

Tales of Aradia the Last Witch Volume One

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I, L.A. Jones, dedicate this story to my two best friends in the whole world, Nuby Caceres Sanchez and Kimberly Anne Mattia, who have always accepted me for who I am in spite of everything. Although I will never be able to thank them enough for being the greatest friends I have ever had, I hope this story will be a start.

LA, thank you for allowing me to be part of this project. Working on this novel has been a joy and I look forward to editing future Volumes in the Aradia series. My wife Amy, you have been, as always, incredibly supportive as I spent so much time and energy working on this book. My part in Tales of Aradia I dedicate to these two great women.

++Harrison

Prologue

"We are innocent!"

The cry echoed in Rome's ears as he held his face stony still. He stood motionless at the head of the room and watched as his men executed their gruesome orders. Victims screamed for mercy before the noose silenced them forever. For the luckier ones, the drop broke their necks, killing them instantly. The less fortunate hung by their throats and flailed their feet, finding only the air for which their lungs desperately screamed. The rest watched in horror as their loved ones were murdered, all the while knowing they were next. The women's blouses were soaking wet from sweat and tears as their sobs competed with those of the children they tried in vain to protect. Many were dragged, weak as dolls and with a broken look in their eyes, to their places of death.

One, however, managed to break her captor's vise-like hold and raced toward the only door. Rome noticed her pitiful attempt at escape, of course, and leisurely headed her off. He grinned as he slammed the double doors behind him, completely blocking her only, dim hope of escape. Ever so slowly he turned and strolled toward her, still grinning and with fangs extended. The woman stopped, frozen by the menace he exuded. In a room full of evil, she could feel he was the worst of it all.

As frightened as she was, she mustered the courage to demand, "Why are you doing this to us? We have committed no crime!"

Rome scoffed loudly. "Oh but you have. The gravest of them all: treason." He circled the helpless woman as he spoke. "For more than a thousand years we have remained hidden and kept the humans unaware of our existence, but you and your kind have betrayed all of the hidden race. The humans now know about you. How do you suppose that happened, hmm?"

"I don't know!" she cried. "Whoever told them of us, if anyone told them of us, it was no witch!"

Rome shrugged. "Regardless, there is only one appropriate response, only one way to make sure the leak ends here. You and your people know the law. By mutual decree, we of the hidden race must remain hidden at any cost. To protect the greater number of us, you must die."

"This is not the spirit of the law," she muttered. "This is not right."

"But it is the will of the Sovereign. You and all of your people are condemned."

Rome snickered as he reached out, pulled the woman's neck to his face, and sank his teeth into her. She moaned in agony, and he in pleasure, as her lifeblood gushed from the twin wounds down his throat.

"Call it good measure," he said with a snort, dropping her limp body with a thud. He had drunk until he'd had his fill. Under normal circumstances, he would have shared the vessel's remainder with his closest men. Today, though, there was blood in such glorious, lavish, wasteful excess, that it could be allowed to flow freely.

Every one of his heightened senses was excited by the scene. He savored the taste she left in his mouth. He held on to the memory of her hopelessly writhing against him while he fed. He admired the sight of so many dangling bodies, with the shrieks and cries forming a sweet melody. All the while he relished the mingling odors of death and fear.

One of his soldiers then suddenly tapped on his shoulder.

Irritated at the interruption, Rome growled, "What?"

Voice quavering slightly, the soldier said, "I am sorry sir, but checking the coven's records against those we gathered, I have discovered two appear to be missing."

This detail definitely aroused Rome's interest.

"Who?" he snapped.

The soldier made a conscious effort not to gulp before managing to respond, "The Seer of the coven and a baby."

"And you have thoroughly searched the area?"

"Yes, sir."

One of Rome's lieutenants, a slight man by the name of Abdiel, appeared at his right and said to the soldier, "You have allowed a mere woman, encumbered by a baby at that, to best you? For that you will be punished."

"Yes," Rome agreed. "And your recommendation regarding the two missing witches, Abdiel?"

He shrugged. "If we've already searched and failed to find them, they must be long gone. I say let them go. They can't accomplish much with their whole coven dead."

Rome whipped around and slapped his lieutenant hard across the face. The force of the blow knocked Abdiel to the floor, his lip split and murder in his eyes.

"For that you will suffer for their escape as well. Didn't you hear what I told her?" Rome pointed to the dead woman at his feet. "It's good measure."

Several other soldiers overheard the conversation. One, brave and hoping to curry his commander's favor, stepped forward and offered to find and dispose of the missing witches.

Rome shook his head though. "No. I would rather deal with this myself."

It was plodding work, but finally he found them hiding out in a lonely cottage.

"Fools," he cursed them. Had his pursuit gone any longer, he'd have had to take cover before daybreak.

Upon reaching the little dwelling, Rome was greeted with a brilliant flash of white light. It emanated from the cottage's windows, beneath and around its door, and through every crevice of its shoddy construction. It enveloped the entire structure and was so blinding that Rome nearly fell completely off his feet.

"Witches," he spat.

One swift kick was all it took for Rome to break the door off its hinges. Storming the cottage, he found a shriveled old husk of a woman leaning limply against a chair with a black cauldron in the center of the space. Small candles, flickering dimly, had been

gathered around the cauldron. A thick black book of spells laid nearby, its thin, ancient pages fluttering in the breeze from the entryway.

"The Seer of Salem coven, I presume?" Rome asked the woman while chuckling dryly.

The Seer feebly moved her lips, but was too weak to reply.

Rome ignored her and cast his eyes around the cottage.

"Where's the brat?" he demanded.

"She is safe," the Seer croaked, as raspy as a dry summer wind. "She is safe where you and yours cannot touch her. She will be safe until the moment when she realizes her destiny."

"Her destiny," Rome repeated skeptically. "What is her destiny?"

"Her destiny is to destroy you and your Sovereign!" the seer sneered at him, her voice weak and crackling but dripping with venom.

Rome quickly crossed the short distance to her and yanked the woman from her chair by the neck. Squeezing, he hissed in her face, "What? What are you talking about?"

"It is done," the woman cackled, even more weak than before. "It is done. She has been sent to where she can be happy until the time comes to avenge her people! She will destroy you! You and your Sovereign!"

"I have heard such threats before, witch," Rome whispered in her face. "Meaningless riddles from meaningless people."

He then extended his fangs and buried his face in her neck. His only regret was that she passed out from exhaustion before he'd had his fill. Rome enjoyed a meal so much more when it struggled.

"Is it done?" a deep voice like that of death embodied asked Rome as he entered the dimly lit throne room.

Rome dutifully dropped to his knees as he made his report. "Yes, Sovereign, it is as you commanded. The witches are dead. Every one, to the last man, woman, and child."

"You lie to your Sovereign," the evil voice resonated softly from the shadows.

"My lord?" Rome replied as his master stepped forward into the flickering torchlight.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he walked toward Rome. His pace seemed casual, and yet every step was measured. Each footstep issued an ominous click against the stone. Rome was grateful that his heart no longer beat, for it would have been pounding through his chest.

Finally the Sovereign stood over Rome, a black hooded cloak hiding his face but for his mouth which sneered at him grimly.

"My Sovereign, I swear to you they are all dead," Rome pleaded, "from the witches' leader to their Seer. They all rot even now in their precious town hall, hidden away in their secret coven."

"What of the Seer's child?" the Sovereign asked.

Rome trembled before replying, "A bluff, my lord."

The Sovereign growled. "Was there not evidence of a missing child?"

"There was, lord, but I do not believe it to be reliable. The Seer was too weak even to stand when I found her. She could not have carried a child in her state, not across the course over which I tracked her. I found no trace of a child at the cottage where I killed the Seer, and no sign that one might have been hidden at some point along the way. My men and I searched the coven and surrounding settlements thoroughly. If ever there was a child, and I do not believe there was, it has since vanished from our realm."

"And yet you are not certain. You fail me."

"I serve you faithfully, my Sovereign," Rome protested. "You said we were to execute the witches on charges of treason. If it might please you that I be so bold, what difference can one child, who had no part in the treason, make?"

"The difference is in following my orders and disobeying them. Your predecessor made the same mistake, so many years ago. You have held such promise since. Pity."

"I serve you faithfully still," Rome swore, barely maintaining his composure. "Allow me the opportunity to atone."

"The seer's child still lives!" the Sovereign cried out as he stamped his foot in frustration.

Rome shook his head before asking, "I wish to understand so as to better serve, Sovereign. Why does the death of one little girl mean so much to you?"

"I know you don't understand," said the Sovereign as he turned away from Rome. "I neither ask nor expect you to."

Rome held himself motionless on his knees, head bent in subservience, waiting for his deathblow, but after several silent, tense minutes, he heard the Sovereign chuckle softly.

"Am I forgiven, Sovereign?" Rome asked, a sliver of hope that he might be spared creeping into his mind.

"Of course you are not," the Sovereign snapped, whipping around to face him, "but there is nothing to be done about it. At least not now. Consider your task concluded. Until I instruct you further, you will resume your standing orders. You are dismissed."

Rome could not help but hurry from the Sovereign's chamber. The obvious fear he inspired in his underling brought a thin smile to the authoritative vampire's face.

"That was generous of you," a new voice spoke, "by your standards."

The Sovereign grunted. "I told Rome there was nothing to be done at the moment. Wasn't I correct, Morgan?"

A woman suddenly appeared in a puff of dark smoke. Like the Sovereign, she was enshrouded in a deep black cloak, yet hers was soft like velvet and swirled about her as she moved. In her left hand she clutched a metallic red staff topped by a crystal ball.

She wrapped one gnarled green hand on the crystal and spoke, "Sovereign, the child is lost for now in the fabric of time and space." Her voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere in the room, as if it were not tethered to her actual form. "The presence

was so weak, as if influenced by fatigue or fear, barely detectable to me, then amplified, strong, stronger than most I have sensed. As quickly as that, it was weak again, then gone, gone..."

"Do you really believe it likely that the lone child of a slaughtered race will become my downfall?" the Sovereign asked Morgan while folding his arms.

The woman replied calmly and without hesitation, "I have read the signs, used the runes, conversed with the gods and goddesses of time and space—"

"Just answer the damned question!" he snapped.

Morgan shrugged and responded simply, "It is what I have seen."

Morgan was prepared for an explosion of the Sovereign's temper. Instead he merely sighed and placed his hand against his face hidden in the hood of his cloak.

He stood like that for a long time before finally asking, "Tell me, Morgan, do your visions always come to pass?"

"The future is a very unpredictable thing. One different step can make a new path."

"Then you don't know," the Sovereign replied.

"All I know is what I see. I see only probabilities," she agreed. "The future is what we make of it."

The Sovereign sighed and said, "You have made many accurate predictions in your service to me. Show me how we may keep this from being one of them."

Chapter One

“You'd think they'd tell us before we drove for twelve hours,” Ross Preston muttered, obviously bitter.

“Did you say something, honey?” Liza, his wife, asked distractedly. She had been gloomily staring out the car window and to the horizon for the better part of an hour.

Liza was normally quite cheery, and tended to elicit the same cheerfulness from others. A high school art teacher, she was a favorite among her students. Petite, with mousy blond hair, and a voice that was barely audible, Liza Preston was the perfect image of a ‘little woman.’

Her small stature and gentle behavior contrasted quite starkly with her husband. He was over six feet tall, brown eyed, and had brown curly hair which simply never looked neat. He was almost obsessively focused on whatever he did and shined as a promising young assistant district attorney, but tended not to handle social situations well. Quite simply, he was a loudmouthed and outspoken hard-ass of a man.

Yet to anyone who really knew them it was clear that Ross and Liza Preston complemented each other perfectly, as if they were the Batman and Robin of married couples. Ross was the father figure who could inspire even the most hardened criminal to go straight. Liza was the comforting mother figure who, just by using her soft

voice and a few choice words, could convince anyone that they could change.

As opposite as Ross and Liza were, what truly united them was a fiery ambition to help anyone who needed it, no matter how far gone a person might be.

They found joy in every life they were able to influence. At that particular moment, however, the only life they wanted to guide was that of their own child, a child whom the specialists at Salem Fertility Center had just told them they could never have.

"It's truly unfair that some doctors, no matter how questionable their choice of practice, are able to make seventeen times the amount a criminal lawyer is paid working for the state. On top of the salary, that criminal lawyer has to deal with a lifetime of stress and sacrifice. And the lawyer's salary is supplied by tax dollars, a tiny drop in an ocean of dues and fees and taxes. That's the kind of revenue that should make the IRS burst out laughing!"

Liza smiled weakly at Ross's comment and said, "I'm disappointed too."

Ross sighed and said, "I don't think disappointed even covers it, Lizzy. We drive over twelve hours from Ohio to Salem, where they supposedly have the best baby-making clinic in the country, only to be told that we don't have a shot in hell of ever actually conceiving our own kid."

"They didn't say that!" Liza protested.

Ross glared at her as long as he dared before returning his eyes to the road. After an awkward and silent moment, Liza did begrudgingly rephrase, "Well... it wasn't quite as explicit as that..."

"Liza, they basically said the odds of us ever conceiving a baby are worse than the Redskins ever winning the Super Bowl. Genetically, it's just not going to happen." He chuckled sarcastically before adding, "We're just not built to be parents."

Liza hung her head, and Ross immediately regretted his harsh words.

"Honey, hey, I'm sorry—" he tried to apologize.

"Don't!" Liza cut him off. "You're right. They had absolutely no right to speak to us like that. And to have the audacity to ask for more money to try experimental protocols on me? Please!"

"I know," said Ross with a disgruntled sigh, glad they'd redirected their frustration away from each other. "Can you believe the nerve of those people?"

Liza scoffed in agreement.

Another awkward silence hung over them until Liza asked, "So what do we do now?"

Ross proposed, "Well, we could always adopt."

Liza stared at him and said hopefully, "You'd be okay with that?"

Ross nodded.

Her mood fell just as quickly as it had risen, though. "You know how hard it is to adopt. Who knows if we'd ever be approved, and even if we were, I imagine it could take years."

“It’s a chance at least. That’s better than what they gave us at the clinic.”

"That's not the point!" Liza shouted.

"Well, what else do you want?" Ross demanded angrily. "What else can I possibly do?"

Liza just shrugged and turned to stare back out her window. Several minutes later she said, "I really don't know."

Ross sighed and just kept driving.

They drove another twenty minutes in complete silence before Liza finally said, "There is one thing I do want."

Ross didn’t know how to feel about anything just then. Exasperated by the whole scenario, he asked, "And what is that?"

"I want..." Liza started, "I want a sign."

"A sign?" Ross asked curiously.

"Yes! A sign!" Liza said excitedly, with the hint of a smile gracing the corners of her lips. "A sign of what we should we do."

Ross glanced at his wife long enough to send her a look as if she’d just asked him to pick up a car or fly off into space. “A sign. Really?”

She nodded excitedly. Despite himself, her enthusiasm was infectious. He broke into a broad grin himself as he prodded her, “Would you prefer a sign from God or aliens? Or are you not too picky?”

The tension finally broken, she laughed and replied, “Oh whichever.”

“From the future, perhaps?”

“That sounds positively lovely, Ross.”

Ross chuckled, shrugged, and said, "You never really know Liza, we might just get a sign. The real questions are where, when, and how on Earth will we be able to tell. I think the real trick to... to signs," he paused to chuckle again before continuing, "is knowing how to interpret them."

"Well, I think you summed it up," said Liza, eyes tired but cheerful. "We'll never really know, at least until we get it."

It was centered a distant way off, yet the flash of white light was so brilliant that both Ross and Liza instinctively jerked their eyes away. Ross slowed the car and pulled to the shoulder, knowing there wasn't anybody behind him and not wanting to cause an accident, but not every driver on the road was as mindful. When his vision cleared, he was greeted by an F250 barreling down on him and his wife.

Ross yanked the wheel to the right and stepped on the accelerator. Liza screamed as her husband drove them off the paved road and right into the forest. Either by his keen eye or miraculous good fortune, they found a narrow gap between trees. With the threat of a head-on collision behind them, he slammed the brakes.

The car skidded on rough dirt smeared with wet autumn leaves, but ultimately halted safely. After a few silent did-that-really-just-happen moments, Ross let out a whoop of excitement and burst out laughing. Liza merely exhaled a sigh of relief.

"You okay, baby?" Ross, still grinning, asked Liza.

"I wish you wouldn't call me that," she replied.

"I'll take that as a 'yes,'" said Ross with a big grin.

Liza scowled and changed the subject. "What in the world was that?"

"I have no idea," Ross said.

"You think we should check it out?" Liza asked rhetorically, unbuckling her seatbelt.

"No," Ross replied, which earned him a sharp look of disbelief from his wife. He went on, "I think I should check it out."

She rolled her eyes, but nodded. She'd learned long ago that there wasn't much point arguing with her husband once he'd decided to play the role of macho alpha male.

Ross reached into the glove compartment and pulled out his mace.

After flicking off the safety latch, he got out of the car, and paused dramatically with the door held open.

"Stay here," he instructed his wife.

Liza restrained herself from chuckling at his bravado.

Before going into law as a profession, Ross had served a tour of duty in the Air Force. He had seen spotlights, flares, and all kinds of explosions, but he had never witnessed a light which was so brilliant and so piercing from so far away as the one he'd just seen.

After ticking off all the likely causes he could brainstorm, he started thinking of unlikely ones.

“Maybe it was aliens,” he muttered under his breath, only to sarcastically add, “Ross, if you really want aliens to be the perpetrators of crimes transfer to Area 51.”

He chuckled to himself and started to relax.

His guard came back up fast, though, when he noticed a soft, otherworldly whimpering sound from somewhere nearby. After a bit of sleuthing he realized it was coming from inside what looked like a shallow cave. The eerie sound was echoing off the stone walls, which confused his sense of direction. With a hard look in his eye and his can of mace raised, he edged into the cavern.

The setting sun cast almost no light through the east-facing cave mouth, and it took Ross’s eyes a few moments to adjust. What he saw perplexed him. He saw nothing.

“Well that’s... weird,” he mumbled.

Perhaps responding to his voice, the whimper returned, and now inside the cave, Ross was able to make it out much more clearly. It sounded like a child.

Casting his gaze downward, he saw a little girl curled up, wrapped in brown linen which blended almost perfectly with the dirty stone floor. From her size, she couldn’t have been over six months old.

At first Ross simply stared in shock. He’d been prepared for bandits or some sort of vicious mutant creature. A child threw him off.

He checked her immediately, but found no signs of abuse or neglect, aside from having been abandoned alone in a cave. Near as

he could tell, she was perfectly healthy and sound. Beyond that initial assessment, though, he was at a total loss for how to handle the girl. He completed a sweep of the cave, finding nothing out of the ordinary. It did not take long. Once again, he looked down at the girl in complete disbelief.

“Now what on earth are you doing here?” Ross asked the baby as he again crouched down beside her. As a lawyer for the District Attorney’s office, he had come across too many unfortunate case of abandonment. A child comes to someone who does not necessarily want it, but has it anyway. Later the person comes to learn that having a child is not like having a complacent slave or an obedient dog. Then, rather than put it up for adoption, the freaks just leave their child somewhere to die.

That pattern just didn’t fit the facts in this case, though, Ross noted curiously. He’d already seen that the little girl looked surprisingly well nourished and completely free of signs of abuse. “Camping, maybe?” Ross asked himself, or perhaps the baby. Either way, he didn’t get a useful response. “That wouldn’t explain the flash, anyway,” he thought aloud.

“Well, I can’t just leave you out here,” he concluded. After a few contemplative seconds, Ross very carefully and very awkwardly scooped the girl into his arms. He held her for a few seconds, not sure if he was doing it right. He knew he had to support her head, but that was about it.

She stared straight into his eyes, and he wondered what she was thinking. The warm little bundle clung to him with surprising

strength. Then she hiccuped, which, strangely enough, set Ross's mind at ease.

He knew he was doing the right thing by taking her with him. More than that, though, he hoped she might cheer up Liza. "You know, kid, you are too cute."

"Oh Ross, she's too cute!" Liza exclaimed as she reached out to take the little girl from her husband.

Her initial confusion at seeing Ross emerge from the forest carrying what seemed to be a small brown sack had evaporated immediately upon realizing he held a baby girl. Once she'd realized it was a child, she'd rushed out of the car, leaving the door hanging open behind her.

Seeing his wife cradle the baby so comfortably and naturally in her arms, Ross chuckled at his wife's maternal instinct.

"But... how? Why?" Liza sputtered, not taking her gaze off the girl.

"Yeah, that's the really weird part," Ross said. "I found her alone in a cave."

"Excuse me?" Liza replied, tearing her eyes from the girl only long enough to cast him a brief look of disbelief.

"I'm not kidding," Ross said, throwing up his hands to illustrate his seriousness. "She was just lying there all alone. I called out to see if anyone else was around but nobody answered."

"Do you think they might have left for just a little while? To get food or water or..." she trailed off. Considering the baby's odd attire, she finished the question, "or clothes?"

"That thought did occur to me," Ross replied. "I don't think so though. I searched the surrounding area and didn't find anything suggesting anybody had been there recently. There was no tent, no campfire, nothing."

"Ross, still," she said.

"I know, I know. I agree. I left my wallet in there with a business card and a note in it."

"Your wallet?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

Flashing a handful of cash and cards from inside his jacket pocket, he replied, "No, I did not leave my credit cards or ID or Golden Spoon punch card."

Liza closed her mouth and smiled. The girl's eyes were wide open, and the two females gazed at one another.

"What do you suppose happened to her?" Liza asked Ross distractedly.

"You got me," Ross replied as he made funny faces at the baby over his wife's shoulder.

"Hm-mm..." said Liza. "We should take her home with us."

"Pardon?" Ross replied.

"Well, she is all alone and we were just talking about adopting."

"I'm no expert, but I think that might technically be considered kidnapping rather than adoption," Ross replied, not nearly as

surprised at his wife's suggestion as most men would have been.

"Actually, no, I am an expert."

Liza scowled and said, "But we can't just leave her out here."

"Not the only two options, Liza."

"But she's just so...special."

"Well, yeah," said Ross. "She's adorable, but so will be the kid we adopt legally."

"Look," she said, flustered, "there is something about her that tells me she's more than that. She's just too special to give up. We should take her in."

As if in confirmation, the little girl cooed at her.

"Sure, what's the harm in the idea," Ross said as he stretched out his arms over his head and paced in a tight circle. "I'm sure that wouldn't affect my legal career, or your job working with kids."

"Oh c'mon Ross," she replied. "Somebody is bound to adopt her. Why not us?"

He paused to stare at his wife.

"I'm going to check out the car," Ross said. "For damage."

Liza chuckled. She let Ross off the hook without complaint.

He leaned in through Liza's still-open door and popped the hood release. After securing the hood open and fiddling for a minute, he seemed satisfied enough. Then he turned his inspection to the vehicle's undercarriage. After uncomfortably crawling under the car, he released a clearly audible groan.

"Bad, huh?" Liza called from across their little clearing while swaying the young girl side-to-side.

Ross poked his head out from under the car and nodded solemnly. Liza bemusedly wondered how, in hardly more than two minutes, he'd managed to smear himself with so much dirt and oil. "The engine's fine," he replied. "But we snapped our rear axle. At least we have time to make up our mind about the kid. We're not going anywhere for a while."

Liza made baby noises at the little girl who promptly giggled.

"Hmph," he replied. He climbed back out from under the car, checked his Motorola StarTAC, and groaned again. "No bars."

"I keep telling you to switch phone providers," Liza replied, smiling.

"Ha ha," he faux laughed. He fished through his wife's purse for her Nokia 6160. "Ha!" he repeated, this time triumphantly. "You don't have any bars either."

"And you're sure you're happy about that, yeah?" she said, tilting her head and raising an eyebrow.

For a few seconds he didn't say anything. Then he just grunted, "Hmph," again. Liza smirked.

"Okay, I'll take a walk," Ross decided. "The last exit was only a couple miles back. You should be fine here for a while. Maybe I'll even get service back at the road."

"Not likely," she replied, "unless you take my Nokia."

"Oh enough of that, you," he said. He'd declared his plan, but for a while Ross just stared at the car, as if that might help. Giving up on that idea, he turned to look at his two ladies. The younger shifted her eyes from Liza to gaze instead at him.

