

PHOENIX SHIFTERS



Harlow

The light streaks across the bedroom as I stand, looking at the mirror. I've got to say I look good. Well, good for a first day at work. Good for someone who spent the night screaming at the covers. I am cursed by one dream. It's been the same dream for as long as I remember. I am sitting in the middle of an ash field. There is nothing as far as I can see except black earth and red skies. The air doesn't make me choke; despite being clouded with smoke. For some reason, I am content to sit and do nothing, which confuses me. I want to run until I reach the end of the charred earth, but somehow, I know there is no end. Somehow, I am the only soul left alive.

Just like I know it is all my fault.

But I digress. My priority is getting to my posting, not trying to figure out the dream I've had on repeat for ten years or more.

"How are you doing?" Liz talks to me through my phone where it sits on the shelf beside the mirror.

"I look like shit," I tell her dismally.

It's not the uniform. It took me an hour to iron every crease to perfection last night. Army greens aren't everyone's cup of tea, but I'll admit to having a thing for a man in combat uniform, even if it is myself. No, my clothes are perfect. My dark brown hair is the regulation length for a recruit, so I don't have any issue there. I just look... exhausted. My hazel eyes are red and swollen. It's not a good look.

"Just tell your new commander that it was nerves," Liz encourages. She's been so supportive since we met in the bar three years ago. I was new to my training unit and trying to look like I could fit in. She was trying to get laid. We hit it off and have been inseparable ever since.

"Yeah." I lift my phone and pose for a selfie of my reflection. I tense my abs and stand straight, trying to get some extra height into my 5'10 frame. While I'm not the shortest of guys, I'm not the tallest either. My body is in good shape, and I'm physically at the peak of my fitness, but without the bulk

of muscles like all my instructors. I'm more of an alley cat than a bull, those words are probably the best compliment General Pletcher ever gave me. The photo is decent enough, so I send it to her.

"Hello, hunk," Liz says as she opens the sent image. "You're looking pretty hot in that uniform, Harlow."

"Worth the time it took to iron it?" I groan internally as I look at the background of my photo. My grey, single room. A tiny and soulless space where I have lived for three years during training as an officer in the British Army Regiment of Shifters, known as the ShiftARS for short. There is nothing left of mine in it. Just a bag of clothes on my bed, and the rest of my life in a few cardboard boxes.

"Well, I'd still love you with creases." Liz yawns.

"How are you tired? It's..." I glance down at the watch on my wrist. "Shit. I'm going to be late!"

"Crap. How is it nine am already?" Liz groans. "Well then, Lieutenant Harlow, go kick some arse."

"That's Second Lieutenant Harlow," I correct her with an excited grin. I just can't say it without that bloody grin. I'm finally done with training. Today I actually make my mark on the world. "I'm sorry, Liz, I gotta go. I'll call you when I get to my new base, tell you where I am." I hang up on her and sigh.

My boots are waiting by the door, and I quickly shove my feet in. There are no cutting corners on my appearance. I have to look perfect.

Liz and I always knew this day would come. My training has ended, and I start my new posting today. I'll get the address of the base when I get into work, but I've got the feeling that it's quite far. Too far to see her daily, and I'm not a believer in long-distance relationships. She's doing well with her job, making her way up the rungs in the company she works for. She doesn't want to be following me around the country, and I don't want to be tied down. She's a few years older than me, too, probably at the age where she wants to find a good man and settle down. I'm not sure I'm ready for that. We celebrated both my 23rd birthday and her latest promotion last week. Now I've had my promotion and graduation, all in the same month.

Crap, I glance at the clock. I'll have to leave my things and come back for them later, otherwise the only mark I'll be getting at this rate is a late one. I grab my keys, chucking my phone and wallet in my back pockets. Then I straighten my jacket and grab my cap.

It's now nine thirty. Crap, I've only just left enough time to get there by ten. I'm going to have to walk pretty smartish to make it on time, but luckily, it's only around the block. I lock up and head off down the road towards the base, giving another glance at my watch. I've got thirty minutes. I'll make it... unless something goes wrong.

