

**Forsaken By Shadow**

**A Novella of the Mirus**

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## **Forsaken By Shadow**

Written and published by Kait Nolan

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## **Glossary of Terms**

*Council of Races:* ruling body of the paranormal races

*Drakyn:* ancient race of dragon shifters

*Firecaster:* paranormal race capable of controlling but not producing fire

*Fire Elemental:* paranormal race born of fire

*Hunters:* assassins under the command of the Council of Races; typically work alone; not limited to a particular race

*Investigation and Enforcement Division (IED):* division of the Council of Races responsible for investigation of crimes involving the paranormal races and enforcement of Mirus law

*Mirus:* general term for the paranormal races

*Shadow Walkers:* special ops division under the command of the Council of Races; typically work in teams; recruited based on ability rather than race; have the ability to control and travel by shadow

*Wylk:* race of wolf shifters; no kin to werewolves

## Chapter 1

**H**e didn't open his eyes when he heard the scream. Though his body all but vibrated with the need for action, some inner instinct counseled him to remain still. Listening.

A roll of thunder, then a muffled crash from another room.

Rage pumped through him, hot and bright as a blast furnace. He had to fight. He had to get to . . . Had to protect . . . *her*.

A hard *thud* shook the wall. A whimper, then a deeper grunt.

His ears strained to pick out other sounds, anything to determine how many he needed to fight.

Faint voices through the wall, and then a rhythmic *thumping*. Not quite like the steady thud of fists on flesh.

Another scream ripped the air, this one more coherent. "Oh, yes! Yes! Vinny! Yes!" He stilled. Not *her*.

Then where was she? Where was . . . He tried to latch on to a name, but the memory skittered away. Rage dimmed fractionally with panic.

Why couldn't he remember her name?

He tried to call up *her* face. But like her name, it simply wouldn't form in his mind, trickling from his thoughts like sand through loose fingers.

A few moments later, he heard a man, presumably Vinny, bellow release. Then everything lapsed back into relative silence.

The sharp scent of whiskey burned his nose, mixing with the pungent odor of stale sweat. The smell permeated the coarse fabric his face was crushed against. His mouth was cotton-dry, coated with a sour film that he tasted with each inhalation.

He tested his limbs, and with motion came pain. Hissing at the sear of agony that shot up from his hands when he flexed them, he stilled again, waiting for the burn to level off enough that he could draw full breath again. He rolled over to a chorus of creaky bed springs and opened his eyes. Lightning flashed beyond the threadbare curtains at the single window. In its brief glare, he saw a low dresser, a desk, and an overturned chair. He counted absently.

*One one thousand . . . two one thousand . . . three one thousand . . .*

A low grumble of thunder. Another flash. A glimpse of a television mounted on the wall, an empty luggage rack below.

He reached for the bedside lamp, gritting his teeth as he flicked it on. With a sense of dread, he squinted in the light of the single, pitiful bulb to see what the hell was wrong with his hands.

They were wrapped in gauze. Lots of it. With fumbling fingers, he unwound the bandages. Both palms were blistered with ugly burns. Even in the dim light, he could see that the skin was charred, curling, and covered in some kind of salve.

*What the fuck?*

He rolled to his feet, moving quickly through the room. In the bathroom he flipped on the light, another anemic fluorescent bulb that flickered several times before illuminating the cracked tile and outdated fixtures. The burns looked even worse in here. What the hell had happened to him?

He glanced into the spotted mirror. Blinked. Then he leaned in close.

The face looking back at him was young, early twenties, shadowed by a few days of scruff. Beneath the scruff, an ugly bruise darkened the left side of his jaw. Dark, somewhat matted hair hung to his shoulders.

A new kind of fear slid greasily through his system.

*Who am I?*

He sucked in air, taking another look around. There were no toiletries save the pitiful bar of soap and tiny, cheap shampoo and lotion beside the gray plastic ice bucket. He went back into the room for the gauze, sinking onto the bed to rewrap his mangled hands.

Panic was a decent analgesic.