Ross smiled.

"Well, firecracker," he joked to the baby, "if you are so special, why don't you save me some exercise and fix the car for us?"

"Don't you put that on the baby," Liza said defensively, with a barely concealed smile.

Ross looked down at his loafers. "I think I have sneakers in the trunk."

He opened it and sorted through a pile of junk.

"Ross?" Liza called uncertainly.

"Hey!" he called out. "I've got a whole change of clothes in here! Sneakers, t-shirt, exercise shorts."

"Ross?"

"I know you're always on me to clean my car out, but you have to admit it's coming in handy now."

"Ross!"

"Hmm?" he inquired, poking his head around the trunk.

"Check under the car again."

"Huh?"

"Check under the car again."

"No, I heard you. But why?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I just said that, didn't I?"

They stared wordlessly for a few seconds, neither really sure what was going on.

"So, you're serious?" he asked.

She just glared at him in response.

“Okay, that’s the serious look. You really don’t trust me sometimes.”

“It’s not that!” she protested in a way that he believed her. “Just trust *me*, I have a feeling.”

He shrugged and again crawled under the car.

“Well how about that,” he called embarrassedly.

“It’s not broken, is it,” she said.

He crawled back, even more dirty and greasy than the first time. “No, it’s not. Everything looks fine.”

"But I thought you said it was broken?" Liza asked confused.

"It was broken..." Ross said slowly. "I thought it was at least. No, it was. I saw it."

Liza shook her head. "I don't understand, Ross."

"That’s both of us, then. I mean, maybe I was wrong, but I could have sworn..." Ross said.

He rubbed his hand over his face, smearing it even further, and said, "Well, either way, it’s not broken now, so I suppose we should get going."

Liza nodded in agreement.

Glancing at his filthy outfit, Ross said, “I think I’m going to change before we go anyway.” Liza smiled and nodded.

As he turned back to the trunk, though, he heard Liza gasp, “Honey!”

"Yup?" he turned.

She pointed at a nasty gash on his shoulder. His shirt was quickly staining with blood. "You're bleeding!"

He reached over his shoulder, then stared down at his grimy and bloody hand. "Hmm. Yeah, I felt my shirt catch on a gear or something."

"Didn't it hurt?"

He blushed enough to be seen through the dirt and grime. "I didn't want to whine."

"Very smart, tough guy," said Liza with a sigh. "I honestly wonder how you got through law school sometimes. Um, here," she said as she walked around, reached into the cluttered trunk, and draped a clean towel over his arms.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you're going to hold the baby while I tend your wound, and there's no way you're touching her as dirty as you are."

She transferred the precious bundle from her arms to his.

"You can do it, baby," she said to him. "Just relax."

He nodded his agreement and shifted his grip so the baby would rest in the crook of his right arm.

"It's pretty deep," she said. "I can't believe you didn't tell me about this. I think you'll need stitches. I'll get the first aid kit, at least we can clean it out and get some Neosporin on it."

"Uh, Liza..." Ross interrupted.

"What?" asked Liza as she swung back around.

It was unmistakable. The hand with which the girl was reaching towards Ross glowed with a dazzling, white light.

The light wasn't as bright or blinding as the flash they'd seen from the road, but it was clearly different only in intensity, not in kind.

Ross and Liza watched in astonishment as she reached over his shoulder and the cut on his back also began to glow white, shrink, and then disappear.

She didn't need to answer his question. He knew the girl had healed him.

While the couple stared down at her, she gazed up at them, beaming like sunshine. By now, her sweet, tiny hand had stopped glowing and was resting its thumb in the girl's mouth.

"It has begun," Morgan gasped as she violently broke out of her meditative trance. Milky, swirling clouds in her staff's crystal sphere slowed and disappeared.

With a flick of her right hand, she summoned a crow into being. She whispered into its ear and sent it on its mission. A few tense seconds later, the Sovereign burst into the room.

"What?" he demanded, less than thrilled at being so unceremoniously summoned. "For what purpose do you request my presence?"

Morgan inhaled deeply, calming herself before speaking. "Torn asunder from time and space, I have sensed the child."

The Sovereign was visibly taken aback. "The last witch? You mean to tell me the last witch lives?"

“The one who escaped the slaughter of her people, last of her kind, does not still live, but lives again.”

If the Sovereign had breath, he'd have taken a deep one himself. "Unbelievable. But it has been over three hundred years, and witches are not immortal. How is it so, demoness? Reincarnation?"

"The substance of existence has been ripped and bridged," she replied. She moaned in pleasure and added, "A mystery I felt three centuries ago and now have solved. How wonderfully satisfying."

“Safe where you and yours cannot touch her,” the Sovereign quoted from the report Rome had given him so long ago. “That we will see. Morgan, I command you to scry for the location and identity of the last witch.”

“You ask what cannot be done.”

The Sovereign growled in response.

"My Sovereign, as a demon born with the sight, I have many capabilities, but I am not a witch. I cannot give more than I already have."

The Sovereign didn't say anything. Instead, he sped to her and gripped her by the throat, lifting her over his head.

Then his hand held nothing but air and wisps of blackness. Seconds later, she reappeared, a bit further away. Ignoring his attack, she added, "My inability to pierce the veil itself speaks to me, though."

“Speak to me, then.”

“Rarely has so little been certain. A whirlwind is coming. Of what sort, though, will be a wonderful surprise to me.”

He dug his nails into the palm of his hand. He found satisfaction in taking control of his pain. Opening his hand, the marks closed quickly, and he licked them clean.

"Do you possess any means of guiding my search for her?" he finally asked.

Morgan nodded.

"How?" the Sovereign snapped.

"Should the one you seek use her powers in extremity, and should I focus and reach, I will feel her."

He reached his hand into his cowl and gripped a fistful of blonde hair. "How extreme would you need it to be?" the Sovereign asked.

"She must find her limits and push far beyond them. The need must be great and the situation dire. She must do that which she believes she cannot. Sufficient would be a direct threat to her life or that of a loved one."

The Sovereign moved toward her again, slowly this time, and Morgan let him.

Inches away from her, the Sovereign stopped, and sighed. "Until that time, I will direct my agents amongst all the clans of the world to closely watch the hidden populations of their territories."

"All around the world," Morgan replied, breathing in the immensity of the directive.

The Sovereign snorted and paced away. "Until you give me more, I have no choice. No choice at all."

Chapter Two

"Rai! Wake up, Rai!" The shrill voice of Aradia's mother pierced her dreams so swiftly and sharply that she jolted herself awake and shot upright.

After she realized where she was and what was happening, Aradia groggily mumbled, "I can't wait to go to college."

"Rai! It's the first day of school! Wake up sweetie!"

"In another state," she added. Only then would her mother, and especially her mother's voice, be unable to disturb her slumber. Nevertheless, for now Aradia was still in bed in her new home in Salem, Massachusetts. No matter what her mother wanted, Aradia was inclined to say "to hell with it all" and stay in bed all day.

Just as Aradia was curling up to go back to sleep, her mother knocked twice and, without waiting, threw open her door. "Come now, Aradia, get up or you're going to miss the bus!"

"No. I am not," Aradia grumbled.

"What makes you say that?" her mother asked with her hands on her hips, an eyebrow raised, and the puppy bathrobe she wore every morning looking as ridiculous as ever.

"Because Dad said he'd drive me," Aradia replied. She'd already pulled the covers over her head, but Liza could sense her daughter was smirking.

After a few moments of contemplation on how she wanted to play her hand, Liza said, "Ah, well then, I guess you'll miss the big breakfast I made for you, the Belgian waffles, cheddar cheese omelet, orange juice, and homemade blueberry muffins. All that will just have to go to your father now. I'm sure he won't mind cleaning his plate, and the whole table, while you get a few minutes more sleep."

Aradia opened her eyes and pulled the covers off her face. "You fight dirty. You know that, don't you?"

"I prefer to think of it as just being a good mother," Liza replied with a lovely smile.

Aradia feigned a scowl. Liza merely turned and slammed the door shut, knowing her daughter would be up and about now.

She was right. Aradia swung out of bed and walked, no longer groggy, over to her dresser. Her nerves had wiped any latent sleepiness out of her.

There was one concern on Aradia's mind at the moment though and that was making a good first impression at her new school.

She had no decision to make on what to wear; she'd chosen and laid out her clothes for the day weeks earlier. She'd actually spent a good deal of time in the interim just staring at the outfit. She wasn't so much eager or nervous, but rather was, if anything, trying to be thorough. Most girls did not have to start their freshman year in a brand new school in a brand new state that was thousands of miles away from their old home in Arizona. She felt that there wasn't

much she could control about her situation. Her clothes, though, she could control. So she did.

After dressing Aradia turned to her chocolate brown vanity mirror and examined the girl staring back. She was a waifish-yet-curvy, pale-skinned and freckled, round-faced teenage girl. Her hair was long, wavy, and shockingly red. Aradia alternated between thinking of it as fire hydrant red and stoplight red. She loved her hair, in no small part because of the way it made her green eyes pop all the more vividly. Green eyes that her father swore that could see right through a person's soul.

Aradia expected to be pleased with the visage. Her anticipatory smile, however, melted into horror when she saw the disgusting whitehead zit on her chin.

Her gut instinct was to shriek and lock her bedroom door to prevent her parents from dragging her to school with the evil blemish on her face. She could skip the first few days and give her chin time to settle down. *Not much happens the first few days anyway, right?* she justified the plan to herself.

She wasn't so vain generally, but today was different. More than simply looking gross, that zit could ruin her intended first impression at her brand new school. She knew first hand how hard a closed-clique school could be when you were one of the ones on the fringes. She did not look forward to four long years of more of the same. If she didn't make a good impression, people mocking her could be only the start of her troubles.

A ray of hope appeared to her as she remembered her latest concoction, mostly made of herbs from her mother's garden. Usually her mother got slightly annoyed when Aradia helped herself to "raw materials," as Aradia put it. With the move, however, Liza knew she would have to leave the garden behind anyway. "You can take whatever herbs you like, honey bee," she'd said. "Even more than you do already."

Aradia had let herself have fun with the options, and had spent most of that day mashing, grinding, and mixing. Most of her mixtures were utter failures at doing anything useful, but her efforts were not in vain. After enough stirring to give her quite the arm workout, she had created about an ounce of paste which, she believed at least, would clear one's skin.

It struck her as very coincidental and timely that she'd created such a salve so shortly before desperately needing one, but she mentally waved that thought away.

"Everything happens for a reason, and all that jazz," she said to herself.

Unfortunately, Aradia had done a poor job of packing or labeling her personal things for the move in any reasonable manner, and most of her stuff, including the lotion, was still packed up.

That much did not bother her, though. In fact, there was a good reason why she'd never developed much of an organizational sense. She possessed a sure-fire method to find anything that was lost to her.

Closing her eyes, she held out her palm and envisioned clearly in her mind the small bottle. It was one of those mini-toiletry shampoo bottles one finds at hotels, that said “Marriot” on the side of it. Aradia was especially big on the “reuse” part of “reduce, reuse, recycle.”

Her hand began to glow, dimly at first, but building up to a bright white intensity. The light started to emerge from her outstretched hand like steam from a kettle. Aradia opened her eyes, and with one last blinding flash like the death of a star, the bottle and lotion-potion appeared in her hand.

"Rai! Come on downstairs! I can't keep protecting your breakfast from your father forever!" her mother's loud voice disrupted the climactic moment.

"I am coming, Mama! And I appreciate your protecting my breakfast from the Daddy Disposal!" Aradia shouted back.

"I heard that!" This time a strong male voice responded to Aradia instead of a soft female one. "And don't shout in the house!

"Okay, Daddy!" she shouted back.

Aradia smirked and turned to her mirror. She then smeared onto her chin a generous glob of the precious, pale pink paste. Realizing it might take a while for the balm to zap the zit on its own, Aradia decided one more summoning might be in order. Pressing her fingers hard onto the spot where she had just rubbed the paste, she called upon the white light once again, “summoning” the ointment deep into her flesh. Just as quickly both the medicinal and the zit disappeared.

"Okay, okay! I have arrived, no need to call my lawyer!" Aradia announced as she skipped down the stairs into the kitchen where her family was having breakfast. Her mother had not exaggerated the quantity of food, and the quality looked just as impressive.

"Too late," her father managed to murmur through a mouth full of toast.

"Oh yeah, that's right," Aradia said in a voice that dripped with faux innocence. "My Daddy is my lawyer. I hope you still have time for your number one client even with your fancy new job."

Ross was Salem's newest Assistant District Attorney. Technically it was a lateral transfer, not a promotion, as it was the same title he'd held in Arizona. His prospects for advancement were much brighter here in Salem, though.

"Don't remind me," he grumbled, swigging back on his glass of orange juice.

"What's your problem?" Aradia demanded defensively. She tended not to take it well when others failed to find the comedy in her frequent, and sometimes successful, attempts at humor.

"Oh, ignore him, honey," her mother said as she provided Aradia with her own glass of juice. Aradia was already digging into a loaded plate of the pre-described breakfast. "Your father is just nervous about being the newest criminal lawyer on the block."

Aradia's father scowled at his wife who just looked at him and said, "Well, you are!"

"You can't really blame me for being grumpy," he defended himself, spraying a dozen or so pumps of the calorie-free butter

substitute his wife insisted their family use onto a muffin. "It's bad enough that my predecessor was dismissed under a cloud of scandal—"

"And cocaine," Aradia interjected and automatically received a warning look from her father before he continued with his complaint.

"What will you be working on?" Liza asked. It was not common, but Ross did, from time to time, throw himself a pity party. Liza had learned that comforting him did nothing to help. The best way to get him out of it was to get him talking about whatever subject bothered him. He only ever got down on himself about things he was really quite good at. She just had to guide him into talking himself out of it.

"Okay, so they're not holding back on me," he said, mood immediately shifting. "Three weeks ago Salem had a murder. The press went crazy over it."

"Over one murder?" Aradia asked. "Why?"

"Well, all violent crime in Salem is way below the national average," he replied, and started rattling off statistics. "It's a pretty small town, just shy of forty-five thousand probably, by the last Census. Aggravated assault, rape, murder, all are way below average."

"Not so good for your job security," Aradia joked.

Ross wanted to chastise her for taking the subject lightly. Rape and murder were not laughing matters to him. He still chuckled

before he could correct her. Liza shot him a glance, with the clear message being: “Don’t encourage that!”

“Anyway,” Ross went on, “I hate saying this, but a murder here is news. It was the manner it was committed that got the press all in a frenzy though. The body was exsanguinated.”

Aradia responded, “Does that mean what I think it does?”

“Drained of blood,” her dad nodded solemnly. “Eerie, huh?”

“Oh,” she replied. “Not what I thought then.”

“What did you think?”

“From context I figured it meant ‘really messed up,’” she joked morbidly.

“Aradia,” her dad struggled, and failed, to hold back another inappropriate laugh, “that is inappropriate.”

“Ross, should you be telling us all this?” Liza attempted to change the subject.

He waved her concern away. “This is all public record. Don’t worry. Frankly, one of the news stations must have an inside source somewhere close to the investigation, because I probably couldn’t tell you much which wasn’t already all over the television.”

Liza nodded. She didn’t quite consider this an acceptable breakfast topic, but if it got her husband out of his funk, she’d let it slide this time.

“They’re calling him or her the Vampire Murderer.”

“Well that’s silly,” Liza replied in spite of herself. “That sounds like he kills vampires.”

“Or she,” Aradia added through a mouth full of Belgian waffle.

Ross nodded his agreement with his daughter while he replied, "It is silly. The press is silly. That was the name that stuck though."

"So you're on the case?" Aradia replied with real interest. "That's huge! They brought you in to solve it before it becomes a cold case!"

Ross let a glimmer of pride show in his eye. "That's more of a police term, but kind of. It's not as big as it seems. You're right that the DA's office is at a dead end. I think they are hoping a fresh set of eyes might help."

"I bet the DA wants to prosecute somebody, and fast," Aradia surmised.

Ross smiled inwardly at his daughter's astuteness. "Well, I won't speak to that, but I know that if I were the DA, I'd want to set an example."

"Well," Aradia said, "if I were the DA, I'd be happy you were swooping in to save the day."

"I plan on it," Ross said boldly, confidence returned. "This case won't be my only challenge, though. There's a real East-West mentality to overcome. Since we moved from Arizona, I'll have to contend with other ADA's thinking I am some glorified backwater cowboy. If I want any respect, I'll have to show results. Until I do, they'll probably expect my only value will be making them look good."

"So you'll do what you always tell me to do," Aradia replied. "Prove them all wrong."

Chapter Three

As Ross drove his daughter to school, he absentmindedly flipped through the radio stations on his car's steering wheel. He'd been meaning to choose his preset stations, but at the moment he wasn't even listening. Aradia, likewise, hardly noticed. They were sitting together physically, but both their minds were elsewhere.

When Salem's last ADA unceremoniously and unexpectedly retired after getting his hand caught in the cookie jar, also known as the evidence locker on a drug bust, it truly did open a great opportunity for Ross. However, the Prestons had a deeper reason to leave their old home. Her parents denied it when she made any such allegations, but Aradia knew she was that very reason.

When Ross and Liza had found her in that cave, they had lived in Ohio. They stayed there a short while longer before her father's career led the family to Arizona. She was only about three years old when they moved west, so she didn't really have much memory of the Ohio years. Arizona was basically all she'd ever known.

Aradia clenched her fist, digging her nails into her palm. She didn't draw blood, but she let it hurt a bit. No matter what her parents said to reassure her, she knew she had made the atmosphere in Arizona so uncomfortable that leaving was the only viable option. *It's my fault*, she repeated in her mind for what seemed the ten

thousandth time. *It won't be any different here. I can't run away from myself.*

She gazed through the passenger side window at the passing structures and landscape. Later she would admit that Salem really would be a neat place to live, but for now she was twenty-seven hundred miles away where she had grown up.

When her parents enrolled Aradia in kindergarten, the trouble started. At first she was just taken as a bit peculiar, as any kid could be. But people noticed she was stronger than she should have been, stronger than several larger kids combined. Fairly early on, a larger kid, a boy named Jensen who was the iconic bully of the class, decided it was her turn to get pushed around.

For an hour in the afternoon the kindergarteners had “Stations” they could explore on their own. Aradia was at the Art Station drawing with crayons. The fact that her drawings often were of bodies hanging from rafters was an issue all on its own, but fortunately this time she was just drawing a giant butterfly.

“I want to sit here,” Jensen said, as tough as a six year old can be.

“You can sit next to me,” five year old Aradia replied as she kept filling in her butterfly’s wings.

“I want to sit *here*,” Jensen replied, shoving Aradia with all his might.

She hadn’t been expecting it, and had no experience in combat of any sort, so he nudged her enough to wobble her a bit. He did

manage to jerk her arm, which drew an ugly red gash of a line across her butterfly.

“My butterfly!” she screamed and promptly started bawling.

Jensen, seeing her crying, was satisfied with his result, but knew she should have fallen over. She was small for her age and he was large for his. He took it as a challenge.

He tried again and again to knock her over, and never could. Aradia took it to be a game of sorts, laughing when he failed to hurt her, which angered him even more. That was when he began the name-calling. Soon the other children were in on the cruelty as well. By that point, Aradia didn’t laugh at it anymore.

One day, Aradia pushed back.

They were on the playground, because of course such a showdown would occur on a playground. A large group of kids were playing King of the Hill, a dodgeball variant, and Aradia wanted to play too.

“You’re not allowed,” Jensen had said. Recognizing the will of their leader, the other kids backed him up.

“I wanna play King with you,” Aradia repeated.

“You can’t play with us!” Jensen yelled at her. “You have a stupid name.”

It wasn’t even much of an insult, but it was enough. She looked around at the circle of kids which had formed around them. They were all laughing. She felt like she was spinning out of control. That was when she screamed and shoved Jensen as hard as she could.

For a second or two he was actually airborne, before crashing to the earth and rolling several meters.

The other kids stopped laughing.

By now the teachers were finally involved, and they broke up the commotion. It turned out Jensen had broken his arm in the fall, and he had a cast for six weeks afterward. For those six weeks, that cast was a constant reminder to everybody that Aradia was different than they were. Jensen asked every student in class to sign it, other than her.

There wasn't any official fallout with the school. Everybody knew Jensen was a troublemaker, but now Aradia was on the radar too. Perhaps more devastating was the fact that Jensen was the youngest of four siblings, and his parents were well established members of the school community.

Ross and Liza were none-too-popular themselves after the skirmish.

There were other oddities as well, of course. Aradia never got sick; she never even got the sniffles. The most off-putting display of her powers, to most people, was that she often seemed to know if something was going to happen just seconds before it actually did.

As she grew she learned to control and hide these abilities, but as a young girl she couldn't help herself.

Needless to say, she was familiar with being isolated from her peers.

The bullying was hard to deal with, and it didn't end with kindergarten, or with Jensen. Much worse than that, though, was that

in her heart she believed the other kids were right to be afraid of her. She really had hurt Jensen, and as she grew, so did her powers and her strength. As a five year old, she broke a boy's arm. What would happen if she lost control again when she was much more powerful? How could she be anything but an outcast?

Aradia's memories fast forwarded six years. Jensen was long gone, but she doubted there was a shortage of Jensens in the world. She was in middle school, and there had been another boy who had taken to calling her names. This one, named Kasey, went the extra mile of mockery and spread horrible rumors about Aradia.

For more than a year, Aradia had begrudgingly put up with his behavior. Contradicting the rumors proved fruitless, and confronting him was not an option that she allowed herself.

Then he went further than he should have.

Aradia had been walking down the halls, just like she always did and just like always, all the other students were arranged in their groups of exclusivity. Unlike normal, however, they all seemed to notice her. Most days she doubted anybody even remembered she was there.

And she recognized the look in their eyes, the way their mouths curled up in malicious smiles. Something was going on, something very bad.

She knelt down to set her bag in front of her locker. It wasn't until she rose turn the combination that she noticed a flyer taped on her locker.

It looked like the cover of a Playboy magazine.

“Charming,” she muttered to herself.

She was just about to tear it down and wad it up when she realized it wasn't quite what she'd first thought. It was indeed the printout of a Playboy cover, but whoever had made it had photoshopped onto the model the face of Aradia's mother.

She hadn't made anything of it at first, but she'd seen dozens of students either holding or looking at handouts on her way into school.

For the first time since she was five, she did not hold back.

A group of three girls had been passing her way, holding a flyer and giggling. Aradia grabbed the leader of the pack by her sweater with enough force that she dropped the flyer and her notebook.

“Hey!” the girl, whose name Aradia neither knew nor cared about, protested. “Lay off!”

“Not the mild-mannered bitch you're used to, huh?” Aradia said. The girl struggled, but Aradia's fists might as well have been steel vices. “Who gave you the flyer?”

“Lay off, freak!”

“Who gave you the flyer, hmm?” Aradia demanded.

Her anger was such that she was well beyond shouting. No, her voice was amazingly level in tone, but just as firm and unyielding as her grip.

“Kasey gave it to me. He gave out all of them. Let go of me!”

She didn't really need to add the last bit. Aradia was already on the move.

She used a more mild form of her summoning ability to find her foe. It didn't have any visual manifestations, and was weaker than her bright, glowing light, but it could lead her in the right direction if she was close to what she sought and her will was strong enough. Unfortunately for Kasey, her will was strong, and she was very close.

He saw her coming. He was on the second floor of the Stevens Library, which was probably where he'd made the copies of his flyer.

"Heya Rai," he gloated, knowing that was a nickname her mom used for her. "How's it—"

He didn't get the chance to complete his sentence though. Aradia accelerated to a full sprint in the few final steps between the two of them. She flung aside the table he'd been sitting at and barreled right through him with a tackle that would have made an NFL linebacker proud.

Aradia wasn't thinking about how strong she was or how far her lunge might propel them. She also wasn't thinking about the fact that they were on the second floor and in front of a window. In the moment, lost in her rage, she just didn't care.

Both she and Kasey plunged straight through the window and down, landing with two hard thuds on the concrete parking lot below.

Aradia was actually hurt far worse than Kasey. Yet, with her enhanced healing, she recovered from the worst of her injuries in just a few days.

