

Shifted

Siren Prophecy series, Book 1

Shifter Academy

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CHAPTER 1

MYREEN

Rule #1: Never go out after dark.

Rule #2: Never go into large bodies of water.

Rule #3: Stay off of social media.

“SO, HOW STRICT IS THAT RULE?” Kenzie asked, tossing a French fry in her mouth.

The two girls were sitting at a picnic table outside the school cafeteria, making the most of their half hour lunch break.

Myreen’s previously comfortable posture stiffened at the question, and she put down the burger she’d been about to bite into. “Rule number one? Pretty unbreakable.” She sighed. “Why?”

These were the rules Myreen had lived by her entire life, rules put in place by her eccentric mother. If a friend ever threw a birthday party after five in the afternoon, Myreen wasn’t allowed to go. When all her friends were enjoying dips in the lake for summertime fun, Myreen wasn’t allowed to go. And when everyone started getting smart phones and chatting on Facebook or Twitter, Myreen couldn’t join them. Myreen was allowed a phone, but only one that could make and receive calls and text messages.

These rules made it difficult for Myreen to make friends. Not that it mattered much, as she was hardly ever in one place long enough to get to know anyone. Her mother moved them every few months, leaving one small town to start a new life in another one. Myreen hated it growing up. She would finally make one good friend, and then her mom would spring a move on her and she’d have to abandon them to start over somewhere else. And with the no-social-media rule, keeping in touch was damn near impossible. Myreen would send letters, but nobody participated in snail mail anymore. Myreen was stuck in the Stone Age while the rest of the world passed her by.

For the last three months, they’d been living in Short Grove, a tiny town in Illinois. The town was so small, it had one school, no mall of any sort, and was pretty much invisible on any map of the state. Luckily, it was only an hour’s drive from Chicago, so Myreen was able to experience city life when she could manage to get away on weekends—with a strict curfew, of course.

Myreen had the sneaking suspicion that another move was, though. She had made one good friend: Kenzie.

Kenzie was great. She had approached Myreen on her first day at the new school, and the two had become fast friends. They did everything together: homework, weekend trips to the city, gossiping on Myreen's couch all hours of the night. Kenzie was aware of the no-going-out-after-dark rule, and rather than prying, she was content to stay at Myreen's house to hang out once the sun set.

Or, at least, she was before today.

Kenzie flipped her wavy brown hair over her shoulder. "There's a party tonight. I think we should go." Her fingers tapped an excited beat, betraying her casual tone.

"Someone in this town is actually throwing a party?" Myreen asked, raising her brows in surprise.

Kenzie leaned forward, a fire burning in her hazel eyes. "And it's at Michael Guido's house." She raised a brow, but when Myreen didn't spark with recognition, she added, "He's a football player. Family's got big money, at least for this small town. So you *know* it's going to be epic."

Myreen dropped her shoulders and shook her head. "Kenzie, as much as I would love to go, you know I can't."

"I was afraid you'd say that." Kenzie's nose crinkled, and she jammed a fry into her plate. "Nothing fun ever happens in *Shallow Grave*," Kenzie said, using her nickname for their sleepy town. She leveled her gaze at Myreen, an unspoken challenge there. "Until now. You're a teenager, Myreen. When was the last time you ever did something you weren't supposed to?"

Myreen snorted. "Um, never."

"Exactly." Kenzie pointed her mashed fry at Myreen's chest. "A little rebellion is healthy—no, *necessary*. I refuse to let you skip this important rite of teenagehood."

Myreen imagined it, telling her mom that she wanted to go to the party and then the deathly stern look and lecture she'd receive in return. She'd heard that lecture so many times, she had the dang thing memorized by now.

She opened her mouth to object, but Kenzie cut her off. "Robby Fletcher'll be there." Kenzie raised her brow and smirked. She was using Myreen's pseudo crush as a bribe, and it was kinda working.

"Robby doesn't know I exist," Myreen said, rolling her eyes.

"So you get to be Cinderella. Wiggle that perfect little body of yours into an even smaller dress. Before you know it, you'll be sweeping him off his feet."

"Aren't guys supposed to do the sweeping?" Myreen asked with a smirk.

"This is the twenty-first century," Kenzie said. "Where's your sense of empowerment?"

"Stuck in the twentieth century, with my *dumb* phone," Myreen said, holding up her flip phone.

"Your mom's weird," Kenzie said. "No offense," she added quickly.

