

Surviving the Dark

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This book is dedicated to my parents, who always encouraged my writing, and to my lovely partner in crime for giving me the strength to return to it.

Trigger Warning

These writings may contain any or all of the following: mental abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, child abuse, rape, bullying, profanity, self-harm, violence, suicide, nudity, sex, death, PTSD, panic/anxiety attacks, addiction, kidnapping, and torture.

Please proceed with caution.

If you or anyone you know is suffering from a mental illness, depression, or suicidal thoughts, please contact the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

Likewise, if you or anyone you know is suffering at the hands of domestic violence, please contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

You are not alone, and there are people who can help.

Chapter 1: The Library's New Wing

The Benjamin Monroe memorial wing stood behind Ensfield's original library. It doubled the size, at least, but remained unseen from the street. A pleasing array of glass windows and metal rectangles dangled around the exterior walls. Clean, crisp edges and a spiraling glass entryway sloped down in decoration. Above the slope, golden letters spelled out my family's name. It had power and prominence displayed in true Monroe fashion.

Sunlight glittered off the fresh, powdery snow as the mayor gave the opening speech. A couple dozen guests listened, huddled like a colony of penguins. The winter sun refused to melt the snow, much less warm the frigid breeze. Sharp blasts of wind cut straight to my bones, distracting me from danger.

On either side of us, evergreen trees stood tall. They sprung from the depths, leaving behind a thin blanket of snow on their branches. It created a perfect cover for our enemies. My ears strained for any warning of an attack. My eyes scanned for signs of trouble: the breath from an invisible guest, the flutter of a spooked bird, or otherwise disturbed snow, lightly falling from the branches above.

Mom's project towered over me like a bully. As usual, she expected me to attend opening events with shared enthusiasm and pleasantries. The council, mom included, groomed me to take her place one day amongst the glam and riches of Ensfield high society, against my wishes. Despite nausea swelling in my throat, I fulfilled their expectations.

Flashes came from every direction as the journalists from *The Harold*, *The Courier*, and *The Morning Gazette* fanned out into the snow, immortalizing our fraudulent smiles. Mom stepped forward with a pair of oversized scissors and snapped me back to reality. The crowd collectively held their breath like they didn't know what to expect. A smile spread across my face as they glared in bated anticipation. The oversized blades sliced through the ribbon anticlimactically, and applause erupted.

“We can do what we like as long as we give them a reason to look the other way.” As a child, I misunderstood the meaning. Her words crawled back as she charmed the pants off everyone in attendance. The new wing acted as mom’s gift to the community, and doubled as a new hiding place for my family’s secrets.

The small crowd filed into the foyer, chattering and laughing with general merriment. Punch, finger sandwiches, a chocolate fountain, and fresh fruit greeted us with the warmth of central heat. The elite in the audience flocked to mom, crowding her like a movie star. The reporters clicked their cameras, not paying attention to what they shot, praying for the money maker candid shot.

I found a corner with an uncomfortable bench in which to escape the pressures of formality. The scent of freshly polished wood and newly opened books calmed my worried heart. Our people worked throughout the morning to make sure the celebration had no hiccups from my twin brother. Our guests, unaware of the danger stalking them, carried on without a clue.

“You always find the best hiding spots.” A gentle, gruff voice spoke as a tall, older gentleman rounded the corner. His clean-shaven face made him look like a different person than the last few months. A genuine smile unlike others spread across my face as Xavier sat next to me.

“Mom’s going to put our name on every building in town, isn’t she?”

“You will take her place one day, and she expects you to know how to conduct yourself. The community needs to see us as a blessing rather than a threat. You will learn how to handle it. Your mom wasn’t the best at it when she was your age either.”

“I don’t want to take her place. I have my own life to live, but that’s not a choice.”

I sat back with a pout. Soft music played over the loudspeaker. A few people walked around the corner, pausing our conversation. We acknowledged them with a polite smile as they walked around, appreciating the new additions. The second hand on my watch ticked like an angry mother’s foot.

“I better get back before she notices I’m gone.” The forced smile took the place of my true feelings. He smiled and

nodded before following me back to the murmur of voices. Mom motioned to me, and her disgruntled energy swirled around her, betraying her lighthearted interactions. The swirling vortex that beckoned me stood in stark contrast to the elation on her face. Xavier gave one more encouraging nod as I glanced back.

“Honey, this is our mayor, Nathan Edwards, and his wife, Lynda.”

“Pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is ours. Your mother has done so much for our community. The new programs and additions to our library thrill us.” Handshakes out of the way, Lynda looped her arm in mine, pulling me towards the staircase. Glancing over my shoulder at mom, she nodded with a smile.

“Your mom tells me you helped with the designs. I’m impressed.” Doing my best to keep my rising panic to a minimum, we took the stairs. To the upstairs. Alone.

“Thank you. I’ve always loved the library and thought ours could use some updates.”

“She also told me you may be able to help me.” She let out a long held breath as we took a seat on a much comfier couch. My pulse quickened. Does she know who I am?

“I can do my best. What did you have in mind?” She leaned in closer, dropping her voice to scarcely a whisper. I was certain she could hear the pounding in my chest.

“I wanted to surprise Nathan with plans for a new house for us, but I don’t know where to start.” A nervous giggle escaped my mouth.

“Of course, I’ll help. It would be my honor. Next week, send me over some details like bedrooms, bathrooms, square footage and whatnot. I can whip you up a few different options.” She rose and took my hand with a grateful smile. Hiding my wince, I joined her. Her eyes twinkled with excitement.

“Thank you so much. This means the world to me.”

“I am at your service, Mayoress.” I bowed to her, choosing to stay upstairs.

Once our guests left, I hobbled with sore feet to my car. My jacket barely kept out the biting gusts as I walked across the parking lot. Sunlight faded from the sky, sending temperatures

plummeting. Another wave of snow threatened to drop from the sky as icy bursts blew between the buildings.

The city slept as I drove home. The streets were empty save for the occasional runner, dog walker, or biker. Open signs flashed bright colors, although no customers perused the windows. The stores would close up shop in a couple hours and head home. Christmas lights spiraled up each light pole like electric snakes, and store-fronts displayed their crafty holiday greetings.

After a few miles and too many stoplights, I parked in front of my apartment building. Many of my neighbors' windows blinked red and green with images of Santa Claus and holiday joy. My soul warmed at the celebration of the ancient, forgotten traditions.

My numb fingers fumbled with my keys, and my feet begged for warmth. Curses flew from my mouth as I dropped the keys for the third time. The polar wind swirled snow into the foyer as I shut out the cold. My apartment was a closet compared to my room at mom's house, but it was mine. Exhaustion pulsed through me as I hastily changed into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Sean expected me at Rendezvous, and I was already late.

Chapter 2: Friend or Foe

A partially lit neon sign blinked behind a cracked window. It didn't appear to be much, but music and laughter drifted to my ears. Rendezvous became my place, my escape, and the only reprieve from mother's watchful eye. It comforted my broken spirit. The music pushed the thoughts from my mind, and the liquor chased the pressure and tension from my chest.

Music screamed at the cold as I opened the door. Relaxation trickled down my body as I stepped inside. The crowd was light for a Friday night. The looming blizzard kept everyone at home but the regulars. A nod to a couple in the corner, and I set off to my normal barstool. Sean spotted me and slid an opened beer to my spot with a wink.

The alcohol warmed the dark, cold crevices of my soul as the icy bottle numbed my cold fingertips. Sean slid another one over moments before I finished the first. He smiled with customers, pretended to take shots, and performed a familiar rhythmic ritual. The beer drifted over my tongue in bitter comfort and down my throat in unladylike gulps.

"Sean, another?" He smiled and held up a finger while I judged the rest sloshing in the bottle.

"Already? Rough week, huh?" He popped the top off another Miller Lite. "Why you drinking so fast?" He lowered his voice, cleaning the bar in front of me.

"You know how life is. The event with mom this afternoon...went. Victor's back to trouble, so be extra safe and vigilant," I warned.

The next mouthful of beer went down harshly as images of his recent attack stole my attention. Another customer approached the bar, and Sean went to help them with a comforting pat on my arm. Victor's antics didn't include humans, but it would take one time, one attack for it to be over.

The ceremony naming me as my family's heir glimmered on the horizon. Victor was clear; he planned to

prevent my ascension and decimate any chance of us surviving. As the violent possibilities danced across my mind's eye, my stomach turned. He promised to leave me for last, which left me terrified to think of what my loved ones would endure if I failed to keep them safe.

The DJ mixed music while I stared absentmindedly at the subtitles on the T.V. Sip after sip, I waited for the alcohol to fade the intrusive thoughts. I did my best to ignore the customer jabbering beside me. The voice drifted over the chatter and music. *Is he talking to me?*

"I apologize; I didn't know anyone was talking to me," I interjected, hoping it would be quick.