Kasey, miraculously, suffered far less than he could have. He took some cuts to his neck and arms from the glass of the window and broke three ribs, but that was the extent of his injuries. The doctor who examined Kasey impressed upon him how much worse it could have been.

Given the nature of the situation, it was difficult for the Prestons to convince Kasey's family not to press charges. For them it was Jensen all over again, only older now, and with potentially greater repercussions. Ironically, Aradia would have probably ended up in juvie if not for Kasey himself. He had strongly urged his parents to let the whole situation go. Partly, he recognized he'd been a jerk to pull the stunt he'd pulled. Stronger, though, was that he didn't want to draw any more attention to the fact that he'd been thrown through a window by a girl.

After that episode, her parents, who had already been discussing leaving Arizona for Aradia's benefit, decided enough was enough.

The Prestons would have accepted the first jobs that came their way. It worked out, by chance, that the first jobs to open were actually pretty promising. Ross's career had plateaued in Arizona, and Liza found a very fitting position at Salem High. Not only were they expanding their art department and looking for a new art teacher, but their guidance counselor had, on short notice, decided to make her maternity leave permanent. Liza's experience and education made her a very qualified candidate for both positions.

Without much more thought, the Prestons packed their things, and never looked back.

Or Ross and Liza never looked back, at least. Aradia couldn't really help but do so.

She wasn't sorry to leave. The only thing she really hated was hate itself, so she wouldn't say she had hated Arizona. She had certainly strongly disliked it, though. Nonetheless, she was reluctant to start the whole unpleasant process of social isolation over from the start.

You never know, she gave herself a mental pep talk, you might find exactly what you are looking for. You might find the one thing you want most in the entire world right here in Salem. You might find friends.

Suddenly, Aradia was no longer back in Arizona, or contemplating her future. She was back in the moment, gazing out the window at the sidewalks and buildings which would be her new home. She was jerked from her reverie with the realization that her father had just spoken to her.

"Sorry, what did you just say?" she asked.

"Are you sure you're okay with my driving you to school?" Ross repeated.

"Of course it is, Daddy," Aradia confirmed.

"Sorry. I guess I am projecting a bit," Ross said sighing.

Aradia bit her tongue. *You're not the only one who's nervous you know!*

"Hey c'mon, Daddy. You'll be great. I know you will," she eventually said.

"Is that run of the mill motivation or your unique all knowingness?" Ross asked his daughter, cocking his head to the side with a grin.

Aradia frowned and said, "You know, Daddy, just because I can occasionally do the whole 'Medium' thing, it does not mean I can predict everything about the future."

"I know honey, I'm just teasing you," Ross said smiling.

Aradia loved it when her father made light of her abilities. It somehow made them feel more normal. She smiled despite her own nervousness and said, "The fact is, Dad, I haven't been able to sense much at all about what we can expect here in Salem. It's kind of weird, actually. I've seen less than usual, and I've been trying."

"Maybe that's why you've seen less," he proposed. "Maybe you need to just let it come to you."

She considered before replying, "Maybe. I don't know. It's weird. Like this place is... special."

Ross didn't reply to that.

After a few moments, Aradia continued, "I think there are some things in life you need to see to know for sure, but other things you can figure out without any psychic flashes."

"And all of us being happy in our new home is one of those things?" asked Ross.

Aradia grinned, and though she was anything but certain, she said confidently, "Damn right."

Chapter Four

As her father drove her through the main entrance, Aradia noted that Salem High appeared to be a stereotypical American high school. It was primarily brick and plaster, with exposed metal struts and enough marble to show it had some prestige. The individual buildings that made up the school were all large with almost-opaque windows. The school's name was embossed in large, bold, red letters near the roof, prominently displaying both its notability and its notoriety.

The school itself seemed isolated. A low fence bordered the school, creating a weak but meaningful division between the students and the community.

As for facilities, it was equipped with the usual football field and track. Salem High also boasted a half-Olympic size swimming pool, which was pretty noteworthy. Aradia couldn't make those features out yet first hand, but she could form clear mental images from the pictures she'd seen on the SHS website and Facebook page. The school's Twitter feed hadn't really been too helpful for her in that regard.

According to Aradia's intel, her new alma mater also boasted an impressive computer lab, classrooms of approximately fifteen to twenty students per teacher, an assembly hall, not one but two gyms, and a library.

A single-story library, Aradia recalled with a sigh of relief.

The one thing that definitely set Salem High School apart, though, was the black logo of a witch riding on a broomstick that seemed to be etched onto every facet of the school, including the website's header.

"Have a great first day, Aradia," her father wished her well.

"You too, Daddy," she replied. He gave her a sharp, curt nod. Most people might have brushed the gesture off, but Aradia knew that from her father, it was a sign of both thanks and respect.

She stepped down from her father's SUV and watched as he drove off, obeying the school's five mile per hour on-campus speed limit the whole way. At that, he was gone, and she was completely on her own.

Unfortunately for Aradia, none of her research could help her navigate the school's confusing room numbers and maze-like hallways. Without any experience in the new territory, her summoning ability wasn't of any use either. Her ignorance was completely understandable as a newcomer, but it also reinforced her notion of being an outsider. She felt hopelessly lost.

Luckily, her father never got anywhere less than twenty minutes early, and she had a fair amount of time to wander and get her bearings. Other students milled about in the halls, mostly catching up on how they had passed their summer breaks. She didn't even cast them a glance. She'd meet her fellow students later; right now, her number one priority was making it to her first class of her first day at her new school on time.

"Who is that?" Saul whispered to Keon, his commander.

The pair stood near their lockers, both wearing black and having no idea what clichés they were. Keon leaned casually against his locker. Saul stood dutifully on his right.

Keon shrugged flippantly, but nevertheless narrowed his eyes and focused on her. "I don't know. I have never seen her before."

"She's definitely new," Saul continued. "Look how she interacts with her surroundings. She's not comfortable here."

"Neither am I," Keon replied. "But I agree with your assessment. She is new. She smells like she is of the hidden race though."

Saul sniffed. "Agreed. I can tell that even from here. I can't place her scent, though."

"No," Keon agreed. "Definitely not vampire or werewolf."

"Fae?" Saul proposed.

Keon sniffed twice, quickly, before definitively replying, "No."

By chance, her path led Aradia right past the two agents. After she was out of earshot, Saul suggested, "Could she be a shape shifter? Might that throw off her scent?"

Keon shook his head, rejecting that hypothesis. "She is something more exotic, I am sure of it. Shapeshifters can only change their form. Their scent remains. They smell acrid and bitter, regardless and always. And she definitely does not smell like a shape shifter."

"Smells pretty damn good though," said Saul with a crude smile.

Keon glanced at Saul disdainfully.

Aradia was wandering back. They were on a twenty-five minute break between the second and third periods. Keon studied her as she glanced around the hallway. He presumed she was learning her environment, but she looked like a lost kid who had wandered away from her parents at the mall.

Finally, Keon muttered, "I should report this to the Sovereign."

Saul looked at him quickly. "Sir? She's definitely something strange, but do we have enough cause to notify the Sovereign? You know how he can be."

"More than you know," Keon replied, "but that is irrelevant. We are duty bound. He commanded we report all strange activity."

"So far she only smells strange," Saul argued, but Keon was no longer listening. "She might just be something unusual from overseas."

"I'll make the journey tonight, personally, after sundown."

Taking pity on his crestfallen comrade, he added, "While I am gone, you will keep an eye on her."

In spite of the fact that it was his command, Keon was concerned to see Saul's eyes light up at the order.

"Passive observation only," Keon added. "You are not to interact with her in any way without my explicit instructions. Understood?"

Saul nodded eagerly and distractedly, all the while keeping his gaze fastened upon Aradia, slowly licking his tongue over his fangs.

Aradia managed to get herself all the way to her third class without a hitch. Her first period, English Literature, had been a bore,

and she was not at all looking forward to starting her day with that class. She found the subject dull, and the teacher had the strangest habit of looking directly to the left of the person she was addressing. It was both creepy and annoying.

Her second period, Biology, was much more promising. She looked forward to the section on botany. She imagined she was the only person in the class who could say that.

She enjoyed Break, the twenty-five minutes between second and third period. Most of her classmates used it to socialize and eat a snack, but she took the opportunity to wander the halls. The corridors were indeed extensive, but she was nearly familiar enough that her *latent summon*, as she thought of the non-glowing version of the power, would become useful. Once she got there, navigation would not be a primary concern.

One aspect of her new school did concern her somewhat: the students. At first, Aradia was too distracted to notice the students' reactions to her. Indeed, most did not seem to notice her at all. After a while, she noticed some kids seemed fixated on her, not with repulsion or revulsion, but with fascination.

She had to admit seeing so many cute boys looking at her intensely was flattering. What was discomfoting though was the fact that the girls seemed to be staring at her the very same way. As if they were seeing something that none of them had ever seen before.

Only a certain amount of the students seemed to be staring at her. Some of the kids, who appeared to be ordinary, slammed their

lockers and chatted with their friends without taking a moment's glance at Aradia. However, right next to them there would be people who seemed a bit too beautiful to be real, and they would be gazing at Aradia vividly.

Is it just me or is this school seriously weird? Aradia asked herself. She then heard the warning bell ring, and quickly scuttled down the hallway to get to her class. All the while trying to avoid and forget the stares of the students.

Without realizing, she rubbed the spot on her left forearm where, after her and Kasey's fall, her tibia had actually pierced her skin.

Eh, she thought, it's probably just curiosity about the new girl. She put it out of her mind as well as she could and focused on the moment.

Third period was Algebra, and she imagined she'd enjoy that even less than English. At least in English class she might get to read *Macbeth* or *The Crucible* or *Nancy Drew*. She doubted they would find their way into her math course, though.

If a bathtub, volume V , is half full of water, she imagined, water drains at rate A from the drain, and Grendel drinks water from the tub at rate $2A$, how quickly would Harry Potter have to cast a water spell to fill the tub within three minutes?

She was pretty sure that equation wasn't solvable with the information she provided. She was the first to admit, though, that math was not her strong suit.

She was shocked out of her mind-numbingly dull daydream by, what else, a boy. He had light hair curling down to his shoulders. Most people would call it golden blonde, but she detected a hint of strawberry. She usually thought long hair looked silly on a boy, but this boy in particular looked anything but silly. He was clean-shaven, but his skin tone was so fair that subcutaneous facial hair was clearly visible, giving him something of a permanent five o'clock shadow. That looked good to Aradia too. He wore a buttoned up purple shirt, dark blue jeans, and appropriately fatigued black boots. The way the clothes hung on his slight frame, Aradia imagined he was thin, but very toned and muscular.

My God, he is so hot! Aradia thought before she could catch herself. *Aradia, you don't usually fawn over a handsome guy,* she chastised internally. *And by not usually, you mean never, of course.*

She still allowed herself to stare. He seemed less like a real person and more like some living, breathing teenage girl fantasy.

Fortunately for her, he sat a row ahead of her and immediately to her right, giving her a clear view of his profile while she could pretend to be studiously watching the teacher. She enjoyed her view.

The teacher, a pretentious man named Mr. Davina, droned on about syllabi, final projects, and the pros and cons of a flat versus bell curve. Aradia mostly ignored him, listening just for keywords that might be of more interest. Just then, the boy she was happily objectifying turned suddenly and looked directly at Aradia.

This time it was she who quickly diverted her eyes. She played it far less cool than the students who, she imagined, were catching

glimpses of her all day. She covered her face with her hand, as if that might hide the tomato red flush of her cheeks.

The boy, however, just gave a silent chuckle and turned back to the teacher. *He knew I was staring!* she realized, and turned an even deeper red.

Despite herself, she noted his clichéd perfect pearly white teeth.

After class, she hung by the exit to ambush her fascination. Stalking an attractive boy was no more her style than staring at one for a forty-two minute class, but maybe Salem was bringing out a new side of her.

No matter her efforts, she lost sight of him in the bustle which resulted from the end-of-class bell. He blended into the crowd amazingly well, even if there were fewer than twenty people in the class.

She was just about to use her latent summoning to find her way to the new boy. It would help if she knew his name, but he had to be close enough that she could find him, even name-unknown. Just when she'd focused herself to begin, her concentration was shattered.

"You're new around here."

She turned sharply, annoyed at the intrusion. "So..." she began.

That was when she set eyes on the second-handsomest guy she had ever seen in person. The newcomer had long hair, too, but his was a rich, dark brown, which almost looked less like hair and more like the chocolate waterfall from Willy Wonka.

He was not dressed like any high school student Aradia had ever seen before. In fact, he looked more like he should be heading to the club than to fourth period. His shirt was silk, his well-fitted jeans were Armani, and on his left wrist he wore a green bezel fiftieth anniversary Rolex Submariner. She recognized it because it was just like one her mother had gotten her dad as a combination birthday present, anniversary present, and congratulations for winning a big case. *Salem High must be higher profile than I'd realized.*

“So?” the new boy asked.

He had the most charming smile Aradia had ever seen. She could tell it was rehearsed; there was no way a smile like that came naturally. She honestly didn't much care, though. He wasn't the guy she had been looking for, but for now, he'd do.

“Sew buttons,” Aradia replied and chuckled awkwardly.

Her new friend gave her a polite smile.

She then quickly added, "Is it that obvious that I am new?"

"No," the boy responded. "Believe it or not, you hide it remarkably well."

"Wish I could say the same about my bad grades," said Aradia.

“Well,” he leaned in even closer than he already was, and winked as he whispered, “for hiding those, it helps if you don't announce them to the first stranger you come across.”

The boy joined her in laughing at his own joke and said, "My name's Tristan. What's yours?"

"Aradia."

"It's a pleasure." He raised an eyebrow. "Aradia, now there is an interesting name."

"Yeah, so it suits me just fine, doesn't it?" said Aradia playfully.

He laughed again and asked, "We should be heading to our next class. I'd hate to make you late. Where are you off to next?"

Aradia dug her schedule out of her backpack and replied, "Study Hall. No! That's fifth. Next is, uh, Gym. Then Study Hall, then lunch."

"Well, being a freshman and a new student, you're liable to get lost, you know."

Aradia scowled. "Believe me I know."

"I'll escort you to your next class," Tristan stated, holding out his arm to Aradia.

"Sure!" Aradia replied enthusiastically.

They really had eaten up most of their time between classes flirting, so they rushed as Tristan led them down the hall, through a doorway, and around a sharp corner. Aradia was so smitten that she was caught completely off guard when her supposed benefactor shoved her through an entrance which had been concealed by the sudden turn.

She was sturdy, but Tristan was surprisingly strong, and she stumbled through two doorways before she regained her footing. It only took Aradia a quick survey of her surroundings to realize exactly what room Tristan had shoved her into. About a dozen guys stared at her entrance, expressions ranging from surprised to amused. In horror she rushed back out through the same set of doors by

which she had so unceremoniously entered. In bold, black letters, the sign on the outer door read, "Boy's Locker Room."

Irate, Aradia demanded, "What the hell was that!"

Tristan nonchalantly replied with an awful but satisfied smile on his face. "What?"

She glared maliciously at him and spat out, "You know? You might look hot, but you're actually one cold son of a bitch!"

She then pivoted on her heel to salvage her dignity with a grand exit. Before she went, though, she turned and added over her shoulder, "And newsflash, hot stuff: those jeans are *way* too tight!" With that, she stalked off.

Chapter Five

By the time Aradia had changed for gym, she was madder than an Angry Bird, and Tristan might as well have been king of the Green Pigs. *That makes Salem High their castle*, she decided. "This won't be like last time," she said to herself like a personal mantra. "Green Pigs are shoddy craftsmen."

She forced herself to believe she would get chances to tear that castle down and find real connections. The whole school couldn't be filled with Tristans. She found one such opportunity even sooner than she'd expected.

Gym at SHS was split into four sections, with a quarter of the school year spent on each. Aradia's first assigned section was Track

and Field. She was a little late, thanks to her pit stop in the wrong locker room, so her fellow Trackers and Fielders were already assembled and doing stretches under the guidance of their instructor, Coach De Sylva.

Stretching his calves was a stunning Latino boy. He was darkly tanned, had a small black goatee, and, based on how tall he was doubled over touching his toes, would probably have a good six or eight inches on Aradia. His short black hair sparkled in the sunlight, either from perspiration or hair gel or genetic giftedness. Maybe all three. Aradia didn't really care.

“What *is* it with this school,” she muttered quietly as she joined the stretching circle.

“Aradia Preston?” De Sylva asked from the center of the circle.

“Present!” she called back. “Sorry I'm late, Coach!”

He smiled kindly in response. He looked to be in his late twenties, but Aradia put him in his mid thirties instead. She had a gift for guessing ages, and she suspected De Sylva was older than he outwardly appeared.

“We already did a round of introductions, but I'll sum it up. I'm Theodore De Sylva, these are your classmates.” As it happened, she already knew that. She'd read all the SHS website bios of her teachers and Facebook stalked the ones who had open profiles. De Sylva was one of the few who did. “First day lateness is excusable. Just don't let it happen again. Deal?”

“You got it, Coach!”

“You could have told us we could be late in advance, Coach!” one of the stunning Latino boy’s friends joked. An almost equally stunning female friend, Aradia noticed with some animosity. *Easy, girl*, she cautioned herself.

“Yeah, yeah,” he replied. “Switch! Butterflies.”

In unison, the group moved to the next stretch. Aradia joined in with them, not bothering to catch up on the ones she had missed. She rarely stretched, was extremely flexible anyway, and had never pulled a muscle, so she didn’t see the point.

After a few more minutes, Coach whistled and barked, “Positions!” Everybody scurried about. Aradia presumed they’d been given assignments before she got there. She intended to ask De Sylva where she should go, but instead got distracted admiring her new crush jog easily and gracefully to a starting line on the track.

I wouldn’t mind lining up with him, she thought, shocking herself with her vaguely sexual suggestiveness.

“Preston!” Coach De Sylva yelled.

She snapped back to reality and ran over. “Yes, sir?”

“Laps today,” he instructed. “Get to the track with Roy.”

“Okay!” Aradia ran to the boy, Roy, and grinned sheepishly as she lined up with him.

He, in turn, gave her a curious stare.

One runs away, one throws you into the guy’s locker room, and now this one’s a starrer. You sure know how to pick ‘em, Rai.

“Here’s the drill,” De Sylva coached. “One lap, four hundred meters. First to finish advances. Normally I keep this exercise same

sex, but the two of you are the odd ones out.” He gave an apologetic glance to Aradia, as if to say that she didn’t really have a chance.

On the shrill bleat from the whistle, the pair took off. Roy sprinted like a greyhound around the first bend of the track. Yet if he was the hound, Aradia was the rabbit setting the pace. To the great surprise of Roy, De Sylva, and in truth, everybody present other than Aradia herself, she actually had a chance at winning the race.

Roy took the run seriously; she could tell he was a runner. She was too, but moreover, she wanted to prove everyone’s assumptions incorrect.

In truth, Aradia was somewhat surprised herself. She had to admit she was guilty of the same assumption as Roy: that the competition would be one-sided, the result a foregone conclusion. In that regard, they were both wrong. She was ahead, but she sensed he was holding back, saving his real speed for the final hundred meters.

She had rapidly thrown her hair back in a ponytail on her way from the locker room, but in her haste she had secured it rather poorly. Now the pounding on the track shook her hair band off and her shockingly vibrant hair blazed free behind her like the tail of an asteroid burning through the atmosphere.

Damn! she cursed. *The drag will slow me down!*

They were indeed going fast enough that the friction could be a factor. Aradia realized that the pair of them could have college scholarships lined up if they pursued Track. She’d have to try out for the team. She and Roy would be unstoppable on relay together.

She was right about the final stretch. As they edged around the second bend of the track, he opened up his speed in a way he rarely had before, and pulled ahead of her, managing to pass on the inside. Aradia realized, too late, that she should not have let that happen. She didn't think it would matter, though.

Too soon, she quoted Vin Diesel to herself, chuckling internally. She'd happened to catch a *Fast and Furious* marathon on television a few days before the move. She was a sucker for an action movie or two... or five.

Only a moment later, she hit her own nitrous, opening up with all she had as well. With fifty meters to go, they ran abreast one another, neither showing any sign of slowing.

They raced on the track so fiercely that everyone else in the class, even those not waiting on their own turns to compete, stopped and stared.

And then something happened for Aradia which she rarely experienced. Her overly analytical mind quieted for a blissful, serene moment, and all she knew was air, sun, ground, and adrenaline. She went to a clear place with the intensity of the contest and she felt like she was flying.

Roy, without intending to, snuck a glance at her, and was amazed by the look of tranquil bliss on her face. He realized that while he was enjoying the competition, she was enjoying the race. At first he had been worried about losing to a girl. He knew his brothers would give him hell for that, no matter how worthy a competitor she was. He felt possessed by that look on her face though. He'd already

noticed how attractive she was, but in that instant he saw her true beauty. It infected him, and took hold. He slowly grinned, and he too let go of everything but the run.

When they soared over the finish, their fellow students burst out cheering for them. Their coach gaped at them open mouthed, staring at the number on his stopwatch.

“That was under a minute!” De Sylva exclaimed, rushing over to the pair of runners. “Fifty-six point two seconds. Fifty-six point two! Aradia, if you shave four seconds off that time, you’d be an Olympic qualifier!”

She gulped down oxygen in a seemingly futile attempt to feed her starving lungs and muscles. “You, ah,” she attempted to reply. “You... really...”

“I think,” Roy interjected between his own panting breaths, “she’s asking... if you really want us... to go faster?”

“Well, I don’t know about you,” Coach replied. It was likely, but uncertain, that he was at least somewhat joking. “For you it would need to be more like ten or eleven seconds faster. But women’s times are higher. Four seconds, Aradia, and you’re there!”

“So then weighted... for gender,” Aradia sputtered, and even managed a wink at Roy, “I kind of won?”

“You two are crazy,” Coach replied. “Okay, go get some water, clear the track. Shayla, Jennifer! You’re up next.”

They jogged lightly, and without further conversation, to the water fountain. After long draughts for both of them, with Roy

allowing Aradia the first drink, they finally started to really catch their breath.

Roy straightened up and stared at Aradia again, this time with both admiration and curiosity evident. Aradia realized he wasn't so good at hiding what he was thinking.

"You're new around here," he finally said.

Aradia gave him a half smile and replied, "So I am told."

Roy grinned, held out his hand stiffly, as if he wasn't used to such formality. "I'm Roy. That's short for Reynaldo."

"Aradia," was her response as she took his hand.

"Yikes," he whimpered. "You got a pretty firm grip. I mean, for a girl. I mean..."

"Uh...thanks," Aradia cut him off before he got his foot any further down his throat.

"So..." Roy trailed off, eager to start a conversation which did not center on his questionable show of masculinity.

He's hot, and sweet, but gosh is he an awkward one.

Aradia thought about letting him fumble, finding it adorable, but took pity. "You're a pretty fast runner. Are you on the track team?"

"Nah. I'm more of a lone... runner," he replied. He crossed his arms and puffed out his chest now that they were on a more flattering topic. "Besides, I enjoy good-natured contests, but it gets a little too intense when it's that formal. It kind of misses the point, for me."

"Oh, thank goodness for that," Aradia chuckled.

“That was definitely a new PR, though,” he added, pride evident in his voice.

“PR?” Aradia replied.

“Personal record,” he explained. “Wait, you didn’t know that?”

“Well, geez,” she got defensive. “You’re a real sweet talker.”

“No, no!” he stammered. “I didn’t mean like that! I just meant, well, I’m shocked that you’re such a natural runner, that you don’t have any experience. You’d have known the term if you did. I’d assumed you did.”

She made a conscious effort to forgive his slip of the tongue. *You wanted a connection, a friend. This guy seems genuine enough. Let it go, Rai.*

“Well then,” she replied, feigning indignation. She could forgive him, but she’d make him sweat it a little bit. After a dramatic pause, she said, “I accept your praise, then.”

He paused a moment while he figured out what to make of her. When she cracked a smile, he realized he was through the woods, and beamed a toothy grin at her. It was the opposite of Tristan’s rehearsed smile. It was sloppy and so huge she wondered sincerely if he actually had a couple extra teeth in there, but it was real. *I like real.*

As they walked to the bleachers to do their rotation running up and down the stairs, Roy turned and said, "Which lunch do you have?"