"None taken," Myreen said with a shrug. "You don't even know the half of it."

“I guess I can kinda understand the no-social-media thing,” Kenzie said, dipping another fry into her mound of ketchup with one hand as she tapped the screen of her phone with the other. “Kids our age really shouldn’t be on social media.”

“You’re literally on it right now.”

“That’s my point,” Kenzie said, stuffing her phone into her pocket. “It’s addictive and it horrible for your social skills. Why do you think *I’m* so unpopular?” She leaned back in her chair, throwing her half-eaten fry onto her plate.

“You’re not unpopular,” Myreen said in Kenzie’s defense. “You’re just...very honest, and not everyone appreciates your brand of honesty.”

In appearance, there was no reason Kenzie shouldn’t be popular. Though she was a tad on the thicker side, she had a curvy figure with nice, wide hips. Her hair had a natural rock star wave that required little maintenance, and her face was pretty enough on its own that she never needed makeup, which was more than half the girls of the cheerleading squad could say. If popularity was just a beauty contest, Kenzie would definitely be in the running.

But this was a small town, and everyone in their school had known each other their whole lives. Kenzie spoke her mind, and unlike most teenage girls, stood up for herself and didn’t take crap from anyone. Because of that, the “popular” kids didn’t like her very much. She wasn’t some lemming they could push around, or some bee looking to follow a queen.

“Whatever,” Kenzie said with a shrug. “But we’re talking about you and your rules right now. I might even get the after-dark rule. Maybe your mom’s afraid you’ll get abducted or something. Or,” she said, dragging out the word, “your mom’s a spy. No, a superhero. That’s it. All her enemies are out to get her and she’s afraid they’ll snatch you for ransom or something. You said you guys move every few months, right?”

“I’ve considered every scenario you can think of,” Myreen said. “But my mom is too clumsy to be a spy, and not nearly strong enough to be a superhero. I have entertained the notion that she might be in the Witness Protection Program, but why she would keep that from me, I don’t know.”

“So you have no idea why you guys move around so much?” Kenzie pried, and Myreen thought she saw her eyes flash for a moment. A trick of the sunlight, or something.

“Nope,” Myreen sighed. “I stopped asking years ago because she would never give me a straight answer. For all I know, it’s something stupid, like she owes someone money. She does have loads of it, even though she never works.”

“Really?” Kenzie’s hazel eyes sparkled, a faint smile on her lips.

Myreen had never told a friend this much about her personal life, and she felt a sort of guilt for betraying her mom’s trust in such a way. But there was something about Kenzie that made Myreen trust her. And it was refreshingly uplifting to be

able to confide these sordid details of her life to someone she considered a true friend.

As if sensing Myreen's discomfort on the topic, Kenzie changed the subject. "She could be something else. Like a werewolf. Or a vampire."

Myreen laughed. "Seriously?"

"Right. You all don't go out after night. Werewolf it is."

"Yep, that must be it." Myreen shook her head.

"So, tonight. You're going."

Myreen frowned. It wasn't at all that she didn't want to go. She'd never been to a party, not since she was in elementary school and everyone had their birthday parties at lunch time. A real high school party sounded like the event of a lifetime! Her chest burned with the yearning to go. But her mom would never, ever, in a million years, let her leave the house after dark.

"I really do want to," Myreen prefaced with a sigh.

"I know there's a 'but' coming, so save it," Kenzie said. "If your mom won't let you go, then I say you should sneak out."

"Sneak out?" Myreen parroted, as if the words were a foreign language to her.

"Yeah, you know, climb out your window while your mom is busy making dinner or something. If you tell her you're sick, she never even has to know. Besides, you deserve a reward for being a perfect daughter. Until now." Kenzie smirked.

"So my reward for good behavior is deviance?" Myreen asked.

"Teenage rebellion. Remember?" Kenzie flipped her hair over her shoulder again, turning sideways so she could drape her arm over the table.

The more she thought about it, the more Myreen wanted to make this party happen. But how? She didn't like the idea of sneaking out. Maybe she could reason with her mom. Myreen wasn't a child anymore. She was sixteen. In two years, she would be considered an adult. She had felt for some time now that she deserved a little taste of freedom, and if there was any real reason for the crazy rules, she was old enough to hear it. A little bit of truth was long overdue.

"Okay," Myreen decided. "I'll find a way to go. Meet me at my house at seven."