He knew nothing. Not his name. Not his birthday. Not where he was or where he was from. Not how he'd gotten here. Every single shred of information related to his identity was an absolute blank. By the time he finished re-bandaging, unanswered questions jostled in his brain like restless cattle. The sheer number of them terrified him.

*There have to be answers here somewhere*, he thought, getting up to search more thoroughly.

The room had looked better in the dark. Fading wallpaper in a pattern popular in some decade well before he'd been born hung from the walls in peeling strips. The few pieces of furniture were scarred, cheap wood veneer. The TV above the luggage stand had knobs. A nearly empty fifth of Jack Daniel's lay on its side on the bedside table. A small puddle stained the already splotchy shag carpet below.

He didn't like whiskey. Didn't taste whiskey on his tongue. So why was it here?

There were no bags, but he did find a set of car keys and a money clip on the desk. The clip held cash but no driver's license, no credit cards. No clue to who he was. He dropped the keys and the money into his pockets and stalked to the bedside table.

Beneath a Gideon Bible, he found a phonebook.

"What the fuck am I doing in Nevada?" Baffled, he tossed the phone book back into the drawer and started to scrub both hands over his face, hissing at the pressure on his palms. *Okay, Nevada. One of the fifty states. At least I know there are fifty states. That's something, right?* Having an answer to one question helped stem the panic that wanted to rise up and choke him. *One down, the rest of my life to go.*

Rain slapped him in the face the moment he opened the door. Across a parking lot, he could see a neon sign proclaiming Canyon Inn. Except the "y" kept flickering out. Parked mere feet from the door of room number 13—*Great*—was a '69 Dodge Charger in serious need of a paint job. The whole thing was a mottled patchwork of gray primer and an ugly ass shit brown. He wondered if it was his.

He moved down the sidewalk, heedless of the fact he was getting soaked. The night clerk, a pimple-faced blond guy with a length of facial fuzz for a beard, looked up in surprise when he stepped into the office.

"Ca . . . can I help you?"

"I need to know what name room thirteen is registered in." His voice sounded rusty with disuse.

The kid hesitated. "I'm sorry, I . . ."

"Look, I'm *in* room thirteen. I need to know what name is on it."

Puzzled, the clerk flipped through a ledger. He ran one skinny finger down the page, then shook his head. "There is no name."

“No name?” He all but growled it, leaning over the counter and into the night clerk’s space.

“N . . . n . . . no. It was paid up front, in cash, for two days. No name.” He sucked in a wheezy breath. “I don’t want no trouble, Mister.”

Another thought wormed its way into consciousness. “A woman. There was a woman. Did you see her with me?”

The kid gave a nervous laugh. “We’re paid not to see.”

He straightened, thinking. “I’m not looking for discretion. I’m looking for answers. Did you see me with a woman?” He enunciated each word of the question as if that would somehow jog the clerk’s memory.

“As far as I know, you were alone. I wasn’t the one who checked you in and there’s been a do not disturb sign on the door. That’s all I know, I swear.”

“So you don’t know who paid for the room?”

Pimple-face shook his head.

“Do you have any idea who I am?”

Another shake of the head. No help there.

“When does the reservation expire?”

“It’s through tomorrow morning.”

“Fine. I’m checking out.” He left the kid sputtering and went back out in the rain.

The keys in his pocket did, in fact, belong to the piece of shit Charger. With a silent prayer, he slid the key into the ignition. The engine caught and roared to life, surprising and pleasing him. While the car rumbled and the rain beat a staccato tattoo on the roof and hood, he flipped open the glove box and rifled through the contents: an ancient owner’s manual, a tire gauge, a switchblade, and a faded printout that was the registration. He leaned over toward the glove box light to get a better look at the name on the form.

“Eric Tobin.” He tried the name out, rolling it off his tongue with a slight southern drawl. It felt neither comfortable nor awkward. It was just a name. If it was his, he didn’t feel it.

He checked the address. Las Vegas. It was as good a place as any to start looking for answers. Resolved, he put the car into gear and headed south toward Sin City.

\* \* \*

Even as he bought a map at a gas station on the edge of town, he knew this was not how normal people would react to this situation. Not that normal people very often found themselves in this situation. He knew the logical step would be to go to the cops or the hospital. Get those burns looked at. Get the wheels in motion to find out who he was and what had happened.