"First lunch, why?" Aradia asked raising an eyebrow.

"I got that lunch too!" said Roy, again lighting up with that amazing smile. More than anything he could have said, she was flattered by the fact that she could make somebody smile like that. "Maybe we'll see each other."

"I hope so," Aradia said, slowly nodding her head.

"Well, then, I'll see you later," said Roy before reluctantly trotting to the guys' group. Apparently they were doing stairs segregated by sex.

At least it gave him a graceful exit, Aradia thought as she smiled. He'd probably have been at my heels the rest of the period otherwise.

Aradia giggled and thought as she started bounding up and down the bleachers with a few other girls. *Maybe moving here wasn't such a bad decision after all*

Chapter Six

Day Two began much as Day One had. Aradia's dad dropped her off, she wandered the campus, and she wondered why so many people were staring at her.

She was sure of it now. At first she'd held open the possibility that she was imagining it, but she'd outright caught a few students looking at her. It wasn't the way one might stare at a celebrity.

She flattered herself to think maybe they all found her really attractive, but it didn't feel like the right kind of staring for that explanation. Besides, it was about equally guys and girls looking, and she didn't think that answer quite fit the facts.

It was more like they were confused and were trying to figure her out. They stared the way one might stare at one of those Seeing Eye puzzles, searching what appeared to be chaos in order to find a 3D bunny.

When she heard the first bell ring, she was practically on the opposite side of campus from her first period. *Poor planning, Rai*, she chided herself.

She hustled.

Aradia's forehead was slightly shining with perspiration, but she made it to English Lit with time to spare, and she wasn't even the last one to arrive. She arranged her notebook and her copy of *Anne of Green Gables*, their reading assignment from the night before, in a convenient manner on her desk.

Aradia was much more comfortable than she had been on Day One. She was feeling especially empowered in her friend-making abilities after her successful interaction with Roy at the track, even though he hadn't made it to their proposed lunch date.

She had sat in the corner of the lunchroom with a clear view of the entrances. She'd made sure to get there early so she wouldn't have to search awkwardly for him. It wouldn't have been hard to find him with her summoning power, of course, but she preferred to be able to wave him over.

She thought waving him to her would be cuter.

She'd never gotten the chance to try, though.

At first she'd sulked through her cheeseburger and baked fries. *They should call them french bakes*, she had moped to herself.

By the time she'd made it to her dessert fruit cup, though, she had felt much better. Roy hadn't necessarily stood her up. She imagined he probably didn't want to miss lunch. Maybe something unavoidable had come up, or maybe he'd already had other plans which he had forgotten.

She smiled at the thought. She didn't know him well, obviously, but she prided herself on her ability to judge one's character. She could easily imagine Roy getting excited and double-booking himself.

At any rate, she decided that as part of her new leaf she was turning, she would give him the benefit of the doubt.

Aradia smiled as she reminisced about the prior day's gym class while she absentmindedly rubbed her hand over the cover of *Anne of Green Gables*.

The girl sitting next to her sneezed. It was a polite, quiet sneeze, but it brought Aradia out of her reverie nonetheless. "Bless you," she said.

The girl turned in surprise. "Oh, thanks!"

She was wearing blue denim overalls with a red shirt, paint splattered sneakers, and chunky thick-framed glasses. Her ears were small and hidden by her pig tails, which lay floppily on her shoulders. Her hair was dirty brown and, like Aradia, she had a lot of

it. Her face was blocky, yet petite, and was dotted with plentiful freckles.

With another positive interaction under her belt, albeit a small one, Aradia wondered if she should perhaps try making friends with this girl.

“Alright, let’s begin,” Ms. O’Dell lazily proposed. She sounded almost as unhappy at the idea as Aradia felt. “Who here did not do last night’s reading?”

What an odd question, Aradia noted. Not surprisingly, nobody raised their hand.

"Rhonda," the teacher said from the front of the class. She appeared to be looking at Aradia, which probably meant she was addressing Sneezzy to Aradia’s right.

Sneezzy’s eyes went wide, confirming Aradia’s supposition. Aradia was glad to know the girl’s real name. *Rhonda is a much more pleasant name than Sneezzy.*

"What chapter in *Anne of Green Gables* is entitled Rachel Lynde is Surprised?"

Mrs. Rachel Lynde is Surprised, Aradia corrected her teacher mentally.

Everyone in class turned to look at Rhonda. Observing the girl freezing up, Aradia winced. Rhonda obviously had no idea of the trap into which she’d been enticed.

Quick as a flash Aradia flipped to the desired chapter and tapped lightly on the page to get Rhonda's attention.

At first, Rhonda hesitated, apparently reluctant to trust someone she barely knew. With little to lose, though, she accepted Aradia's help and said, "Chapter One."

The teacher smiled and said, "Good," then turned to the chalk board. In large letters she slowly wrote and underlined "Themes." "Imagination vs. Social Expectations," she wrote and said aloud. "Images of Nature." "Social Concerns." She went on for a while in that manner.

Rhonda breathed a deep sigh of relief and whispered, "Thank you."

"No problem," Aradia replied with a shrug and a smile.

"Reading books like this one has never been my strong suit. I'm more of a Star Wars Expanded Universe fan," Rhonda explained, then blushed after realizing what she had just so casually admitted.

"Well, may the force be with you," replied Aradia, earning herself a smile from Rhonda, whose cheeks came down a notch on the blush scale. "I usually prefer classics, but 'to each his own,' I like to say. Besides, a hundred years ago the only book around was the bible. Nowadays, I'm just thankful to have options."

Rhonda laughed, drawing the attention of a couple nearby students, and she blushed again. Aradia chuckled.

Ms. O'Dell seemed about to start discussing the items she'd listed on the board, many of which were not technically themes, Aradia noted. She was interrupted, though, by a straggler sauntering into the room. It was the blonde boy from her Algebra class, the one who had evaded her the day before. Today he wore a dark green

polo, khaki chinos, and brown loafers. Aradia decided he'd be *The-Most-Handsome-Boy-I've-Ever-Seen* until she learned his name. Probably afterward, too.

He was tall, though not as tall as Roy, Aradia estimated. *That could be good*, she thought. *Easier to reach his lips*. His wavy blonde hair bounced with every step he took. In Aradia's mind he moved in slow motion. Even in the fluorescent lighting, his skin glowed like the first winter snow.

Aradia gazed at him adoringly.

Strolling to an empty seat at the front of the class, he said, "I apologize for my tardiness, Ms. O'Dell. I was...sick this morning."

Ms. O'Dell grunted an acknowledgement of the weak excuse and asked, "You were sick yesterday for class as well then, I take it?"

Again he was at a pleasant angle for Aradia, and she saw him smile as he answered, "Fortunately I am feeling much better now. Thank you for your concern, ma'am." His smile was more charming than Tristan's and seemed as natural as Roy's. *He's smooth*, Aradia swooned.

"Well, at least you're here now. Should I take it you did not get last night's assignment?"

"I asked a friend for it so I would not get behind," he replied, and Ms. O'Dell actually seemed disappointed that she could not bust his chops in front of the class. "I found the reading to be quite engrossing, really. It has the reputation of being adolescent material,

but was obviously intended originally for readers of all ages. I see you have already begun discussion on the primary themes..."

Ms. O'Dell seemed to get over her annoyance when she realized she had at least one student in her English Literature class interested in discussing English literature.

Practically mid-sentence, Aradia noticed *The-Most-Handsome-Boy-I've-Ever-Seen* get distracted, as if by a sudden thought or realization. She wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't been entranced and staring. His nostrils flared and he sniffed twice, sharply.

He turned and looked directly at Aradia. Her heart stopped.

For a brief moment, their eyes locked. She just froze and stared right back. The boy gave her a little wave, but when Aradia did not respond, he turned away.

"Who is that?" Aradia asked Rhonda in a whisper, more concerned the boy would hear her than the teacher.

"Who's who?"

"The boy that just walked in."

"Oh. That's Dax. Dax Dayton. His dad is the head of the zoning board, or something like that. I think he's a sophomore."

"He's..." Aradia stammered, "magnificent."

Rhonda grinned.

Chapter Seven

"So where are you from?" Rhonda asked. She and Aradia shuffled to the end of the cafeteria line.

"Arizona," Aradia replied as she placed \$2.75 in the cashier's outstretched hand.

"Wow," said Rhonda. "That's a way's away. What's it like there?"

"Boring, hence why we left," Aradia said.

"Mmm," Rhonda replied. After a pause, she raised an inquisitive eyebrow and asked, "We?"

"My parents and I," Aradia explained. "No siblings."

Rhonda nodded.

The pair slowly made their way through the mass of tables crowded into the lunchroom. Even with that many tables, there was still hardly an empty seat, and Aradia wondered how the area stacked up against Salem fire codes.

"Geez," she muttered, "it's packed."

"It'll be less jammed when the weather is nicer out. You should have seen it before they split it up into two lunches," Rhonda replied.

"With all the talking and shoving, it feels less like a school and more like a Nine Inch Nails concert," Aradia quipped.

"Nine Inch Nails? Is that an Arizona band?"

"And I thought I was sheltered," Aradia replied.

Soon, Rhonda had led them to a table a bit more isolated from the rest. Aradia had a feeling she was at what would be known in school TV dramas as "the loser table."

She glanced at Rhonda who was already joining the others seated at the table. She struggled with herself over whether this was

the direction she wanted to take her social standing. Rhonda looked over and, braces sparkling, asked, "So you sitting down or what?"

Realizing that just one day prior she had been encouraging her dad not to worry what others thought, Aradia decided to practice what she preached. With a mental shrug, she took a seat next to Rhonda. *Besides, Rhonda seems like a good, honest person. Her friends are probably real friends to her.*

"Everyone, this is Aradia. She's new. Aradia, meet everyone. This is Everett," she introduced, and gestured to a large, friendly-looking boy who seemed a bit bashful. When Rhonda gestured toward him, he gave an awkward grunt and fidgeted with his glasses.

"This is Felix," Rhonda went on. Felix had wispy, blonde hair, which looked a bit like he'd given himself a good static charge with a balloon just moments earlier. Aradia suspected it always looked that way. He was short, but not too short. She could tell his height because when Rhonda introduced him, he stood and shook her hand. Aradia later learned that his pointy nose and eyes were pretty much permanently glued to a comic book, so she took it as quite a compliment that he greeted her so politely.

"And last but not least, meet Calvin," Rhonda finished up. Calvin wore his jet black hair in spikes and had a white, rodent-like face. Aradia thought his hair looked amazing, but that he wasn't doing himself any favors with his sneering attitude.

Everybody was reading. Everett had a gaming magazine with a picture of a Mechwarrior in combat on the front cover. Felix was engrossed in a Green Lantern comic. Calvin had a large pile of

books on the table, and was currently reading a particularly huge one.

“Calvin’s family is one of the richest in Salem,” Everett leaned over the table and loudly whispered to Aradia.

“Can it,” Calvin replied. “I can hear you.”

“That’s really neat,” Aradia said to Calvin, as if she hadn’t heard his protest. “I hope if my family were that rich I’d still wear normal clothes, not pretentious silk shirts like... some people might.”

Without looking up, Felix said, “I think the name you were looking for was Tristan.”

Aradia blushed. She realized there had been a lot of blushing, lately.

“So what does your family do?” Aradia asked.

“Er...” Calvin grumbled, mood seeming to turn even more foul at the question. “We uh, they... sell plumbing equipment.”

Without missing a beat, Aradia replied, “Well, there’s always a market for it.”

Aradia was thrilled by how accepting this motley crew was of her, an outsider. As they were all discussing their experiences on their first day and a half of school, Aradia heard a warm, familiar voice from behind her. "Hey speedy, 'sup?"

Aradia grinned wide as she turned to look at Roy and replied, "Hey there yourself."

“I’m sorry I missed you for lunch yesterday,” he apologized. “My family had a thing.”

She waved it off. “You’re here now.”

With a glance around the table, Roy asked, "Do you want to sit with me and my crew?"

Aradia didn't quite like the implication in Roy's voice, and her enthusiasm at seeing him again suddenly vanished, as did her big smile. *Benefit of the doubt, Rai*, she reminded herself.

In an edged tone, she asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Roy shrugged, careful not to spill his tray in the process. "I'm just saying..." he began, but trailed off as if the rest of the thought were clear enough that it did not need to be spoken aloud.

Aradia scowled. Rhonda interjected, "You know, we'd understand if you want to sit with him, Aradia."

Aradia glanced around at the others with whom she had just been happily chatting.

Turning back to Roy, she said, "No thanks, Roy. I am perfectly happy sitting here."

"Are you sure?" he asked, obviously doubtful.

"You're welcome to join us," Aradia ignored his question.

He seemed taken aback by the suggestion. "Thanks, but I have people waiting for me."

Aradia just nodded in response.

He seemed to search for the right words. Apparently not finding them, Roy walked off.

"That was pretty cool of you," said Everett.

Aradia smiled at him as a show of thanks.

"I think it's only fair to warn you," Rhonda pointed out, "that sitting with us on a regular basis will lower your Popularity Quotient at this school several points."

Aradia shrugged, and with a gentle smile replied, "Yeah, well, if I want to be popular, I can audition for American Idol or something."

"Oh, can you sing?" Rhonda asked.

Aradia replied, "Hell no, but I don't think that's actually a requirement to audition for American Idol."

Everyone gave Aradia a polite laugh. Even Calvin allowed his dour mood to lighten a bit. It seemed that the tension created by Roy's proposal had been successfully dissipated, and Aradia took the good humor to symbolize her acceptance into the group.

After some friendly chatting and hungry munching, Everett put down his magazine and turned his head to look to and fro curiously.

"What's up, Everett?" asked Felix, noticing his odd behavior.

Everett shook his head and very unconvincingly said, "Nothing."

"No seriously, Everett, spill," Rhonda instructed, now curious herself.

"It's just that people are staring at us," said Everett.

"Dude," interjected Calvin, rolling his eyes and rubbing his lip stud, "they always stare at us."

Everett shook his head. "No, it's more than usual today. It's more intense. It's weird."

Aradia glanced over her shoulder and got a feeling of déjà vu. It was just like she'd noticed in the hallways. Mostly, people ignored

her, but certain heads in the crowd would pause on her and her group for just a moment. And all those heads belonged to people who seemed too beautiful to be real.

Aradia shook off the feeling of uneasiness. Still, she knew that whatever the reason was, it was somehow about her, not her new friends.

Turning her back on the crowd, she said, "Forget 'em. It's no big deal."

"Still," Everett continued, "it's just weird how they keep staring."

"Maybe they forgot to take their medication," Aradia grumbled.

Everett's face and tone turned cold as he replied, "I take medication. Anti-depressants to be exact."

Embarrassed, Aradia tried to turn the conversation around. Deadpan, she said, "Oh, I didn't mean depression medication."

Everett took stock of the situation, not sure where she was going yet, and still a little offended.

"Anti-depression meds are for the cool kids, like us," Aradia explained. "The weirdos are probably taking anti-psychotics and stimulants and stuff. Plus, those are just medications for the mind. I bet the starers are also taking other medications, the kind that improve, you know, other parts of the body." She added a wicked grin to drive the punchline home.

After a brief silence, everyone at the table burst out laughing. Aradia stretched her arms behind her head, completely satisfied.

Aradia lay in bed, cozy and happy. Her first week at Salem High proved long and tiring, but she felt good about her time there nonetheless. She had made four probable friends, which was three more than she'd ever really had before, and one whom she hoped would become a friend despite a rocky turn of events. She liked her classes and teachers, finding them generally stimulating. In spite of finding one enemy, Tristan, the student body seemed generally accepting and at worst neutral. This simple lack of animosity towards her was a huge and pleasant contrast to Arizona.

Then there were *The Starers*. They were inexplicable on several levels, and they bothered her greatly. Aradia had noticed early on that much of the student body of Salem High was ridiculously attractive. She was now certain that the people staring at her were all members of the *Too Pretty to be Real Students* crowd. Rather, they were members of the *Too Pretty to be Real Students* crowds, with an "s" on the end.

These gorgeous people flocked together in close circles, and seemed to be completely isolated from the rest of the school. They were always whispering or nodding to each other as if they shared some sort of code.

"It's totally suspicious," she whispered with a silly grin on her face as she drifted to sleep. "Pretty people who maintain exclusive cliques. Especially in high school. I smell something strange afoot."

Still, try though she did to talk herself out of it, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was missing something big. She felt surrounded by a "perfect" race of people who were a little too

interested in her. She had troubling dreams of dangerous groups who all shared a deep, dark secret.

Chapter Eight

"Morgan!" the Sovereign bellowed. "Morgan where are you?"

With her typical, mystical entrance, she puffed into existence. Seeing that the Sovereign was not alone, she showed deference. As the black cloud around her dissipated, she knelt at the Sovereign's feet. "You summoned, Sovereign."

The Sovereign looked down at her and spat, "Rise, demoness." She did. Gesturing to the vampire at his right, he said, "Keon of the Night Shadow clan has reported an anomaly in Salem, Massachusetts, in the United States. I wish to know if what he saw was the last witch."

"As you wish, Sovereign," Morgan said nodding.

The Sovereign turned on his heel and put his back to the pair.

Taking a step forward, Keon asked, "What must I do, Seer?"

He did his best to remain stoic, but feared what sort of response he would get. From what little he knew, most demons were beastlike hiddens, somewhere between sentient and animal. He had heard wild rumors about the creatures in his long life, but could count on one hand all the interactions he'd had with one. None of those interactions had ended well. Now he was at the mercy of the

Sovereign's pet demon Seer. He wondered if what he was supposed to do might traumatize him for life.

Morgan glided towards him while Keon readied himself and did not stop until she was merely inches away. She then held out her long green arm and gestured to the wall to her left.

"Do you see that mirror?" she asked in her usual raspy voice.

Keon nodded.

Morgan instructed him, "Go to that mirror and look into it."

"Why?" the question was out of Keon's mouth before he could stop it.

"It is a revealing mirror. It can reveal what you wish to show us so that we may see it for ourselves," Morgan explained.

Keon nodded, walked to where the mirror hung, and looked into it. Morgan followed along beside him and placed her clawed hand on the mirror's edge.

Keon's jaw dropped at what he saw: himself. This in itself revealed how special the mirror was, for like every other vampire, he cast no reflection.

"It has been so long..." he whispered, and held up a hand to touch his reflection. Keon had been young when he was turned, making him an ideal agent for his post. He was tall for his outward age, and muscular, but not quite bulky. He wore his black hair in a ponytail and had a firm, square jaw. A sinister expression was more or less permanently etched on his face, showing through even his astonishment.

Then the face of the mirror seemed to swirl like ripples in a pond. Keon's reflection distorted and melted into a redheaded girl looking lost in a school hallway, wearing a light jacket, a purple shirt, and flower patterned boot cut jeans with sneakers.

"Is this the girl you wish to show us?" the Sovereign asked Keon.

Keon, both amazed and intimidated, merely nodded.

"Morgan?" the Sovereign prompted.

"Mmm..." Morgan breathed out a moan, but said nothing meaningful.

The Sovereign growled in frustration and said, "What do you sense from her?"

"Oh yes," Morgan replied, nodding slowly. "I sense a great deal in her. Strength and confusion. She has an old soul."

"That sounds about right," the Sovereign said. "But is she the one?"

"The substance of reality does not bend easily to our wills, my lord. In order to know who and what she really is, I must have something precious to her, and it must have her blood on it."

"Keon," the Sovereign thundered.

"Trust in me and the rest of my clan," Keon replied. "We shall retrieve what you need. I have already stationed one of my subordinates observing her."

Keon could only see the Sovereign's chin and nose slowly rise and fall under his cowl.

"If you wish," Keon further proposed, "we can snatch her right now and bring her to you. Or snuff her out and end this now."

"You will do no such thing," the Sovereign replied. He was quiet, almost whispering. Keon had never felt such fear or intimidation before.

"It will be as you command."

"Keep her under constant surveillance and report any unusual activity to me directly. When it is opportune, snatch something that meets Morgan's criteria. Be absolutely certain no one notices you doing so. Am I understood?"

Keon nodded. The Sovereign jerked his head toward the exit, and Keon left the throne room. He turned sharply toward Morgan, his meaning clear. She, too, disappeared.

Coming forth from the shadows, Rome said, "If I might be so bold, my Sovereign, I rather liked that ferret's suggestion to put her down now."

"Finish what you failed to complete two centuries ago?" the Sovereign replied.

Rome, only mildly chastised, went on, "I understand if you don't entrust such a task to a Night Shadow. He and his clanmates are clowns. I would be honored to take the assignment. I would not fail you twice."

"No, I imagine not." After a brief decision, the Sovereign explained to Rome, "If she were anywhere else in the world, perhaps, but not in Salem. Of course that is where she would surface.

By now, other hiddens will have noticed her. If she disappeared, questions would be raised."

"You need not answer those questions," Rome insisted. "Your word is law!"

"True," the Sovereign acknowledged. "And I became Sovereign by taking only necessary, calculated risks, Rome. Right now, she is impotent against me. One whisper of protest, though, could incite a rebellion, and I will avoid that outcome."

Rome nodded. "As a girl in high school, she is controllable, but as a martyr she could damage your standing."

"You pick up slowly," the Sovereign said, "but you can learn. Vampires follow me without question," *mostly*, the Sovereign thought, but left that part out. "Other hiddens still question my rule. Many factions do not yet accept me. If I make any move that they find suspicious..."

"You are above them, Sovereign," Rome protested. "Your power is vast, and not merely political. You would win any war. I would ensure that."

"No doubt, but when we start my war of conquest, it will be at the time of my choosing," the Sovereign concluded with an evil and handsome grin.

The Sovereign lingered for hours, studying Aradia's reflection. Until Morgan wiped it, the image would remain in the mirror like a newly painted portrait.

A slight, whooshing displacement of air betrayed Morgan's return.

"I did not bid you come."

"No, you did not," Morgan replied with uncharacteristic simplicity. For a while longer, the Sovereign ignored her.

"It's hard to believe," the Sovereign said finally, still staring at the mirror, "that this little thing is the sole survivor of her people. Look at her. I have faced and defeated far more powerful looking creatures than her, including witches."

"You underestimate her strength," Morgan replied. "Her power. You cannot feel it as I can. She has great potential."

"Tell me about it," he commanded.

"You should not underestimate her, for if there is one thing I sense, it is that she is anything but impotent against you." The Sovereign was not surprised to learn that Morgan had been eavesdropping on his conversation with Rome.

Morgan braced herself. She expected an inevitable, furious outburst from the Sovereign for her impertinence. Surprising her, the Sovereign instead chuckled and kept his eyes locked on the mirror.

After studying it for a while longer, he said, "I need not explain myself to you any more than to my servant Rome." *Whatever she is, last witch or not, I'll not act until I know how she will be most useful to me. If I decide to crush her, my action will be swift, decisive, and impossible to withstand.*

"Hey, did you hear?" Everett asked as he sat down at the table a few days later with excitement dripping from his voice.

"You were talking? Yup, I'm not deaf, I heard that," Aradia quipped.

"My mom's deaf," Everett replied quickly.

"You're not ever going to let me live down that anti-depressant thing, are you?" Ever since the medication comment, which she'd successfully kept from becoming a disaster, whenever Aradia had said something even the slightest bit sensitive, Everett had replied that either he, or a parent, or a friend, or a pet, or somebody in his life had suffered from it.

"Nope!" Everett said cheerfully. "But seriously everybody, did you hear?"

When nobody bit, he went on, "I'm talking about the unsolved murder. The hardware store guy that was killed."

"Oh yeah. No blood, two puncture wounds on the neck. The Vampire Murderer. I read about it in the paper."

"Felix, you must be the only person our age who still reads the newspaper," Calvin grumbled.

"Well, get me an iPad like yours for my birthday and maybe I'll think about switching to something electronic," Felix replied.

Calvin opened his mouth to argue, but Everett cut him off. "Anyway," he said, dropping his voice dramatically. "I heard on the news, the police are thinking about declaring it a 'cold case file.'"

Aradia's ears perked up a bit. Rhonda asked Everett, "What is a cold case file?"