"Make it eight," Kenzie said. "Only losers go to a party on time. Or so I've heard."

"Eight it is." A bubble of excitement bounced in Myreen's belly, followed by a stab of doubt threatening to pop it.

"Dinner's ready," her mom called from the kitchen.

Myreen had been pacing in her room, putting together just the right words to make her case to her mom. It had been years since Myreen had pushed for any kind of lenience on the rules, accepting them as just a way of life. For the most part, she

had never really minded. She was content to stay in with her mom every night and watch movies or play cards and board games. She was content not to be addicted to a device as most teens were these days. She was even okay with the fact that she had never really been swimming before.

But this party was a chance to have some real fun, to be normal for a change. Until Kenzie had brought it up, Myreen hadn't admitted to herself how desperately she wanted to be a normal kid. Moving around all the time was exhausting. Her mom owed her this one small exception to the rules.

Myreen took one deep breath in front of her mirror, fixing her hair just right, as if preparing for a speech in front of a large audience. Her shiny, thick black hair flowed down past her shoulders in wayward waves, currents of dark blue peeking out here and there—thanks to a bottle of dye and Kenzie's goading. Her sky blue eyes stared back at her with uncertainty, shadowed by thick black eyelashes that never needed mascara.

You can do this, she told herself, then turned away from her reflection and headed for the kitchen.

Her mother was setting the table and turned to smile at her when she entered. Her long pale blond hair always seemed to waft around her, as if unbound by the laws of gravity, forever floating in a sea of its own imagination. Myreen had no idea where she'd gotten her black-as-midnight hair, but she undoubtedly got her eyes from her mom, whose were bright with happiness this evening. Myreen felt an extra twinge of guilt knowing that she was about to snuff out their light.

"I made your favorite," her mom said, placing a full plate on the table. "Pesto grilled salmon and fettuccine alfredo."

"Thanks, Mom," Myreen said, ignoring the lump in her throat. She sat at the table and looked down at her plate, the delicious smell taunting her.

"How was school today?" her mom asked, sitting across from her and poking a fork into her food.

"It was alright." Myreen wondered: when was the best time to bring up this overdue conversation?

She looked out the window. The last bit of daylight was clinging lazily to the horizon, slowly dragging its glow across the late autumn sky.

"Just alright?" her mom asked before popping a bite of herb-covered fish into her mouth.

The clock would be striking seven soon. *Now is as good a time as any.*

"Actually, something kinda cool did happen today," Myreen began, poking at her food. "One of the football players is throwing a party tonight, and I was hoping I could go."

Her mother's jaw froze mid-chew, and the light immediately vanished from her eyes.

"Kenzie will be there," Myreen added quickly. "We won't stay long, just one hour would be enough. And I promise not to drink any—"

“Not tonight,” her mom cut her off.

Myreen had expected this answer. “Mom, I never get to go to any social functions. I’m not asking for something outrageous here. Just *one* party. At which I promise to be on my best behavior.”

“There will be other parties,” her mom said, a casual tone masking a dark and heavy secret.

“Parties that you still won’t let me go to,” Myreen said, unable to keep a bit of sass out of her voice. “I don’t get it. Every girl my age gets to go out after school. Everyone gets to hang out with friends and do things at night.”

“But those girls aren’t my daughters.”

“I never ask for anything,” Myreen said, her big speech rushing out, skipping over words she had prepared. “I never complain when we have to pack all our things and rush out all of a sudden. I never ask for fancy clothes or gadgets or anything like that. I get almost all A’s in school and have never gotten in trouble. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m a really good kid. All I’m asking for, just this once, is one tiny hour of freedom, to have some fun with kids my own age.”

Her mom looked down at her food, stoic. “I’m sorry, honey. The answer is no.”

Anger bubbled up from under the surface, an anger Myreen was so used to bottling up. Her mother was her best friend, and she was a very secretive person. Myreen didn’t like to pry, but she deserved an explanation.

“Why is the answer no?” Myreen tried to sound like an adult deserving of the respect she was asking for, and not like the indignant teenager she felt bristling on the inside. “Why don’t you ever let me even go into the backyard after sunset? What’s so scary about the dark?”

“We’re not having this conversation right now,” her mom said flatly, continuing to eat her food as if their talk was over.

“Then when?” Myreen asked. “I’m sixteen years old. I’m not just some child you can cart around with you anymore. I’m almost an adult, and I need to know why. Why do you hop around from place to place? Why can’t we do anything online? And what’s the deal with water? What are you so afraid of?”

