I need a distraction,” I say finally. “Something to keep my mind together, you know?”

“Yeah, that sounds like a better plan than banging the bounty hunter. Although, it might be nice to have one of them in our pocket again. It sure was nice knowing when one of them was snooping around the area.”

I nod in agreement. “Just the same, I think I’m going to put more effort into this Lillian thing instead.”

“Good deal. We should be hearing back from Flip this afternoon about which building she’s in. He’s supposed to be coming through with his girl.”

“Right,” I say. I sit for a moment, trying to remember her name.

Mac must be reading my mind because he adds, “Tasha.”

“Right, Tasha,” I say. “Human, huh? Have we met her?”

“A few times. Used to be a hang-around a few years back.”

I try to remember if I’ve ever run into a girl named Tasha during the many times women were hanging around the bar just to have a chance to sleep with one of the club members. Women often buzzed around us like flies looking to become the next old lady to one of our ranks. Since my wife passed, I tended to attract them like flies to honey whenever they were around in groups.

In any event, I can’t think of a single Tasha. “Guess I’ll meet her later.”

We talk a bit longer, then I go back to my room and shower. Might as well get ready for the day. It’s going to be a long one after all.

By the time mid-morning comes around, Flip comes through with his old lady. Tasha is a long-legged white girl with ratty-looking blonde hair and bloodshot eyes. The second I see her I

want to call the whole thing off. I'm trying to give her a chance though.

Flip walks her up to me at the bar and introduces us. Her lips lift slightly in a small closed-mouth smile. "Nice to meet you."

I tell the prospect to get her something to drink, then I pull Flip aside. "So, what's the deal on where they're holding Lillian?"

He smiles broadly. "You won't believe this, but they're holding Lillian over at Bayside."

Bayside. In terms of internment centers for my kind, Bayside is less a prison and more of a county jail than anything else. The Authority and bounty hunters usually use it as a place to hold somebody until they can be transferred. With all the shifter arrests over the last bunch of years, I'm willing to bet that processing has been a bitch.

"That is good news," I say honestly. Most of us in the club have been through Bayside one way or another. Still, we'll need to case the joint for new security measures. It won't be nearly as difficult, though, to get her out of there as it would be in one of the long-term detention houses. The only thing was time. If Lillian's there now, she won't be there for long.

"All right. Good work. Thanks." I return to Tasha who is engaged with the bartender.

The second I walk up, she clears her throat and straightens up. "Hey, Dire," I sense she's anxious and being deliberately casual to hide her nerves.

“Hey. Did Flip tell you what we need you for?”

“Yeah. You want me to go in Bayside and have a look around.”

“That’s right. Think you can doll yourself up in about an hour?”

She blinks dumbly, then says, “Sure, Dire. Anything for you.”

“Good. Get ready then.”

She hops off the barstool and Flip leads her into one of the back rooms.

I sure hope she cleans up well or else she’s not going to work out. She has to look like she belongs there for this whole thing to work.

An hour later, Flip and Tasha return.

Tasha looks like a totally different woman. She’s wearing a gray business suit and her ratty hair is up in a bun and away from her face. Her greasy makeup has been powdered and toned down. She looks fresh and clean, like one of the normies uptown. My confidence in this plan is restored.

Tasha and Flip are driving Mac’s Mercedes with me right behind them on my bike. As we pull up to Bayside, we park in the lot across the street. Tasha gets out of the car and Flip stays behind, leaning low in the car to keep from being seen.

I watch Tasha walk up to the front door as confidently as any white woman in the city. It's a perfect deception.

Once she's through the door, I look down at my watch. It shouldn't take her too long to get a look at what we'll be dealing with.

I park my bike behind a decorative tree at the edge of the lot and I'm seated with my back against said tree trunk, keeping a casual eye on the entrance to Bayside. The building used to be a fancy hotel and still has the whole covered front drive-through.

A car has pulled up past the door and parked. A painfully thin human steps out of the driver's seat. He looks like a cowboy with his bowed legs and tight jeans with a big belt buckle.

I snort a laugh to myself. These bounty hunters aren't even trying to blend in anymore. The cowboy opens the back door and roughly pulls out a cuffed woman and walks toward the entrance dragging her along.

The front passenger's side door opens and there she is. The mystery woman with the short curly hair.

I probably should make myself scarce. Maybe slip into the building next door. But I can't stop watching her.

She pulls another cuffed person out of the back seat of the car and follows the cowboy.

Something inside me awakes. Something reaches out to her. The feeling is like a touch on her shoulder. *See me...*

She walks all the way up the walk leading to the entrance and for just a moment, I think that she's going to disappear behind the door, gone forever from my sight once more.

The cowboy is waiting for her near the door and takes both of their two catches in hand. She holds the door as they walk through and then, seemingly apropos of nothing, releases the door and turns to look over her shoulder directly at me.

She stops and so does time. We're looking at one another across the road as if we are simultaneously pulled out of space. There's no one here right now but us two.

She lets go of the door and takes a step toward me. I smile at her. I wonder, if she's as intrigued as I am, could I pull her in even more?

I stand and walk down the block away from her. Slowly. There's an old department store down the block from here that's been closed for a few weeks for repairs. Let's see what happens. When I reach the store's locked door, it takes only a moment to pick the lock and let myself in. Only now do I dare a look over my shoulder.

Yes! She's following. Even a quick glance shows me the mix of determination and intrigue on her face.

I don't know what I'm doing baiting her like this, but I feel compelled to find out what happens next.

Chapter Seven



Aliyah

I DON'T KNOW WHAT makes me turn around, but the second I do, I know I have to go after him.

My higher mind is telling me I can't let him escape this time. I need to catch him before he gets away. That's logical. Why else would I follow him?

As he starts walking, I jog across the street after him. My heart is racing as I gain on him, knowing I will catch up to him. The memory of his scent is on my mind and I'm almost close enough to catch it again. My body vibrates as I close the gap between us.

I see him break into a door of an old department store and as he pushes his way in, he looks over at me, that damned crooked smile on his face enticing and enraging me.

This man is your enemy, I remind myself, not for the first time today.

He wants me to follow him, that's obvious. Is he so eager for me to arrest him?

Inside the old department store I immediately pause to take in the room. It's dimly lit, filled with old, dusty shelves and broken clothing racks in various states. It's a huge open space, like any department store, one extensive expanse with racks and checkout desks creating aisles for walking. The walls are

faded and dirty with vaguely clean spots where signs used to be.

At the back of the store, I see a figure sitting atop a large counter positioned before the changing rooms. Dire. He is looking at me. His arms are crossed like he knew I would come after him.

I walk closer, moving slowly along the aisle, adding my own footprints to his boot prints visible on the dusty floor.

“You know,” he says, “I’m not a hundred percent on the law, but I’m pretty sure this is harassment.”

I scoff at him. “Yeah, whatever. Are we doing this the easy way or the hard way?”

He looks at me carefully, his eyes narrowing. “What’s your name?”

“What does that matter?”

He shrugs. “Haven’t seen you around. I like to have some idea of who’s chasing me, you know?”

There’s a strong part of me that doesn’t want to answer him. I think it’s some rule about not negotiating with targets or something. Still, I feel compelled to answer him.

“Aliyah,” I say, then against my better judgment, I add, “Aster.”

“Aliyah Aster.” He says my name like he is tasting a delicious dessert. He seems to be savoring it. “Do you really think you have what it takes to bring me in?”

I feel my stomach tighten.

He smiles, making his strong masculine face look impish like he's challenging me. One eyebrow raises skeptically. "You didn't do so well before."

"I got one shot in before you got cheap on me."

"Cheap." He shakes his head and chuckles. "My kisses have been called a lot of things, but cheap? Never."

"That was a mistake." I can hear my voice getting loud and high-pitched. I sound like a defensive child. *Way to go, Pokerface.*

"Yeah, seems like we agree on that." His dark eyes are moving over me like hands and my heart skips a beat. "And yet, you followed me all the way in here. Looks like you need something from me, right?"

"I need to bring you in."

He tilts his head and slides down off the counter, taking a step toward me. He's close enough now for me to smell him. Sweet and musky. Like an open forest or somewhere free from the stink of the city. I want to move away from him, but I can't get my feet to budge.

"Can't let you do that," he says. "I've got way too many things to handle just now to get myself locked up. Maybe we can schedule something for next week?"

I roll my eyes. "Who the fuck do you think you are? Big bad wolf thinks he's untouchable, huh?" My eye is drawn to the scars on his arms and I feel my face flush.

He must see my slightly embarrassed look because the next thing he says is, “I wouldn’t go that far.” He takes another step toward me. Involuntarily, I look up as he towers over me. His scent is making my skin tingle with excitement.

“In fact,” his voice is a low, purring baritone, “it really depends on who’s touching me. Rub this big bad wolf the right way, I might surprise you.” He’s looking down at me like he wants to devour me.

Lord Help me, I think I want him to do just that. I’m losing my breath just looking at him.

I reach for the gun in my holster, and he grabs my hand in a flash of preternatural speed, pressing himself against me while his large hand eclipses mine. I am right against his chest, and I feel like I’m swimming in his warmth.

I need to get some distance between us. I don’t know why I can’t just do my fucking job and arrest him. What is going on with me?

“Nice try.”

“Let my hand go,” I say through clenched teeth.

“No.” He growls the word.

The low, husky sound of his voice vibrates through me, and I start to melt inside. I take a breath and it comes out shaky, so I bite my lip to suppress something of the fire sparking inside of me.

“Take the gun out.” His rumbling voice is barely above a whisper. “Nice and slow.”

It occurs to me anything could happen if I refuse. He could easily hurt me. Break me in half before I even know what's happening. Only...

Only he hasn't done that yet. He moves fast. Faster than any shifter I've ever seen. And he's got the added bonus of knowing magic. I don't think there's any doubt between us that he could best me in a fight. Especially right now. I can't let him take my gun, though. I look up at him as defiantly as I can muster saying, "No. You're going to have to take it from me."

His eyes are shining again. The pulse of those gold and blue highlights seems to spin, a match to my head spin. I feel the vibration of a low growl coming from him. I don't want to admit it, but he's turning me on in the strangest way. I feel like I deliberately denied him to force him to look at me this way. Just to get him riled up. How stupid could I be?

"I'd rather you just gave it up," he says. "Surrender is much sweeter than resistance."

"Not that you'd know anything about that."

His lips curl up into a full smile and I know I need to do something. I need to break this hold he has on me.

I step back from him and for a split second, he lets go of my hand. I pull my gun and he knocks it away. The gun goes flying across the room spinning and ricocheting through the broken clothes racks, lost among the wreckage.

He steps to me and closes the gap between us again. I punch him, my fist connecting across his jaw and staggering him for just a second. Ha! I am not helpless.

He looks back at me and a trickle of blood falls from his lip. He pauses long enough to acknowledge his bloody lip, looking at his fingertip coming away wet. Then he chuckles as if to say, *Good one...*

He grabs me around the waist so fast that I don't have time to fully register what's happened. I'm in his arms again, my hands pressed against his chest.

He leans down and kisses me, the coppery taste of his blood on my lips. I'm excited and repulsed and God, I want him so desperately.

My body is on fire as his hands move around to my back. I feel the sharp sting of his fangs against my lip. My own sense of fear and danger is mixed up in my want for him.

He sweeps me up in his arms, lifting me with no effort while layering my mouth with kisses and nibbles on my lips.

My legs wrap around his waist even as my arms tighten around his neck. I feel his heat and respond in kind.

He raises his head for a moment and our eyes meet. I know he sees my acquiescence and unbridled desire for more.

His hold on me tightens as he carries me into one of the old changing rooms, using one arm to rip away the old curtains. No words are needed or wanted as he sets me on my feet in the mirrored space.

I undo his belt buckle and slide my hand down his pants as he pulls my face upwards, kissing me again.

When my hand finds his cock, I'm surprised, to say the least. He's extremely gifted. His manhood is about as long as it is thick and from what I could feel, he is bigger than any man I'd ever been with before. As I take him in my hand, I start to wonder if he'll be rough with me. He's so big, he could really hurt me if he isn't careful.

I feel him undo my pants and I feel a spark of panic, imagining him ramming himself inside me. I pull away from him and push him to the bench in the small room. He sits back and watches me as I pull off my jeans and panties and kick them into the corner. The view in the dusty, full-length mirrors distracts him momentarily and then his eyes are back on mine, burning need evident in them.

If this is going to happen, I better get in control of it.

I straddle him, kissing him as his large hands grab my ass. His cock is out, pressed against the hot center between my legs. The electricity between us transfers like a touch, making my skin vibrate. I move my hips against him, teasing him as I feel his hands move up my shirt. I look down at him and he's smiling at me.

"What are you waiting for?" he says in that low rumbling voice of his. I'm so wet for him and he knows it, feels it as I slide over his manhood, pressing him against me without letting him enter. Maybe it's fear. Both for the physical and

everything else. Maybe I think there's still a chance I can step away from him.

I don't want to, though. Heaven help me, I don't want this to stop.

He grabs my hips and lifts me up and as I feel the head of his cock pressing against my sex I gasp, "Go slow." It's involuntary. I don't want to show him weakness, but I can't help but to say it.

Something changes in his face as his eyes soften. "Of course," he says.

He guides me as I lower myself down onto him, the sensation of him entering me sends warm tingly throbs through my body. I bite down on my bottom lip as he moves his hips to match mine and I stifle the moans trying to escape me. I'm holding onto him as my excitement grows and I feel him thrusting deeper. There's pain with every thrust pulsing through me, but it feels so good right now.

I feel his hands move up my chest, to my bra. I feel claws piercing through the fabric as he grabs hold of one of my breasts. He's moaning in deep guttural sounds as I hold onto him, holding in my own moans. I'm still holding back from him, even now as I'm giving him my body. I don't know how much longer I can hold out. I can feel myself starting to climax.