"Not a problem. I was wondering if you were waiting for anyone." He spoke louder and familiarity snaked its way up my spine. I resisted the temptation to raise my eyes to his.

"It doesn't concern you."

Keeping my eyes down, my tone came out meaner than I intended. The day left me irritated and snappy, yet his voice set off an eruption of butterflies in my stomach. Confusion added itself to the mix, and I refused to acknowledge him. His voice continued to rise above the noise of the bar, making it impossible to brush off. With harshness, the swirling tornado rose quickly and threatened to take me away.

"May I help you with something?"

"Thought I might buy your next beer?" The man's voice pierced my concentration. Stealing a quick glance, the familiarity in his voice disappeared. *Victor disappeared for a while. Maybe he learned some new tricks.*

"Yeah, sure. Thanks." *If it means leaving me be, why not?* I caught the words moments before they attached themselves to the end of my sentence.

His eyes sparkled unnaturally as he placed a folded five under my napkin. My face contorted into a scowl, and as if by design, Sean dropped a glass behind the counter. The crash pulled my focus as adrenaline flooded my system. The shards scattered in a cacophony of tiny tinks. His energy flared, leaving sparks in his wake. Sparks only I, and other empathic witches, could see. The newcomer withdrew to a table a few feet away, and I returned my attention to the T.V.

I knocked back a couple of gulps before I focused my magic. With a deep breath, the layout of the bar opened in my mind. Inner vision worked like a snake searching for a heat source. Anything without energy appeared dark and lifeless; whereas, life pulsed in vibrant shades. The glow varied between vibrant and pale, lighting up uniquely for each person.

My focus settled on the man with the alluring voice. His tangled, vibrant hues stuck out against the other patrons. They swirled and twisted around him, sparkling like his eyes. They beckoned me, whether accidentally or intentionally, I planned to find out. Passing through without friction, surprise knocked me back when I hit a brick wall around his mind. The ease with which I got by the beautiful array of colors and the impenetrable shield meant he knew I'd be looking.

There wasn't enough alcohol in the bar to drown the curses inside. There had to be a way to figure out if he arrived on Victor's orders. His mesmerizing eyes, his smooth voice, and the danger plagued my thoughts. *If Victor had learned more tricks...*

Beer after beer, his stare bore holes into my back. Prickles of fear and danger danced on my skin. Several attempts to break through his mind barrier left me frustrated. *There's only one way to find out.* My heart drummed against my rib cage as I draped my jacket over the chair. Apprehension and fear coursed through me.

"Thanks for the beer."

"It's my pleasure." His smile refreshed a dried-up pond in my soul, and I smiled back. "Do you always drink alone at the bar?"

"Do you always make it a point to hit on women who choose to sit alone at the bar?"

"Touché. No, I don't normally even approach strangers, bar or otherwise. I couldn't help myself."

He was looking for me. Calmness emanating from him stayed consistent, but the air between us crackled. An unfamiliar longing grew the more I heard his voice. He leaned forward in his chair, and I thought I would fall out of mine. Golden brown hair interacted with the neon signs and made his natural

highlights glow. The ferocity behind his sunrise eyes would stop any woman in her tracks.

“What’s brought you to town?” I avoided eye contact as the butterflies in my stomach shredded the lining with each word I spoke. His words were a melody I didn’t know I missed, and I craved more. *Does he have me under a spell?*

“Work brought me close to the area. Personal brought me here, specifically.” He brought his glass of amber liquid to his lips and took a drink. He captivated me, and it felt like delicious suicide.

“It’s a bar. I’m pretty sure personal brings everyone here. I’m Cassidy.” I smirked as I finished another beer, glancing around. *I have to get him away from here.*

“Kian.”

"How about we go back to my place, Kian?"

"Sure." His eyes lit up with excitement, too much excitement, like my invitation was his mission. He jumped up from his chair and had his coat halfway over his shoulders in an instant. Sean eyed us from behind the bar. *What am I doing?*

Chapter 3: Throw Danger to the Wind

The silence of the winter night created a void as the door closed behind us. It embraced me and whisked me away into the dark, protecting me from the evils that chased me. The evils that could be beside me. Fluffy snow absorbed our crunching footsteps as we made our way down the road. Kian gazed at the tiny blinking Christmas lights we passed. He admired the downtown architecture, and I admired him.

His relaxed shoulders and pleasant demeanor sent terrifying shivers through my body. He held himself calmly and without an intended script. If he was on a mission to hurt me, he was confident in his abilities. His energy playfully teased mine, but his guarded mind remained inaccessible.