“That’s enough, Myreen!” her mom snapped.

The silence that ensued made Myreen realize how loud her voice had been, which made her feel very young and naïve now. She hated feeling so small, so helpless to control anything in her life. She wasn’t willing to just go with the flow anymore.

“Unless you can give me an explanation for your rules, I will no longer abide by them,” Myreen declared in a low but strong voice.

A spark of panic lit her mom’s blue eyes, and Myreen saw a fear behind them that part of her believed had always been there, hiding.

“Did it ever occur to you that those rules exist to protect you?” A note of desperation raised the pitch of her mom’s voice.

“Protect me from what?” Myreen asked, hiding her own desperation. She had always suspected her mom was running. That something bad had happened to her that related to night and water.

Her mom stayed silent, looking at her with pleading eyes.

“If you have something to tell me, now would be the time,” Myreen said. “Whatever it is, I’m ready to listen.”

Her mom’s eyes fell to the floor, darting back and forth in deliberation. Anticipation sizzled in Myreen’s belly like pop rocks in soda. Was she actually going to get to hear about her mother’s mysterious past? Myreen knew nothing about her mom’s history. Nothing about grandparents or extended family. Myreen didn’t even know who her father was. Every time she’d asked, her mother always changed the subject. But it seemed she might finally get some clue, some missing piece of this almost empty puzzle.

Then her mom’s eyes stopped their pacing. They returned to meet Myreen’s gaze, and she knew. Her mom had decided to continue the secrecy.

Myreen pushed away from the table and stood. “Then I’m going.”

“No, you can’t.” Her mom jumped out of her chair.

“I’ll be back before midnight,” Myreen said firmly, pushing her chair into the table and heading for the door.

“Myreen Lee Fairchild, you are not leaving this house!” her mom yelled in her well-practiced maternal tone.

Some young, skittish side of Myreen wanted to do as her mother said, to please her and avoid repercussion. But her determination to make a stand was behind the wheel, and she had no intention of turning around. Maybe this one act of mutiny would finally get her mother to confess something, anything.

She strode for the door, but her mom ran ahead of her and gripped the knob.

“Let me out,” Myreen insisted with narrowed eyes.

“I can’t do that.”

“Let me out!” Myreen yelled. Her voice sounded strangely musical, not her own.

Her mother gasped and dropped her hand. Myreen was startled by her own shout, ashamed that she had talked back so brazenly, enough to make her mom jump. But she had gone too far to give up now. Her mom had released the door knob. Myreen had to take her chance before the opportunity closed.

She rushed out, slamming the door behind her and running down the street. Her pulse was racing, her hands shaking as she pulled out her phone to dial Kenzie’s number and put the phone to her ear.

“Hey, Kenz, things didn’t go so well, can I come over before the party?” Myreen asked into her phone.

“Of course, come on over,” Kenzie’s worried voice replied. “Is everything okay?”

“I don’t know,” Myreen said honestly. “I’ll see you in a few minutes.” She hung up the phone and stuck her hands in her pockets as she strode to Kenzie’s house down the street.

She hated what happened back there. But it needed to happen, one way or another, and had needed to for some time. She’d had enough of secrets and changed subjects, enough of blindly complying to ridiculous requests. Things were never going to be the same after tonight, and that both excited and terrified her.

CHAPTER 2

MYREEN

“I’M SURE EVERYTHING will be okay,” Kenzie reassured Myreen as the two walked back from the party. “I can’t even tell you how many times I’ve argued with my mom and Gram, and it always turns out alright.”

Myreen had tried to enjoy the party, but she spent the whole time wrangling a giant knot of stress in her gut. Her mom hadn’t even called or texted her, which was incredibly uncharacteristic of her. Even when Myreen was at school, her mom would text her at least once to check in. Had she broken her mother’s heart? Sent her into a nervous breakdown? Myreen was dreading going home, and she was grateful that Kenzie had offered to accompany her. She really needed that support right now.

“I hope so,” Myreen said. “My mom and I have never fought like this. I’ve never even talked back to her before. I know it’s a silly thing for a teenager, but she’s kinda my best friend—besides you, of course.”

“I don’t think that’s silly at all,” Kenzie said. “I think it’s kinda sweet, actually. I wish I could say that about my mom. I mean, I love her, but I wouldn’t call us ‘friends.’” They continued walking in silence for a moment, and then Kenzie added, “I’ll stick around as long as you want me to. Or, I can leave right away to give you guys time to talk. Whatever you want.”