He leans into me, his strong arms wrapping around me. He holds me securely as he gets to his feet, holding me. I wrap my legs around him as I hold on.

He turns me to the wall, pressing me against it, and says, “Don’t hold back from me.”

He reaches down and wraps his arms under my thighs and leans into me. He’s holding me up with the wall on my back and thrusting harder, his claws digging into the skin of my thighs.

I moan loudly, my carnal instincts taking over my body. I’m holding onto him, my nails digging into the leather of his kutte as I do my best to withstand the power of his body against mine.

“Oh...yes...yes!” My body starts to shake as I climax in his arms. His eyes are closed, his face close to mine and his panting hot breath is in my face.

“Shit,” he murmurs as his body jerks.

Watching him give way to his own passion is turning me on even more. My hand goes to his face and he opens his dark eyes, connecting with me. I’m still shivering, my legs like jelly in his muscular arms. Oh, but I don’t want him to stop. I don’t want this to end.

I move my hips, encouraging him. He leans in and kisses me, slowly moving his hips with mine. Soft moans leave my lips as his tongue finds mine again.

“Don’t stop,” I whisper through his kisses. “Don’t stop...”

I wouldn't go so far as to say that I'm prudish. I mean, I haven't been with very many men at all, really, but the few who I've been with have been satisfactory. Not extraordinary perhaps, but totally sufficient and enjoyable.

Of course, I've only ever been with mages. Never a shifter. And most definitely never a wolf. To be honest, up until this very moment, it never occurred to me that it might ever be an option.

I expected him to be unflinchingly rough. He wasn't. At least not as rough as I imagined. He was controlled even when his claws and fangs came out, he didn't hurt me in any detrimental way.

Twice we fucked in this changing room and now that we're both spent, the guilt has come over me like a shroud. It feels like a cold blanket against my skin, and I do not like it.

We're on opposite sides of the changing room, half-naked and catching our breaths. I look away from him, grabbing my panties as he pulls up his pants. This is so bad. So very bad...

I get into my jeans, all the while feeling his eyes on me as I finish dressing.

He doesn't say a word. Just watches. What is there to say? I'm sure he knows as well as I do that we fucked up.

"This didn't happen," I say without looking at him. "This... whatever it is. It never happened. Do you understand?"

I hear him scoff, then ask, "You gonna take me in?"

My hand flies on its own and grabs the silver knife in my holster. I point it at him, aiming for his chest.

He doesn't flinch. Hell, he doesn't even look surprised. He just tilts his head, his teeth showing in a slightly menacing smile. "Either do it or don't." His voice is dangerously soft. "But stop waving your silver around if you don't mean it."

I break into a cold sweat. Jesus, what the hell is wrong with me?

My hand is shaking as he steps forward, leaning into the knife until it's pressed against the leather of his kutte, smoke again rising in tendrils as the solid silver blade nears his skin.

I move quickly, bringing the knife to his neck.

He lifts his chin and sports a wry grin as even more steam rises from the blade biting ever so slightly into his skin.

"What are you waiting for, Scav?" he snarls at me. "Take me down if you think you can."

I narrow my eyes, staring unblinkingly at him. I am torn up; all sorts of mixed feelings are tearing me apart inside.

"Fuck you," I growl after a moment that seems to stretch into forever.

I put the knife away and walk out of the changing room and out of the store without looking back. By the time I spot Cash standing by the car, I have to dig my hands in my jeans to keep from shaking.

“Hey,” he says as I walk around to the passenger’s side. “I was wondering where you were. You left me with the paperwork. What’s wrong?”

I pause and smile over at him. “Yeah, sorry about that. Nothing’s wrong. Thought I saw someone.” I open the door and drop into the front seat. “Now, I’m really tired and hungry. Let’s stop for food before we head back to the office, huh?”

“Sure.” Cash says nothing more, despite the puzzled look on his face, as he puts the car into gear and drives.

Thank goodness. I’m not ready to have any kind of conversation about what I’ve just done.

Chapter Eight



Dire

IT'S TIME FOR CHURCH, but my head is somewhere else.

I can't stop thinking about her. I don't know how I let it get so far with her yesterday. It was like from the moment I saw her, everything else just fell away from me. I started flirting with her from the moment we first talked.

And being with her was like damn, it's hard to explain it, even to myself. When I close my eyes, I can still taste her sweet lips and feel the texture of them against my tongue. I can still feel my hands pressing into the soft flesh of her ass. And the feeling of being inside her...the way *I* felt from the first thrust to the last shudder of my orgasm. No comparisons anyplace or with anyone in this life.

I feel Mac nudge me under the table and I snap back into the moment. We're supposed to be talking about this mission and I need to focus on that. Not the last (and best) piece of ass I had.

"...shouldn't be too difficult." Flip has a crude drawing in front of him of the security at Bayside. It's pretty much the same as I remember it being, with a few exceptions for changes they've added over the last few years. Already everybody's putting in their two cents as to how to go about the big jailbreak and despite my mind wandering, I do hear most of what's being said. This is going to be a relatively easy job.

“So, what do you think?” Flip asks me. “About...five or six guys ought to do it, right?”

I think about it, looking down at the paper. One guy to drive, two to look out, one to shut down the power...

I shake my head. “Seven to be safe. We still don’t know exactly where they’re holding her. I want no less than three sets of boots on the ground.”

Nods all around.

“Cool,” said Flip. “I can take out the power, but only for about five minutes with these new systems.”

“That’s it? Five minutes?” Mac balked. “You see the size of that place? No way we’ll get in and out in that little bit of time.”

“We won’t need to get in and out,” I say. “Just in. We can wreck the cameras along the way by hand.”

More nods. I start assigning my best men to their jobs and call the meeting to an end. That didn’t go too badly. I might be distracted, but I can still run this club effectively.

“Hey, boss. Let me holler at you for a second.” Mac says as everyone leaves the room.

We hang back and as soon as we’re alone he asks, “Where were you yesterday?”

“What are you talking about? I was with Flip—“

“Flip told me you disappeared with some chick while he waited for Tasha. Since when do you chase tail while you’re

on the job?”

Caught. Well, I might’ve expected as much, actually. I mean, it wasn’t like I was all that discreet or anything. I walk to the door and close it so we’re not overheard.

“Remember that Scav I told you about? The woman I saw through the portal?”

Mac’s face pales as he understands what I’m getting at. “You have got to be shitting me. Dire—“

“I know, all right? It’s not like I was looking for something to happen.”

He narrows his eyes and leans into me. “What something? What else did you do? More than yesterday?”

I take a deep breath before I speak. “Yeah. Way more. We fucked in one of the changing rooms of that old clothing store by the jailhouse.”

Mac flinched like I was going to slap him, but he didn’t say anything at first. He just stood there shaking his head.

“I know I fucked up,” I say, “but it’s not like it’s ever going to happen again.”

Mac just sighs. “Dire, you gotta stay away from that chick.”

“No shit, Sherlock. Do you know how fucked-up this is? I don’t even know how it happened. The second I saw her; it was like something took over. Like I was acting against my will. Like I was hypnotized or something.”

I thought about what Mac had said before about Celestia and expected maybe he would throw an I told you so in my face. He doesn't, though.

"You're playing with fire messing with that girl. I don't know what you gotta do to make it happen, but you cannot see her again. It's messing with your head."

"I know," I say finally. "She's bad news in every possible way. Not to mention the timing couldn't be worse."

Mac chortles. "No kidding. Not gonna lie, buddy. Celestia is a son of a bitch when it hits."

I frown at him, certain my disbelief shows.

He shrugs and adds, "Hey, this isn't like some Hoodoo shit. You ain't gotta believe in it for it to exist, brother. Celestia isn't a judgment. It just is."

I shake my head. I'm still resisting the idea that this is some magic soulmate shit, even though the evidence is becoming more and more cut and dry every time I think about it.

"Look," he says, patting me on the shoulder, "maybe you should consider not traveling alone for a while."

"You think I need a babysitter?"

"I think you need some distance. That's all. What you're dealing with isn't some prime pussy you can't resist. This is mystical shit. It's not in your control anymore. Your soul and hers are drawn to each other like magnets. You can't possibly guarantee that it won't happen again unless there's somebody with you to distract you."

It's not a bad idea. I mean, it's not like we run in the same circles and it's not like she's going to walk through the front door of the clubhouse anytime soon. Having one of my guys with me should I run into her would give me something else to focus on.

"It won't be forever," said Mac. "Just until we get this whole thing with Lillian sorted out. Then if you want to sneak around and fuck her on the sly, go for it. Just don't get yourself stitched up."

"Yeah, all right," I say. "I won't ride alone. For now, anyway."

Mac leaves it at that, and we leave the meeting room. Out in the bar, the rest of the crew are scattered around, having beers, discussing the game plan for getting Lillian out.

I see Misty arguing with Flip on the far side of the room. It looks intense, but I don't intervene. Even though Misty's a pain in the ass, she's still just a kid. Flip can handle whatever she's dishing out at him.

And then I see her see me as I walk across the bar. She gives Flip a look, pursed lips and raised eyebrows as if to silently say, *I'll show you*, then walks past him and toward me. To his credit, Flip tries to stop her by grabbing her arm, but she yanks her arm free and keeps moving. Great. Now I get to be dragged into whatever bullshit this is.

"Dire," she says, "We got a problem."

Flip steps between us and looks at me, imploring with his eyes. "Sorry, boss. She doesn't mean anything by bugging you

with this. I got it handled.”

“The hell you do!” She steps to one side to get my attention.

“Dire, I just got word from Flora at the camp. First aid supplies are running low.”

I look from her to Flip and back again, waiting for her to continue. “And...?”

“And I was telling Flip that you guys ought to give us some of your stash. Just until Lil gets out and she can call her supplier.”

“And I told her,” Flip interjects, “that we’re going to need all the aid we can get since there might be trouble breaking Lillian out.”

“Come on, Flip. We’re almost down to nothing. All it would take is one big hit from the Authority—“

“Not our problem right now, Misty.”

“God, you are such a heartless, gutless asshole—“

“Enough,” I say and the both of them stop bickering instantly.

“Flip, get about ten boxes from the back, and load up the truck.”

Flip’s eyes widen, but he doesn’t speak against me. He knows better. “Sure, Boss. Whatever you say.”

As he leaves, Misty gives me a smile. “Thanks, Dire. We owe you big time.”

“Yeah, no shit. You and Flip can head out as soon as the boxes are packed.”

“I’ll let him know.”

As she walks away, I think about how scattered I’ve been since meeting Aliyah and the conversation I just had with Mac. The crew going to free Lillian doesn’t need me at the moment and hanging around here doing nothing just makes me think about HER more.

“Hey,” I call out to Misty. She stops at the back door and looks back at me. “Let me know when you’re about to roll out. I’ll come with you.”

Chapter Nine



Aliyah

CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, bounty hunting isn't all about running through the mean streets after the bad guys. In fact, we typically spend more time tracking down our targets in the office than actually catching them while we're in the field. Sometimes we just come to the office and wait for a call. I always end up wondering why the hell I can't do that at home.

Today is the kind of day where I'm sitting around and waiting. I hate being idle. I'm sitting at the community table in the back of the office, playing solitaire with an old deck that's probably been in the building since it was built. Cash sits across from me, scrolling through his phone while he tap-tap-taps the table with his vape.

"Do you have to do that?" I ask him. He doesn't answer me. He's too engrossed in whatever video he's watching.

"Cash," I say. Still, he doesn't respond. I nudge him with my foot under the table. He jumps, a dumbfounded look on his face.

"What?"

"The tapping. You want to knock that shit off, please?"

He gives me an annoyed look, but he still puts the vape in his shirt pocket. "Sorry," he mutters.

We've been like this all morning. Sitting around and waiting. I'm trying not to think about Dire...and failing for the most part. I keep remembering the way his large hands felt on my ass, the claws digging into my skin. And how big he was and how good that felt. I still kind of feel him when I walk or cross my legs; the aches from taking a dick that large are like a pleasant reminder of him.

Goddamn, he's bad news. Just bad, bad news. I don't know what the hell got into me and, as fun as it was, I hope to never experience that kind of conflict of interest again. I can't even imagine having to tell Cash or my boss about Dire. Pretty sure I'd at least lose my license, and at best, I'd probably get hauled into jail for harboring a criminal or some other trumped-up charge for sleeping with the enemy.

The door opens and my boss, Genie, pokes his head in. His name is Eugene, but we don't call him that. Somewhere along the line, Cash started calling him Genie and it just stuck.

He's standing there in his white dress shirt and tight and drab-colored slacks. He's got his phone in his hand and he's looking at us as if he just got some bad news. "You two in my office. Now. Got a special."

Cash and I exchange a silent glance, then follow him out of the room. Specials are usually never good. They don't pay as well, and they usually involve us doing shit that's outside of our job description. We always take them, though, because they're always direct from the main office and you don't want to deny an Authority job without good reason.

We walk into Genie's office. It smells like old, stale coffee in here and maybe something else. Body odor, perhaps? I mean, Genie does sweat a lot.

He sits down at his desk which is covered in papers and notepads with red and blue pen scribbled all over them. He clears his throat as he sits down at his computer.

"So, there's been some significant movement from one of the outlaw gangs just outside the city limits."

"Outlaw gangs?" Cash says. "Somebody starting trouble in the cities on the outer rim?"

"Nothing like that. Not yet anyway. Authority thinks it might be connected to your big catch the other day."

Neither of us says anything, a million thoughts spinning between us. "The rebels are connected to the outlaw MCs?" I ask and Genie shrugs.

"Don't know. They want some surveillance work, though." He looks down at the paperwork piled on his desk. "MC is called Maztecs. Their clubhouse is about fifty miles east of the city. They tagged us because we're the closest hunters."