"A case nobody can solve," Calvin explained.

Everett expanded, "The odds are that they are never going to solve the case, which means whoever killed that guy will probably get away with murder!"

"The odds are also good," Aradia contributed gravely, "that whoever committed the crime lives right here in Salem."

"You mean there's a murderer among us?" asked Rhonda, voice shaking a bit. She hadn't really followed the story as it broke or considered the implications until just then.

Everett nodded.

Calvin said, "I don't see how this is really such a big deal."

"I do," said Aradia.

The others had not heard Aradia sound so serious before. They'd also not seen her directly contradict Calvin, which tended to lead to arguments.

Calvin raised an eyebrow and said, "Yeah? By all means, please explain."

"If someone got away with murder, it will make them think they can kill again."

Aradia usually liked to do her homework right after school. It was only her second week, and she was still working out her new routine. Salem High was only a short detour on her dad's drive home, so the timing seemed to work pretty well so far.

Her favorite place to get her work done in Arizona had been underneath the basement stairwell in the gymnasium. She generally

didn't have to face other students and their ridicule there. Of course, her dusty, creepy hideout had only given them more fodder for which to ridicule her. *Hindsight's twenty/twenty*, Aradia thought with a mental shrug.

She figured she'd try a more public setting this time around, and after wandering aimlessly, she found herself at the football field. *Bleachers to sit on, plenty of room to spread out, and maybe some cute guys to stare at. This could work.*

So there she was, taking notes on her bio reading and listening to the football coach as he yelled at the players. De Sylva coached Track and Field and Cross Country, but not Football. Football was coached by a gruff man in his early fifties named Stan Gardner.

Coach Gardner was as much a stereotype as Aradia had ever seen. Proud American good old boy who had been the star quarterback when he had attended Salem High, he'd gone on to play college football and do fairly well. When he failed to get recruited to the NFL, he'd returned to his high school alma mater to coach. He'd been at that for about twenty-five years or so. By now he was pretty much an institution in the small town.

The students grunted and heaved through their various, torturous drills. It provided good background white noise for Aradia as she did her work.

After a while Aradia checked her watch; her dad would be arriving soon. She'd finished her Biology, World Studies, and English readings. She had already completed her Latin homework during Study Hall, and so far she hadn't been assigned any

homework in her 2D Art or Personal Fitness classes, which only left Algebra to do at home. *Not bad*, she assessed.

When she was almost finished packing up her books, she suddenly felt very uneasy, and turned to the field just in time to see the quarterback slip and fall. At first the other players laughed, but when the QB did not get up, they stopped what they were doing and hurried over to assist.

At first, Aradia just watched as people swarmed around the kid. He was still conscious, which Aradia took as a good sign. She thought about getting involved, but the coach and sports nurse the school kept on hand were both on the scene, so she kept her distance for the moment. With help the boy got upright, but when he tried to stand on his own, he screamed in pain. Aradia grew more alarmed.

The coach helped him hobble to the bench at the sideline and let the nurse inspect the injured area. *His ankle*, Aradia noted.

“Looks like a sprain, Jayce,” the nurse, whose name Aradia hadn’t learned yet, declared. He went on, “Sit out the rest of practice. If you still can’t stand on your own, I’ll call your folks and drive you to the ER myself.”

Aradia watched as a couple members of the team approached the injured quarterback. He snapped them away like an irritated crocodile. *Some leader*, Aradia thought sarcastically. After that, the other boys stopped trying, shrugged, and left him as they finished their practice.

Strong leader or not, he didn't deserve to suffer needlessly. He had his head buried in his hands and was shaking it vigorously when Aradia approached.

"You okay?" was the first thing Aradia asked him.

The boy whipped around to face her, and immediately regretted it. He'd also banged his head on the way down, and the rapid turn made his forehead throb. "Who the hell are you?"

He had short blonde hair which was glistening with sweat. His face was sharp with a pointed chin and a nose that was almost triangular. His green eyes blazed and his face was currently twisted with a combination of pain, anger, and, Aradia suspected, fear.

Aradia was taken aback by his rudeness and also at how cute he was. *This school!* she thought. *Is there something in the water here?* This boy, however, wasn't one of the preternaturally good looking ones. So far as Aradia could tell, he was just regular old all-American cute.

She ignored his snappy response and continued with her attempt to help. "My name is Aradia. Are you okay?"

"Do I look okay?"

"No, but that's why I am asking," Aradia stated matter-of-factly.

The boy peered at her bemusedly.

After a brief standoff, he went with, "Well, it's none of your damn business."

"What if I paid you a penny for your thoughts?"

Jayce stared blankly, not seeing where she was going.

“Would that make it my business?” Aradia expanded on her last question, smiling.

Jayce sighed and asked, “If I tell you, will you get the hell out of here and leave me alone?”

“Probably not, but maybe,” said Aradia bluntly.

The boy sighed and said, “I just found out that I sprained my ankle.”

“Are they sure?” she asked.

“Look at it,” he replied. She complied. His ankle was already swollen to the size of a small grapefruit.

“Oh geez,” Aradia said without thinking.

“Yeah,” Jayce agreed. “It’s definitely sprained, or worse. I’m not walking this off. There is no way in hell it will heal in time for the homecoming game.”

“And that’s a big deal,” Aradia said, trying to follow the thought process as closely as she could.

Jayce scoffed at her. “Yeah, yeah that’s a big deal. It’s going to be the first and most important game of the whole season.”

Aradia squinted a little. He was holding something back, she could tell. “Why’s it really so important to you?”

Jayce turned his eyes back to his ankle. “I won’t be able to play for my dad. He works and travels a lot. He can’t make it to most of my games, but he’s going to be there this Friday.”

He began to breathe heavily as soon as his explanation was done. *Holding back tears, I bet.*

Aradia considered the situation. Distractedly, she said, "Bummer."

The boy raised an eyebrow and snapped, "Really? That's what you have to say? Who the hell even says 'bummer' anymore?"

Aradia shrugged and said, "But that's what it is, isn't it? Your injury and your entire situation."

The boy thought about it until finally he sighed, and nodded his head in agreement. With a sorry laugh he said, "Yeah. Bummer."

Aradia came to a decision. She knew how her parents felt about her use of her abilities in public, but she couldn't let Jayce miss out on playing for his dad. Trying not to draw too much attention to it, she positioned herself between Jayce and her backpack. She reached in as if she was rummaging, but she closed her eyes, focused, and hoped nobody noticed the white light as she summoned.

Turning back to him, she said, "Let me look at your ankle."

The boy drew back until Aradia explained, "I think I might have something that will help."

"I can't use steroids you know," the boy pointed out sarcastically.

"Oh please. Like they'd even help."

The boy was clearly freaked by Aradia, but his interest was definitely piqued.

Raising an eyebrow, he cautiously asked, "What can you do?"

Aradia held up the small white container she'd summoned. It was filled with about two ounces of peach-colored cream. She'd mixed it at the same time as her anti-blemish balm.

"Ah, I see. You're going to make me wear makeup." The boy said incredulously. "Because that totally makes sense."

"No! This isn't makeup, this is cream, and it can heal sprained limbs." *I think. Or maybe it cures hiccups. Or causes hiccups.* Aradia wasn't always so good at getting her potions to do what she wanted them to do.

Jayce looked at her skeptically. "Look, um, thanks for the, ah, help, but I think I'm going to take Frasier up on his offer for a ride to the hospital."

I guess that's the nurse, Aradia noted, filing the name away.

"Oh c'mon, Jayce, what have you got to lose?" Aradia argued.

The boy shrugged and seemed about to acquiesce, but after a second he turned to her suspiciously.

"How'd you know my name was Jayce?" he demanded.

"I heard Frasier use it," she replied happily. Gesturing with the cream, she asked, "You going to trust me on this?"

"Trust you? I have no clue who you are. Do you even go to school here?"

"I'm new," Aradia said with a shrug. "Look, if this turns out to be something that screws you over, you know where to find me. You can come kick my ass or call me names or do whatever jocks do to get even."

"I wouldn't hit a girl."

"How antiquated of you. Look!" Aradia practically shouted, tired of arguing with him. "I am trying to help you out of the

goodness of my heart. Just don't make me regret it, okay? Now shut up and hold still, I'm thinking this'll hurt."

Before Jayce could argue, she grabbed his ankle and tried not to retch from the smell of his sweaty, smelly feet. He grimaced from the pressure, but did a pretty good job of holding his ankle steady as she applied the cream.

Noticing that he had his eyes clenched closed, she decided to speed up the process. Two seconds later, the tips of her fingers glowed white. Her summoning was dim in the bright sunlight, and Aradia was confident it went unnoticed.

"There," she said, and gingerly set down his ankle.

"Ah, thanks," Jayce said. "I'm going to go to the hospital now. I'll see you around."

"D-d-d-d!" she sounded at him, holding up a now non-glowing finger. "Give it a minute."

"You're weird," he said bluntly, but he gave it a minute.

"How do you feel?" Aradia asked nervously. No hiccups or boils or sprouting horns, so far, which was good.

"Actually," he said, "it doesn't hurt so much anymore. Hardly at all. What was that, something to numb it?"

"Take a look at your foot," she said, grinning.

He did. The ankle was still slightly swollen, and a little purple, but he could see dramatic improvement.

"No way."

“Way!” She quickly added, “Now I can't be sure if it helped you all the way. You might reinjure it. Stay off the ankle as much as you can and soak it for a couple days. Do you have Epson salt at home?”

He shook his head. “I dunno.”

“You drive?”

He nodded.

“Pick some up on the way home. It's easy to find. They'll have it at CVS.”

“What's CVS?”

“Oh, right. Um, Walgreens? Any drug store. Follow the instructions on the box for soaking. I think you'll be ready to rumble by homecoming game time.”

“Ready to rumble?” he asked, raising his eyebrow again.

“You know you're going to go blind if you keep doing that,” Aradia quipped, raising her own eyebrow back at him.

Jayce chuckled. “Hey, thanks,” he said, sincerely this time.

“No problemo.”

He began to walk toward the parking lot, taking care with his footing. Suddenly, he stopped and turned back to her. “Look, I appreciate you helping me out and all, but, uh... next time we see each other...”

“You're still a jock and I'm still a geek?” she proposed, smiling.

“Well, yeah, I guess,” he replied, smiling himself at how silly it sounded when she spelled it out. “I mean, you can say hi and stuff, if you want.”

"Say hi to a football player," Aradia gasped while clutching her heart for dramatic flair. "Heaven forbid! No disrespect, Jayce, but I have a carefully fostered reputation as a loser at this school, and being friends with you would totally ruin it!"

Jayce chuckled while Aradia winked at him.

Beyond the initial thanks, Aradia hadn't expected Jayce to acknowledge her help with his injury. For the rest of their second week at school, he more or less ignored her, confirming her expectations. And yet, maybe it was because his ankle had fully recovered by Friday or because the game had gone so well, but he ended up surprising her.

After the game, he jogged over, helmet in hand, to where she was sitting in the bleachers. "Hey Aradia!"

"Oh, hey," she said, trying to play it cool. It had been a lot easier talking to him when he'd been injured and she'd had all the power, literally.

Lowering his voice to a whisper, he said, "I'm having a party tomorrow. My dad'll be back out of town. Would you like to come?"

Stunned by his offer, especially in front of their peers, Aradia was immediately suspicious. "Are you serious?"

"Well yeah," said Jayce sheepishly.

Aradia shrugged and said, "Um, yeah, I guess I could go."

Jayce smiled and turned to leave.

"Oh!" Aradia exclaimed. He turned back, and Aradia asked, "Can I invite my friends, too?"

Jayce winced and said, "No, sorry, it's a private party. Only... certain people are invited." He dialed up the charm and added, "Only my friends."

Aradia hated how special that made her feel.

"It's alright, Rai. We understand. You should go and have fun," Rhonda assured her friend.

Calvin nodded his encouragement and said, "Yeah Aradia, you should go."

"I'm sure Everett and Felix would say the same thing."

Aradia and Rhonda had scheduled a girls' afternoon at the mall. Rhonda was thrilled to have somebody to go shopping with her. She could usually convince one of the guys to come with her, but she didn't trust their fashion sense so much.

When they bumped into Calvin, who was shopping for a new pair of pants, he'd been surprisingly happy to tag along. As it turned out, he didn't trust his fashion sense so much either.

Now they were in the food court munching on Chinese food.

Aradia exhaled deeply and said, "Okay. I'll go."

Rhonda beamed, and even Calvin smiled.

"Why are you guys so excited for me to go to a party without you though?" Aradia couldn't help but point out.

Calvin held up three fingers and began to tick off the reasons. "One, we know the people who hang at those parties. Dislike isn't a one way street. We don't like them any more than they like us. Why the hell would we want to get trapped with those jerks surrounding

us like a bunch of wild animals? Two, this 'Jayce' guy would never have invited us to one of his parties, so I'm cool not being there. Three, we *are* your friends so if you have an opportunity to go to a popular guy's party, and you want to, no way would we ever hold you back. If it makes you happy, it makes us happy."

"Oooh, four!" Rhonda chimed in excitedly. "If you get in good with the popular crowd you can introduce us to them and then we can get to be part of their crowd."

Calvin shook his head, exasperated. "I just said we can't stand that crowd."

"But you guys..." Aradia began to argue.

"Seriously, Aradia, go to the party," Calvin commanded. "Even if I think it sounds like a night in hell, everybody says Jayce's parties are the best."

"Or at least that's what they say on Facebook," said Rhonda. "They don't actually talk to us directly about them much."

Chapter Nine

The first thing Aradia did for the party was lie to her parents. She never liked doing it, but she felt like she had no choice. She told them she was going over to Rhonda's for the night, and Rhonda was happy to corroborate her story. Liza, who was in the area anyway, picked them up from the mall, made a quick pit stop for Aradia to

get her toothbrush and a change of clothes, and dropped the pair off at Rhonda's house.

"Thanks for the ride, Mrs. Preston," Rhonda had said. Aradia hadn't had the guts to comment. She just kept her eyes low and hoped her mom didn't see how guilty she felt.

With a heavy conscience Aradia emptied the party clothes out of her backpack onto Rhonda's bed.

"I still wish you were coming with me to this thing," Aradia grumbled as she squeezed into a turquoise, shimmery halter-top.

"Oh c'mon Rai, you'll be alright. I bet you'll have a great time!" Rhonda said as she handed Aradia a black mini skirt.

"Oh, hell no!" Aradia cried out. "I am so not wearing a mini skirt to this party."

"Why not?" Rhonda asked.

"I don't know anyone there! The last thing I want to do is give people the wrong impression. Besides, have you ever tried wearing one of those things?"

"Of course I have. It's my mini skirt I'm offering you," she replied, smiling.

"Yeah, well, then you know they're uncomfortable as hell."

Aradia pulled on black jean shorts with glittery rhinestones on them.

"Yeah, I'll give you that," Rhonda admitted.

Aradia worked on a knot in her hair as she replied, "It is sad how some girls think it's better to look good than to feel good. Just

ask the runway models or the women who marry rich men and end up becoming alcoholics."

She reached for her pink and black heelless slip-on Pumas, but Rhonda headed her off and grabbed them. "No way. You are not wearing those old things!"

"I love my Pumas!"

"I'm sure you do, but you're not wearing them to the party! Here, wear these." She thrust a pair of fancy white flats at her.

Aradia stared at the shoes skeptically, then at Rhonda.

Rhonda counter attacked with pleading puppy dog eyes.

"Okay, okay! I'll wear 'em," Aradia grumbled finally, mostly just to make her stop.

Aradia sat on the floor and struggled with the shoes. After a few grunts, she succeeded in figuring out the straps. She stood, pleased with herself, but when she looked in the mirror she pulled a face of disgust.

"What?" Rhonda asked. "You look beautiful. And hot."

"No," Aradia argued, "I look like a slut. Worse, I don't look like myself."

"Wouldn't it be worse if you looked like a slut and did look like yourself?"

Aradia glared at her friend.

"Hey! Sorry! But really, isn't that the point?" Rhonda asked.

Aradia sighed and said, "Maybe. I think that's the saddest part of the entire situation."

The party started at nine. By about quarter past, Rhonda had helped Aradia sneak out of the house. It was not far to Jayce's; nothing in Salem was too far from anything else, really. Aradia still wished the walk was shorter, though. She felt creeped out walking on the sidewalk bordering the woods.

She usually felt at home out in nature, and given her strength and resilience she'd never much been afraid of the dark. These woods were different somehow. She couldn't shake the weird feeling that there was someone out there in the dark, watching her. She did not know if it was one of her powers or just a gut feeling.

According to the directions Rhonda had given her, she was almost at the party. The dim glow over the next hill must have been Jayce's house.

She was now sure that someone was following her, hunting her. She could hear him, or her, in the rustling of branches and the crinkling of leaves on the ground. Aradia stopped, whipped around, and stared into the dark woods. Her eyes swiftly adjusted as she looked around apprehensively.

She could hear a sound that wasn't trees or leaves. It was low and deep breathing, almost a growl. *It's got to be your imagination*, she reassured herself, but that just wasn't right, and she knew it. She edged closer to the nearest cluster of bushes. She moved slowly, focusing on the breathing, which seemed to be getting louder.

Suddenly, Aradia heard twigs snapping right beside her. Quickly she turned to meet the sound. A figure rushed her.

Aradia raised her arm to strike at his head.

She only barely stopped herself before she struck him clean on the jaw.

“Whoa!” Jayce said playfully as he caught her arm. “You wouldn’t want to have to use more of that magic cream on me.”

Aradia was terribly embarrassed, and almost wished he really had been an assailant.

“Oh, Jayce! Hi!” she said awkwardly.

"I'm glad you're here, Aradia. I've been waiting for you! C'mon, I can't wait to introduce you to my friends." Still holding her arm, Jayce slid one of his hands into hers and practically dragged her to the house.

It was loud and noisy, a typical high school party. It was Aradia’s first, of course, but she assumed it was typical based on what she’d seen on TV and in movies. The party was complete with music, beer, and smoking, mostly cigarettes. Empty 24-packs of Milwaukee’s Best and PBR littered the kitchen and dining room. Considering her father was a criminal lawyer, Aradia decided not to take notice of every activity that was going on at the house for fear she might get prosecuted for guilt by association.

"You look nice, by the way," Jayce said, sweeping his gaze over Aradia from head to toe for probably the third or fourth time.

Aradia blushed, which Jayce noticed.

He draped his arm across her shoulders and said, "Aw, c'mon now, Aradia. You make it seem like you never got paid a compliment before."

"You know, I'm starting to think hookers made up that phrase," said Aradia.

"Uh, what?" asked Jayce, perplexed. He hadn't been expecting that response.

"The phrase 'paid a compliment.' I think hookers made it up. I'll tell you why. They invented it as an encouragement to their customers and to make sure nobody ever stiffed them!"

Aradia realized her joke probably wasn't as funny as she had meant it to be. In fact, she wasn't even sure it made sense. Suddenly she felt very uncomfortable and very out of place.

Jayce, however, threw his head back and laughed. "You know what I like about you, Aradia?"

"No, but I would like to," she cracked, grabbing the lifeline he was offering.

"You just say whatever you're thinking. Most people don't talk like you do," Jayce replied. "And you can make me laugh."

"Well," Aradia said, tossing her hair playfully. "That's kind of the point of being funny."

"I think it's kind of cool," he said. Leaning in toward her ear, he added in a whisper, "And kind of sexy."

Aradia shivered despite the warmth of being huddled under Jayce's arm. Once again she thought that maybe coming here hadn't been such a good idea.

Chapter Ten

An hour later, Aradia crunched her empty Fanta can in frustration and stomped off toward the food table. Half of it was stocked with chips, pretzels, and near-empty pizza boxes. The other half of the table was covered in puke. Somebody had thoughtfully removed whatever food had been stationed on that side.

Aradia grimaced as she reached into a bowl of Doritos, and prayed that they'd had been spared from the partygoer's drunken rampage. After stuffing a handful into her mouth, she chewed thoughtfully and cast her eyes around the room.

Jayce's house was impressive. It was large and well-decorated. Aradia wondered if his dad had handled the décor, or maybe they'd hired a professional decorator. She also wondered whether his mom was in the picture at all. She'd done some sleuthing, but couldn't find anything too telling. All the artwork was of elephants or abstract shapes, not family portraits, and she didn't dare invade the master bedroom to check the closets. That was mostly out of respect for Jayce's family's privacy, but also because the bedrooms seemed to be in pretty much constant use.

Aradia glimpsed the tiki bar by the pool. *Ah, well, when in Rome...* she thought, and strolled out toward it.

A group of guys and girls, most of whom she did not recognize, was hanging by the bar. One was pouring several rum and pineapple

juice cocktails, mostly rum with little more than a splash of pineapple. Before Aradia had a chance to speak, the boy mixing drinks thrust one into her hands. She noticed the guys were all drinking canned beer, and suddenly the extra-high alcohol content in the fruity mixed drinks made sense to her.

A loud cry of elation seized her attention. She turned and saw five drunken football players trying to tackle one another into the pool. One of them suddenly broke away from the others, doubled up, and started heaving his stomach into the bushes.

Aradia stared at the chilly drink in her hand, then at the drunk dorks on parade, then back at the drink.

"Forget this. If I'm going to make a fool of myself, I'll go on a reality show where at least I get paid."

"Wise choice," a lightly accented voice chirped behind her.

Aradia spun around to find Roy smiling at her.

"Roy, hey!" Aradia cried out happily. "How are you? What are you doing here?"

Roy shrugged and said, "Trying to have a good time."

Aradia laughed and asked, "How's that going for you?"

Roy cocked his head to the side, grinning sheepishly.

"Let's say I'm hoping it will turn around for me. I'm at a party that my brothers dragged me to, where I don't know anybody. Instead of making out with a hot girl like most guys here, I'm standing outside bothering a girl who probably hates me."

"Say what?" Aradia's eyes flew open in surprise.

"I know, pathetic, isn't it?" Roy chuckled. Aradia couldn't tell if this was some play he was making on her, or if he was really that down on himself. *Maybe somewhere in between.*

Aradia shook her head and said, "No, what I meant was, why do you think I hate you?"

"You were polite and all at the track, but the next day you didn't want to have lunch with me."

"Roy," Aradia argued, "I was sitting with my friends."

"Friends," Roy scoffed. "Sure."

"I know you're thinking something. Go ahead and say it."

"If you didn't want to sit with me, you could have just said it. That crowd, they are so not your friends. They are geeks, they are..." Roy trailed off when he caught the look Aradia was shooting him. "I'm not helping myself here any, am I?"

"Roy," Aradia said sternly, "I do not say bad things about your friends, so please don't say bad things about mine. The guys are smart and sweet. They're a little icky, at times, I'll admit that, and I'm already sick of Felix telling me about all the different colored Lantern Corps, but they're good people. And Rhonda's cool! She's a bit nerdy, but so am I. They're wonderful people and unlike you, they don't judge others so superficially. I mean, that's what is wrong with America. You can't just—"

"Alright! Alright!" said Roy, holding up his hands as if admitting defeat. "Chill, Oprah Winfrey! Chill!"

Aradia grinned and tucked a strand of her red hair behind her ear. Eventually, she shrugged and asked him, “Look, let's just start over, okay?”

“Only if that means you forgive me for being kind of a jerk,” Roy said as he smiled in response.

“Okay, so who is that?” Aradia asked.

Roy squinted in the direction she was pointing. “That’s Amber O’Shay. She’s part of the Salem High marching band. She’s also Crystal’s best friend since pre-school.”

After a bit of chit chat, Roy had started giving Aradia the lay of the land on who was at the party.

“And who’s Crystal?”

“Jayce’s girlfriend. They’ve been together for a while now.”

Aradia nodded, trying to learn as many of the personalities as she could as quickly as she could. A tall kid with dull red hair walked past them precariously carrying five beers. Aradia asked, “Who was that?”

“Oh, that was Connaer.”

“Irish?”

“Scottish. Family moved to America about six years ago, I think. Cool accents. Connaer’s a senior. He’s been trying to set up a Salem male derby league since his freshman year. So far, it’s just him. He keeps trying though.”

“Gotta give him an A for effort, I suppose. What about that guy?” she asked, pointing at another student.