“Thanks, Kenz,” Myreen said, managing a half-smile.

Myreen’s house was in sight, and the stress knot constricted even tighter. She had no idea what to expect, and part of her hoped that they could just go back to the way things were. She’d rather have a happy relationship with her mom, even if it was shrouded in secrecy.

As they got closer, Myreen saw there was something amiss. The front door was wide open. Her mom never left the door open after nightfall; as soon as the sun went down, she would turn the deadbolt. The stress knot flared with a wave of panic, and Myreen picked up the pace, her brisk walk quickly turning into a run.

“What’s wrong?” Kenzie asked, running behind her.

“I hope nothing,” Myreen said as they made it to the door.

Nothing in the house was out of place, everything was just as it had been when she left.

“Mom?” Myreen called out.

No answer.

Myreen made her way across the small living room to the last place she had seen her mom—the kitchen.

“Mom?” she called out again, receiving the same empty silence in reply.

“Myreen, something about this doesn’t feel right,” Kenzie said, hovering in the doorway and looking around. “We should go.”

Myreen didn’t have time to wonder at the curious caution of her usually reckless friend. “I have to find my mom,” Myreen said, as if the idea of leaving her house was ridiculous.

She stamped into the kitchen, then froze.

Lying on the floor, pale blue eyes open wide and beautiful face fixed in anguish, was her mother.

Myreen dropped to the floor, her hands fumbling, finding their way to her mother’s face.

“Mom? Mom!” she yelled, trying to shake her mother awake.

Her mom’s body was cold and unresponsive. Remembering from movies she’d seen, Myreen pressed her index and middle fingers to her mom’s neck under her jaw, feeling around for a pulse. But there was none.

“Oh no!” Kenzie gasped as she came into the room behind her.

“Call 9-1-1!” Myreen shrieked, then turned her mother’s head the other way to search for a pulse on the other side of her neck. But as she did, her fingers ran into an angry red bite mark. A *dry* bite mark. No blood. With a bite this deep, there should be blood everywhere, shouldn’t there?

Panic spiked in her chest as she tried to comprehend what was happening. Something had bit her mom! But what? How could a bite hurt her this badly? Badly enough to... No, she couldn’t be dead. She just couldn’t!

Myreen’s head was a din of white noise as she fought the heavy sob that threatened to constrict her chest. But she couldn’t cry. Crying would mean admitting defeat, facing the reality that her mother was...

She was vaguely aware of the sound of Kenzie dialing on her phone as she paced nervously around the kitchen, and of the sound of heavy feet coming in through the front door.

A large hand landed on Myreen’s shoulder, and she sucked in a breath and spun her head around.

“You have to come with me right now,” said a man she had never seen before. His build was threatening enough. He could have easily attacked her mom.

She jerked her shoulder away from his hand. “Who are you? Did you hurt my mom?” she accused with a tremulous voice, her mind a clashing storm of sorrow, anger and paranoia.

“No, but if we don’t leave now, the ones who did will get you, too,” he said.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” she protested, lips twitching between a sneer and a pout. *Don’t cry, don’t cry!*

“If you don’t, you will die,” he said. “Please, we don’t have much time.” He held out a strong hand. “If I wanted to kill you, don’t you think I would have already done so? I am not your enemy.”

Myreen looked up at Kenzie, who was staring at the stranger with intense eyes, holding her phone to a deaf ear.

“Please,” the man urged once more, and Myreen heard sincerity and desperation in his voice.

Her mother was dead. Someone or something had killed her. And Myreen believed this man when he said she was in danger of being next. She didn’t have a lot of options. Stay here and wait for the cops to arrive—and risk whatever fate awaited her if the murderer returned—or take a leap of faith and trust this man, who seemed to genuinely want to help her.

Without a word, she reluctantly accepted the man’s hand. He pulled her to her feet, and together she and Kenzie followed him briskly out of the house, Myreen’s legs jumping ahead of her body as if whatever had attacked her mom was going to jump out at her at any second.

He charged toward a sleek black Camaro parked along the curb and opened the back door. Trepidation rooted her to the sidewalk at the thought of getting in this stranger’s car, but she couldn’t find her voice.

“You never said anything about getting into a car,” Kenzie said, voicing Myreen’s thoughts for her.