But his gut told him to wait. To check out the address on the car registration. Get some more clues to whether he really was Eric Tobin or if he just, for some reason, had Eric Tobin’s car.

Nothing looked familiar as he drove through the deserted streets. He was far from The Strip, driving into an area that got progressively rougher with each passing block. Graffiti covered the concrete walls of buildings with broken out windows behind bars.

Padlocks hung from many doors. This part of town was industrial and failing. Not the sort of place you listed as a residential address.

A few more turns and he found the street listed on the registration. He slowed the car, eyes shifting over building faces, searching for street numbers. On the second pass, he found one and began counting the buildings until he came to the right point in the sequence for the address on the registration. Set between an apparently abandoned warehouse and a plant of some kind, all that remained was a vacant lot with a few piles of rubble. Weeds grew haphazardly from cracks in what was left of the foundation.

He sat, engine idling, for a good fifteen minutes, staring at the empty space and struggling to remember . . . anything. But the effort was fruitless and made his head ache. Eventually he put the car back into gear and wove his way back through the dark streets.

Because he didn't know what else to do, when he saw a sign for a hospital, he followed. Several blocks later, he swung into the drive of St. Rose Hospital, following the signs for Emergency.

The first set of automatic doors slid open with a quiet whoosh. He passed a set of payphones and some restrooms. Then came the second set of doors. As soon as they slid shut behind him, he felt his chest tighten. The scent of too many bodies combined with the hospital smell made him want to puke. As the walls seemed to press in, he squeezed his eyes shut and fought to level out the sensation he recognized as panic.

*Hospital phobia. Okay, that's something else I didn't know before.*

"Can I help you, sir?"

He opened his eyes and looked at the nurse who spoke from the reception counter. She wore hot pink scrubs and had her sandy hair up in a perky little ponytail. Brown eyes studied him with a mixture of concern and polite inquiry.

He started to say 'No'. To turn around and walk back out. But where would he go? What would he do? And there were the burns on his hands. So instead he blurted out, "I don't know who I am."

Her face didn't shift into lines of shock. Instead she gestured with one hand to a little clipboard. "Sign in please."

He blinked at her. "Did you hear what I said? *I don't know who I am.*"

"Yes, sir, I heard you." She wrote something on the pad herself. "Have a seat. We'll be with you as soon as we can."

Shoving the frustration down, he moved into the waiting area, a twenty by thirty foot room decorated in a fugly combination of white and orange. The center was dominated by a big ass tropical fish tank with rows of linked chairs spiraling out like arms. There were thirty-three people in the room. He sat where he could see the fish and one of the two wall-mount TVs playing muted reruns of Gilligan's Island.

*I know every character on this stupid show, and I can't write my own name on a form. What the fuck?*

He picked up a stack of magazines and checked out the dates. The most recent he found was an issue of *Reader's Digest* from March 2000. Of course who knew how far out of date it was.

Eventually the nurse came back. "Sir, if you'd come with me."

She hadn't come out for anybody else, but since he didn't have a name to call, he guessed that made him a special case. He rose and followed her to an area behind the



reception desk. A sign on the wall read *triage*. Moving past her into one of the two rooms, he sat. She leaned against a counter, pen poised over a chart.

“Have you been drinking?” she asked.

“No.”

“Have you used any other drugs?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. I don’t feel high or drunk or impaired. I just don’t know who I am.”

She made some notes. “Okay, what’s the last thing you remember?”

“Waking up six hours ago in a hotel room about two hundred miles north of here.”

“And before that?”

“Nothing.”

The nurse stopped writing and arched one brow. “Nothing?”

Frustration simmered in his blood. “Nothing. Not my name, not where I’m from, not what I do. I remember nothing before six hours ago. It’s like I didn’t exist.” His voice had risen with each word, such that by the end, the other nurse working the reception desk had stuck her head in the room. “Everything okay?” Miss Hot Pink waved her away.

He rubbed his palms on his jeans, hissing when the pain reminded him of his other injuries. He wished his sour stomach would settle.