Which it shouldn't, not for a highly trained officer in a unit of paranormal shifters. Except I'm not a proper shifter. I have an animal form, but I can't control my shift. What use is a shifter who can't shift at will?

Just as I walk past a side alley, a hand swings out into my face. It's not a punch, thank goodness. I'm too attractive to start my posting with bruises. The hand covers my mouth and pulls me back. I'm no longer headed to my posting but moving back into the frame of a very large man.

Shit.

Instant panic grips me as half my face is covered. Breathing isn't so easy now. Add struggling to that, and I'm already short of breath. I grab the guy's hand, trying to push back the cold sweat and panic. The guy behind me is *huge*. Six foot four, maybe taller. My head is pulled back against his shoulder, forcing me onto tip toes. Damn, I need to think, and quickly.

Twisting left and right gets me nowhere. As hard as I pull on his arm, I can't twist out of this grip. I slam my elbow back into his chest, but it does nothing. *Crap*. Kicking his shins seems to annoy him, but I'm not aiming for annoying here.

He pulls up on my jaw. The pain in my neck builds. He's going to pull my head off. Already I'm on my tip toes, and grabbing his arm helps with the pressure on my neck, but there is little more I can do.

"Yield?" the guy asks.

Fuck no! I kick him in the shins to be clear. He proves to be clearer as the hand over my mouth lifts me until my feet can't find the ground at all and the only thing I see is sky.

"Now?" he questions.

Fuck yes. I just need to tell him before my head comes off. I lift my hands from his arm to signal that I surrender, but it's too painful to keep them away for long. Luckily, he gets the message, and the pressure eases. My feet find the ground again, but there's still enough force to hurt.

"Hands."

I don't want to, but the pain is so bad I'm not sure I have much choice. I hold them out together, and cold metal surrounds my left wrist. *Crap, no!* I can't just let him do this.

I pull my right hand back, wriggling against him. The pull on my jaw increases. I won't let it get to the point where my feet are off the ground again, but there must be something I can do. I mean, this guy is using one hand!

This can't be happening, not again. Nothing I'm trying works. *Shit.* I have to focus on getting free, but breathing is difficult. My eyes are getting heavy. Reluctantly, I surrender my right hand. The crunch of metal around my wrist seals my fate. The pressure on my face reduces. The hand is just there to keep me quiet now.

He starts moving, pushing me forward with him. His body does most of the work, directing me along, but at least it's a clue where to put my feet. There's enough upward tilt on my head to stop me from seeing my own feet, but I can see a black van parked at the side of the street. The back doors

are open, and I'm guessing it's where I'm headed. This is my last chance to do something, but I can't think of a single thing.

Harlow

We reach the van doors, but I'm *not* going in there. I can't. *Shit! Think!*

All I can do is lift my legs. Spread them wide, catch the doors with my feet. He feels unbalanced behind me, and when my foot hits the door, I have something to push against. Mr Muscle simply turns and lifts me in backwards.

Fuck, it's over. Any opportunity I had to escape is gone. There's no point fighting anymore, and relaxing my body highlights just how exhausted I am. My arms ache, but it's not only that. Every muscle in my body feels worn, like a huge adrenaline rush that's fading now.

It's normal after a rock-climbing session. I guess it's normal in this situation too, but after rock climbing, I feel more pumped. Now I just want to sleep. I'm knackered just from being grabbed and dragged three metres to a van. OK, he was making it hard to breathe, but thankfully he's stopped that now. As I relax, so does he, but his hand is still pressing against my mouth, a blatant reminder that I can't talk. The back doors shut from the outside, and then the driver's door slams. My eyes close, blinking away a tear.

The van starts moving with a jolt. I guess I tensed, because his arm is suddenly around my chest, and he holds me close. Then he pulls me backwards and sits down. At least resting is easier when I'm sitting, even with a human seatbelt holding me still. I've been kidnapped. Again. *Fuck.*

"Relax, Penelope. We're not going to hurt you."

Mr Muscle's words hold little water after he nearly took my head off. It's not being hurt that worries me, it's being taken from my life and manipulated this way that gets me angry. Or it will when I recover.