Roy gulped back the last of his soda, and crushed the can in his hand. “That is Dylan Warner. He’s the captain of the track team and Amber’s new boyfriend.”

“Everybody seems to have a boyfriend,” Aradia grumbled.

Roy shifted his gaze awkwardly towards the pool.

Aradia shrugged. “Oh well. If they are happy, then I guess I’m happy. However,” she leaned in and whispered into Roy’s ear, “somebody better tell him that the hickey on his neck is pretty conspicuous.”

“What do you...” Roy then narrowed his eyes and noticed the purplish bruise shining on the boy’s neck.

“I suppose it should be no surprise to me that the girl has got a great grip with her teeth. Being part of a marching band, she must get plenty of practice biting long hard objects.”

Roy chortled loudly while Aradia rushed on, “But somebody better remind her that giving your boyfriend a hickey is a completely different experience than playing the French horn.”

Roy’s laughter grew even louder and seemed to cut clear across the entire backyard. Indeed, it was so obnoxious that a couple people even turned to stare at them. Aradia always enjoyed it when people laughed at her jokes, but not when that laughter earned her annoyed stares. Eager to distract Roy and his loud laughter, she pointed out another random person. “Who is he?”

Almost instantly, Roy’s laughter died away. “That’s Tad Levy.”

“What’s so serious about Tad Levy?”

Roy explained, “Nothing, really. It’s just that he works at Stanley Hardware. Or he worked there, I guess, for the murder victim.”

Aradia’s eyes widened. “Murder victim... you don’t mean...?”

“The Vampire Murder,” Roy finished for her. “Yeah.”

“Hmm,” Aradia replied.

“Hey, you hungry?” Roy asked. He turned and made for the kitchen. Aradia hurried to catch up with him.

“You know, everybody in Salem has been talking about it,” Roy said grimly as he grabbed a Granny Smith from a bowl and began to chomp on it. “The Vampire Murder.”

“Yeah,” Aradia replied, pouring herself a glass of water. “You know, what I find weird is that everyone is talking about it to each other, but no one is willing to talk to the authorities.”

“It’s kind of obvious why,” Roy swallowed the chunk of apple he’d been chewing.

“Oh? Why’s that,” Aradia asked.

“Well, according to the victim’s business partner, I think his name is Dereck Carringock or Dereck Carrot Top or something like that—”

“Caradoc. Dereck Caradoc,” Aradia replied. She’d also seen him on the news.

“Well, he was on TV saying the business was failing and Mr. Stanley was deeply in debt. And Tad,” he pointed at Tad Levy, who was now grinding on the dance floor, “told me once that he suspected Mr. Stanley was involved in something shady.”

Aradia wasn't quite sold on this explanation.

"So, naturally, if someone talks, then dirty secrets come out and people start to lose money. No one wants to do that, am I right?"

Aradia raised an eyebrow. "So you think his murder had something to do with his business?"

"That's my guess," Roy admitted with a shrug.

"Then why hasn't anyone said so?" Aradia pointed out. "People have been murdered for things like that before, and in more bizarre ways. Yet no one here in Salem has been willing to say anything to the police. Surely, it can't be just because they want to avoid losing money."

Roy didn't answer her. He just looked away, trying to avoid her interrogative stare. Attempting to look casual, he tossed his apple core into the open trash can set in the center of the kitchen. *He knows more than he's letting on. Something weird is going on here, Aradia thought as she peered at the boy. Something really weird.*

The two quickly changed the subject after that, and ended up hanging out together in the kitchen for a while. Even in that room, the music was loud, so Aradia imagined it must have been positively blaring in the living room where her fellow students were dancing.

Finishing her water, she turned to place the glass in the sink and nearly bumped right into Dax.

"Oh, hi," Aradia said, obviously flustered.

"Hello," Dax responded.

He only spoke a single word, but his voice was deep and bold and grabbed hold of Aradia as if she were hypnotized. She knew from class that he spoke with a British accent, but he sounded entirely different now that his amazing voice was directed at her.

Aradia stared up at him, absorbed by his presence. He looked as handsome as Aradia had ever seen him. He wore a dark gray shirt with three buttons at the collar and a black leather jacket over it, dark blue jeans, and low, black boots. Even in the dimly lit kitchen, his wavy hair shone like gold.

With his golden hair and pale skin, he looks just like an angel, Aradia thought.

Aradia was taken from her reverie by the arrival of a newcomer. Another boy, this one with a black crew cut and a dark goatee, appeared next to Dax.

He draped his arm on the object of Aradia's affection and asked, "Hey Dax, what's up?"

Dax responded, "Oh, nothing. I was just talking to statue girl here."

Aradia's time on cloud nine seemed to be up.

Her expression hardened and she snapped, "What do you mean by 'statue girl'?"

Roy hung back for the moment, but stayed near.

"When I noticed you staring at me, my first inclination was 'stalker girl.' I thought 'statue girl' seemed a bit more pleasant."

"Staring? No way. I'm not the one who's been staring," Aradia protested.

"Well," Dax explained, "since day one in Algebra you have done nothing but stare at me. It's okay. Really, I could do far worse as stalkers go. I felt I owed you a deservedly unique moniker."

"My name is Aradia," she said defensively.

"That's a lot prettier than statue girl," Dax admitted. Aradia hoped that her cheeks were already flushed enough from anger that her blushing was not too obvious. Dax took a step to his side and the new arrival took his arm off his shoulders. "Xan, meet Aradia, the statue, or stalker girl, take your pick. Aradia, this is my dear brother Xan."

Aradia practically saw red. She was frustrated that again she had found a complete jerk so attractive.

Roy stepped up to Aradia's side, and she was glad to have a comforting person involved. Like a dog sensing a predator, his eyes narrowed as he shot the brothers a venomous glare. Dax and Xan responded in kind.

They way Roy was tensed, she suspected he was either barely holding himself back or about to pounce. She was still angered by Dax's comment, but definitely didn't want a fight to break out, especially over her. Aradia shouted, feigning excitement, "Oh, I love this song! C'mon Roy, let's go dance."

She grabbed Roy's hand and dragged him toward Jayce's living room turned dance floor.

Xan chuckled and said, "I think she likes you."

Dax shifted his shoulders slightly in a shrug and thoughtfully repeated, "I could do worse."

“Could?” Xan asked playfully.

Dax grinned his acknowledgement at having been outplayed.

“Have, Xan. I have.”

Dax broke off the conversation and turned away from his brother, but began to wish he’d maintained the verbal sparring when his gaze quickly shifted back to Aradia. She had succeeded in pulling Roy onto the dance floor. Dax fought to keep his fangs retracted.

By now Aradia was hardly even concerned over her staring peers. She felt like they were being more obvious at this point as well, or maybe she’d just gotten better at spotting them. Specifically, the *Too Perfectly Freaky* people, as Aradia had decided to call them, watched as she and Roy started dancing to the early nineties song “Connected” by the Stereo MC's.

She was dancing with Roy, but she was still thinking of Dax. She turned her head to the left and saw him staring as well, and he definitely made no effort to conceal it. Grinning wickedly, she began to dance more provocatively with Roy. Roy grinned and danced awkwardly along with her, not noticing where she was directing her gaze. She watched with surprising pleasure as Dax mouthed along with the song, “I see through you.” She got closer to Roy, so close that her body rubbed against his. Roy, much to his own dismay, blushed. Aradia threw her head back and laughed.

As they danced, Aradia grew less and less comfortable. Dax was not the only of the *too-freaky-perfect* people puffing out his chest. Nearly all the freaky boys stiffened and eyed her and Roy, less like

kids at a party and more like predators calculating a kill. The girls, too, had steel in their eyes, looking lethal like lionesses defending their babies.

Aradia found the atmosphere growing tense.

Apparently Roy did too. He grabbed Aradia's hand and said, "Let's get out of here."

Aradia, however, planted her feet firmly, and despite Roy's strength, she did not budge.

"After this song," she said.

Roy looked back at her and grinned sheepishly.

They did not leave after that song. Eventually it was just the two of them on the dance floor slow dancing to "Smooth Operator" by Sade. Roy's head was tilted down, and his forehead pressed against Aradia's.

"So are you having a good time?" Roy finally asked her.

"Since I started hanging with you? Yeah," said Aradia, grinning broadly.

Roy smiled back in response.

Dax stood statuesque at the entryway to the kitchen. He had not moved from the spot since Roy and Aradia started dancing, and he had not for a moment diverted his gaze.

Xan was across the room flirting with Jayce's girlfriend. He kept most of his attention focused on his flirting tactics, but he was cognizant enough of his surroundings to note his brother's unusual

behavior. Xan was perfectly perplexed by why Dax was acting so strangely.

Aradia was something exotic, that much was obvious; she was therefore interesting. She was not, however, to Xan, fascinating. Yet, Xan knew his brother well enough to know that Dax tended to notice details which others might miss. Xan decided that as long as Dax was focused on Aradia, he'd remain focused on his brother.

Chapter Eleven

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," Keon commented.

Saul shrugged and said, "When in Rome," before throwing back the last of his beer.

"Please tell me you have kept a close watch on the girl," Keon said.

"What does it look like?" Saul asked sarcastically.

Keon thought of a thousand things to say, but shook his head after thinking better of it. Besides, the more his lieutenant looked like a drunken fool, the better he'd blend at the high school party.

"Report," Keon commanded.

"She gets around," he replied.

"Around?"

"Socially," Saul explained. "Recently she's been dancing with the dog there for a while now, and that one," he nodded in Dax's direction, "has taken an interest."

Keon digested that information. “What else have you learned?”

“She’s a courageous one, gotta respect that.”

“Courageous how?” Keon asked suspiciously.

“I tailed her here,” Saul replied. “Did my best monster-in-the-woods routine. Thought I could provoke her into revealing what she was.”

“And you did not engage her directly, right?”

“Right, just like you said,” Saul replied defensively. “Just a little growling and shaking bushes is all. She strode right up to where I was like she was going to take me on. She seemed to just get more curious, the scarier I got. She didn’t see me though. She is very interesting.”

Keon was less than thrilled at the report. Saul was right though, at least, about Aradia being of interest.

“Anyway,” he said, leaning against the wall next to Saul and doing his best to look like a normal, human teenager. “I reported our findings to our Sovereign.”

Saul’s ears perked up. “And?” he finally prompted, just as Keon knew he would.

“He wants us to get a sample from her,” said Keon. He went on to describe the particular requirements.

“As the Sovereign commands,” Saul replied with perfect, stilted formality. More casually, he added, “Though that’s a pretty weird command.” Seeing his Solo cup empty, Saul grabbed a half-full cup of beer off the beer pong table. He smirked at the protesting players.

Keon scowled. “Well, according to the Sovereign's demon Seer, that,” he tipped his head in Aradia's direction, “scrawny, smelly little girl might actually be a witch.”

Saul spat his beer out.

Not bothering to compose himself, he asked, “What?”

“You heard me,” was all Keon said in response.

Saul looked from Keon to Aradia. He let his eyes linger for a while on the girl before turning them back to his superior.

“Yeah, I heard you, but... you're kidding!” Keon did not respond. “A witch? A hidden witch? That is impossible! They were wiped out centuries ago.”

“Apparently we missed one,” Keon said sarcastically.

Saul stared again at Aradia. “But how?”

“They don't know,” Keon said. “The Sovereign and Morgan, that is. Either way, it matters not. What does matter is obeying our Sovereign's order: acquire the item to prove her identity.”

“This is big news,” Saul said. “Every hidden in the world would want to know about this.”

“I can think of three in particular,” Keon mused. “But for now we will remain silent on the matter. Understood?”

Saul stared silently at Aradia, looking awestruck, until finally he said, “Understood. If she is truly a witch, then wouldn't that mean that she's...”

“The last of her kind?” Keon finished for him then turned to look at Aradia as well.

After a while, he finally answered his own question by saying, "Yes."

Aradia clutched her forehead. Her frontal lobe exploded into excruciating, mind-searing pain. Images danced and swam before her eyes of cops rapping on the door, panic, confusion, disorder, and drunken teens either taking off into the night or being handcuffed and shoved into the back of a squad car.

"Hey Aradia, are you alright?" asked Roy.

Aradia opened her eyes to see Roy staring at her with concern in his eyes. She didn't know how long she'd been catatonic.

"Yeah Roy, I am alright," she croaked. "This is going to sound random. Do your parents know you're at this party?"

Roy shook his head and said, "Course not."

"Would they be ticked if they found out you were here?"

Roy laughed. "Yeah, my dad would probably put me on dishwasher duty at the diner for about a month!"

"Yeah, that's about what I thought," Aradia replied. "Where is your car parked?"

Roy raised an eyebrow.

"If you brought your own car, I suggest you get to it like about five minutes ago."

"Aradia, what's this about?"

"In about twenty seconds, cops are going to be at Jayce's door, and neither of us wants to be here when they start arresting people."

Roy looked utterly amused. He was still getting used to her odd sense of humor. Thinking he was playing along, he grinned and asked, "Now Aradia, how could you possibly know that?"

"Enough of this," she threw her hands up, exasperated. Grabbing his wrist Aradia yanked Roy toward the back yard. She was careful to avoid the route through the kitchen, where Dax was still being creepy.

Over the noise of the party, Aradia picked out the sound of a police baton tapping against the front door. Suddenly the door was open and blue uniformed Salem Police Department officers swarmed into the house.

It looked like three officers were present, and Aradia suspected there might be at least one more outside the house. That was actually a fairly impressive turnout, considering the Salem PD consisted of a full complement of 97 employees, 81 of whom were full-time officers. They must have considered Jayce's party to be pretty big news to devote at least four percent of their personnel to it.

Slow night for crime, Aradia mused. Good for Salem. Bad for Jayce and us.

"See?" Aradia said, somewhere between panicked and smug.

Roy, who had been running along with Aradia, stopped for a moment and stood stunned. Gathering his wits, this time he grabbed Aradia's hand.

"C'mon Rai, we got to get out of here!" He insisted once they'd reached the pool again.

“You’re coming with me,” she replied.

He shook his head. “I have to find my brothers. I can’t leave without them. I just wanted to make sure you got out safely.”

She thought for a moment then nodded her assent. “Find your brothers and get home.”

Roy stood looking at her. “What about you?”

Aradia smiled and said, “I’ll be fine. Now go!”

He turned and ran against the crush of his peers. He was certainly the only one trying to get back into the house. He peeked over his shoulder as he ran, obviously feeling a little guilty at having left Aradia. Then he was back inside.

She quickly scaled the fence in the backyard. She did not much fancy running through unfamiliar woods at night, but she also knew running around the house in the open was a surefire way to get picked up. She compromised and cut through a small chunk of forest on her way back to Fletcher Street which would lead her straight back to Rhonda’s.

Unfortunately it looked like Salem’s finest had anticipated that type of response. From the top of Broomstick Hill, the same hill from which Jayce had earlier spied her, as it happened, she could see a police cruiser parked about half a mile off.

She made a snap decision.

In the direction of Rhonda’s house, Fletcher was straight, and the police would have a clear view of her from where they were parked if she left the woods at any point.

Normally that wouldn't have bothered her. She was very comfortable amid trees and nature, and under other circumstances might have even preferred that path to the road. However, whatever she'd sensed earlier had her spooked. Until she knew more, she wanted to play it safe.

In the other direction, toward town, Fletcher was a positive zig zag of a road as it meandered around small hills and other obstructions. It would be relatively easy for her to evade capture in that direction. It would take a while, but she could even just walk home.

That was the play.

I'll need a cover story, Aradia thought glumly as she doubled back past Jayce's house and snuck toward town. *It's a shame I can't turn invisible.*

After committing to her plan Aradia couldn't help but question the wisdom of her decision. Wandering around in the middle of the night in what was still an unfamiliar place seemed, at the very least, ill-conceived. *At least Salem has a low rate of violent crimes*, Aradia noted, remembering her father's statistics lesson.

Before too long she found herself back in the city proper. Not sure exactly how to proceed, she decided to at least let her partner-in-crime know where she was. She took a seat at a well lit bench beneath a street light on Cauldron Avenue and pulled out her cell.

<You still up?> she texted Rhonda.

Almost immediately, Rhonda replied: <Yup! Still at Jayce's?>

<Not exactly>

<On your way back?>

<Also not exactly. I don't think I'll be back tonight>

<Skank!>

<Not like that!>

<Suuuurrrreeeee>

<Psh. Just letting you know I'm safe. See you Monday>

Feeling more responsible after letting Rhonda know she was okay, Aradia got to pondering how she'd spend the next few hours. "At least it's peaceful," she said to herself, just before another head-crushing vision hit her.

She saw herself and, of all people, Tristan running together down Cauldron. From around the corner at Cauldron and 3rd Street came a police patrol vehicle. In her mind the lights flashed and the siren *whooped*. Two officers stepped out. Her hands were in the air. Tristan was cuffed. She was left alone.

"Anybody home?" Tristan said. Aradia came back to the here-and-now. She got the feeling that he was repeating himself.

"Pleasure to see you," she said, voice laced with sarcasm.

"I'm sure it is," he replied cockily. For good measure he gave her a dirty look. He reeked of booze. He seemed to hesitate a moment, then said, "Come on. I saw cops around the corner. This way." He started heading north toward 3rd Street.

She gave a hard look at Tristan, debating what to do. After only a short delay, Aradia sighed, heaved herself up, and grabbed him from behind by the left shoulder.

"Problem?" he asked, confused and curious.

"Okay, Tristan," she said to him. "This is how it is going to be. We're going to split up, and you are going to go that way."

She pointed to her right, toward 4th Street.

"And I am going to go this way."

She pointed in the direction he'd been heading.

Tristan scoffed. "You can't tell me what to do."

I really don't feel like dealing with this. Aradia grabbed the front of his shirt, brought his face to meet hers, and growled, "Wanna bet?"

Tristan struggled to free himself. After letting him squirm vainly for a few seconds, she released her grip. With one solid look into Aradia's eyes, he nodded. "You *are* curious," he said before he took off in the direction she'd instructed.

Aradia then turned, sighed, and jogged the opposite way. She got to the corner just in time to intercept the inevitable.

She only had a few seconds before the cruiser would arrive. She knew that from her vision. Those few seconds were enough for her to catch something very odd out of the corner of her eye.

A couple was making out in an alleyway across Cauldron from her. Salem was a clean town, so it wasn't as gross as it would have been most places. Still, Aradia felt they should probably get a room.

At least it's a dark alley, she thought, giving the couple some semblance of privacy.

They seemed to be about her age, maybe a little older, and were pressed against a brick wall, the rear wall of the Salem Visitor's Center. The girl's head was tipped and it seemed that the boy was giving her a hickey.

None of that was terribly unusual.

Beyond those first few details, she didn't pay them much mind. She was really more focused on intercepting the police car she knew was coming.

She wished she'd spent a little more time watching them. Just as she turned away from the couple, the boy raised his head. It was very dark, very late, and not much of the glow from the street lights made it into the alleyway. On top of that, she wasn't really focusing on them. There was no way Aradia could be sure of what she was seeing.

And yet, she felt sure of what she was seeing. The boy's face, from his lips to his chin, was dripping with blood. Just as frightening, his two long fangs glistened in the moonlight.

Fangs! Aradia thought, *like a vampire!*

Then she heard the *whoop* of the police car rolling around from 3rd, just as she'd predicted. The car pulled to a stop. They left the lights flashing as the two officers emerged.

Aradia almost immediately turned back to where the vampire was draining his prey. Of course they were both gone. *Oh come on*, Aradia griped mentally. *What a friggin cliché.*

"Evening, miss," one of the policemen greeted politely. He was a little shorter than average, maybe 5' 7". He wore wire-framed glasses and had a kind voice.

Aradia threw her hands up just as she'd seen herself do in the vision. She stood very still as the cops moved towards her.

"Uh, you can put your hands down," the same officer, *Officer Soft Voice*, instructed. She felt silly and put them down, but still kept her hands where they could see them. She'd watched a lot of *CSI*.

"What's your name, kid?" the other officer asked. He looked older than Officer Soft Voice, had a goatee, and sounded bored.

"Aradia," she responded in a polite tone. "Aradia Preston."

Aradia caught a spark of recognition in Officer Soft Voice's eye when she spoke her full name. She hadn't meant to name drop, and she hoped she wasn't getting her father into hot water.

Officer Goat Chin didn't seem to think anything of her surname. Still sounding bored, he asked, "Were you at Jayce Chapman's party tonight?"

"Yes."

Both officers were taken aback by her candid response. They exchanged a brief, puzzled look.

Aradia just shrugged and said, "It's not like you don't already know I was there."

Soft Voice shrugged as well and said, "We just weren't expecting you to confirm it."

"What he means," Goat Chin interrupted, "is that in our experience, most teenagers are not as honest as we wish them to be."

"Same here!" Aradia exclaimed. "Fortunately, I'm not like most teenagers."

"Were you aware," Goat Chin asked, largely ignoring her response, "that large amounts of liquor and other illicit substances were present at the party?" At least he sounded a little less bored.

"Pretty hard to miss," she smiled. After a moment, she caught herself, and very politely added, "Yes, officer."

"Miss, have you been drinking?" Soft Voice asked carefully.

"No, sir. Well, Fanta. And a Mountain Dew. But no beer or rum mixers or anything." She decided to go ahead and answer the next question as well, "I didn't smoke anything either."

"Miss, I'm going to have to ask you to submit to a PAS, a preliminary alcohol screening," Soft Voice said, almost wincing.

Goat Chin started to say, "If you refuse, we'll have to take you in to the station," but he was cut off almost immediately by Aradia.

"Sure!" she exclaimed with surprising enthusiasm. She'd never even seen a breathalyzer before. It sounded fun.

One prolonged exhale later, Aradia could no longer say she'd never taken a breathalyzer test. She also could no longer say it sounded fun.

"Zero point zero," Soft Voice read, sounding obviously relieved. He had clearly been much more nervous about the results than Aradia.

Goat Chin went back to being bored.

"It's awfully late for you to be out alone, miss," Officer Soft Voice said. "We'll give you a ride home now."

Aradia thought the situation through. She didn't see that she had much choice. Hopefully her folks hadn't set the alarm.

"Thanks," she said. "These shoes aren't very comfortable to walk in. But before we go anywhere, I saw a woman being attacked right over there."

Drats, I should have mentioned that sooner, she chastised herself.

"What woman?" Goat Chin asked.

Aradia tipped her head and pointed to the alley behind the Visitor's Center. "Well, they're gone now. They were right over there though. Could you check for blood?"

They exchanged another glance. It was wordless, but Aradia interpreted it fairly easily. Goat Chin was saying, *This is boring, let's go get some pizza or something*, and Soft Voice replied, *We need to at least check it out*.

Soft Voice won.

Goat Chin escorted Aradia to the back of the cruiser. Once he was confident she was locked up and not going anywhere, he joined his partner. Goat Chin's hand hovered near his holster; Soft Voice held a Maglite at about his ear level. The team carefully investigated the alley.

Not too surprisingly, they found no trace of the man and woman. *Vampire and woman*, Aradia corrected. She'd hoped at least for some blood spatter. He'd been practically dripping.

"Could you describe the incident?" Soft Voice asked.

She thought for a moment, then decided to be honest.

“The Vampire Murderer,” Goat Chin said. “Not even the first tip we’ve gotten tonight.”

Even Soft Voice seemed to lose interest once she’d described his fangs. At first she got angry, but then Aradia realized how it must have sounded to them. Would she have acted any differently if she hadn’t seen it herself?

Well, I can create fireballs and see the future, so maybe I’d have given the claim some credit. She couldn’t really blame them though.

Seeing their reaction, Aradia had to wonder. They’d found no blood, she was tired, and with the Vampire Murderer hunt going on, she did have vampires on the brain. *Maybe I should chalk it up as my imagination.*

Putting the vehicle into drive, Soft Voice said, “I’m sorry that we did not introduce ourselves sooner. I’m Officer Ortega. My partner is Officer Manheim.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” she said. She decided to have some fun. “That was against procedure, wasn’t it? Not declaring yourselves?”

Soft Voice, or Ortega, rather, winced again. “As I said, miss, you have our apologies for that.”

Aradia chuckled at the situation.

“Where can we take you?”