I feel an icy cold finger on my bones. "The Maztecs?"

"Great," says Cash with annoyance in his voice. "And how many pennies are we getting paid for this one?"

"Half the regular rate, but this is Authority work, so we take what they offer."

“Genie,” I say, “I don’t need to tell you this is a bad idea, right? I mean, isn’t that a wolf gang? Do we really want to mess with wolves?”

“Since when do you have a problem dealing with shifters, Aliyah?”

Since I fucked one in an old department store changing room.
I swallow hard, pushing away the errant thought. “Listen, rogue shifters are one thing. Organized ones, though. I mean, that’s kind of out of our wheelhouse, don’t you think?”

“Specials are always out of our wheelhouse. What do you want me to do? Tell them no thanks? You know that’s not an option.”

I look over at Cash, who just shrugs helplessly. “I don’t know,” I say to Genie. “Maybe that’s exactly what you should tell them. I mean, if we’re going to take every shit job the Authority trickles down to us—”

“Save it.” Genie waves his hand at me with an exasperated look on his face. “For crying out loud, Aliyah. Since when do you want to turn down a job and especially an Authority job? Of the two of you, you know what’s at stake the most. Or at least I thought you did.”

That stung. Just because I come from academy stock, I’m supposed to know better than to buck against the Authority. Right.

“Sorry, I just...It sounds dangerous, is all.”

“That’s never stopped you before. You know what, since you’re so mouthy about it, I think you ought to be the one to take it”

I see Cash frown out of the corner of my eye. “By herself?” he asks. “Is that wise?”

“It’s just surveillance,” Genie says. “No engagement. Just zip in and out. I don’t need the both of you for something like that.”

Great. That’s just great. Here I am, trying to stay away from the big sexy wolf and my boss wants me to walk right into his den. What can I say? If I push for Cash to do it instead, that’ll make me look like a bigger brat than he thinks I am.

“Fine,” I say. “Give me the details.”

He does. The details are straightforward. As Genie says, Dire’s motorcycle club might be connected to Lillian and the rebel supernaturals. I just have to survey their gang until I find something worth bringing back. Now that I think about it, I will probably not even have to see Dire at all. If I stay hidden, he certainly won’t see me. This might not be the shitstorm I think I’m being set up for. Maybe.

I take the job and head out to where the Maztec clubhouse reportedly is. The whole drive, my heart is racing at the prospect of seeing Dire again. It’s sickening. I repeat aloud to myself, “This is work. You won’t even talk to him. You probably won’t see him. Stop being silly about all this.”

The clubhouse sits at the end of a road littered with mostly abandoned, burned-down houses scattered on either side of the road. I can clearly see their compound from the end of the block. High chain link fencing, filled in with opaque sheets of what looks to be weathered treated plywood surrounds what looks at first glance like a junkyard. Seems like it might be a deliberately misleading impression.

The clubhouse sits on a slight rise. An old car is visible, sitting on the side of the large driveway leading up to the saloon-style building visible above the fence and ornate reinforced metal gates. The gates are open, I'm guessing for the day and obviously attended as there are two men visibly lounging on either side of the opening. Not a blatantly militant front, but clearly a perimeter protected by the members. At a guess, I'd say their presence was more of a statement than a true guard outpost. A warning to say, *don't fuck with us, we are watching and ready.*

I park my car and turn it off, setting off a surveil spell around me. It's lazy, but this way, I am able to hear most of what's going on in the yard and if I'm lucky, some of the conversation in the clubhouse. After a few moments, I realize nothing's coming through. I guess I shouldn't be surprised at that, though. If Dire knows magic, he's probably got some kind of barrier around the clubhouse, especially protecting against mages like me.

I can still watch the place, though and I'm far enough away I doubt I'd even recognize Dire if he should walk out for some reason.

Who am I kidding? I'd know him from a mile away.

And so, I sit and wait. This seems harmless enough. Well worth half the regular rate for my job.

I'm not waiting long before I see movement within the yard. A truck rolls out and skids to a stop in front of the clubhouse. Two people walk out of the house and down to the waiting truck.

And there he is. His dark skin shines in the sunlight. My heart skips a beat and I feel a flutter of joy in my gut. I recognize him on a deeper level than simple observation.

The female he's walking with appears to be the wolf shifter who escaped me, Misty Cole. And who, next to his massive stature, looks almost childlike. The top of her head just barely comes up to his bicep.

I bite my lip hard, trying to chase away the feeling of arousal. God, why am I remembering what his lips taste like?

Dire hoists Misty into the truck and he steps in to join her. I can't identify the driver, but he looks to be a male. The gate opens for them as the truck approaches it. Opens and closes by automatic action, interestingly enough. Confirmation those guys lounging around the gate have a more serious job than being gate attendants. The trained soldier in me wonders absently how they are armed as they do not carry any visible weapons.

I watch the truck pull out and drive up the road. As I start the car and follow, I realize I'm going on instinct; why am I

leaving my assigned task to observe when my mind has not even formulated a plan?

Against my better judgment, I continue to follow them along the back roads, past all the burned-out buildings left over from the war that happened a generation ago. It's funny how no one has thought to rebuild any of this. Maybe because it's all too close to the city's edge. Who knows?

Finally, the truck turns down an unmarked road. I follow, doing my best to keep a distance between us. We drive along this road for what feels like an hour or more. The sun is starting to make its descent in the sky and just as I have a smidge of concern about following them unobserved after dark, the truck turns off the road and onto a destroyed blacktop road, now more of a rutted path than what was likely once a beautiful tree-shaded driveway.

In the distance is what must be their destination. Burned-out walls are visible, but not much else. An old town? A private compound destroyed during the war? It's hard to tell from here.

I turn off the road and follow more slowly. Before long, I recognize what looked strange from far away. The truck stopped in front of a fence with a large gate dividing them from whatever was on the other side. From here, I can only see one of the old buildings over the gate. It doesn't even look like a complete structure, just a collection of walls with a tarp over the top, which is why it appeared to be a destroyed town.

Camouflage. Deliberate subterfuge. But hiding what? Time to find out.

I park, concealing my car under overgrown bushes on the side of the road. After gently closing the door, I use the line of brush for cover, to sneak closer.

Dire, Misty, and the driver get out of the truck. They wait for a few minutes until someone walks out to greet them. By now, even hidden by brush, I am close enough to see she is a thin, scraggly-looking shifter with stringy hair and bright green eyes. I don't recognize her, or the driver for that matter, from any of the wanted posters, but that doesn't mean anything, really. All shifters are on a watch list.

They talk, the four of them. I think about casting another surveil spell to see if I can hear anything, but I decide against it. There's no telling who these people are or what they can do, after all.

They only talk for a few minutes before the two women and the driver get in the truck. Dire stops at the passenger's side door. He steps back from the truck and closes the door, waving them on while he stays behind. The large gate slides open and lets the truck through. Dire puts up a finger to whoever is holding that gate open, then turns to walk back down the broken-up roadway.

Is he looking this way? It certainly seems so. A slow smile crosses his face and I feel my face flush. He sees me. Dammit. He stops a few feet from my hiding place.

"You coming or what?"

His baritone voice carries effortlessly across the road to my hiding place in the brush. I should make a break for my car and drive away. But what would I report if I did? I don't even know what this place is. Nope. I decide to make the best of this predicament. And ignore the joyful feeling deep in my gut at the thought of spending more time with this hunky biker.

I reach to check whether my gun is in my holster before I stand and break cover. *Steady, Lee. He can't do anything to you as long as you're armed.*

As I walk up to him, I can see his smile has a smug appearance. As if to say he knew I was out here all along. "You're a terrible spy," he says. "I clocked you a couple miles after we left the clubhouse."

"Clearly."

"What are you doing here? Isn't this kind of thing above your pay grade?"

"Apparently not. I think it's kind of obvious why I'm here. Maybe you should be the one to share with me."

He looks around us as if to try to sense if there are more hunters around. "I can show you better than I can tell you. Come on."

He turns around and walks through the gate where the truck passed minutes ago. I follow cautiously, keeping my hand near my holster. He motions to the gatekeeper to close and addresses several angry-looking men with guns on their backs blocking our further progress. They were each looking past

Dire and directly at me. “Stand down,” Dire says. “She’s with me.”

They glance at him, then immediately avert their gazes and step aside as we draw near and pass them.

Wow. Just a word from him and they back off. No questions asked. That is interesting.

Dire leads me along a trail and down into a valley of tents and makeshift houses. Children are playing with a ball around one of the tents where an old lady is sitting, watching over the kids and knitting what looks to be a blanket or a sweater.

I see a young mother with a baby on her hip walking out of the single large building. She pauses to talk to the truck driver, who continues to unload boxes and carry them into the building. In the center of it all, is a large tent with tables and ancient-looking surveillance equipment.

And it hits me. This is a rebel camp. *Shit.*

Chapter Ten



Dire

“SO, I GUESS THE Authority wants to know what an outlaw MC wants with refugees.” I make my question casual even though I really want to know the answer.

Aliyah’s sharp eyes appear to miss nothing as I watch her look over the camp. I wasn’t lying when I told her that I saw her almost immediately. I don’t know what they’re teaching Scavs these days, but she’s shit at shadowing her target.

She looks at me with narrowed eyes. “You mean rebels.”

“No rebels here.” My head shakes as I look around the dingy, dirty encampment. “Only people who’ve been displaced since the war. These parts, for miles around skirting the city, are filled with pockets like this of tent cities.”

She blinks, squinching her eyes at me in the most adorable, puzzled expression, then takes another look around. “The war ended ages ago,” she says. “Everyone here can’t possibly be a refugee.”

Two of Lillian’s little ones are playing with a ball around her mother’s tent. One of them kicks the ball toward me. I stop it with my foot and nudge it back. I hear the bitterness in my voice as I scoff at her gullibility. “I guess you didn’t see too much of the war, huh?”

“So, you’re telling me those are orphans from the war?” she asks, her voice dripping with skepticism.

“Of course not. All the orphans grew up and ended up living the rest of their lives in places like this. Or were taken in by motorcycle clubs. Shifters live in packs or prides, or pods, or troops, or bands, or mobs, or even a tower. Take your pick of the name, they’re all the same. Most shifters live in communal groups. And since the war, the cabal and their brutal enforcers have made sure we can’t rebuild our families. This is how most of our people are forced to live. In fear. Keeping out of sight and off the beaten track. With no resources and afraid to even build a permanent shelter over their heads.”

I feel her eyes on me, analyzing. “Not everybody’s as lucky as these folk, though. Some supernaturals live underground in sewers or old subway shafts. I feel the worst for them. They never really get to see the sun.”

I continue walking, leading her to one of the tents where the smell of food is heaviest. She lifts her nose and smiles. “That smells really good.”

Jonah, a bear shifter who has lived his whole life here, is cooking rat skewers on an open flame behind his tent. He sees us coming and smiles. “Hey, Dire.”

“Hey,” I say. “Smells good. Got any to spare?”

“For you? Of course.”

He reaches back and pulls out two skewers with roasted rat carcasses on them. I give one to Aliyah and she gives it a skeptical look.

“Thank the man,” I tell her. “Food isn’t exactly free around here.”

I see her brown eyes widen as she looks over at Joe. “Thanks.”

We walk away and I take a bite from the skewer. She picks at hers with her fingers.

“So, you were an orphan,” she asks.

“Both my folks were taken out in a raid during the war. My entire block was erased off the map.”

She’s staring at me. I’m talking about this like it’s the weather and that’s obviously throwing her off. “How old were you?”

I shrug. “I don’t count the days much anymore, so my age has become a rounded figure in my mind. I don’t know. Ten? Maybe eleven.”

“That’s so young.”

“One of the Maztec crew found me and took me in. Good thing, too. I didn’t have anything but the clothes on my back and those were getting thin and ragged.”

She doesn’t say anything. I can see wheels turning in her head, though. Obviously, this is a reality she knew nothing about. And how would she? As a mage, she’s lived an entirely different life.

I lead her to one of the benches scattered around the open courtyard in the center of the tented village. We sit and eat the skewered rats eagerly. I’m hungrier than I thought. This is no more than a snack to me, but I won’t take more food from

these people. I know they will give to me and short themselves.

“I’m sorry. How,” she pauses to gather her words. “I’m having a hard time believing anyone is still displaced after the war. Buildings were built for the refugees. Entire communities were rebuilt.”

I shake my head. “Internment camps. Prisons. Places making it convenient for the cabal to find us and for the Mage Council and the Authority to help erase us.”

She scoffs, clearly not wanting to believe. I can hear the uncertainty in her voice now. She’s questioning her understanding of the facts now. “That...that can’t be. I mean, I know the Authority can be tough, but...I mean, what you’re talking about...that just can’t be right.”

I look at her, then toss the remnants of my skewer into the dust. “It’s not right. That’s truth. And yet?” I wave my arm, taking in the raw poverty visible before us. “This is also truth.”

She falls silent, her eyes drifting down to the circular white scars on my forearm. There’s no mistaking magical wounds, especially to a mage. When she sees me looking at her, she turns her eyes away from me.

“This war is still going on,” I say. “And it’s still taking lives, no matter what you’ve been told.”

“So...are you their protector?”

She’s asking me with her eyebrows raised and there’s no sarcasm in her voice. She genuinely wants to know this.

“Where I can protect, I do. Sometimes, it’s not enough, though.”

Suddenly, I see my wife in my mind’s eye. It happens every now and then. I think of her in random quiet moments. Maybe this time isn’t so random. Talking about being a protector makes me think of her.

“Are you going to take me in?” I ask her, mostly to divert my mind.

She smiles unexpectedly. It’s brief. Just a quick twitch on the corners of her mouth. “You say that every time we meet.”

“It continues to be a valid question.”