As we crossed the bridge around the corner from my apartment, I paused. The trickle of remaining water cut through the snow, and I pushed the negativity from my mind. My hands heated through to the rough concrete, appeasing the dread. He slipped next to me and placed his hand over mine before I could move out of the way. Bracing myself for the sharp sting of skin to skin contact, nothing but warm and unfamiliar intimacy tingled along my skin.

"It's beautiful when it snows."

"It is. Well, we're almost there."

With wide eyes, I pulled my hand from underneath his, thrust them into my pockets, and motioned down the road. My heart hammered in my chest. Alcohol and curiosity distorted my thinking. A fire burned in my chest, and even the unforgiving frigidity of winter couldn't dull the excitement. The intimacy of his hand effortlessly pierced through the wall I deliberately built over the years. Snow blew across the road as we walked up the stoop to my door.

"It's not much, but it's mine. Please, make yourself at home, and double lock the door behind you." I said, climbing the pitch-black stairs. My jacket and bag crumpled as I dropped

them by the kitchen. Another beer called my name despite the several I downed at the bar.

"Would you like a beer?" I asked as I took one from the fridge and popped the top off.

"Yeah, sure." He replied, and I handed him the one in my hand while I grabbed another.

He explored my small apartment with intrigue as I took a seat on the couch. He gracefully picked up picture frames and glanced at the wall decor. For half a second, his opinion of my space mattered. Insecurity crawled up my spine but disappeared when he smiled. Drunken imagination had me undressing him with my eyes.

"Tell me an intriguing fact." The beer washed over my tongue and down my throat seconds before a nervous laughter escaped.

"What,"

"There are one hundred and twenty five thousand, two hundred and twenty consumable calories in a Victorian male."

"I meant about you." He laughed until his eyes creased.

"I have violet eyes."

"I thought they were contacts, so that's cool. Cool is not interesting, though." My mouth fell open in surprise. *I can barely remember my name.*

"Let's see. Well, that depends on your definition."

"I see you're avoiding it."

Flirting seemed the best option as the alcohol drove me to explore where physical discomfort started with him. Not a conversation. His eyes sparkled again, and my heart skipped a beat. My breath flew from my chest as he smiled, and I melted like putty in his hands. I danced in the warmth of the fire inside.

Kian didn't acknowledge the slight tremor in my hand as I reached up to touch his face. His breath came in ragged bursts as he maintained eye contact with me. Expecting a sharp sting, I reached to his clean-shaven face. Like before, nothing happened. *There's no pain.* With haste, I pulled him to me and kissed him ferociously. Maybe it was passion. Maybe it was drunk. Maybe it was stupid. He reciprocated as he pulled me close and cupped the back of my neck.

His shirt escaped over his head, and we searched each other's eyes, neither of us aware of what we hunted in the other. My hands roamed his chest. *Still no pain.* Soaking up his energy, I kicked off my shoes and threw my shirt towards my bedroom door. His hands tenderly met my face and pulled me to him. I drifted through the space between us like a lost astronaut.

"Do you need to check that?"

"Check what?" He pointed to where my ringing phone barely made a noise. "No, I'm ignoring it."

He pulled me on top of him, and I lifted myself to look at him. An ocean of unexplored depths distracted me as I tried to memorize every part of his face. The danger melted. No spell or magical working could make touch comfortable. He was different.

It took no time to shed the rest of our clothing with a sense of urgency. His hands roamed my body in response to my kisses over his chest. We lost ourselves. We fell into strange familiarity. The tingle of his skin covered me like the softest blanket. The outside world ceased to exist until a banging on my door brought us back to reality. We both jumped as a key slid into the lock.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* I scrambled to the banister. "Mom!" I screamed as I threw a blanket off the chair and over to Kian.

"Cassidy, are you okay? I tried calling."

"What the hell?"

My mother took a moment to catch her breath as she rounded the top of the stairs. I yelled again as I darted to snatch another blanket off the cedar chest to wrap around myself. Kian froze on the couch as if he could blend in with the fabric.

"Yes, Mom. I'm perfectly fine. I have all of my fingers and toes." Waving my hands at her, a selfish, drunken rage sparked to life inside of me. The air pulsed with hostility.

"Who is he? Why does he appear to be naked on your couch?"

"This is Kian. He's not naked. He has boxers on, and I don't need to explain anything to you."