“We have to get off the streets,” he said, holding the door open. “We’re too exposed here.”

“Then we can go to my house,” Kenzie said. “It’s just down the street.” She pointed in that direction.

“It’s too close.” The man shook his head. “They will follow Myreen’s scent there.”

“Follow her scent?” Kenzie said. “Are you talking about what I think you’re talking about?”

He cut a narrowed gaze at Kenzie. “I’ll explain everything, but we have to get to a safe place first.” His broad shoulders bristled with urgency. “Please, they may already be on to us.”

Myreen passed a hesitant look to Kenzie.

“I’m not leaving your side,” Kenzie promised, taking her hand and squeezing it firmly.

They nodded to each other and got in the car. The man closed the door and rushed into the driver’s seat, wasting no time in starting the engine and speeding down the road.

Now that she had a chance, Myreen took a good look at the man sitting in front of her. He looked to be in his late thirties, with short brown hair and handsome dark stubble framing his rugged face. He had the look of a gladiator, rough and strong, with scars marring the bulges on his arms.

“Who are you and what do you want with me?” Myreen hiccupped, now wishing she had just stayed with her mom and waited for the police.

He looked at her in the rearview mirror. “My name is Oberon. I came to personally invite you to a school for... special people like you. I had no idea you were in any kind of danger. We didn’t realize you were a target.”

“A target for who?” she asked, trying to remain calm. “Who did that to my mom?” Tears welled in her eyes, but she knew if she let them break, they would render her useless.

“Vampires,” Oberon replied, dead serious.

“Vampires?” Myreen asked, not bothering to hide her skepticism. “Do you think I’m an idiot?”

“This isn’t a joke, Myreen,” he said, radiating authority. “You don’t live in the world you think you do. Do you even know what you are?”

She narrowed her eyes. What was he talking about?

“What *is* she?” Kenzie asked beside her. Myreen turned to Kenzie, who looked like she completely believed every word this Oberon guy was saying.

“Myreen, have you ever experienced anything strange? Anything you couldn’t explain?” Oberon kept his gaze on Myreen in the mirror, ignoring Kenzie’s question.

Myreen’s mind flipped through screenshots of her life. There was nothing normal about the way she grew up, but nothing to indicate she was something otherworldly, as this man was suggesting.

“No,” she answered honestly.

“What about your mother?” he asked.

Myreen shook her head, not yet ready to say anything relating to her mom.

“You’ve never... been to the beach? Or had anything weird happen to you while swimming?”

She met his steely gaze in the mirror. Why was he asking her about swimming? Was there really something to the stupid “no water” rule?

“I’ve never been allowed to swim.” She leaned on the edge of her seat in anticipation of some explanation at last.

Oberon’s brows raised in an understanding that was completely lost to her. What did he know that she didn’t?

“So your mom knew, and she tried to keep you from it,” he said with a nod.

“From what?” Myreen asked at the same time as Kenzie.

Oberon sighed, flicking another look at Kenzie through the rearview mirror. “Myreen, you are a mermaid.”

The balloon of excitement that had been growing inside her popped, the sound like a whoopee cushion in her head. She didn’t know what she was hoping he would tell her, but that certainly wasn’t it.

“A mermaid?” she said flatly. “Okay, that’s it. Just let me out of the car.”

“It’s true,” he said.

“First you say vampires attacked my house, and now you expect me to believe that I’m a mermaid?” she summarized in a mocking tone. “I don’t know if you’re crazy or just toying with me, but my mom just died! This is sick!”

“Think about it, Myreen,” he said. “I know you saw that bite mark on your mom’s neck. What do you think that could have been from?”

“Not vampires,” she said, throwing up her hands in exasperation. “They don’t exist.”

“Actually, that’s not true,” Kenzie said, her voice low. She couldn’t even meet Myreen’s gaze.

Myreen rolled her eyes. She knew Kenzie was into weird stuff, but now wasn’t the time for her to defend this psycho. Myreen was not going to buy into this nonsense. Her mother’s dead body back at home was real, and she needed to do something about it.

“Please let me out of the car,” she said.

“I can prove it to you,” Oberon growled, clearly getting frustrated.

“And how exactly are you going to prove to me that I’m a mermaid?” she asked, all sass.

“Mermaids aren’t the only shape-shifters in the world,” he said, harshly turning the steering wheel. “There are more species than you can imagine. For centuries, we’ve been hunted down by vampires and certain humans, but we finally have a place where we can be safe from them.”