She nods slowly. “No. I don’t think so. I don’t know what this is,” now it’s she who is waving to include the encampment. “But I don’t think it warrants an arrest.”

“A lot of bounty hunters would disagree with you. I don’t know if you’ve heard, but Shifters are nothing but thieves and murderers.”

Her smile is completely gone now. I feel like I’ve hit a nerve that she didn’t know was exposed. “Humans have said similar things about Mages.” She says that so softly as to be barely audible.

I hear her just fine. “I guess we have a common enemy in that, then.”

She flinches. After a few moments of silence, she says, with shame in her voice, “I can’t get mixed up with you. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” I say. “We’re on opposite sides of the fence. It could be bad for both of us.”

“If I go back and I lie about what I’ve seen, I could get into big trouble.”

“So, don’t go back.” The words come out before I realize it and they sound foreign, husky and raw, like someone else is speaking.

She looks over at me, her brow furrowing, then she looks away. “I have to go back. And so do you.”

“Yeah.” We both go silent again until I finally say, “Once you leave here, you should stay as far away from me as you can. We can’t ever meet like this again.”

She doesn’t say anything. She’s biting her lip and I notice a thin line of water in her eyes. Everything in me hates what I just said to her. I want to take it back.

But it’s the truth. This has to be the last time we meet. Or else...I don’t know what I’ll do.

“You’re right,” she says softly. “You’re so right.” She stands up and tosses her skewer into the dust next to mine.

“You stay on your side, and I’ll stay on mine. Deal?”

I nod. “Deal.”

Chapter Eleven



Aliyah

EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED AND yet nothing has. I'm standing on the pier, looking out on the lake just beyond the west end of town. Lake Orion is the biggest lake in the county and where most of the human families go during the summer months. It's late right now, though. The sun is setting, leaving behind a blended sky with shades of bright yellow and orange. It's beautiful. And all I see in my mind's eye is the dreary poverty of a hidden shifter refugee camp

I guess this is the perfect setting to question everything. It's been a few days since I followed Dire out to the refugee camp and I'm starting to wonder how much of what he told me was the truth.

I keep coming back to the fact that he could have told me nothing. I saw it with my own eyes, after all. He could have left me to come to my own interpretation. There were families in that camp. There were refugees, not rebels. And it was too open, too tragic, and transparent for there to have been a hidden purpose. That camp was their home, sad and utterly real, but home.

The crazy thing is that it's not like he didn't tell me anything that I didn't know, at least on a subconscious level. All this time, I thought I had it pretty good being a mage in service to the Authority. Given that we're not even considered fully human, just being employed seemed like a win.

I mean, up until now.

I never thought about what the war did to everyone else. I thought Dire was a thug. A meathead only capable of violence. I bought into the propaganda even as I tried to convince myself I didn't. Dire is clearly not what I expected. And I have no idea what to do with that information.

"There you are."

I jump and turn around to see Cash walking up the pier. His boots make hollow noises on the wooden boards under his feet, which I would have heard if I hadn't been so deep in thought. "I didn't know you were looking for me." *We've been off work for a few hours now. Did he follow me here?*

"Well, you left so quick after our last run, I thought maybe I ought to check in with you. Make sure you're okay."

I take a deep breath. Cash and I have always been pretty close. We were friends before I signed up to be a bounty hunter. In fact, it was on his recommendation that I even got this job. I'm questioning his motives because, well, I guess because I realize I need to talk about what's on my mind. He is my friend. I should be able to talk to my friend. I hope he doesn't judge me too hard.

"So, you never mentioned how that whole surveillance thing worked out," he says, like he's reading my mind.

"Yeah," I say. "There's not really anything to tell. I didn't find anything."

He nods. “I know that’s what you told Genie, but what really happened?”

I look at him. He’s standing next to me with his hands in his pockets, looking out over the lake solemnly. “I just told you —“

“I followed you.”

I felt my feet go cold. *Shit*. My mind is racing. How much could he know? I can’t tear my eyes away from him, trying to anticipate what’s coming.

“You’ve been acting kind of squirrely lately.” He looks away from me, his shoulders sagging a bit, and faces the lake. Picking up a stone, he tosses it toward the water in a lousy attempt to skip it. *The wrong type of fricking stone, idiot*, some part of me thinks.

“It’s not, like, loud or anything. I don’t think anybody’d notice it except for me if we’re being honest, Lee. So, I followed you. Just to make sure you would be okay.”

“Clearly, I was.” I’m trying really hard not to sound as offended as I am, but it’s not coming through right.

“You got a lotta nerve, Lee. All I was doing to was looking out for you and you’re giving me attitude.”

I take a breath. “Nothing happened. Okay? There really was nothing to tell.”

He looks at me, narrowing his eyes the way he does when he doesn’t believe me.

I roll mine. “Fine,” I say finally. “Maybe there was something. If I tell you the truth.... Look, I need you to be my friend, okay? This is off the record and out of the realm of getting a bounty. I need Cash, my buddy, not Cash, my partner.”

He takes out his vape and turns it on. “Sure. I’m always going to be on your side, kiddo. You got nothing to worry about there.”

I nod. That’s as much of a guarantee as I could have hoped for. “Okay. The MC was giving supplies to a refugee camp.”

“Refugee?” His frown no doubt echoes my own when I first entered the camp. “What are you talking about?”

I tell him about the camp. The children. The elderly. No soldiers or rebel forces. Just people living their lives in tents and houses bricked together with old concrete. He listened silently as I described everything that I saw.

Finally, he says, “And this, what’s his name? Dire? That his real name?”

“Of course, that’s not his real name.”

Cash shakes his head in disbelief. “Yeah, okay. This Dire guy. Do you believe him? That these people were refugees and not rebels? Tell me you’re not that gullible.”

“That’s the thing. I didn’t have to believe him. I could see it with my own eyes. There were kids and old people. Families, Cash. Not war-hardened rebels. I don’t know. It was people living their lives.”

He shakes his head again, but he says nothing in response.

“And Dire. He tells me about how the war left this whole generation of shifters and other magic folk with nothing. You know, his entire community was destroyed in a raid. That’s how he ended up with the Maztecs. His entire family was killed.”

Cash is just looking at me, his eyes running over my face as if trying to read me. “You talk about him like he’s a person. He’s a Maztec, Lee. He’s a shifter. They’re not like us. They are not human. Those guys are literal animals.”

The hate in his voice is unmistakable.

“I know, I know.” I run my hand over my face in frustration. “Listen, I’m not an idiot, okay? I know who he is and who the Maztecs are and...”

I trail off. I don’t really know how to explain what I’m feeling to him. How everything that I thought I knew just seems wrong now. How everything he just said about shifter feels wrong to me now.

“Where are you going with all this?”

I shrug. It’s the most honest answer I can give him. “I don’t really know. Cash, after learning about those refugees, I wonder how much of our lives is legit, you know? We work for the Authority, so they leave us mages alone. But everybody else gets the horns one way or the other. Everybody else is subject to scrutiny and imprisonment—“

“Well, they’re not us,” he interrupts, loudly. “They didn’t fight against true humans in the war. We’re not the monsters; they

are. That's why we're allowed to have these lives."

"Yeah...but how far away are we from them, Cash? Seriously. True humans don't see us as one of them. We can't even live in the same neighborhoods as them, even though as many of our people perished in that war as theirs. And they wouldn't have won it without us. Why aren't we equal with them?"

Everything goes quiet between us. I don't think I meant to say that. I don't know what I think. Cash just looks at me, his brow furrowed, sympathy in his eyes.

"You're all turned around, aren't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess I am.

He takes a deep breath, then pulls me into a hug. "Well, as your friend, I gotta tell you this kind of talk scares the shit out of me. But I want to support you. Know what I mean?"

I bury my face into his chest and a part of me wants to start crying. I'm really scared right now. These feelings, these ideas are foreign and yet feel so right and true. I'm terrified.

I pull away from Cash before I start to blubber all over him. "I think I need more information," I tell him. "Maybe I should do research before I go off the deep end. I came here to get my head straight, you know? It's a safe spot to think."

"What kind of research?"

"I don't know. I think I start with Dire Opal. He seems to know more about this than me."

He shifts his feet from one side to the other. Then nods as if accepting my response. “Okay. Whatever you need, I want to support you.”

“Thank you.”

He reaches into his back pocket, “Before you do anything, though, will you take this with you?”

He pulls out a small crystal shaped like a sheriff’s badge. “It’s my sigil,” he says. “You could stir up some real trouble poking your nose around the Maztecs and you might find yourself in a pinch. If you need anything at all, just ring me up on my sigil. I’ll be right by your side.”

I hold the warm, vibrating blue crystal star in my hands and smile at him. “Thanks, Cash. And thank you for not judging me.”

He smiles kindly. “Everybody has to figure their shit out at one point in time or another. I’m glad you came to me before you did anything crazy. I’d hate it if something happened to you and I wasn’t there to help you out.”

Cash is a good guy. I know a lot of mages who would jump at the chance to sell me out to the highest bidder for talking this way.

He walks me back to my car and we say a few more words before I drive home. On the way, I start to wonder about my own history. What I know for sure about my family is that my father fought and died in the war. He was a general who commanded an elite troupe of mages stationed on the front

line. My dad saw more action than a lot of other mages in the war, but he was known as being powerful. He could do things no one else could do.

Like making portals. After the war, he was assigned to the Authority where he created the first portals that we use to sentence criminals. He assembled a special team of mages to create permanent portals that could not be broken or redirected except by the highest of magic. The portals all lead to other places. Desolate and deserted realms where there's little water or food. Some of the places had toxic air or such limited oxygen that a person would suffocate in minutes. My father was the only mage I ever knew who was powerful enough to make portals. That is until I met Dire.

I get home and my father is all I can think about. He was a noble man. Loyal to our country and his place in it. And I have always been the same. I wanted to follow in his footsteps. As I walk into my living room and turn on the lights with a wave of my hand, I think about the gift of magic inside me. This gift is from him. My power and everything I've ever learned came from him. That can't be wrong...right?

I remember stashing a trunk in my bedroom closet that's full of things from my father's life along with a few items of my own. There are scrapbooks and medals. And lots and lots of items I hold onto to remind me of where I come from. Maybe if I look through it, I can connect with him again. Just get some reassurance, maybe.

As I pull out the trunk from the bottom of my closet, I kneel down before it and take a deep breath. I feel like I'm opening it like it was a treasure chest. Maybe, in a way, it is my treasure. Always has been.

In the trunk are a stack of scrapbooks that I put together when I was in high school, right after he died. It's packed full of photos and articles about him during wartime and some from before. I pick out one book and page through it, noting the pictures of my father standing with some of the elite members of his troop. They're wearing long and decorative robes in the old style of mage warriors. Their heavy boots rose all the way up to the knees. Their hands were gloved, and lights emanated from them menacingly.

I used to stare at these photos when I was young, hoping that one day I would take one just like it. I wanted to stand with my colleagues like the fierce warriors we were. Would he be proud of me, I wonder? As a bounty hunter?

I move on to another scrapbook. This one chronicles the creation of the portals. In the articles, he talked to the human press. They interviewed him about the alternate worlds and realms they were planning to send criminals to. He discussed the changes being made in the law detailing how the portals would be used. There was apparently not much journalistic interest in the magic powering it all.

I stop on an article. I've seen this story before. The headline reads *Terrorist Cell in Lupine Fifth District Destroyed*. I remember this. It happened when I was young. A terrorist cell

had been discovered and mage authorities wiped them out and captured the offenders. I remember that they were a group of shifters.

A cold feeling came over me like an icy wind. Shifters. They were a group of shifters. The neighborhood had been shifter controlled. And the group they caught were wolves. I'm thinking of what Dire told me about his family. Could this be the same thing?

I can't fathom it. This had to be a coincidence. Surely there were other incidents where something like this occurred, right?

The article described the incident as having heavy casualties thanks to the residents' refusal to cooperate. I don't know what 'refusing to cooperate' means in this context. I look at the names of the captured. None of them had Dire's same last name and there were no names of any of the casualties.

I close the scrapbook and sit back on my heels, trying to analyze what I just read. None of this is definitive proof of anything. Mages raid neighborhoods all the time and if there were terrorists there and the residents resisted, what could one expect?

I have a horrifying thought. It hits me like a sledgehammer. Jesus, what if I'm wrong? What if we've all been wrong this whole time?

My phone buzzes in my jeans pocket. It's Cash. "Hey." I'm trying not to betray myself with my voice, but it sounds pretty shaky. I clear my throat. "What's up?"

“Have you seen the news yet?”

“I just got home. What’s going on?”

He sighed. “Somebody just broke Lillian Ohma out of jail.”

Chapter Twelve



Dire

THE JAILBREAK WENT LIKE clockwork. Honestly, I couldn't have planned it better if the place was completely abandoned.

We got there under the cover of night and, as promised, Flip cutting the power was our cue to break in. He'd said that he could give us five minutes and to his credit, he gave us seven. It wasn't much, but it was enough for us to get through the back storage door and to the basement, where the cells were.

We'd estimated by now, she'd be mixed in with the general population as a way of hiding her. Keeping her separate would have made our job a lot easier, at least by their logic. The whole time, I hoped I'd read this situation correctly. If she'd been somewhere else in the building, it would have been a bigger problem.

We got all the cages open, releasing every shifter they had locked up. We were on our way out by the time the power came back on. With all the captured shifters now running loose, we were able to slip out the way we came and now we're riding back.

Lillian is on the back of my bike, helmet on to hide her identity and it's looking like we're in the clear. We didn't hear the alarms until we pulled off and I think that if we can get to the main roads leading out of town, we'll be home free.

We round a corner leading to the highway and...damn. Nothing but red and blue lights blocked the road.