She gave her home address.

While they were on the way, Aradia could not help but ask, “Hey, can I ask you guys something?”

Manheim went ahead and replied, "Yes, you need a high school diploma to be a cop. No, I've never killed anyone. Yes, we do sometimes get free donuts. No, you can't come in for police training after school."

"Um, what?" Aradia said.

"Sorry little lady," Ortega said. "In fairness, those are the most common questions, but aside from that, my partner has got some issues."

"I do not," Manheim replied defensively.

"Issues?" said Aradia. "Dude, it sounds like he's got a whole magazine subscription."

Ortega and Aradia shared a solid laugh. Manheim did not join them.

As they rounded a turn, she said, "But hey, like I was saying, can I ask you guys a question?"

Ortega said, "Sure kid, shoot, no pun intended."

"I don't know what it meant, but I know what I saw tonight. Do you believe in vampires?" asked Aradia.

Neither of them replied right away.

After an awkward silence, Manheim replied, "No. Why? Do you?"

Aradia did not respond, but after a few minutes of quiet pondering, she muttered, "I don't want to."

She turned to look through the window and caught a glance of Tristan with his perfect body, perfect good looks, and perfect...everything.

For a moment they made eye contact. If her cops had seen him, they did not react, which she suspected meant they had not. He was staring at her in disbelief as she was driven away in the back of a cop car.

Aradia added to herself, *But I'm starting to think that I don't have a choice.*

Chapter Twelve

Aradia rushed down the stairs Sunday morning and stormed the kitchen where her father was drinking a black coffee and munching on baby carrots.

Noting her obvious agitation, he asked, “What’s up, Rai?”

“How could you not have told me the Vampire Murderer murdered again?” she fumed, staring him straight in the eye.

He bit off half a carrot, chewed it slowly, and set down the second half. He swallowed, took a swig of his steaming hot coffee, and looked at his daughter. Frustratingly, after all that time, his only response was, “What?”

“I had to hear it on TV! Breaking news, another death, the same MO.”

“You watch the news on Sunday morning?” her dad asked, surprised.

“Huh? No, I just wanted some background noise while I got ready. I couldn’t miss it though.”

“Aradia, honey, you know I can’t share those sorts of details.” Thoughtfully, he added, “It really shouldn’t be on the news.”

“Well, somebody’s sharing the details, because it is.”

“What’s your sudden interest in the Vampire Murderer?” Ross Preston asked.

“Nothing,” Aradia replied quickly and defensively. “Just that I’m making friends here, and somebody’s out killing people, and…”

After she clearly wasn’t going to finish her thought, her dad finished, “And you think that with your abilities, you can help?”

“Well, you know it’s true.”

“Honey, you deserve to live your own life. When the time comes that you decide what you want to be, maybe you will go into law enforcement, or become a detective, or run a private security firm. But until then, you get to be a kid.”

“I’ve grown up a lot, dad.”

He looked at her and grabbed a baby carrot.

When she was ten, Aradia’s parents had told her, at her insistence, the story of how they found her. None of her powers had yet developed fully, but it was already clear that she had precognitive, telepathic, and physical abilities, and she wanted to know why. Her parents had always planned on telling her eventually where she came from, or at least what they knew of it, so they obliged her curiosity.

After hearing her origin story, or at least what her adopted parents knew, Aradia had started acting out. At first she became

sulky and withdrawn. Soon she was speaking back to and disobeying her parents, and before long she was ditching school and experimenting with pot. To her surprise, it wasn't so difficult for a tween to get her hands on restricted substances like cigarettes and marijuana.

During this time Aradia tried to pretend her powers were nonexistent. She did not realize that she was bottling up her powers the same way she was bottling up her anger. She couldn't keep her anger inside, and it found its way out, mostly in the form of Aradia lashing out verbally at the people she loved most, her parents. It never occurred to her that, just as her anger was finding a way to escape the internal pressure she was creating, so too might her powers.

Aradia had had a tough go of it with friends. She always knew she was different, and as a young kid she learned through unfortunate experiences that other kids weren't so accepting. She drew indrawn. She didn't realize what she was doing, of course, but she started separating herself from her peers. When someone came along who might be a real friend, she'd push them away before they had the chance to reject and hurt her.

Most of the damage to her social life she'd done herself.

She wasn't a hermit, though. She did socialize, just not with anybody who might really be worth socializing. Her "friends," then, usually ended up being people who were too self-absorbed or too mean for anybody else to bother with them.

That description pretty perfectly fit Aradia's friend Jona Lee Burbance. She was short-tempered, shrewish, rude, and often quite cruel. Jona Lee was a few years older than Aradia. Aradia looked older than she really was, so they didn't appear so unusual together. Whenever they hung out, Jona Lee had constantly criticized Aradia, who had tried to take the situation in stride.

On day, which began not unlike many others, Aradia was cutting school to hang with Jona Lee at the mall. Jona had belittled Aradia constantly about everything from her shoes to her hair. Aradia felt her temper brewing, but she mostly ignored the mistreatment.

They got bourbon chicken for lunch at the food court. Jona Lee paid for both of them. She pulled what was obviously a man's wallet from her purse and paid cash from it. Aradia knew Jona Lee was not seeing anyone, but she said nothing and ate her chicken.

After lunch they smoked cigarettes in front of the mall and Jona Lee told her she looked inexperienced smoking, clearly intending it as an insult. After that they went back to shopping.

Aradia stepped out of a changing room to get her friend's opinion. It would obviously be negative; it almost always was. But it was the thing to do.

Aradia was wearing leggings, a loose purple top, and a leather jacket. Jona Lee made a rude noise and was, of course, very negative. "Please, you're way too fat to pull that outfit off. You look pregnant," she'd said. In fairness, Aradia did look silly. She was twelve, she looked a few years older, but she was trying on clothes

designed for girls in their late teens. She definitely was not fat, though. "You have no fashion sense."

Aradia said nothing and turned back into the fitting room, closing the door and beginning to undress. That was when her friend, Jona Lee, opened her mouth one time too many.

"It looks like something your idiot mother would wear."

Aradia did not hesitate. She didn't think. She balled her fists and with all her force slammed them into the door of the fitting room. Her pent up anger and powers had found their escape.

The doors were fashioned with mirrors on both sides. The inside mirror shattered, and Aradia sliced both her fists pretty well. The outside mirror shattered also.

The countless, tiny shards of glass flew at Jona Lee like so many razor blades with speed and trajectory which was not natural. She threw up her arms instinctively to protect herself, shielding her eyes and much of her face. The glass dug into her severely pretty much everywhere else that was unguarded. Her outfit was skimpy, so that left a large surface area which was lacerated.

Jona Lee quickly transformed from bitchy teenager to bloody, screaming mess, and was rushed to the hospital with Aradia accompanying her in the ambulance.

Paramedics quickly began minimizing the damage as best they could. The entire time, Aradia sat huddled, whispering to herself over and over again, "What have I done? What have I done?"

Jona Lee had no permanent injury from the glass. Even the scarring was not too noticeable, though it was extensive. Given the circumstances, she basically had the best possible outcome.

After that event, Jona Lee and Aradia no longer saw one another.

Aradia became consumed by guilt over what had happened, and plunged into the depths of depression. She was no longer smoking or acting out, but that behavior was replaced by a new moroseness. Aradia hardly spoke at all, and never about anything meaningful.

That phase lasted about a year. Her parents kept a close eye on her, but gave her space. Eventually Ross and Liza were able to convince Aradia to forgive herself.

Aradia deeply regretted that the accident had happened, but she learned from it. Jona Lee had, completely unwittingly, not only taught Aradia the necessity for responsibility with her powers, but she had also helped to repair Aradia's relationship with her parents.

The incident had made Aradia realize that whether she wanted her powers or not was irrelevant. They made her feel isolated from everyone, but no matter how much she wished it, they would never go away, and she could not turn her back on them.

Almost as if a switch was flicked, one day Aradia walked up to her parents and hugged them both. They embraced her back. For a long time nobody said anything, then Aradia broke the silence. "I love you." It was the first time in well over a year that she'd said those words.

From that point on she focused on learning to use her powers. She found that with her attention, they began developing at a steady pace. She began to sense the extent of her mind-reading, her summoning, her strength, and her innate knowledge of potion-making.

She was thrilled when she discovered an ability to heal minor injuries. It seemed such an ironic turn of fate that Jona Lee's injury had set her on the course to being a healer.

What finally gave her closure for the Jona Lee incident was when, one day, she was able to seamlessly repair a family vase after it was smashed.

"Take that, all the king's horses and men," she declared triumphantly, carefully setting the vase back in its spot.

She wanted to do more, and as she saw it, she was uniquely situated to help in a big way. Her own father was an ADA, and she had powers that could help her solve crimes.

That was the first time they'd talked about her powers and how she could help her dad. They'd had the conversation many times since. It was almost always amicable, but the outcome never changed. Once in a while she'd, quite passively and without her control, get a vision which contained useful information. When that happened her dad would call it an anonymous tip and then investigate so he could back it up with hard facts. That was the furthest her assistance had ever gone.

On the whole, the situation worked. Aradia was finally accepting herself for who she was, but she still wanted to know where she'd truly come from and why she was the way she was.

"You have indeed grown up, Aradia, and I couldn't be more proud of you," he said. Tipping the bowl in her direction, he asked, "Carrot?"

"No, Daddy, I don't want a carrot."

He shrugged and took another big gulp of his coffee. *How does he gulp his coffee like that*, she couldn't help but wonder. *It looks scalding hot.*

She was just about to say something to that effect when her dad stated, "You know, I don't think I'm the only one who's been holding out."

Aradia suddenly didn't care so much about his coffee. Nervously she grabbed and chomped on a carrot.

"You know what I'm referring to?"

Guiltily, she nodded.

"How do you think I feel about you lying to your mom and me and going to a party?"

"Disappointed," she said in a hushed tone. This time she was unable to look him in the eye.

He nodded. He didn't raise his voice at all. Normally his tone increased at any irritation, no matter how minor. For him to be so calm was more disconcerting than if he'd been screaming and red in the face. "You know, Rai, it is not just the lying and going to a party

that I'm upset about. Since you lied to your mother and me about where you were, something could have happened to you, and we wouldn't have realized. If you had gotten drunk at that party, someone could have raped you—”

“Dad, I—”

“Don't interrupt me right now, Aradia. Dammit, I've seen so many cases come across my desk that look exactly like what you did, except they don't end so happily. Girls get victimized and end up pregnant or infected with HIV, hell, even killed. These things happen, all too often.”

“So, what then, I'm not supposed to have a life because I might end up in a shallow grave?”

“I'm not saying that, Aradia,” he said. Still his voice hadn't increased one decibel. “What I'm saying is that your mom and I are here to help guide you. When you cut us out like that, though, there's nothing we can do. We give you our trust because we know you won't abuse it. But last night you did just that.”

She looked like a sad puppy with its tail between its legs. She hadn't really thought about the situation from this perspective. Ross paused and took a deep breath.

“Besides, did you consider what effect alcohol might have on your...” in a hushed tone he finished, “abilities?”

Aradia gulped. She had definitely not thought of that. She usually had good control over her powers; the last real accident had been Jona Lee. But that control came from the fact that when she used them she had total concentration. If she was drunk, she might

have let her concentration, along with her judgment, slip. *Who knows what could have happened?*

"I am so sorry, Daddy," Aradia said, sounding just about as sad-puppy as she looked. "I really am sorry."

"I know you are, honey," Ross said. "Bring it in for a hug."

She got up and hugged him. He remained seated, but their heights worked pretty well.

"Being sorry isn't going to save you from a little punishment though, is it?"

"Um, yes?" she said hopefully. He chuckled, but shook his head.

Ross held up his fingers and ticked off the consequences one by one. "One, no more staying over at Rhonda's place until your mother and I feel like we can trust you again. Two, from now on you will help your mother after school. You will help her clean her classroom, organize her papers, scrape gum off the chairs and so on. Three, when I go in to work on weekends, you will accompany me and help me organize *my* office. You'll file and make coffee. Believe me when I tell you that you cannot imagine how much filing and coffee-making there is to do in a legal office. And four, from now on, if you want to go to an illegal party, at least tell your mother and me where you will be."

Aradia was in the flow of the punishments, thinking about the nosedive her life had just taken, when the last one instantly grabbed her full attention.

She looked up, extremely perplexed, and said, "What do you mean?"

"Honey," Ross said as he threaded his fingers through his brown curly hair and sighed again. "You are a teenager. Going to a party is expected. Hell, if anything, your mom, and I are proud that you have managed to make friends at all in this town. The last place we were in... We were lucky if your teachers even spoke to us!"

"Kind of a low blow there, Dad."

"Erm, sorry," he said, realizing she was right. "But it's kind of true."

Aradia still looked puzzled. "So, what? You are happy I went to an illegal party?"

"Proud actually," Ross said with a smile. "I shouldn't be, but I'd be a hypocrite if I expounded on the importance of honesty and then turned around and lied to you."

"So then why are you punishing me?" asked Aradia, completely befuddled by her father's logic.

"Because, firecracker, you lied to us. I'm not mad you were there. I'm mad you didn't tell us. And I'm mad that you did not take into consideration what drugs and drink might do to you specifically. Honey, whether you like it or not, you are not like other people. You have special conditions, and annoying or strange as they may be, they are still part of you, and you have to consider them."

"I didn't do any of that," she said.

"Hmm?"

"Drugs or drink," she repeated. "In fact, I've never had a drink of alcohol."

"Hmm," he repeated.

“It’s true. Even back when I was all ‘OMG FML,’ I never had alcohol.”

“I have no idea what that means,” he said.

“Use context, Daddy,” she admonished jokingly.

“Well, maybe we’ll have a beer together,” he proposed. She shot him another surprised look, and he added, “Purely for educational purposes, in a controlled setting.”

She laughed. The tension was broken. Her punishments were inconvenient, but she understood his reasoning.

“Hey, I do have one question. How’d you find out?”

“Well, you were here when I woke up this morning, so I knew something was up,” he said. “I was planning on just asking you about it though, until I read my work email.”

Aradia winced. She had an idea where this was going.

“Local PD apparently took a statement from you last night. Specifically they cited an alleged attack behind the Visitor’s Center and details about a party they busted at some kid’s house.”

“And you had the report emailed to you,” Aradia said. Immediately she turned around though and said, “Wait, no you didn’t. That was last night. No way the DA’s office would have it yet.”

He chuckled. “You know, you’ve got the mind for law if you ever do want to go into it.”

“What then?” she asked.

“You tell me,” he prompted. “Get it right and you’re off the hook for making our coffee next weekend.”

She thought about it and connected the dots. “Officer Ortega,” she said. “You guys have worked together. He gave you a heads up.”

“As a professional courtesy,” Ross added. “He came in as an expert witness for me shortly after we got here. The case was completely unrelated to the killings. He’s a good guy. How’d you know it was him?”

“He recognized my last name,” Aradia replied. “The other guy, Goat Chin, he couldn’t have cared less who I was.”

Ross raised an eyebrow, but didn’t ask. Instead he poured the last few carrots into his hand and threw them in his mouth all at once.

Aradia cracked a smile as she asked her father, "So is everything okay now?"

"Mostly," he said. "There’s still the issue of your mother’s punishments."

"What?"

"She’s at the market," he said. "I didn’t see my email until after she’d already gone."

"So you mean..."

"She doesn’t know yet."

So I have to go through the whole thing again! Aradia realized. *And Mom is so much better at laying down the guilt trip than Daddy...*

"You know," her father said, "it might take some of the edge off if you tell her yourself."

Aradia thought that through. He was right. "Will do, Daddy."

She headed toward the fridge to make herself some breakfast. "Not that it makes any difference in my punishment, but I had a pretty horrible time last night."

"Really?" her father asked. "Based on what Ortega said, it sounded like a pretty fun party."

"That is so inappropriate!" Aradia said. "Gosh."

Aradia shut her eyes as she recalled the party. She remembered the initial boredom, the unwanted sexual advances, and the disgusting amount of alcohol-induced vomiting she'd witnessed. *Any amount is too much, really.* She thought of the smoke filled rooms and the teenagers smoking cigarettes and passing joints or bongos around. She thought of the crowded house and the shoving of people everywhere. Then after all that there was her ill-planned and, in retrospect, largely unnecessary evasion of the police.

"Yeah, Daddy," Aradia nodded, "seriously."

Then Aradia also remembered dancing with Roy, and the way Dax had watched her all night. He was creepy, no two ways about that, but she felt a crazy attraction to him. *I'm not going to admit it, Daddy, but I did have a little fun.*

Chapter Thirteen

"Freshly brewed, black, half a Splenda, just like you like," Aradia said as she set the steaming mug of coffee down on her father's desk. The cup was made to look as if it was composed

entirely of duct tape. It was his favorite mug. “I used extra coffee beans, too, to make it stronger.”

“Hmm,” Ross replied. “Thank you, Aradia. That was very sweet of you. Now what is it you want?”

“Want?” she replied with over-the-top feigned innocence. “A girl can’t just make her dad a cup of coffee?”

He chuckled. “Come on, Rai, spill.”

“I want to see the body,” she replied bluntly.

“It kind of sounded like you were asking me to gain you illegal clearance to see a murder victim’s corpse,” Ross replied. “But I know I couldn’t have heard you right, because that would be crazy.”

“Dad,” she said, whispering, “you know I might find something the examiners missed.”

“I’m not letting you inspect the body,” he replied firmly.

“But... What do you mean you won’t let me inspect the body?” Aradia demanded.

Her father was unflinching as he faced her, leaning back in his chair. “Exactly what I said, Aradia. Even if I wanted to, I don’t think I could do that. I’d need a court order just to get in there myself.”

“Okay, then,” she replied, “what about the crime scene?”

“That I could get you into,” he replied. Her eyes lit up like a kid who was promised a pony. “But I’m still not doing it.”

“But Daddy...” she whined.

“Choose your battles, Aradia. You don’t want to argue with me on this one. It will do you no good.”

“But it might do the investigation good,” she replied. “I want to be more involved in solving this case. You know I can help. I could help your department, your reputation...”

“This isn’t about me,” he shook his head. “Yes, it might help solve the case, but there is no guarantee that it will. And I can’t have you tamper with potential evidence.”

She pouted.

“Hey, Aradia, you want to know my biggest reason for not letting you get involved?”

She nodded sullenly.

“You’re fifteen. You should get to be a fifteen year old. You deserve that, and you deserve not to get sucked into every case that gives me trouble. It’s not about my pride. I remember high school. It was a great time for me. I wouldn’t have gotten to have half as much fun if I’d been out solving murders like the Hardy Boys.”

“I think the Hardy Boys still had fun. And I think the Scooby Squad would be a more apt comparison.”

He chuckled. “Look, Rai, I probably shouldn’t encourage you, but I’m proud of you. I’m proud of you for wanting to be involved, for wanting to do everything you can to help people, to protect people. But we’ve had this conversation before. I’m doing everything I can to protect *you*, and that means keeping you away from dangerous murderers.”

“Dad, no one would ever know. Not your colleagues, not the Vampire Murderer...”

Ross sighed and took a big gulp of his coffee. *Even I can't gulp something that hot. He must have desensitized his mouth to heat over the years.*

After he'd swallowed, he said, "There's also the house fire."

"I was twelve then," Aradia said. "I'm older now. I'm stronger and have better control."

"I want you to know how proud we were about the house fire," Ross said. "Your mother and I, we tried talking to you about it, but you were still acting out. It meant so much that even in the midst of your dark time, you still did the right thing. You risked your own life using your abilities to put out that house fire. You saved families."

"And I can help again now," Aradia said. "If you don't let me, it's like you're stopping me from putting out a house fire."

"You slept for three days straight," Ross replied. "You barely even took water. Your mother sat by your side day and night. Any longer and we'd have had no choice but to take you to the hospital, and from there... That would be the end of your secret, Aradia."

"I'm willing to risk it."

"We're not willing to risk you," he replied.

"This isn't fair," she said. "This is my choice."

"And someday you'll get to make it, and your mother and I will be so proud of you. But not today. Tell you what, you can get out of here if you want. You're good on your punishment for the day."

"Okay," she replied dejectedly.

Grumbling and muttering to herself, Aradia left her father's office and headed for the exit. She couldn't be mad at him, not after

how he'd been so honest with her, and so flattering of her. She never really had considered how hard it must have been for her parents after she put out that fire.

She'd just been so tired. Whenever she pushed her powers like that, it drained her. She was starting to get better about learning how to proportion her powers to get the result she needed without taking so much out of her.

She had to admit, though, she hadn't quite figured it all out yet.

"Thank you for coming in, Mr. Caradoc," Aradia heard from inside a nearby office on her way towards the exit.

Caradoc?

Aradia quickly made herself busy neatening up the break room. No sooner did she have her cover in place than the man she'd seen on the news, Mr. Stanley's business partner, emerged from the office with two of her father's coworkers.

"Anything to help you serve and protect," Derek Caradoc replied. He looked suave and sophisticated in his pinstriped suit. By any reasonable standard he was an attractive man. Yet Aradia didn't like his look.

The same lawyer who had just thanked him smiled and she said, "That's next door at the station. Here we make sure the bad guys they catch get put away."

Derek smiled. "If there is anything I can do to help, you have my number." They all shook hands, and Derek saw himself out. He turned to smirk at Aradia as he walked past. The room's temperature seemed to drop and she felt ice in her spine.

The lawyers came into the break room to fill up their own cups of coffee. Aradia did her best to look like she was ignoring them while she rearranged supplies in the cabinets. She hoped her father's coworkers were so used to seeing her by now that they wouldn't even notice her.

"Alright, Tony, what's your problem?" the same speaker as before demanded. Aradia couldn't quite remember her name, but she knew she was another ADA, like her dad.

The younger one, Tony, was a lawyer for the DA's office, but not an ADA himself.

The man shrugged casually before saying, "I just don't like that guy. I don't trust him."

The ADA nodded solemnly. "Neither do I."

"Stanley was this close to bankruptcy," Tony held up two fingers very close together, "when Derek partners up with him."

"Not all investors need a business to succeed to make a profit," she replied. "It's deceptive, but not illegal."

"Then he's either a criminal or a vulture," Tony replied. "Either way I don't like him."

"Not enough to get a warrant," she replied.

Tony stirred some more creamer into his coffee. "What about the insurance fraud?"

She shook her head. "Three counts of misdemeanor insurance fraud, the most recent of which was two years ago. He paid his court ordered fines. Nothing in this case points to insurance fraud as a motive."

“We need somebody to start talking,” Tony said.

She nodded. “Until somebody does, you can forget about them testifying. Without solid forensic evidence or reliable testimony, nothing major is going to stick.”

“It’s like everyone we talk to is afraid of something more frightening than seeing a murderer walk.”

At this point the two walked back out on their business, oblivious to Aradia sitting with wide eyes.

Chapter Fourteen

"So how goes the punishment parade?" Roy asked Aradia.

She sipped her hot chocolate and stared at him from across the diner table. He had one arm propped against the window and the other draped atop the booth’s head cushion. He looked very at home.

The two of them were sitting in the back corner adjacent to a side window at SilverMoon Diner. The SilverMoon was one of the most popular hangouts for Salem High students. It was located on Witch Lane, which of course made it the butt of many an Abbot-and-Costello-esque corny joke. It was smack in the middle of the city, three blocks from Salem High. The diner was close enough to cater to the high school students, yet far enough not to turn into an animal house.

It was also owned by Roy’s family.

"It depends," Aradia responded before taking a bite out her cheeseburger. Through her full mouth she asked, "How should it be going?"

The diner had two full menus. The first was a classic, with burgers, chili cheese fries, and milkshakes galore. The second was traditional Guatemalan food. Roy's family was originally from Guatemala, and they were proud of their heritage and culture. They couldn't decide when they were opening shop which type of restaurant to open, so they did both. It seemed to work pretty well.

Aradia was particularly thankful for that decision, for she practically lived off their burgers, no matter how much she was scolded by her mother. The fusion design also afforded her the opportunity to learn that she had quite an affinity for chuchitos.

"What do you mean?" asked Roy.

"I was stupid and I'm being punished. You don't expect me to be having fun, do you?" Aradia responded. She was mildly annoyed that he was broaching the topic, but she almost immediately regretted snapping at him. Annoying or not, he was being thoughtful.