She assumed her normal mom stance. Complete with hands on her hips, and a scowl on her face, she threatened my

good time. My attitude refused to hide, encouraged by the alcohol and angered by the intrusion. She hit me with an empathic wave, making the room spin.

"Why are you upset anyway?"

"You don't have your contacts in."

"No, Mom. I don't. You barge in scaring me half to death, and that's all you have to say?" I glared at her. Her shoulders fell forward in exhaustion, as if her anger was too heavy to bear. The clock ticked loudly, accentuating the silence.

"Something happened."

"Obviously."

"This is serious." She paused, shifting her weight.

"Victor attacked tonight."

"Okay, I won't leave my apartment. I'll be safe. I promise to call you in the morning."

"Did you understand what I said?"

I stared at her with indignation. Her energy flared like the sun, and it released my own from its chains. Nothing, inside or otherwise, stopped me from giving her what I intended for Victor.

"Yes, Mother. I understand every word, but there is nothing we can do right now, is there?" She studied me. "Is there?"

"You're drunk again."

"Here we go again. Let's hear it for the millionth time, how I'm such a filthy drunk." Venom spewed from my mouth.

"I will not do this with you in front of your company." She rubbed her temples as she leaned back against the kitchen bar. Her face fell even more distressed than when she arrived. She shielded herself and left.

"Damn it." My heart sank as guilt overpowered my buzz. My thoughts finally broke free from the grip of danger; I didn't want her reminding me. My fists came down on the banister as I stared after her.

"Cassidy," I made eye contact with him regardless of the tears forming there. "I have no problem staying with you." He was the perfect gentleman, but I couldn't protect myself while I protected another.

"No, Kian. I can't put you in the middle of this." I threw his clothes at him. "Please, just go."

"As you wish."

He dressed, and I walked him down the stairs, still wrapped in the blanket. He kissed me as he opened the front door. A few tears broke from their confinement as I shut the door and locked it. My apartment returned to a normal, eerie quiet.

Flipping the T.V. on for background noise, I collapsed onto the sofa. Kian felt like a friend I knew for years. He felt like the comfort of hot chocolate on a cold and snowy night. He felt like a cold waterfall in the middle of summer. He smiled from ear to ear. My toes gripped the soles of my emotional shoes, trying to keep me from falling off the Earth. The way he made me feel distracted me and distractions get you killed. I had to be careful. Victor was coming for me.

Chapter 4: The Vampire's Lair

An unimpressive brick building stood before us with no signs, lights, or music spilling into the night like Rendezvous. After months, Sean finally agreed to join me at the only place in town exclusive to the magical community. As we got out of the car, he wasn't uncomfortable as we approached the door. His short and curly brown hair came down to a tidy beard. His rings glittered in the floodlight as if kissed by the snow. His rosary swung under his shirt, glinting through the openings as he moved.

Passing by as he eyed the building, I banged heavily on the metal door. Screeching open a small slit, two grey-blue eyes stared back at me. Creases formed in the edges as the owner smiled. The only door in or out swung open to a six-hundred-year-old vampire towering over me. My first home away from home was Club Nova and the first place from which mom banned me. Rusty wore his usual black suit with his hair in a ponytail, face cleanly shaven, fangs politely tucked away.

"Cassidy! I didn't know you were bringing dinner."

"Rusty, Sean. Sean, Rusty. Bouncer, owner, and general badass."

"Pleased to meet you. Cassie said there aren't many humans around." Outstretched hands met in a handshake, and Rusty's eyes grew to the size of the moon.

"Why does he know?"

"He has for most of my life. If he was going to out us, he would have years ago. He's good."

"You better be glad I trust your judgment," Rusty called behind us.

"Okay, the main bar where we can play pool is up here on our left."

"They do serve beer here, right?"

"Nah, just blood and guts. I'm kidding. Of course they do."

The plain door let bursts of magic and loud pops escape to the hallway. As we entered, all eyes rose to meet us and activity ceased. Center of attention, exactly where I tried not to be. Once they saw me with him, their apprehension eased. Slowly, the magic returned as we walked towards the pool tables. Bright flashes of color, laughter, and cheering took the place of the uncomfortable silence.

"I'm going to go grab a couple of beers," Sean said.

"Hey, Cass!" A greeting flew across the room from a group in the corner, and I waved. A deep breath filled me with oxygen as my muscles relaxed a little. Sean's wide eyes and noticeably paler complexion brought out a genuine smile.