I don't know why my dad wants me to be part of the family business so badly but inheriting an illegal import/export cartel isn't on my list of career choices. Joining the ShiftARS wasn't on the list, either, until they rescued me the last time Dad's goons grabbed me.

I suppose there is the chance this guy isn't working for my dad. He could be a maniac murderer. That doesn't bear thinking about. But it consumes my thoughts as I sit on what is beginning to feel like a long drive. My arse is getting numb on the cold metal floor. There is literally nothing to distract me from the feeling in this stripped out van. I find my eyes wandering across the bodywork, searching for patterns in the diverts and bumps. The man behind me shifts periodically and I wonder if he's suffering the same fate. It doesn't help me; this man is a professional. This van was probably stripped and sand blasted before this, and will be again after. There will be no trace of the two of us after this. I'm going to disappear, never to be seen again. Liz is probably the only one who will even notice. The perfect summary to my crappy life.

"Relax." Muscles whispers, drawing my attention to the ragged breaths I'm taking. It's not really a calm situation though, I'm doing the best I can.

Why does Dad keep doing this? It must be the fact he wants me to follow in his footsteps; he's always looked after me each time he's held me prisoner before. It's the only possibility other than the homicidal maniac option, but I'm trying to steer clear of that idea for as long as possible.

My abductor appears to be a very patient man, just sitting behind me with his arms around my chest and mouth. He hasn't loosened his grip since we sat down, so his arms must be getting tired. I have been relaxing and resting as much as possible so that when we get wherever we're going, I'll have more energy than him.

It's odd, sitting pressed up against another man like this. I feel the rise and fall of his chest, and the rhythmic movement soothes me. My eyes begin to grow heavy. I should be fighting this man, keeping my senses sharp, not snuggling back against him like lovers. I'm not even gay. No really, I'm not.

The van stops, and the engine turns off. I take a deep breath and wait.

The van's door opens, a man I haven't seen climbing in. I guess he's the driver. Any advantage gained by resting against this guy is gone now that I'm outnumbered. He doesn't say a word, just looks at me with steel-blue eyes and makes his way over. He doesn't say a word, just grabs me by the arms and lifts. At least my pathetic cry can now be heard since the first guy lets go of my face.

"Easy now, Penelope, we're not going to hurt you."

Funny, but I find that as reassuring as Muscle's almost identical words. At least I can see this guy's face properly. I've only had strained glances over my shoulder at the other guy. I need to remember everything about him for my police report later.

He's broad and muscular, though not quite as tall as Muscles. A light stubble covers the lower half of his face, the same dirty blonde as his short hair. The bits I can see anyway. Most is covered by a black beanie hat.

Long sleeves cling to his muscles, hiding any tattoos but not his solid form. The body under his black clothing doesn't matter after seeing his whole head. At least that face is something I wouldn't mind remembering.

Jerking my hands away is automatic as Steel-eyes makes a grab for me. It's a short battle, I have nowhere to go. He grabs the metal between my cuffs and lifts my arms. Kicking my legs is my only option as Muscles struggles to his feet behind me, tugging me with him.

Once we're up, Muscles releases me. Even with my arms above my head, it's easier to breathe now. Muscles pats my clothes, like a cop searching a suspect, except I'm not making it that easy for him. Well, I'm wriggling in Steel-eyes' grip. Probably more annoying than anything else. I need to be more effective here, but I just can't think. My cock should not be stirring under another man's touch, not like this. Please not like this. My body is tired, but I can breathe properly now, although I'm still feeling the woozy effect from not enough oxygen. He claims my phone and wallet. I've no idea where they've gone. Then the guy bends down.

“What are you doing?” Steel-eyes asks his companion. I feel his body twist as he looks down briefly.

“He kicks like a demon.”

OK, I think I’ve got an idea, but it means putting all my weight through my arms.

Deep breath, count to three, and lift my legs. God, I can feel the pull on my wrists, but hopefully not for long. My feet jam forward into Steel-eyes’ shins, then swing up into his nuts. Ha, take that! His arms drop as he doubles over in pain, and I take my chance to pull back against him. Hopefully I can pull free. He has other ideas, and his head swings forward into my face.