Mac pulls up next to me, his mouth is open slightly. "Shit," he swears. "This is bad."

"Pretty bad," I agree. We pull over to the side of the road, just out of sight of the blockade. The crew is all looking at me for the next move.

"What's the play?"

I sigh and look back at them all for a moment. It'd be no good to try and cross the blockade together. That'd be suicide.

"Lil," I say over my shoulder. "Ride with Mac." She nods and gets off my bike and onto Mac's. "Mac take the back roads to the clubhouse. The rest of you follow Mac back. I got these guys."

Mac frowned. "No way, I'm letting you take that risk."

"You don't have a choice, brother," I tell him. "Stay back until you see them go after me. Got it?"

"Got it, boss."

I rev up my engine and barrel toward the flashing lights at top speed. I speed past them, flipping them off as I buzz by. Like clockwork, the cars fly after me, lights and sirens blaring. I speed through the streets with a dozen Authority cops in hot pursuit.

"Pull over!" I hear a voice behind me say over a distorted speaker. This was probably going to be my only warning. I

need to prepare.

A second later, a flash of light buzzes past my head and into a stop sign, disintegrating it. Heh. It's just like them to shoot first.

I zig-zag along the road, dodging their shots until I get to an alley. I make a sharp turn down it. I raise my hand and make a portal back to the club. As I ride my bike through, I close the door behind me fast, nearly shaving the rubber off the tires on my bike.

And I'm safe within the barriers of the club gates. I sit there for a moment, my adrenaline up and I laugh to myself. Like taking candy from a baby. The way should be clear for the others. It'll take them a bit to get here.

I hear something behind me. Footsteps. I turn off my bike and listen as I get off. There is definitely someone behind me. My other senses pick up the scent on the air and I know it's not any of my crew. In fact, I smell sweat, and vape smoke, and cinnamon.

"Hold it!" The voice comes out of the darkness

I freeze as I hear the click of a pistol just behind me.

"Don't move." The voice is male, but Aliyah's here, I can smell her. Shit.

I put my hands up and turn around. Sure enough, standing by the gate is Aliyah and the man I saw her with earlier. Her partner. He's got his gun trained on me and she's standing a step behind with her hand on her holster.

“You two are trespassing on private property,” I say.

“And you’re a suspect in a jailbreak,” the man says. “Or are you going to try and deny it?”

I lower my hands. There’s no way this guy could know I’m involved. There’s no way either of them could know this soon. It makes me wonder what Aliyah told him. Did she betray me?

“This feels like profiling,” I say. “I’m just a shifter with a motorcycle club. No crime in that.”

I see Aliyah put her hand on her partner’s arm. She says softly, “Let me talk to him.”

This should be interesting. He doesn’t lower his gun, but she steps more into the light.

“Where were you just now?” she asks.

I don’t answer her.

She looks nervously over at her partner and says, “Dire, please —”

“So, did you guys hear about a jailbreak and just assume that I must have something to do with it?” I say, more to her partner than her. “I didn’t know that bounty hunters were vigilantes.”

“We uphold the law,” the partner insists. “We work in the same vein as they do. And I happen to know for a fact that you’ve got a few hefty bounties on your head, Dire Opal.”

I look over at Aliyah. The look on her face is puzzling. She’s not angry. She’s not even looking at me coldly. There’s a kind of imploring in her eyes. She wants to reach out to me. And

that damned pull I have with her isn't making that feeling any better. I want to reach out to her too.

"Gotta catch me to cash in," I say. The adrenaline is still pumping in my veins from the chase. I'm itching for this fight. "Think you got what it takes to bring me in? You're fucking with a heavyweight when you fuck with me."

Her partner's jaw stiffens. "Bring it on, big fella."

"Hold on," Aliyah interjects, turning to her partner. "Let's not turn to violence. I think if we just find out what we need to know—"

Her partner scoffs at her and says, "Sorry, Lee. I know you've developed a sort of affection for him, but he's a shifter. We don't negotiate with shifters, remember? Dogs that bite gotta get put down."

He pulls the trigger on his gun and the silver hits my shoulder. The burn sears through me as I stumbled back...but I'm still standing and the bullet's gone all the way through. It's going to take more than this pop gun of his to take me down.

He shoots again, but I'm ready for him this time. I slow down time with a blink and dodge the bullet, then I rush up to him and punch him square in the jaw. As time slides back into place, he's in the air, flying backward down into the dust. He skids back a few yards before he comes to a stop.

"Dire, stop!"

I hear Aliyah yelling, but I'm already after him. Fangs and claws bared, I charge him, bounding at him through the dust.

He waves his arms and levitates upwards just as I pounce. I miss him by inches as he floats above me.

I tumble out of the way as he shoots energy shards at me from his fingertips. I get myself up and shift into a wolf, leaping up at him.

He tries to dodge me midair, but I grab his leg in my jaws and yank him back down. He tumbles down to the ground and I'm on top of him, my claws digging into his shoulders. As I lean into him, I feel the burn of his knife as he presses it to my throat.

We hear a gunshot go off and we both look up to see Aliyah standing to the side, her gun pointed in the air...then she slowly brings the gun down and trains it on me.

We stare at each other for a moment. Even in my wolf form, I can tell she still sees me as me. Her eyes are searching mine for meaning right now.

I hear the knife before I see it, slicing up, the point cutting my fur and searing into the skin underneath. I roar and jerk back as the gun goes off again. A spark jumps from the metal of the blade as the bullet bounces off it. The knife flies out of her partner's hand and into the darkness as he yelps out in surprise and pain.

"Fuck! Lee, what the hell are you doing?" I slowly back away from him as he struggles to get to his feet.

Aliyah has the gun trained on him, but her hand is shaking. "I'm sorry, Cash."

He stands up and dusts himself off, then he looks over at me and back at her.

“He’s not worth it, Lee,” Even not knowing the guy, I recognize the disgust and hate in his voice. “Trust me. None of them are worth it.”

She swallows hard. I can see that she’s struggling, but she’s holding her ground. “I need answers,” she says.

“You do this and you’re finished.”

“If we bring him in, I won’t learn what I need to know. We have to turn him loose.”

“No, we don’t. We have to turn him in. Jesus, do you have any idea what this animal is capable of? We can’t let him go!”

She glances over at me and he takes a step towards her, hand raised to cast a spell at her. She steps back and he freezes.

“Get them up. Now,” she shouts at him.

He slowly raises his hands. I shift back to my human form and glance at my watch. The crew’s going to be here any second. I need to warn them away.

“On your knees,” she says to Cash. He obeys, getting on his knees in front of her. She stares at him for the longest time.

Jesus, she’s trying to make a choice here. “What’s the play, Aliyah?” I ask.

Her head jerks as I speak as if to bring her out of her own thoughts. She doesn’t look at me. Her bottom lip trembles.

“Dire. Where was your community? What district?” she asks me.

I cock my head. I know what she’s asking me, but why?

She dares a look at me as she waits for a response.

“Fifth,” I tell her. “Lupine East about twenty miles north of the central hub.”

I watch as she lets out a slow and shaky breath, water shining in her eyes. “Shit,” she says.

“What is this?” Cash asks. “Lee, what...?”

She lowers her gun and raises her hand. A soft, almost imperceptible mist appears around him and his head rocks back as if he was punched. He leans one way, then the next, then his arms lower as he crumbles to the ground.

I don’t have to ask. I can smell the familiar scent of lavender in the magic. She put him to sleep. I look over at her as she wipes at her face with the back of her hand and holsters her gun.

“Aliyah...are you all right?”

She shakes her head, still looking at her partner lying in the dust. “No,” she says with a quavering voice. “I just ruined my life. I am not okay.”

I hear the bikes roaring up the road. “How long will he be out?”

“An hour,” she says. “Hour and a half at the most.”

As the bikes pull in, I walk over to her and wrap my arms around her. She leans into me so easily, her face nuzzled against my chest. Her breath is shaky like she's about to break. I squeeze her gently.

"There'll be time to cry later," I say softly, "I have to get my crew packed and out of here."

She nods her head, then, "I'm coming with you."

She looks up at me, tears hanging in her eyes. "Aliyah—"

"Please, Dire."

This is not right. She doesn't belong in my world...but she just blew her own up.

"Hey," I hear Mac behind me. As I let her go, her hand automatically slides into mine. We turn as one. She's not ready to let go of me. I feel her squeeze my hand and I squeeze back in reassurance.

Mac and the others stop just short of Cash's crumpled form.

Mac looks from him to me. Then to Aliyah. "What the hell happened?" he asks.

"Plans changed," I say. "We've got an hour to get our shit and get the hell out of here."

Chapter Thirteen



Aliyah

I'M CLINGING TIGHT TO Dire. My arms are wrapped around his chest as his bike rumbles between my legs and the wind whips around us. All the while, my brain keeps asking *what the hell are we doing?? What have we done??*

For so long, I dreamed of being in the ranks of the Authority like my father was. I went to the academy so that I could follow in his footsteps. And when that didn't work out, I found honor in my job as a bounty hunter. At least I believed I was still honoring my father.

Now? Now, nothing made any sense anymore. Up until today, I believed mages did not raid and pillage. They did not kill innocent women and children, even if they were shifters. Everyone was brought to justice as the law saw fit. That was our way.

But maybe it's not. I'm pressing my head against Dire's back and I can feel his heartbeat under the leather of his kutte. Once upon a time, he was a child in a neighborhood like any other, and one day, his family was wiped out by mages. And why? They say it was terrorists, but now I wonder if that was ever true.

We've been riding for at least an hour. By now, Cash has woken up and undoubtedly called the authorities. They'll take Dire's clubhouse apart at the very least. I don't know what else. I fear to know the truth of that.

Dire seemed to know it well enough. Seven arrived that night on bikes and while they all packed whatever they could carry with them, he called other members of the club and warned them.

A few of them met us on the road. They pulled in with the pack on their own bikes as we rode past spots on the road. I don't know if this is everyone, but I would hate to think about how anyone left behind would suffer the wrath of the trouble I just stirred up.

As the night went on around us, we sped through the empty highway until the desert gave way to what looked like steam rising from the hot concrete. We sped through it and in an instant, everything changed. We were in a town. As we made our way down the main drag, I noted the lights of several stores on either side of the road. It looked as occupied as any little town.

We turn a corner and there stands a small building with several floors above it. The front has no windows and one door is painted black, but the sign above the door reads *Wolf's Den*, and I know this is where we have to be going.

Dire pulls his bike in the front and everyone else rolls their bikes next to his until they're all lined up on an angle.

Dire turns his bike off and kicks out the stand. As he gets off and helps me down, he asks me, "You okay?"

I nod. I'm as fine as I suppose I can be. I still want to cry, but the time for that would come later.

We all file inside. The first and most dramatic part of the room is the ornate polished wood bar. There are tables and chairs with a few people wearing Maztec kutties sitting in them and a pool table in the back and a jukebox. By my eye, it is an entirely unremarkable place.

The guy behind the bar nods his head at Dire as we step in, but he doesn't smile or greet the rest of us in any way.

"Where's Pope?" Dire asks.

"In back. He's waiting for you."

Dire turns to me and says, "Stay here. I'll be right back."

I nod and he gestures to the men behind him. Most of them follow, but several of them stay behind and get beers from the bartender.

I don't know what's going on. I don't know who Pope is or why Dire had to leave to talk to him. I bite my lip and start tapping on the bar nervously. The bartender walks up to me and asks me, "You thirsty, darling?"

"Water would be great," I say. My throat is as dry as the desert.

"Sure thing." He turns around and gets me a glass of water with ice in it.

I take a sip and I watch as the other MC members talk in loud voices, bantering back and forth as if we didn't just run for our lives out of town. Maybe this was their normal way of life? I don't know.

Lillian Ohma is sitting alone at the end of the bar. She's got dark circles under her eyes and she looks as though she's been up for days and days. She leans into her hand, trying to open up heavy eyelids. So, they did break her out of jail. At least Cash had been right about that.

I do wonder how he knew. And now that I'm sitting here, I'm starting to wonder about a lot of things. Like why I was asked to do surveillance on them in the first place. The Authority must have had them under investigation this whole time. Cash was probably looking to get a jump on getting a huge bounty that was sure to come.

Maybe he won't call the Authority. His sense of justice wasn't nearly as large as his greed.

Dire appears from the back along with a buff-looking Latino man with long dark hair pulled back into a ponytail. He looks older, at least in his forties. He pats Dire heartily on the back and then the same to one of Dire's men, the one he spoke to before we left, who joined them. Dire speaks briefly to his man, then walks over to me.

"How are you holding up?" he asks.

I don't know how to answer that, so I don't. He nods in understanding.

"It's late," he says, "there are rooms on the second floor. You can have your pick of them. No one will bother you here. I'll be up in a bit to check on you."

“Thank you,” I realize that he means for me to sleep alone. My heart aches at the idea, but I get it. It’s for the best, though. I get off the stool and make my way to the back stairs Dire had pointed out to me.

I choose a room near the end of the first hallway, away from the noise of the bar below me. I don’t know how thin these walls are, but I’d like to get some sleep. The room’s small, but it’s not too bad. It’s bigger than a hotel room. It has its own bathroom and the bed and sheets look reasonably clean. There’s a dresser and two nightstands like any other room I’ve ever seen and no pictures or decorations. Clearly, this was just a room for sleeping.

I pull off my jeans and slip into the bed, eager to get some rest. But as soon as my head hits the pillow, I just lay there, looking up at the ceiling. And then the waterworks come. It starts small. Just a trickle of tears as they roll down my cheeks and onto the pillow.

I don’t know what comes after this. I don’t know if I’ll be safe here or anywhere. I don’t even know if I can ever go back home. I weep for a while. At least until I’m tired of doing it. I have no idea how much time has passed, but I’m no closer to getting any sleep.