"The bartender. The split in her tongue looks like a snake. And her eyes-"

"Yeah, I didn't have time to warn you. That's Roxie, one of the most powerful shapeshifters I know. She belongs to Rusty." Her long, hot pink Mohawk fell over the left side. The shaved sides of her head accentuated her gauged ears. Pink, blue, and green glitter danced across her face as if she were a fairy.

"She's looking more human tonight than usual," I added with a smile. The slot of quarters clicked loudly as I slammed it in. "And if you keep staring, I'm going to break." I joked as I pulled the rack and placed it under the table.

"The hell you will."

Nova was the polar opposite from Rendezvous. Soft jazz played as a nice background instead of a distraction. Not a single T.V. graced the walls. Spells floated around tables; magic exploded on the ceiling. The soundproof interior protected us. Magic didn't hide at Nova. Sean watched in amazement; few humans got a glimpse into our lives.

"So, the guy from last night..."

"Mom thinks he's the protector."

"Like The Protector?" The striped ten ball slipped into the pocket, and he celebrated with a few fist pumps.

"You know you're solids, right?" His celebration dwindled to disappointment.

"You've got to be shitting me." I shook my head and mouthed no as I walked around the table, eyeing the best angle. "Damn it!" He bellowed as I set up my shot with a grin.

"Very little alone time before mom came barging in. We hung out a bit but not much. Showed up at Cedarvale to his car parked outside and yes, like The Protector. By the way, if you focused more on the game than the bartender, you wouldn't forget your balls." He flipped me the bird in amusement.

"How does he work into everything? He just shows up and boom, everything goes okay? And from the looks of it last night, you're interested. I doubt you're disappointed." My worst fears existed in his words.

"I'm not sure how it all fits. He's a distraction and a dangerous one at that. Attraction doesn't matter. I can't act on it. If Victor finds out, he will use it against me. He will do anything."

"All because you're going to have some ceremony for the family? Families have ceremonies all the time."

"The ceremony will open up my ability to grow to my full power while mom gets to keep hers. Victor wants us dead, regardless of the ceremony." The pool stick slid through my fingers like butter, but the cue didn't go where I wanted. The eight ball teetered on the edge of the pocket before disappearing.

"Damn it," I muttered.

"What can I do to help?"

"Nothing but stay safe. We have our people working on logistics. We can't seem to get a step ahead. Hopefully, it will be complete before Victor realizes he missed his opportunity. It's the best way for this to work out." More quarters went into the slot.

"Anyone need a beer?" Roxie sauntered over. Sean's ears flushed red. She and I stood with our arms around each other, watching him fumble with the racking.

"I'm always down for another. I'm sure Sean would like one."

"Sure. I'd love another." He stammered out as she approached and put a finger on his chest.

"You never told me he was delicious."

Her eyes undressed him. I couldn't do anything but giggle as he drooled after her. Her charm was deadly. Relaxing against the table, I smiled as Sean absorbed the experience. Wild excitement glimmered in his eyes. He snapped out of the trance and glanced around. Embarrassment flooded his energy as he sheepishly diverted his eyes.

"So, she can shift into anything she wants?"

"Yup, anything that has been or is alive. Plants to animals. That's why I know dragons are or were real. She has become one before."

"What does it look like?"

"The dragon or her shifting?"

"Don't you dare." He rushed to whisper as she made her way back to us.

"Roxie, Sean's curious. He wants to see you shape-shift," I said with a sly grin in Sean's direction.

"What would you like to see snack cake?" She leaned over our game, and Sean cleared his throat.

"It really isn't necessary. You don't have to do anything." His darker complexion usually hid his blushing, but it was clear as day as the soft red spread from his ear across the bridge of his nose.

"I don't mind. I'll surprise you if you don't tell me." Trouble gleamed in her eyes as she stalked her prey.

"I...I... I don't know. A dog or a cat."

Her arms rose above her head. A blue stream of fog started behind her as a green one started in front. Spiraling around her, wisps engulfed her. As the swirling mist fell, she disappeared. Sean gasped as it continued to move and shift on the floor. Even after seeing it a million times, it was always a pleasure.

A large timber wolf with the same piercing gray eyes took her place. Her shaggy gray and brown fur moved smoothly with her as she leaped onto the felt top. Sean's eyes widened in amazement as her pads made no sound. She inched closer to him and put her snout inches from his face. He stayed still as she sniffed him and rubbed against his chest. Even as a wolf, she blurred the lines of flirtation. She pranced around, putting on a

show before disappearing behind the bar and returning to her semi-human form.

"Is she always like this?"

"Absolutely."

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