My world crumples, pain explodes from my nose where his head hits me, my eyes slowly close against my will.

“Shit, Troy, what did you do?”

My hearing works, but my legs don’t do anything. I need to open my eyes, but if they think I’m out cold, maybe I could... who am I kidding? What the fuck can I do against two huge guys like that? I feel my body fold as they lay me down then their hands leave my arms. They’ve let go of me, and hopefully, they’ve still got the van door open.

“Damn it, he fucking hurt me,” Steel-eyes’ voice huffs.

“I was going to take his boots off. I’m going to have bruises down my shins.” The other guy sounds sympathetic.

“Look at his fucking face. He’s going to have bruises too. Riley, how the fuck are we going to explain that?” Steel-eyes has a panic in his voice. Whatever is going on, I wasn’t supposed to get hurt. But I know his name is Troy, and the first guy who grabbed me is Riley. Not that it helps much.

Half opening one eye, the two men aren’t in view, but I can hear them behind me. More importantly, I can see the van door is open. I twist my feet. My boots are still there, and the laces feel tight. I’ll only get one chance at this, and the last thing I want to do is trip on untied laces.

And go! I urge my body to move, and somehow, I’m up and stumbling to the door. I trip slightly, and my heart catches in my mouth, but it doesn’t stop me. I just stumble out the door then fall down the steps. It isn’t elegant, but I’m free and running. I don’t know where I’m heading, and I don’t care—just away.

There are buildings ahead; it’s predictable, but it’s somewhere to hide. I make the cover of the buildings, but I really need somewhere better to hide. There are small alleyways between the buildings, but I’m not taking the first few. That would be obvious. I’m not sure how much longer my legs can keep me going for now, so I turn down an alley.

There’s a wall at the end, with a few giant wheelie bins to hide behind, but that’s it. I know when I stop, I’ll be done. I can feel my chest aching and tight; my legs are burning. They only keep moving because they have momentum now. I run at the wall, praying to a god I don’t believe in to get me

over. I'm going to try bouldering up a brick wall with my hands cuffed together and my legs like jelly. Or die trying. Either option works for me.

I take a huge jump at the wall, and I'm high enough to kick off on the bin. Somehow, I do it. Well, my fingers grip the top and my body slams into the wall. My nose was already sore, now it feels like it's going to fall off. I could easily let go and fall. I bet I'd be unconscious before I hit the ground, but I have to dig deep. I just need to get over the wall. My fingers are about ten feet up, and my feet are hanging higher than my head if I was standing.

Clinging by my fingers, my only hope is if my feet can find something to grip. Not a big problem in soft rock-climbing shoes, but in solid army boots I can't feel a thing.

My left foot finds a hint of something. I scrape around to find it again, but my shoulders are burning, and the pain is getting too much. Funny how my shoulders will give out before my fingers, but I can't take this pain much longer. There! My foot finally connects, and the grip holds, but there's no time to enjoy the wave of relief that washes over me like a cold sweat. I just kick up and hook my arms over.

Now, I'm hanging by my elbows. No better for my shoulders, which are screaming at me to let go. I just need to swing my leg up and hook my knee so I can climb down. Come on, just a little higher... Damn, no success.

Ok, think!

If I can clear my head a little...

I hunker against the wall, trying to catch a breath before I have another go. My eyes close without my permission. No, no, they can't do that. They fight against my attempts to open them.

Just one more try. If I'm going to pass out up here, I need to fall on the other side. My leg swings up with renewed force, like I've just done a deal with it; do this one thing and you can take the rest of the day off.

It connects, and my abdominal muscles tense, expecting the same deal. My knee finds the top. It's easy from here, just a few more deals to make with my other leg, my hips, and my shoulders. My hips agree, but my shoulders go on strike. They are done. One last push with my other leg, but I'm not sure it's enough. It's *I'm* falling, I think. It's hard to tell. My entire body has signed up for this deal, and it's finished for the day.

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