I hear a knock at my door, so I sit up and wipe my face. “Yes?”

“It’s me. Can I come in?”

It’s funny how Dire’s voice seems to make the door tremble. “Yes.”

I turn the light on by my bed as Dire enters. He looks awkwardly tall for the room as if it weren't made for someone his size. "Just wanted to check in with you."

"I'm fine," I immediately know it's a lie. "Actually, no, I'm not. I'm light years away from fine."

He takes a deep breath and says, "I've been trying to figure this out. Figure us out. From the moment I saw you, everything changed" He stops and looks away briefly. Finally, he looks back at me and asks, "Why did you come with me? I mean, you don't need to be a part of any of this. In fact, it's probably better if you weren't."

He's not wrong. I'm sure there's an alternate reality where I completely ignore my feelings and walk away from him. But that's not this reality. In this reality, I'm here with him instead of back home behind the safe wall of my life.

"I want to know the truth," And that's true, but it's not all. God, do I tell him everything I'm feeling?

"The truth. About what? About how shifters and other supernaturals are treated? Are you really that sheltered?"

I shrug and I look down at my bare feet on the crumpled bedding. I'm curled up, holding my knees against my chest as I look up at him standing by the door. "I don't know. I didn't know there was more to the story of my life before I met you. I didn't know everything was...was a lie."

His eyes soften and he walks towards me. "It's not all a lie. Not everything."

This pull between us is so strong. It's all I can do to ignore it. "I know your entire family was killed," I say, "and it's because of mages that it happened. Ever since you showed me the refugee camp, I've been questioning everything in my life. I feel like I'm starting to see things for what they are, not what I hope they'll be."

I don't know why, but I feel myself starting to sob. I try to push it away, but it just seems to be getting worse with every word I say. "You don't know how hard I worked just to have a normal life. I had a legitimate job and an apartment that I could afford and so what if I can only live and work in one area of the whole city? At least I'm working. At least..."

I cover my mouth as the tears start to come again. He steps in, sits on the edge of the bed, and pulls me to him, his strong arms wrapping around my body. "It's okay," he whispers.

"No, it's not," I weep. "It's never going to be okay again."

He touches my chin and pulls my face up to his and he kisses me. It's deep and gentle like a caress. I lean into him, welcoming his warm touch. As my hands move up his chest, he wraps his arms around my waist.

He pulls away from me suddenly, his lips leaving mine feels like he's suddenly miles away from me. I look up at him with desperate eyes and he stands and steps back even further, his hands falling to his sides.

"I should get back to my room," he says. "Tomorrow is going to be a tough day and—"

“Don’t go,” I blurt out. The words feel both voluntary and instinctual. I don’t understand it. All I know is that I want him here with me.

He pauses, his dark eyes reading me silently. “I can’t be with you, Aliyah. You...you understand that, right?” He backs closer to the door, as if not willing to turn away but needing to escape.

I shake my head. “Not right now, I don’t. Please don’t leave me alone tonight.”

It’s an endless bunch of seconds as he stands, looking at me, one hand on the door latch, obviously debating between the door and me.

I don’t know if he’s going to leave but I’m ready to beg him to stay. I’ll get down on my knees if I have to. I feel empty and broken down and I need him right now. His presence is the only thing that makes me feel like my entire life hasn’t been for nothing. I rise from the bed and walk toward him.

“I don’t know what this is between us. All I know is you’re the only thing that feels right to me and if you leave me, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

He takes a step towards me as the sobs return. My knees have gone weak and I’m leaning on the bedpost. I know ready to crawl if that’s what it comes to. I’ll submit everything to him if he’ll just stay with me tonight.

“You’re distraught. You don’t know what you’re saying.” I hear him, but something in his voice sounds distant. Like he

doesn't believe it.

"Please, Dire," I say, my voice cracking. "Please."

"I am a *powerful* creature," he says as he walks toward me. "I am not the kind of being you can toy with. What I feel for you is undeniably strong. If I stay with you tonight, be certain of what you're asking me. I don't have the strength to resist—"

I close the gap between us, hope lends me strength, and I jump into his arms, take his head into my hands, and kiss him passionately. His muscular arms hold me against him, his hands grasp my ass as he returns my affection. He kisses me hard, his sharp teeth grazing my lips.

He turns on his heel and lowers me down to the bed and takes off his kutte and his shirt. I sit up and start unbuckling his belt. He lets me unzip his jeans, watching me as my hands wrap around his massive cock. I suck on the head as I move my hands up and down his shaft. He's moaning whispery words to me as he runs his fingers through my hair.

"Oh, yeah, babe...like that...."

I want to be adventurous. I try to slide him down my throat. He's so big that I only make it halfway, but when I hear him gasp, I know it's worth the effort. I let my hands do the rest of the work, twisting up and down from the base to my lips as I suck. I feel him start to shiver and both hands are in my hair. I test my limits and try to get more of him down my throat. The deeper I go, the more he leans into me, his whispery moans starting to turn.

“Fuck,” I hear him growl. “Don’t stop....”

I speed up. He’s about to come and I want to feel him exploding in my mouth. I want to drink every bit of his essence. When he finally does, he stiffens, a shaky moan rumbling above me. I slow down, swallowing his explosion and I reach up to run my hands over the hills of his washboard abs.

“I want you so bad,” he moans as I continue to suck him off. I feel him get hard in my mouth again. He pulls away from me and lifts my chin up to him. “Lose the shirt.”

Obediently, I pull my t-shirt over my head and toss it across the room. He touches the hollow of my neck and draws his finger down the center of my chest, one of his claws pressing a stinging line in my skin. When it gets to the front of my bra, he hooks the finger into the fabric at the seam and pulls, ripping it free. The air hits my nipples and makes them even harder than they were before. He leans in and kisses my neck, then brings both his clawed fingers up to the straps at my shoulders, ripping through the elastic with one swift movement.

His hands move down to my breasts. The sharpness of his claws against my nipples sends chills up my back. He brings his mouth up my neck, nibbling at my ear, and growls, “Now, your pants.”

I lean back from him and unbutton my pants, then slide them down my hips. His eyes follow my hands as I pull them off and kick them on the floor. He’s smiling at me, admiring my

body as he takes his pants all the way off as well. He leans onto the bed, kissing my legs and thighs as he moves up and between my legs. He wraps his arms around my thighs while he buries his head against my sex, his tongue stroking my inner lips slowly and methodically.

I arch my back as he licks me, then sucks on my clit, his claws digging into the skin of my thighs. I grab his head, my body starting to shake from pleasure. The moans escaping my lips are shaky as he speeds up his pace. I feel like I'm going to climax at any moment.

But he slows down, bringing me back from the edge. He rises up, kissing my thighs. "Not yet, baby," he says with a smile. "Not yet."

He moves to my mouth, kissing me slowly. I feel him between my legs, the head of his cock at the entrance of my sex, taunting me. I'm going to explode before he even penetrates me. "Say my name," he growls against my mouth. "Let me hear it..."

"Dire," I moan and he smiles slightly.

"That's it." He slowly enters me, taking his time with every inch of his manhood.

My toes curl and my breath leaves me. I'm gasping as the intense pleasure and pain have a hold on me. It's not until he takes a second thrust that a raspy sound comes out of me.

He's moving slowly, but he's fucking me so deep I'm starting to see stars before my eyes. He pulls one of my thighs up to

his shoulders and he leans back, watching himself move in and out of me.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he growls. “And so tight...shit...”

I can see he’s starting to sweat. His fangs are elongating, and his growls are getting deeper, more animal-like. He’s losing control.

I reach up and grab his face, looking into his eyes as I move my hips with his. I squeeze my walls around his quivering cock and his eyes shut, the animal inside of him fighting to be free.

He takes in a breath and leans all the way back, stopping. He’s looking back at me with wild eyes, still, even now, trying to keep me safe. But I don’t want to be safe. I have nothing but him right now. He’s the only thing I need.

I sit up and straddle him, keeping him inside me. He nuzzles his face into my shoulder as I rock my hips against him. His mouth is on my shoulder, and I can feel his teeth pressing against my skin. He’s still holding back. He wants to mark me.

I feel him grab hold of my ass and he starts thrusting hard, the last threads of his humanity starting to snap. His growls are like earthquakes against me. I hold on, my climax starting to build inside me.

He pulls his head up and looks into my eyes. They’re glowing red as the wolf in him forces its way forward. With shining fangs behind his lips, he whispers, “Be mine, Aliyah. Only mine.”

If he marks me, then I'm his. We are bonded and there's nothing in this world that will ever tear it apart. In a way, he's already marked me. I have claw marks on my body from him this time and even deeper ones now. I can feel the white-hot burn of them on my ass and thighs.

"Yes," I say. "I'm yours. Forever."

His hands move up my back, the claws digging into my skin as he leans in and bites my shoulder. He thrusts hard into me. The intense pain sends my body into a place I've never been. Pain and pleasure mix and swirl in my body like a storm.

I climax hard. My nails are dug into his back. I cry out his name so loud that my own magic frees itself from me and shakes the building. He holds me as his body gives in and explodes inside me, then he releases his grip on my shoulder and howls to the ceiling.

And as our collective orgasm descends, we fall onto the bed in a heap. I lay there, his body on top of mine, and tears roll down my cheeks, the intensity of it all unbelievably wonderful.

He lifts his head and touches my cheeks with his thumb and he wipes away the tears, then he kisses me. There are no proclamations of love. There doesn't have to be. I'm his and he is mine.

Chapter Fourteen



Dire

MAC WAS THE ONE who said that this was inevitable. I know now he was right. However it's happened, whoever we are in this life and in this moment, we are meant to be together. As I lay with her in my arms, I use magic to seal the wound on her shoulder. I leave the scar, though, a sign of our union. She is my mate from this moment forward.

Her head is resting against my chest and she's dozing. For the first time since the death of my wife, I'm feeling complete. It's funny how much I missed this. I think I actually forgot what this feels like. How did I go so long without it?"

I reach up and scratch my nose and I notice her head following my arm. She's looking at the scars on my forearm. When I rest my hand on my chest, she touches the scars, her fingers tracing them lightly. "Who did this to you?"

I take a deep breath and say, "Do you really want to hear that story?"

She nods her head. "I want to know everything about you."

I pause. It's been years since I've talked about it, even though the memory is as fresh as it was after it all happened.

"Motorcycle clubs aren't exactly known for their goodwill," I begin. "For the most part, the Maztecs stayed out of the affairs of other shifters and magical folks. They were happy enough to live on the outskirts of town and the Authority was fine with

that arrangement. It wasn't until my neighborhood got hit that they stepped into anything going on around here."

I pause, expecting a response from her. She's just still against me, her head on my chest, listening to me speak.

"As it turns out, the club president back then had family in my neighborhood. A sister and some nephews, I think. When word got to them that we'd been hit, they rode into town to see if they could offer aid. The problem was that the fifth district was miles away from the clubhouse. By the time they got to us, everything and everyone had been destroyed."

"Everyone?" she asks.

"Yup."

She pauses, then, "The news reported that they apprehended terrorists. I remember because there was a public banishing the following weekend."

"Yeah," I say, "there was definitely a banishing. Whoever those shifters were, though, they weren't from our neighborhood. Every living thing that lived there was wiped from the planet in that raid. I only survived because my mother hid me in a hidden storm cellar behind our house before she joined the resistance against the mages."

I pause. The memory of the day I was found still haunts me. "When the Maztecs pulled me out, there was nothing left. The buildings were nothing but husks, and the streets were littered with piles of carbon where my friends and family made their final stand. It was a massacre."

“Jesus,” she whispered.

“I was lucky to have been taken in by them. They treated me like one of their own. I spent a lot of my youth running errands for the crew. The president, Pope. He took care of me like one of his own. As I got older and got bigger, they started encouraging me to join the club officially. At twelve, I was almost the height I am now. And as a wolf, I was already pretty huge.”

I feel her smile against my chest. “That’s where the nickname came from. Direwolf.”

“Yeah. Pope used to talk about me like I was something out of legend. Especially when he discovered that I knew magic, too. I was proving to be worth my weight in gold to them.”

“Then, one summer, a young shifter wandered into our midst. She belonged to another club that had been wiped out by one of the raids and she wanted to join us. She was tough as nails. Just as tough as any of us, so they let her prospect alongside me. Well, summer love happened the way it does when you’re young, and pretty soon, we were dating. About a year after we did our time and got initiated into the club, we decided to become mates...”

I don’t want to go on. I stop altogether, trying to find the words to explain. I feel her hand slip over mine. She squeezes my fingers to encourage me to go on.

“We wanted to wait for the full moon. It was a spiritual thing that meant a lot to her, so we agreed to wait. The night we planned to mate; the club was raided. Mages dropped down on

our clubhouse like locusts, destroying everything in their path. One of them found us together and went to attack her with whip magic. I stepped between them and took the hit with my forearm, yanked him off his feet, but he left me with this scar.”

I stop again. I’m this far. I might as well keep going.

“But, as bad of a beating that I gave that guy, they gave me a worse one, binding me with magic while they kicked my ass. They took her away from me, dragging her through the dirt by her hair. They beat her bloody in front of me. Then, the one who hit me with the whip magic hit her with a decompose spell. And that was it.”

I feel her stiffen in my arms. I don’t have to explain what a decompose spell is. I don’t know if she’s ever seen it cast, and if she hasn’t, I sincerely hope she never does. Seeing someone you love slowly turn to dust is not a memory any person should have. It still haunts my nightmares.

“I’m so sorry,” she says softly. She lifts her head and looks at me, her eyes searching my face. Then she kisses my cheek and I realize that I’ve been crying. Her lips meet mine and she kisses me tenderly. I hold her in my arms and breathe in her sweet cinnamon smell as we kiss, our bare bodies pressed together.