He reached back over his seat to hand her an envelope. She narrowed her eyes at it for a moment, then took it, afraid to leave him driving one-handed for too long. On the flat side of the envelope was a label that read THE DOME with a strange insignia beneath it, a crest divided into four sections, each with a different symbol inside: talons, a wing, a spiral and claw marks.

“Like I said earlier, I came here tonight to personally invite you to the school,” he continued as she inspected the envelope. “We don’t often get stray mermaids, so I knew it would be best to have this discussion in person. To explain to you who we are and why you should come to the school.” He looked back over his shoulder. “Open it.”

Myreen looked at Kenzie, who was watching with large eyes full of anticipation. Kenzie nodded in encouragement, so Myreen figured why not.

She ripped the envelope open and unfolded the letter inside. The same insignia was in the top right corner in full color. At the top were the words “The Dome” and under that “Academy for the Gifted”. But as she read it, impossibly the “G” turned into an “Sh” to read “Academy for the Shifted.” She blinked hard several times, but the letters kept changing back and forth. If this was a prank, it was a very well thought-out one.

Shrugging off that weirdness, she continued to read the letter.

Myreen Fairchild,

We are excited to invite you to study at our most prestigious school for gifted individuals. You are receiving this letter because you have been found to be one of us, and we would be honored to guide you through your journey of self-discovery and make you a valued member of our community. The choice is yours, but we must warn you that failure to accept this invitation may put your family and others at risk. A representative will be in touch shortly to give you further instructions. We look forward to studying with you.

Sincerely,
Oberon Rex, Director

“Normally, initiates either grew up in families that are already affiliated with the school, or have begun to exhibit abilities that would make them aware of their status, so the form letter usually suffices. We rarely have to meet in person,” Oberon said. “But like I said, you are a rare case.”

“You keep saying ‘we,’” Kenzie said. “Does that mean you’re a shape-shifter too?”

Myreen shot her a look that said, “Don’t be ridiculous,” but Kenzie was focused on Oberon.

“I am,” he said with pride.

“Kenzie, you can’t really believe all this,” Myreen said.

“Actually, I do,” Kenzie said.

“Well, I don’t,” Myreen said. “And I want no part of this sick game he’s playing with us. Please take me home so I can call the cops and find out what really happened to my mom.”

“I said I can prove it to you.” He pulled the car over onto the side of the road. Then he got out of the car and yanked open her door. He waved out his hand in an invitation for her to get out.

Myreen didn’t hesitate. She didn’t know what he was planning to do, but now was her chance to make a run for it. She got out of the car and realized they were on a long stretch of road that led to the city. There was nothing but green field around them for miles. It would be a long run back, if she even made it that far.

Kenzie hopped out after her, and it was clear that she had no interest in running; her eyes were trained unblinkingly on Oberon. Myreen stayed close to Kenzie so that she could grab her arm and drag her away if she had to.

Oberon stepped away a few feet into the grass and began unbuttoning his black shirt.

“What the!? Why are you stripping?” Myreen shrieked.

“Just wait,” Oberon said with a hint of irritation in his voice.

He threw off his shirt and pulled down his pants, and Myreen was now truly terrified of what he was planning to do. She grabbed Kenzie’s arm and squeezed,

trying to tell her telepathically to escape with her now that his pants were around his ankles. Kenzie didn't get the message, and Myreen's sudden tug on Kenzie's unmoving arm caused her to trip to the ground.

She pushed herself up with her hands in time to see something that just wasn't possible.

Oberon had turned from a large, muscular man into an even bigger, mythical beast. All over, his skin sprouted small brown feathers. His rugged face transformed, his nose and mouth growing and twisting into a huge black beak with a dagger-sharp tip. His hands and feet enlarged to smooth black talons that dug into the grass as he landed on all fours. And out of his broad back emerged the most magnificent pair of brown wings, furling and expanding, making the air crack with their power.

Standing before her was a gryphon. A beast of legend. This creature didn't exist, and yet here it was, not three feet from her, looking at her with Oberon's golden-brown eyes.

Thanks for reading this excerpt from *Shifted*, book 1 in the *Siren Prophecy* series. This series is part of the new Shifter Academy world, where five bestselling and award-winning authors will introduce you to shifter, vampires, and hunters throughout time. With a new book released every six weeks, the adventures will never end.

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