“What’s going on with your hands here?”

“Burned. I don’t know how. It’s pretty bad.”

“Let’s take a look then.”

He held still as she unwrapped the gauze, bracing himself for her reaction to the mangled flesh. But when the bandages came away, his jaw dropped.

“Pretty serious first degree burns, maybe second degree in places, but nothing you won’t recover from,” pronounced the nurse. “Though you’ll probably scar.”

He stared at his palms. “I don’t understand.” The skin was no longer charred and curling. It was a smooth expanse of angry red blisters. *I’m going crazy*, he thought. *Burns that severe don’t heal in six hours.*

“Burns of any degree are painful, so people often think they’re worse than they are. We’ll get you some Silvadene and fresh bandages while we wait for the doctor.”

The nurse efficiently bandaged his hands back up and sent him out into the waiting room. He thought about walking out again. But how else would he get answers?

Eventually he was called back to an exam room. A doctor came in, his white coat waving like a flag as he walked. Unlike the seemingly unflappable nurse, this guy looked harried and tired, like he was at the end of his shift.

“Amnesia, huh?” said the doctor, looking at the chart.

Not knowing what else to do, he nodded.

The doctor shone a light in his eyes and ordered blood tests and a CT scan. He was formally admitted to the hospital. Sometime after the scan and while still waiting for the results of the blood tests, the cops showed up to interview him. He was thankful he wasn’t still in the damned hospital gown.

Neither officer seemed particularly inclined to believe him. He guessed in Vegas they saw all kinds of weird shit and people who wanted to forget who they really were. That was supposed to be the point of Vegas, wasn’t it? They asked questions. He repeated himself a lot. They got annoyed when he gave them no answers. Eventually they took his

fingerprints—and weren't they fucking lucky that those hadn't been burned away?—and left.

He slept fitfully, off and on, exhaustion tugging him under despite the rock hard exam bed. Hours later, after the tox screen came back negative and the CT scan had verified that there was nothing physically abnormal with his brain, another woman showed up with two cups of lousy coffee in her hands. She was older, with streaks of silver shooting through her dark brown hair. A well-used leather briefcase hung over one shoulder of her black pantsuit, which hung wilted on her slightly plump frame.

"I'm Alice Graham," she said, handing him one Styrofoam cup. "I'm with the Clark County Department of Social Services. Have you eaten?"

The irritated grumble of his stomach answered that.

"C'mon, we'll hit the cafeteria."

Not until they sat at a table in the mostly empty cafeteria with plates of questionable spaghetti did she pull a file out of the briefcase by her chair. She slid the plain manila folder across the table.

"What's this?" he asked.

"According to your fingerprints, you."

He stared down at the folder, suddenly uncertain whether he really wanted to know who he was. What if he was a criminal with a record longer than his arm? What if he was in massive debt? What if he was some deadbeat dad who'd run out on paying child support and alimony?

When he looked up at Alice again, she was gazing at him with sympathy. It occurred to him that if he was in real trouble, they'd have sent the cops back instead of a social worker. So he opened the folder.

The page on top read *MISSING*. The boy pictured looked out of a sober, unsmiling face. A shaggy mop of brown hair fell over blue eyes. Beneath the picture he read *Cade Shepherd, Age: 8, Disappeared: August 9, 1985*. He waited for the zing of recognition, the trickle of a memory. Anything that would connect him to this boy. But he felt nothing.

He looked back up at Alice.

"You've been missing for fifteen years, Cade."

The name didn't feel any more familiar as it tripped off of her tongue.

When he didn't make any move to page further through the folder, Alice continued. "You're from Tennessee originally. Memphis."

That explained the accent.

"You disappeared from a hospital there right after your mother passed away."

His mother had died in a hospital. He should feel something at that, but he didn't. That would explain why he hated hospitals.

Cade roused himself to speak. "How did she die?"

Alice paused as if gauging whether to tell him. "She was admitted with the kind of severe trauma consistent with being beaten."

"By my father?"

"Are you remembering?"

"Guessing."

"Records indicate he was probably abusive. There was a child services record on you. It's all in the file."

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