When our lips part, she smiles at me and I think that maybe we could go another round, but a low buzzing sound pulls us out of the moment.

I’ve been hearing it off and on all night. In the heat of passion, my ears fell deaf to the sound, but now it seems to be

interrupting us like a cough in a quiet room. Aliyah frowns and looks around. “Is that a phone?”

“I don’t know,” I say, then I smile at her, rubbing my hands along her back. “Ignore it.”

She smiles and kisses me again. The buzzing goes on, though. Now that we’ve drawn attention to it, neither of us can get back in the mood. She sighs and says, “It’s probably my phone. Let me turn it off.”

She gets out of bed and starts looking around the floor through our clothes. She gets to her pants, where she kicked them off at the edge of the bed, and picks up the hip belt she was wearing. As she opens it, she freezes, a soft blue light pulses from the open pocket. All the joy drained out of her face as her eyes slowly widen.

I sit up and look at her. “What’s wrong?”

“Dire, I...” It’s all she has time to say.

The next second, the door bursts open. Men in black armor rush in, guns and glowing staffs pointed at us. We both put our hands up and they grab us. They yank me out of the bed while they bind Aliyah’s hands with magic and throw her to the ground. She yells out in surprise and pain, and I snap.

“Leave her alone!” I shift into a wolf and the mage holding me jumps back in a panic. I lunge for the one who’s holding Aliyah to the ground.

But I’m yanked back. Chocking. Held by something around my neck.

“I told you to hold onto him.” The voice is familiar. Rough and twangy. I’ve heard this person before.

Out of the darkness, a thin man in jeans with a large belt buckle walks in. It’s Cash. Aliyah’s partner. He walks right up to me, his gun in hand.

“This is where I get my lick back,” he says with a smile. Then he hits me between the eyes with the butt of his gun.

Chapter Fifteen



Aliyah

IT'S BEEN A ROUGH few days. It's all pretty much impossible to process.

I'm driving to see Dire. Because he's broken out of every prison he was ever placed in, he's being held in a maximum security facility in the central hub. Catching him was a big win for the Authority and a big payday for Cash. They've prioritized his banishment date. Well, trial date officially, but there's no option but banishment for him.

His capture has been all over the news and I've been hounded by the press for comments almost every day. I was instructed not to give one. Not that I would ever do such a thing anyway.

The night they captured Dire, we were separated immediately. After knocking him unconscious, he was dragged out and thrown into the back of the truck. No one else was arrested. All they wanted was him. Cash even managed to keep the Authority off my back by telling them that I was a part of the capture.

After they dragged him away, I was released. As I gathered my clothes, Cash grabbed my hip bag, pulling out his humming and glowing sigil. It wasn't a sigil at all, as it turns out. It was a homing device.

"Sorry, Lee," he said to me as I put on my pants. "This wasn't personal. You get that, right?"

I put on my shirt, then snatched my bag from him and punched him in the mouth. I didn't have anything to say to him.

The next morning, I was brought before a tribunal. I have to be honest. I don't even know why I was there. Cash and Genie did all the talking for me, telling the judge I was part of an elaborate plan to trap a wanted criminal. I guess they were trying to save me from prison time. The judge didn't let me off scot-free, though. I didn't get any jail time, but I was stripped of my bounty hunting license, saying I took the undercover operation too far. Generously, he left the door open for me to apply for reinstatement someday. Sure. Not bloody likely.

Lucky. That's what they're saying. Funny how I don't feel lucky at all.

My phone rings and I glance at the display. Cash. Fucker. What does he want now?

"What?" I am not exactly pleasant in my greeting.

"Uh, hey," he said after a moment. "I just want to check in with you. Make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine," I say. "What are you calling me for, anyway?"

"Genie's been trying to reach you, you know. So, he can give you your half of the bounty."

I feel like I am about to throw up as soon as he says that.

Cash doesn't wait for my response. "Look, I know you think you felt something for Dire Opal, but you've got to realize the

two of you being a thing? Not only is that not legal, but it wasn't going to do anything but bring you a world of hurt. I did what I did to protect you. You might not see it now but one of these days you're going to look back on this and you'll know I was right."

It's amazing how Cash rationalizes his actions. It's incomprehensible to think about the mental hoops he must jump through to say that to me and mean it.

"Tell Genie he can keep the money. Or better yet, take it all yourself. I don't want it."

He was quiet for a long time. Then, "I'm here for you, Lee. When you're ready to come around. All right?"

I punch the button to end the call, angry that I even picked it up in the first place.

Taking a deep breath, I counted to fifty, slowly in my head, and set aside my anger. Just in time as I enter the central hub. Traffic is heavy and the border is busy today. The banishment is going to happen tomorrow. People are traveling into the city to watch.

Dire has been wanted for a long time, so this is a big show of power for the Authority. I want to see him before he goes. I need him to know I haven't abandoned him.

Being here makes me nauseous. I've been through these gates a million times. Going past the border checks always felt secure before now. Now it feels like a prison. Maybe it's always been this way and I was blind.

These streets are in direct contrast with everywhere else in town. I drive along pristine streets where there's not even a shred of trash. Humans walk the streets casually, enjoying a lush life in their fancy restaurants and shopping centers. It's a dream world I've never been a part of, and for the first time in my life, I'm damn bitter about that.

I get to the facility and through the security checkpoint with little issue, though plenty of humans are looking at me as if I smell. I see them wrinkling their noses as I pass or whispering to their coworkers about me. And to think that I used to want to be a part of this society.

Dire is being held in a singular room on the top floor. I'm led to an empty room with a pane of magic-proof glass splitting the room down the center. As I wait in a chair, I look around to see there are cameras watching. I'm not sure why. When they bring him out, it's not like I'll be able to touch him.

A door opens on the other side. He walks out wearing a white prisoner's jumpsuit. Glowing binds encircle his wrists. His face is bruised from where they hit him when he was arrested. My heart aches for him. For us. I wish this stupid barrier wasn't here.

"Five minutes," The speaker twangs, sounding like a pilot's announcement on a commercial airline, the words nearly unrecognizable. It doesn't matter. We both know we have only a few minutes. Five hours, days, weeks, or years would not be enough time.

I'm taking him in, trying to memorize his face under this harsh fluorescent lighting. Our eyes meet. I see joy and sorrow reflected and know mine echo the same emotions.

"You shouldn't be here. Why did you come?"

"I had to." My voice sounds so weak like I feel. I feel completely helpless. "I had to see you again. After everything that's happened. You don't expect me to just abandon you, do you?"

He doesn't say anything for a moment. His eyebrows are turned up and he's looking at me like he's got a world of things to say to me. "This isn't exactly how I thought we'd be spending this time. There was so much I wanted to show you."

My heart is breaking. He knows this is his last day on earth. Tomorrow morning it will all be over for him. I hope they send him someplace where his end will be quick.

He turns his eyes away from me, looking down at his hands. "You need to forget about me," he says. "Get on with your life. You got to have your freedom after everything's said and done. It's a gift. You should take it and run."

I lean forward and put my hand against the glass. I wish I could touch him. I want to feel his warm hands one more time. "Stop talking like that. I'm not going anywhere."

"Don't be stupid. Tomorrow morning, this ends for me. All of this. Once I'm banished, I won't be coming back."

"I know. That's why I'm here." I pull my collar down, showing him the scar from where he bit me. He looks at it,

then looks again into my eyes.

“Forever,” It’s all I can say. He needs to know. I need him to know I’m in this until the end.

He flinches as if I punched him, and his shoulders sag a bit.

“They’re calling you a hero. Have you heard that?”

“Actually, they’re calling Cash and the bounty hunting company I worked for heroes. I was just one of the staff members.”

He’s staring at me and I think he’s trying to read me. “I hear my bounty was pretty high. They must have paid out quite a bit for me.”

“They did.” I take a deep breath, thinking of Cash’s phone call. “It was more money than I’ve ever seen in my life. Enough to set me up comfortably for a long time.”

He frowns. “So, how comfortable are you now?”

I chuckle. The sound is hollow, lifeless. “I’m not comfortable at all. I didn’t take the money, Dire. Nothing is what I thought I knew. My life hasn’t been the same since we met. I feel like I’m awake for the first time in my life. I’m not going back to sleep.”

He doesn’t say anything. He just sits there, his dark eyes looking watery. After a few moments, he finally says, “Do you know anything about Celestia?”

I shake my head.

“Apparently, the mages of old believed two souls who are meant to be together will always be drawn to each other, even into the next life.”

That makes me smile. “Like soulmates.”

“Yeah. Like us. This isn’t the end, Aliyah. Do you understand? One way or another, this isn’t over.”

I feel my stomach tighten. A desperate need to be with him rises up inside me. I can’t stand this barrier between us.

“I want you there tomorrow,” he says. “I want you to sit close so I can see your eyes before I go. Can you do that for me?”

I nod. “Of course.”

He smiles for the first time since coming into the room. A real smile, just for me. Then brings his bound hands up and places one of them on the glass. The size eclipses mine. “This isn’t over.”

“Time.” The speaker is perfectly clear this time.

Dire leans back in his chair, putting his hands back in his lap. The guard enters and leads him away.

I watch him go and a great pain grows in my chest. I manage to hold it all in until I get to my car.

As soon as I’m driving away, I weep. The shattered feeling in my chest spreads all the way to my arms and I have to pull over. I don’t think I can handle seeing him go. I don’t want him to die. I don’t want to live without him.

I wipe my face after a while. Calmer. A decision made, I pull back onto the road. I need to get home and return here again before morning. I know what to do. The answers are in my father's papers. In front of my nose, but only now do I understand the true legacy he left for me.

Dire wants me there, then I'm going to be there. Right in front, bright and early. And with a surprise. It's time to fulfill the destiny my father always believed would be mine one day. I am done letting others make my life choices.

Chapter Sixteen



Dire

THEY BRING ME OUT of my cell around dawn, but they didn't have to wake me. Who can sleep the night before their banishment? And even if I could, why would I want to? Every breath I take, I'm cherishing.

I walk down the long hall that leads to the arena. I'm told by the guards it's a full house today. I never knew I was so popular. Or maybe people are starved for entertainment. Who knows? As we walk, I hear the crowd below me. It sounds like rushing water or an ocean. A sea of voices rumbles under my feet like a wave.

The elevator takes us down to the arena and the sound gets louder every second. My stomach tightens at the prospect of having to look out over all those angry human faces. I've never bothered to watch any of these propaganda shows when they broadcast them, but I've heard sometimes prisoners are thrown to a crowd if it's rabid enough. The idea gives me the shivers.

The doors open and the guard pushes me forward. "Let's go, dog."

I stumble into darkness. Before me is another hallway leading to a glowing light. From here it looks ethereal. Irony. How appropriate.

I walk freely, glad the only chains are the magic binders around each of my wrists. At least I can walk like a man and not shuffling with chains around my feet, waist, and hands. Both guards are behind me, ready to fire off their silver bullets if I should try anything.

It's laughable. Where the hell would I go if I did try to run?

I walk through the door and into the light. The stage where my preordained 'trial' and subsequent banishment will take place is located in the middle of a large area. The crowd is huge, filling every seat from the edge of the stage all the way up to the nosebleeds. The seats go fully around the arena. I see myself reflected from dozens of huge monitors as I walk into the arena. Obviously, this venue is intended to provide a perfect view from every seat.

The air shakes with a chorus of boos and jeers. I can see their faces. Many are nearly unrecognizable as human faces, twisted with angry expressions. They are so frightened of those who are different, who are not like them. Most stand in front of their seats, screaming obscenities as they shake closed fists; cowards acting out from a place of false safety; emboldened by the spineless herd mindset.

The guards push me to the center of the stage, then step back to take their places by the exits. Behind and above me is a large plush chair on a riser. The place where the judge will come out and sit in judgment of me. And below him is the gate through which I'll be pushed when this circus is over.

I look back out at the crowd, and I see her sitting right in front as promised. She's got tears hanging in her eyes, but she's not crying. Not yet. She's trying to keep up appearances among this mob of rabid humans. I have no doubt they will try to hurt her if they see her showing sympathy for me.

The pitch of the crowd's roar increases. Fewer and fewer individual words can be heard. They are near the tipping point, close to violence as the judge steps out of the door from which I entered. His robes are black with two gold stripes down the front to signify his rank and title. Two gold stripes mean trouble.

Or it would if this were a court of justice rather than a kangaroo court. Two stripes mean this judge has a high banishment rate. And that means he wants to make me suffer. It also means the Global Cabal is taking no chance I might escape the fate they intend for me.

The judge walks up the stairs leading to his chair, his eyes looking forward, seeming to ignore my presence. Before he sits, he reaches up and touches the glowing ball above his chair. The orb bell lets out a high ringing noise, magically enhanced to pierce through all other sound, and the crowd quiets. My trial, such as it is, begins.

I turn to face him. His face, blank before, now glows with a satisfied smirk. "This banishment trial is now in session," he begins. "Mr. Christopher Opal stands accused of the following crimes."

With a wave of his hand, a transparent list scrolls in front of him and he goes through each charge. I have to say I'm impressed. I was responsible for more mayhem than I thought. I am proud to know the Authority even noticed. And even prouder of all those times I've helped people, be they shifters or humans, through the years. The story of the good I've done is there for those who care to open their eyes and see.

"You've got quite a list of charges, Mr. Opal," he says to me when he's done. "You've been a very busy mongrel."

I bristle, but I don't respond to the slur. Now's hardly the time to punch a judge out, no matter how satisfying it would be.

"I'm required to ask you if you would prefer to throw yourself on the mercy of this court, but somehow, I doubt that you're interested."

There's a chuckle somewhere in the crowd. At least someone in this mob has a sense of humor.

"You do have the right to say a few words to your peers before sentencing. This is your chance to preserve a bit of your legacy before you're tossed through the gate and to your banishment. Do you have anything you'd like to say?"

I shake my head. "Nope."

The crowd groans reacting like I personally insulted every single one of them. The judge raises his hand again, ringing the orb bell to silence them.

"So be it," he says once the crowd has quieted.

I glance over my shoulder at Aliyah. She's got her head down, hands balled up in her lap, her whole body is trembling. Suddenly, she looks up directly at me, as if she knows I am looking at her at this moment. As our gazes lock, I recognize what the vibrant gold and blue sparks flashing in her eyes mean. She is not curling up in anguish, she's powering a spell. A huge spell, based on the buildup of portal energy I feel.

Even though the dampening bands block my ability to use magic, I still sense it in and around me. It's a diabolical spell, frustrating beyond frustrating to be fully capable of sensing and seeing magic, but not able to tap into it for any reason, not even to heal a wound.

I realize not that I have been feeling low magic building to higher and higher levels ever since I walked into the arena. It was a subtle build up and I assumed it was coming from the banishment portal open before me. Only now do I recognize the true source of the magic that's been steadily growing.

I feel the surge of Aliyah's power burst over the arena. Before my eyes, she vanishes. I spin around, looking for her, trying to guess what she is up to.

The Judge pauses in his pronouncement of sentence, his eyes narrowing as he no doubt now feels the same tremendous surge of magical power. Looking up, I sense the power pushing against the arena's shield. It's like an arrow, sharp and focused.

Aliyah suddenly reappears. Inside the arena. She stands at my side, facing the judge. Her power continues to throb, throwing

a shield within the shield about the two of us.

The guards rush toward us but are bounced back by the shield, stunned and falling flat on their butts.

I hear gasps and screams coming from the audience but dismiss the sound as a distraction. I dare not touch Aliyah, for fear of what could happen if the dampening bands come into direct contact with her active spell.

The judge is screaming for more guards, for more mages and I feel their attempts to break her shield, but it holds. She is burning with a power level I've never seen before, greater than mine and I'm no slouch.

"Aliyah, what are you doing?" I speak softly, hopefully for her ears only.

"I'm going with you, Dire. If I burn out all of my power in this one play, so be it. No matter what happens, you are my mate. Forever." She glances over at me, and flicks away another attack against the shield. "I can't stop them. Even together we can't stop them. And I can't hold them off forever, either. So please don't argue with me about this. It's my choice, mate."

I can hear the stubborn set of her voice and know she's serious. I smile and say, "Alright, babe. I won't try to talk you out of it. Shall we speak to the judge?"

She looks at me full-on briefly, puzzlement in her face. "You aren't going to try to stop me?"

"No. What you've done here finishes you in this world. And I'm selfish enough to want you with me, even if it's death we

face. God, I want to kiss you, to hold, you, but these damn bracelets...”

She laughs out loud and cringes as yet another attack wave strikes her shield.

They are getting serious. We’re out of time. And we both know it.

I turn to the red-faced judge, still shouting for help. “Judge!” My voice booms out, louder by nature than most. “Judge, stop the attacks. My mate is not attacking anyone. Her shield is only for defense. We want to talk.”

The Judge, still standing, focuses on us and stops shouting. His eyes narrow, disbelief and suspicion mix with curiosity on his face. After a moment’s thought, he reaches out and rings the orb bell once. Then once again, and again until the audience and mages in the arena settle down and order returns to the arena.

“What is the meaning of this attack, woman?” He glares at Aliyah, at me, and back again at her. “I order you to release your shield immediately and surrender to the agents.”

“I am sorry, your honor,” Aliyah says. “That is not an option at this time as I’m certain the only reason Dire and I still live is because of the shield I’m holding.”

She takes a small step forward and away from me, focusing more of her attention on the judge now that the attacks have paused.

“You are about to banish my mate. It is my desire to go with him. I ask you to guarantee our safety when I release the shield. We want only for the banishment to continue, with both of us entering the portal. Will you agree and guarantee our safe transit of the portal?”

The audience appears to be stunned into silence, poised on the edge of their seats watching this drama play out.

“This is unprecedented. Prosecutor, have you any objections? A mage steps up to the Judge, handing him a document reader, and steps back.

“The prosecution has no objections, your honor. The document just presented to you contains details about the woman, Aliyah Aster, and cites a reference for precedence.”

After a brief review, the Judge looks up. “Your request, Aliyah Aster, to enter into banishment with the accused is granted.”

Too easy “His agreement rings false, Aliyah.” I say barely above a whisper. “It came far too quickly.”

She glances my way and nods slightly, then calls out in a firm voice, “Thank you, your honor. And will you give your word against your power as a mage that we will be protected when I release the shield?”

The judge pales, realizing Aliyah has called his bluff.

Should he give his word and they are attacked, he will lose his powers immediately and likely die within a few months, as happens to all mages in old age or if their power is completely depleted for any reason.

If it not for the shield, the daggers of hate he sends toward us would surely find a target. Aliyah and I stand resolute, waiting for his response.

“So be it.” His words are clipped and clear for all to hear. And aimed at the mages gathered in and around the arena. “Mages. Stand down. Those of you who are not directly involved in this banishment are ordered to leave the arena now and cease all attacks.” He looks pointedly around the arena at those who are brimming with power.

I watch as one by one, the mages withdraw. No doubt not far, but out of the arena. There is no greater bond a mage can give than the one this judge is about to make. And none of the other mages want to destroy their colleague by an accidental discharge.

“Aliyah Aster.” The judge looks her fully in the eye. “I swear on my life and power as a mage that you and your mate will not be attacked when you release your shield. You shall both be allowed to enter the banishment portal to suffer together the banishment ordered for Dire Opal. Which I shall gladly pronounce as soon as you lower the shield.”

Aliyah turns back to me, a question in her eyes. “Do you see any loopholes, Dire? Have I protected us enough?”

“You are amazing, my mate. Treachery will destroy him, and he knows it. It’s brilliant. Let’s get this over with.”

The audience comes to life as they hear the judge’s promise. And yet, they are quieter, with no catcalls this time. And the jeers have turned to cheers. Perhaps this banishment will turn

into a public relations nightmare for the Authority. One can only hope.

Aliyah whispers a few words and with a controlled wave of her hands, I feel the shield drop away. I notice, however, she has not dropped her power level, likely not trusting the need for protection is over.

“The shield is dissolved, your honor. Thank you for your pledge and for granting my request.”

She is much nicer than I would have been to the wretched man. As we watch along with everyone in the arena, the judge waves his hand, and the banishment gate shimmers with gold light.

The color of sand. Maybe I’m being sent to the desert. It’d be an interesting choice.

The shimmery light disappears, and I see a haze of green. I can make out the shades of a wasteland. Cracked ground, withered trees. It is a nightmare.

The guards step forward and stand on either side of us. My heart pounds loudly in my ears. This is it. No turning back now.

“Christopher Opal,” says the judge, “You are hereby banished from this realm. By the law, as long as you draw breath, you may never return to our shining shores. May your soul receive the peace in the next world that you could not receive here.”

The irony of such sweet words. It’s enough to make a guy vomit.

The guards grab me by the arms. Before they can act to force me through the portal, an explosion erupts within the arena. Screams arise from the spectators.

The guards release me and whirl toward the noise.

I look as well. Fireworks are being shot off into the high ceilings, shattering lights into a million shards as sparks and glass come showering down over us. The chaos is instant.

I scan the crowd until I finally see the signal I was waiting for. Mac as wolf leaps up out of the crowd and bounds for the stage, with at least seven of the other MC members running behind in wolf form with him. The humans are horrified and leap out of the way, fearful of the beasts loose in the crowd.

I elbow one of the guards and he doubles over, then falls to his knees. I run towards the edge of the stage where Mac is coming and lift my bound hands in the air. “Mac!”

Mac leaps and shifts at the same time. As he becomes human again, a spark flies from his fingertips, hitting the blue binds around my wrists and disintegrating them. He doesn’t waste time, either. The one guard who was still standing swings an energy blast at me and Mac steps in front of it, throwing up a shield spell to deflect it.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” Mac shouts back at me.

The people in the crowd run in all directions. I sense Aliyah gathering her power to erect a shield again and I stop her by grabbing her hand. I pull her close, wrap my arms around her waist, and lift her.

Her eyes are large, filled with confusion.

“Hold on,” I tell her.

Instantly, she wraps her arms around my neck, without question. I bolt for the portal holding her close.

Everything slows down. Aliyah sees where we’re headed, but she doesn’t scream or fight me. She closes her eyes and buries her head into my chest. If we’re going, we’re going together.

I take one final glance over my shoulder at Mac, who’s backing away from the guards coming at him. I think I see him smile as I take my last step in this world. With my free hand, I summon all the magic I have inside me and close my eyes, seeing where we need to be. Where we need to go.

This is portal magic like I’ve never done before. This is a trick my mother taught me when I was young, always as a just in case. She knew what kind of life awaited me in a world that hates shifters.

But it’s simple in theory. I feel the mist hit my skin, sense the magic and its destination...then change its course.

As soon as we fall through, everything shifts around us, throwing us hard to the right. I hold onto Aliyah as tight as I can as we tumble through dimensions, feeling the winds of barren deserts and ice-cold tundra. We’re being hurled past all the places where they meant to send me to my death, to the one place where we might live in peace.

And then we’re surrounded by light as we tumble into the crunchy brown grass. I manage to turn myself, so I take the

brunt of the fall, landing on my back with Aliyah slamming into my chest. The flat, sharp pain of gravity causes me to yelp out in pain, but I'm alive.

We are both alive. We lay on the ground catching our collective breath.

I look up at the warm sun shining on us and say a short prayer of thanks to my Mother. It's then I notice Aliyah is trembling and sobbing.

"Aliyah." I rub her back gently. "Open your eyes. Please. It's all right, baby. We're safe."

I don't know if she hears me or even realizes what I've done. She doesn't move from my chest. I try to sit up, and my back stiffens, but I try again.

"Come on," I tell her, pulling her up with me. "Open your eyes."

She doesn't for a moment, then slowly, her eyelids lift and realization melts away terror. She sees the tents and makeshift houses. The fire pit in the center of the village.

"How..." She blinks as if it's a hallucination. "I don't understand. The banishment portal. How did you bring us here?"

I kiss her on the forehead. "I told you. I am a very powerful creature."

Epilogue



A New Life

I NEVER KNEW THAT spring could look so beautiful. I'm standing with my feet bare, luxuriating in the dewy grass. My wedding dress brushes against my ankles. I've stepped onto the edge of what will be the village common currently filled with Dire's crew and friends. Some live here with us now. Others remain behind in the city continuing the fight to free all shifters and supernaturals from the yoke of human and mage oppression.

Dire, Mac, and a handful of others in the Mazetec club are high-level shifters and magic users. Had it not been for Mac's magic, none of us would be here. It was how he was able to slip into the arena, then slip out once we were gone.

He sees me looking at him and smiles. He's in the middle of saying something to Flip about his girlfriend – a skinny blonde with stringy hair and unsteady feet. Seems she showed up already sauced to the gills. We're not even at the reception yet.

He walks up to me and says, "You look beautiful, Aliyah."

"Thank you," I glance back at the rest of the crew. They look awkward yet happy in their suits and tuxes. "So, what's next for the Maztecs now that Dire has stepped down?"

Mac shrugged. "I'm thinking we'll head back to the border to keep an eye on the cause."

I shake my head. “You’re crazy to be anywhere around there now. The bounty on your head has got to be crazy high.”

Mac shrugged. “Yeah, but that’s the life. They gotta catch us if they want us.”

I can’t lie. I’m glad Dire’s out of the life. After Dire redirected us in the portal to land with the refugees, Dire searched for a place where we could settle. He found this oasis, green and overgrown like no one has ever lived here before, even though it was clear that, at some point, it had been inhabited. Old cabins remain in the middle of lush woods with no masters. We chose one and decided to make it our home.

Now, I’m standing in a beautiful clearing in the middle of this wood, looking up at impossibly tall trees with branches that almost block out the sun. There’s nothing but green wood and quiet here. Others are building or re-occupying cabins around us as we create a community, a pack of free shifters. Dire is the Alpha. Using my father’s papers, which Mac was able to retrieve, I learned how to imbue the land around us with its own magic to create a shield hiding us from magic detection. And we’re free. Really free.

“You could always stay here, Mac. “There are cabins all through these woods. Lots of fresh air and free space. There are even trails in the mountains to the west. Big enough to ride on.”

“Sounds like you two found heaven.” He says this with a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “Maybe if I live long enough, I’ll retire here.”

“You are one of the few who knows how to get here, Mac. And are always welcome. Whenever you want to be here.”

I see Misty running up to us from the clearing. “Hey,” she says, “Can we get this show on the road, please?”

“Watch your mouth,” Mac warns. Misty rolls her eyes and looks over at me.

“Ready?”

I nod. She takes my hand and leads me through the wood.

Everyone gathers around in a circle. All bearing witness to our union. Dire stands with me, my hands in his as the sunlight shines down on us. The gold rays hit his dark skin and he looks shimmery and smooth. I want to reach up and touch his warm face.

“You ready to make it official?” he asks me.

“Yes. Forever.”

He brings my hands up to his mouth and kisses them. The feel of his touch makes me giddy and I giggle gleefully.

He leans his forehead to mine and whispers, “Forever.”

A Note from the Author



HELLO, DEAR READER!

I hope you enjoyed this world where magic beings and supernatural mysteries are hidden in plain sight. More stories and adventures to come in future books. If you enjoyed this fun read, step into another book set in the same universe but with a new love story where forbidden romance blooms and intrepid hero and heroine face insurmountable odds and danger at every turn.

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These books are all steamy stand-alone reads, set in the same world.

Cheers!

ColbieClarke
— A U T H O R —