Roy hung his head sheepishly but then drew himself up straight. *It's amazing how readable he is*, Aradia realized, then regretted that she was psychoanalyzing her friend rather than listening to him.

"Excuse me for worrying about you, Aradia. Maybe next time I'll know better."

Yeah, I deserved that, she thought. *Though it was really passive aggressive.*

"Sorry, Roy. I guess I'm just a little upset. It's like, I've learned my lesson, and I couldn't possibly regret it more, but the punishment just keeps on reminding me, you know? So then I start getting mad that they're still punishing me, but it's kind of like, I did it to myself, so then I get frustrated that I got mad at them."

Roy nodded and said, "I can understand that."

After swigging down the last of her hot cocoa, Aradia said, "I'm glad you and your brothers got out unscathed."

"Thanks to you, you mean," he said. Aradia already knew the trio had avoided arrest and had managed to sneak into their bedrooms. Roy had shared that during their initial debrief the Monday after the party. Since then he'd consistently brought up the premonition she'd had. She made it clear she didn't want to talk about it, but that hadn't stopped Roy from mentioning it every chance he got. So far she'd evaded the topic successfully.

"Glad I could help," said Aradia.

Roy leaned forward.

After a quick inspection to see if anyone was in earshot, he looked Aradia in the eye and asked, "How on earth did you manage to know beforehand that the cops were going to show?"

Aradia choked on her mouthful of half-chewed fries. After Roy finished slapping her hard on the back, he returned to his seat to await her explanation. He wasn't letting it go this time. Aradia was torn because she did not know what to say.

I knew I'd have to deal with this eventually.

If she lied, he would probably know. She ran through her options. She could say she had heard sirens. Then Roy would say, "*You couldn't hear police sirens three feet from the door between the music and the general clamor of everyone.*" He'd obviously be right, and she'd be a liar. She could say she'd called in a tip to the police. That would explain how she knew, but it was really much more trouble than it was worth.

She could say nothing. Silence is honest. Of course, he would never let it go, and he'd probably try to find the answer on his own. Maybe he'd succeed.

She could tell the truth. He probably wouldn't believe her, and then she'd be back to being a liar. She could prove it, of course. Maybe not the precognition, but enough consecutive successful guesses at the *pick a number* game would probably convince him she had something special going on.

Supposing he did believe her, though, what if he told someone? *There was probably a pretty good reason why Superman never told his childhood friends what he could really do.*

Completely torn by ethics and a desperate need to survive, Aradia looked nervously at Roy who was eagerly awaiting her answer.

Finally, she said, "Does it really matter now? I knew the cops would show up, and they did. I warned you, you and your brothers got out, and I was busted, kind of. So really, does it matter how I knew?"

Roy said nothing, which made Aradia feel frustrated.

Finally, in an angry huff, she stood up and said, "Well, if it bothers you so much that I can't explain everything I do to you, then maybe I should save you the trouble of wondering by leaving you alone!"

She turned to leave, but in a flash Roy was at her side and grasping her hand.

"Hey now, Aradia, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful, because I'm not," Roy said while giving a gentle tug on her hand. She responded and looked at him. "I was just curious, that's all."

"Yeah, well, remember what curiosity did to the cat," Aradia muttered with her eyes lowered.

Using two fingers from his free hand, Roy tilted her chin up. Turning his own head down toward hers, he looked her in the eye and very seriously said, "You might not know this about me, but I'm not a cat. More of a dog person, really."

Aradia laughed, and soon they were both seated again. Aradia got the impression Roy wasn't too happy that the table was back between them, but she resisted the urge to read his mind.

"That's a shame," she said winking. "I love cats. Always wanted one."

"Oh, well I..." he fumbled. "I don't dislike cats," he finished lamely.

Aradia laughed and Roy smiled. For a while neither of them said anything, happily eating away at their respective meals, making small talk, and smiling when their eyes met. At some point Roy's

hand found its way back to Aradia's. She hardly noticed when it happened, and she let him keep it there. Roy was happy as a clam, and Aradia considered it quite a pleasant afternoon, until the door to the diner opened and in walked Dax Dayton.

Today he was wearing a green polo, khakis, and dark brown loafers. His blonde hair was perfectly combed and the reflected sunlight seemed to set it ablaze.

Aradia yanked her hand from Roy's grasp and stared at Dax.

Ever since the encounter at Jayce's, Aradia's attitude toward Dax had changed dramatically. He'd been an utter jerk, and the relentless staring had an almost stalker quality to it. Yet instead of being dismayed, she found herself somewhere between flattered and excited by his attention. She could not stop herself from looking at him completely mystified.

The reason why I am staring at him all the time is because he's handsome, Aradia thought to herself. And he stares at me because he lacks basic social skills. Yeah, that's probably it. No matter what she tried to convince herself, though, part of her knew that there was something much deeper involved when it came to her and Dax.

Dax stopped by the counter, bought a glass-bottled Coke-Cola, paid the cashier, and turned to walk out toward the door when he saw Aradia. He froze. Since the party, they had not spoken a word, and this instance was no exception. Dax just stood there, looking right at her. For a brief few moments, Aradia felt the world melt away. There was only she and Dax left.

Then he spun on his heel and took his leave of the diner. Aradia stared after him, still entranced, until Roy barked a gruff, annoyed cough.

“So...” Roy began, voice dripping with disdain. “I guess you have a thing for one of the Coppertone boys.”

“The who?” Aradia asked.

“Is one of the greatest rock bands ever?” Roy quipped with a smile.

“No, no,” Aradia responded with a few shakes of her head.

“What I meant was...”

“I know what you meant.” This time Roy responded with a scowl, not a smile.

“If you know what I meant, are you going to answer me?” Aradia snapped.

Roy sighed and seemed to consider his options. Finally he explained, “We call Dax and them the ‘Coppertone boys’ because he and his kind always reek of sunscreen.”

“His kind?” Aradia repeated.

Flustered, Roy doubled back by saying, “You know, I mean his friends, him and his crew, not his kind. Slip of the tongue, Rai.”

Aradia just nodded. She wasn’t sure what to make of the strange turn the conversation had taken. Picking an angle, she asked, “Why do they reek of sunscreen?”

Roy shrugged and then said, “I guess they don’t want to burn.”

“I don’t wear sun block,” Aradia replied, “but from what I understand, it’s a good idea to prevent skin cancer and aging.”

“Really not their concern,” Roy mumbled. Quickly he added, “Besides, they slather it on. Practically bathe in it. I can smell them coming a mile off.”

"Your sense of smell is that good?"

“Hyperbole,” Roy replied. “Extreme exaggeration to make a point.”

Aradia said nothing.

Enough pieces were falling into place that she could get an idea of the big picture. What she’d seen in the alleyway behind the Visitor Center, the overly attractive people staring at her, the Vampire Murders, and now what Roy knew about the Coppertone boys and their “kind” all seemed cut from the same cloth.

The logical side of her mind argued that there must be a simpler solution than the path down which she was headed. Then the logical side of her mind admitted that the things she herself could do were supposed to be impossible, and maybe she shouldn’t rule anything out just yet.

Roy certainly seemed to know more about the situation than she’d have expected him to.

"I got to get going," Aradia said as she grabbed her backpack off the booth cushion.

He glanced at his watch and said, “Hang on. I’ll ask one of my brothers to give you a ride home.”

Aradia shook her head. "I’ve got to stop by the forest. I need to gather some herbs for biology class. We’re starting the chapters on botany soon, and I wanted to bring in some interesting samples to

show Ms. Flora. Isn't that awesome that her name's Ms. Flora and she teaches biology?"

"The forest?" Roy's face became ashen grey. "But tonight's a full moon!"

"Yeah I know, that's the best time to gather samples, by the light of the full moon at midnight. Sounds kind of mystical, I know, but hey, I guess Walt Disney had to get his ideas from somewhere."

"You can't go into the forest at night."

"Okay. Why not?"

"Well," Roy paused, searching for an answer that would satisfy her enough to abort her plan. "There are animals out there, and...the full moon is... is... when the weirdos come out!"

Aradia raised an eyebrow and said, "Roy, what are you really afraid of, a werewolf might get me?"

Roy went from grey to completely white. The look he gave Aradia was that of a five-year-old seeing Bambi's mother being shot. Aradia noticed the change in Roy's demeanor. She realized he was holding out on her about a number of topics.

She'd need more to go on before she sacrificed her grades just to soothe a friend's nerves. *Friends come and go, but my transcript will last forever!*

"Well, anyway, thanks for the concern Roy. I will keep it in my mind."

"So you're not going?" he asked hopefully.

"Of course I'm going."

Roy's face fell.

"Look, no offense Roy, but my GPA far outranks your fears of the woods at night. But I'll look out for weirdos and animals, alright?"

Roy looked as if he was about to cry.

Aradia hugged him and whispered in his ear, "Don't worry, Roy. I'll be okay. I'm a lot tougher than I look."

Her parents were not happy at first about her plans for the evening, but after a little conversation they acquiesced. She pointed out that she was being honest with them, and part of rebuilding their trust in her was giving her the opportunity to earn it.

"Plus," Aradia tacked on to the end of her argument, "it's for school, and I'd hate for you to crush my love of learning."

Full or not, the moon did not provide a lot of light. She had an idea of where to look, but finding the plants she wanted was still a challenge by flashlight. She honestly wasn't sure why she did most of her collecting at night, but she'd noticed her plants did best when she gathered them under certain, odd circumstances. She'd studied a fair amount of literature on the matter, but couldn't explain it.

It was well into the night by the time Aradia had found and properly catalogued everything for which she'd come. Most girls, most people even, would feel hopelessly lost where Aradia was. She did not. She felt a certain calm come over her when she got away from civilization. It helped her relax and reflect.

She placed her hand against a tree. She felt the cool, moist bark beneath her fingertips. Closing her eyes, she felt beyond her fingers,

into the tree itself, down through its roots, into the very earth. She could feel the tickle of the swaying branches and the leaves whispering in the wind. She'd fought against her powers for most of her life, but in times like this, her abilities brought her peace.

She'd been sincere when she'd told Roy not to worry. His concerns, no matter how poorly justified, were not to be completely discounted. She just didn't imagine coming up against an opponent who could beat her in a fight.

She could do so much, she'd half-considered doing the superhero gig. She smiled at the concept. She imagined she'd have a purple jumpsuit, a short yellow cape, and maybe a utility belt. That was never really an option for her, though. To Aradia, it was the role of the police and the courts to uphold the law, inflicting judgment and punishment. Anything else was vigilantism.

After all, Aradia concluded, what's the point of having laws if not everyone follows them?

She couldn't shake the notion, though, that with all the powers she had, there must be something special she was supposed to do with them.

She let her arm fall, severing her connection. She had to get home. She made her way back to the road. It was a relatively lengthy drive to her house from where she was, but cutting through the forest a couple times would make it a fairly easy walk.

Over the tops of some boulders on her left she saw the lights from the police station. She smiled as she briefly considered stopping by and asking Officer Ortega for a ride home.

Nah, she decided. It's almost two in the morning. The skeleton crew is probably one officer and a janitor at this hour.

Aradia stopped and froze. Just like the time on the way to Jayce's party, she heard heavy breathing and felt eyes on her. She debated how to proceed.

A rustle of the underbrush directly behind her made her decision. Aradia turned. Prowling toward her menacingly was a big, black wolf. It growled at her maliciously, hungrily.

When Aradia had considered what kind of opponents she might face, she had underestimated how terrifying an adversary could be.

The beast was larger than any wolf of which Aradia had ever heard. It was so large, mangy, and ferocious that it seemed more like the crossbreed of a hyena and a lion.

It was also wearing pants. That was weird.

Aradia was petrified and didn't know what to do. She feared that any action she took might provoke it. Its muscles were tight and bunched. It was ready to pounce if she gave it reason. She suspected it was fast.

For several long minutes, which were practically an eternity, the two of them faced off in complete silence.

The wolf began to crouch lower and Aradia heard its breathing slowing down. *Maybe it's relaxing*, Aradia hoped. No sooner had the thought crossed her mind than the animal finally did pounce.

She was right that it was fast. Its monstrous jaw went straight toward Aradia's throat, but with her lightning quick reflexes she

managed to dodge it. Pivoting quickly on her right leg, she kicked hard with her left, and used the beast's size and momentum against it. The wolf slammed hard into a tree. After hardly a moment's pause, it picked itself up and turned to face Aradia once again.

Much to Aradia's amazement, instead of attacking, the wolf raised itself unnaturally upon its hind legs. It flexed its front legs and paws as if they were arms and hands. Aradia was positively dumbfounded. The situation was unheard of. *Unheard of outside of horror movies.* She did not have time to dwell on the thought, though, for the wolf again struck.

She moved to dodge the blow again, but the creature anticipated her deflection. The wolf feinted to her right, then sunk its teeth into her outstretched left arm. It wasn't fighting like a wolf.

That was when Aradia finally lit upon the real truth.

Holy crap, I'm fighting a werewolf.

Aradia bellowed in pain as the werewolf's teeth sunk into the meat of her left forearm. Using her right fist she beat at the wolf's face in an effort to force it off. She did not pull her punches.

Every time her fist connected, she heard a heavy thud and felt the wolf recoil against her strength. It held fast, however, and using its greater weight forced her to the ground. *This will not end well.*

Close as she was to the werewolf's face, Aradia got a good look straight into its eyes. She was caught by them, surprised not only by their humanity, but also by their familiarity.

Hoping she wasn't making a mistake, and with the knowledge that she was gambling with her life, she grabbed the wolf by its

muzzle. She wrenched the wolf's teeth from her arm, and both she and the beast yowled.

With the creature's head held fast, she stared into its eyes once more. Only this time, Aradia did more than just stare. Calming herself as much as she could, given the circumstances, she reached into the other being's mind. Her psychic power usually just gave her visions but if necessary she could use it for things. Touching an animal's mind had always been odd for her, but she hoped the fact that this wasn't exactly your PetSmart type of pooch might be of aid to her.

Contact. There was indeed a sentience in it. She searched the wolf's mind, and tried to soothe it. As often happened when using her powers in this manner, Aradia lost track of the flow of time. Seconds or hours might have passed as far as she knew.

Then her mouth fell open in disbelief.

"Roy!" she shrieked, "Is that you?"

The wolf wrestled away from her grasp, and bore its teeth viciously. Roy was in there, she was sure, but the guy she'd had a relaxed meal with earlier definitely wasn't calling the shots now. Aradia felt around quickly for a weapon. Her right hand settled on a tree branch. Her left arm hung limp, throbbing and seemingly useless.

Once again, the Roy-wolf stood on its hind legs ready to attack its prey. Aradia backed up, slowly dragging the branch with her, and pressed her back against a tree. Her foe followed with her, measuring her actions. Carefully she inched herself up the trunk until she was

standing, and looked the werewolf straight in the eyes. She hoped to get through to the Roy inside the monster, so that he might take control and cease the attack.

Aradia was sorely disappointed.

The wolf lunged at Aradia. With superhuman agility she darted to her side, and tossed the branch from her right hand to her bloody left one. With her injured left arm she swung the branch and knocked her friend out cold.

At first, she contemplated just running straight home. After a bit of deliberation, she shook her head at that idea. She couldn't just leave Roy here like this, for his sake and for everyone else's. Resigning herself to the task, she retrieved her rucksack, bandaged her arm up as best she could with her first aid kit, and grabbed Roy by his ankles.

Where to? she wondered. Her house? Out of the questions. There was no way she'd expose her parents to an out-of-control werewolf. Roy's? Maybe, but if his family didn't know he was a werewolf, she didn't want to be the one to out him.

Just then she again noticed the glow of lights from the police station.

I suppose it's worth checking out

Chapter Fifteen

“Worth checking out, huh, Aradia?” she grumbled to herself. She had underestimated the difficulty of dragging an unconscious werewolf through a mile of forest. She’d kept off the road. She really did not want to explain the situation to a passing motorist.

Her blood soaked through the quick and dirty patch job she’d done on her wound, but she didn’t think she was at risk of losing too much blood. The bite itself was filthy with saliva and grime and bacteria, but she’d always proven naturally resilient against infections, so she was content with her own health for the moment.

She was tired, though. It was past three now, and using her powers as she had under combat conditions had taken a toll on her as well.

The Salem Police Department was not large, and given the time of day, was only lightly staffed. *Am I really trying to rationalize breaking into a police station?*

As stealthily as she could with Roy in tow, Aradia snuck around to the back of the building. *Maybe I can find an extra set of keys to the jail cells, sneak Roy into one of them, and wait it out until morning...*

She considered her options for a while before finally admitting aloud, “This is nuts. Time for a new plan, Rai.”

Her first step would be dragging Roy back into the woods. However, as soon as she turned, she found herself face to face with a uniformed police officer, and it wasn’t one of the two she knew.

Aradia's breath caught in her throat. She was so scared that she didn't notice his disheveled appearance, unkempt hair, untucked shirt, or twitching nose.

"What have we here?" he demanded in what Aradia thought was a very un-police-officerish tone.

"Just, um..." Aradia replied awkwardly. Avoiding eye contact, she mumbled, "Walking my dog."

The man grunted in response and advanced toward her slowly. She backed up, stumbling over werewolf-Roy. She scrambled to her feet as he reached out to her and she wondered if she was getting arrested.

To her surprise, he reached right past her and inspected the wolf. She observed, not sure what to make of it. He felt for Roy's pulse and counted as he timed on his wristwatch. Thirty seconds later and seemingly satisfied, the officer checked Roy's injuries.

"So, uh, are you also a vet?" Aradia asked, not sure if she was joking or in earnest.

He ignored her. She briefly considered bolting, but there was no way she could leave Roy helpless in the hands of this odd man.

"You had a fair idea," the officer said, "if a piss-poor plan on executing it. Give me a hand here."

Aradia stood stock still.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he said to a confused Aradia. "Animal control? Help me get him inside into one of the cells."

She still didn't know what to make of this guy, but it was her plan he was helping her complete. Reluctantly, she grabbed Roy's

legs and hefted him up. The two of them were able to carry him with relative ease.

When they got to the building, they carefully set Roy down. Officer Scruffy pulled out a set of keys and entered a code on a keypad beside the door. Aradia noticed he put his body between her and the keypad as he did so, blocking her from seeing the code. The pad chirped a happy noise, a green light flashed, and she heard the door click unlocked.

He held a finger to his lips and slowly exhaled, “Shhhhhh,” before motioning to pick up Roy again.

This dude is seriously creepy, she thought. Nonetheless, she figured he couldn't be too bad of a character if he was guiding her into a police station. She obeyed his directive and again helped lift Roy.

Together they hauled him into one of the cells. She was pleased to see the other few cells were empty and nobody was overseeing the area. *Crime must be down*, she deduced.

When they'd completed their task, Aradia whispered, “Why are you doing this?”

Officer Scruffy thought for a moment, glancing from the incarcerated wolf to Aradia and back a couple times. Finally he replied, “Part of me thinks I should kill you.”

She backed up a step and said, “Whoa, really not an appropriate answer to my question.”

“Keep your voice down,” he chastised her.

“You just...” she caught herself speaking loudly, and tried again in a whisper, “You just said you might kill me!”

“I probably should,” he said quietly. His nose twitched again, and he looked contemplative. “I figure, though, if you can knock out a pureblooded werewolf, you must be hidden.”

“Werewolf?” Aradia repeated, playing dumb. “I think somebody’s been reading a little too much *Twilight* there, buddy. I was just, um, walking my dog. He’s an Alaskan husky. Mix. An Alaskan husky mix. That’s why he looks like a wolf. Sorta.”

He chuckled, but did not press the point.

“What did you mean by hidden?” she asked.

He looked at her curiously, cautiously. After a tense silence he said, “If you’re still playing dumb, then fine, I can play that game. If you really don’t know, though,” he flicked a thumb in Roy’s direction, “just wait until he wakes up and ask him.”

She rolled her eyes. “He’s usually about as forthcoming as you are.”

He smiled, and for the first time since she’d met him, he didn’t seem so menacing. “That’s good. He must be careful with how much he divulges. You should be too, though I suspect you know at least that much already.”

Abruptly he turned and headed toward a doorway into the forward portion of the structure. After keying in another code, he left Aradia and Roy alone.

Muffled by the door, she could make out a brief conversation on the other side. “Repairs still going on,” Scruffy called out. “Have to keep the area clear till morning.”

She couldn’t quite make out the response, but she got the gist of it as being another officer astonished at repair work being done at that hour.

“Thanks, Scruffy,” she whispered. Finally able to release her tension, she actually chuckled.

She pulled her phone from her rucksack and started a text to both her parents:

<Hi guys. I’m fine. Some stuff happened. I’m at the police station. Not arrested. Can’t talk. Explain everything later. Trust me.>

She did not get an immediate response, for which she was grateful.

There were a couple chairs lining the walls. She grabbed one and pulled it near Roy’s cell. She was careful to keep enough distance that he could not lunge and reach her, in case he woke up and was angry.

She cast a glance at Roy sleeping in his wolf form. When she hadn’t been looking he’d curled up in a ball, and his legs were twitching like he was having a running dream.

“What a weird night,” she muttered to herself.

It was a little over two hours later, at the first light of dawn, when Roy shifted back into his human form. Aradia had dozed a bit,

but had never fallen into a very deep sleep. She was exhausted, but when the transformation began, her grogginess disappeared.

She could not help but stare as she watched. His fur retracted back into his skin, and his bones shrank and adjusted into their proper places. His skin grew tight and rippled, like the surface of a pond under a light breeze. His snout disappeared altogether, and his dog-nose morphed into a human one. His fierce, carnivorous teeth dulled and turned into that cute smile she knew so well. He slept through the whole process.

She hadn't noticed in his wolf form, but he still wore some tatters of the clothes he had worn the previous day. That made her wonder if perhaps the initial transformation had come sooner than he'd expected it to. He'd been concerned about the full moon, so he must have known he would change. Why wouldn't he have taken his clothes off? That would start getting expensive, fast, if he had to buy new clothes every full moon.

There wasn't really much left of his t-shirt and jeans. He was still wearing, though, a set of elastic-looking boxer briefs. She noticed with a chuckle that he'd apparently cut a hole in the back of them, presumably for his werewolf tail.

I wonder where you find elastic underwear. I guess at a werewolf clothing store.

She had just seen him transform, and yet it was so hard for her to believe that the guy now lying on the floor of the jail cell had fought her as a werewolf the night before. Looking back at her experiences so far in Salem, she supposed it did make some sense.

It explained his keen sense of smell, and his ability to keep up with her on the track. His strange warning about the full moon at his family diner made a sort of ironic sense. He'd been warning her about himself. *I can't believe he'd let himself turn into a werewolf outside like that. If it hadn't been me he'd found, he'd have killed somebody tonight.*

Just then, a horrible thought struck Aradia with such force that she feared she'd vomit. What if Roy had, in the past, killed people?

Aradia looked and studied Roy's form and thought back on what she knew of werewolves. She'd never really been too interested in fantasy, but she had *True Blood* and *Being Human* on her DVR. He'd definitely looked wolf-like, but he'd been much bigger than any conventional wolf. He'd had some very human features as well. She thought with a shudder about how he'd reared up on his hind legs and come at her. She glanced down at her still throbbing arm. Then she thought about those eyes, still so familiar even while his teeth were latched on to her.

She needed him awake, now.

"Roy," Aradia prodded him with her foot.

Roy made a lazy growling noise as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. Slowly he propped himself up and rose to his feet.

He stopped, however, as soon as he realized where he was.

"Why am I in jail?"

He was surprised when Aradia answered him.

"Would you rather be at the animal shelter?"

He jumped and spun around to face her. The two of them stood perfectly still, looking at each other.

Finally Aradia asked, almost conversationally, "So, you're a werewolf?"

Roy sputtered, "Whoa, um... What do you mean?"

Aradia rolled her eyes and said, "C'mon Roy. I know what you are."

"You're serious?" Roy repeated again, fear evident in his voice. His words were no longer slurring.

Aradia stared him down like she was at the final table of the World Series of Poker.

Roy burst out laughing. "You're really serious?" he asked as he laughed. He kept it up for a while, but Aradia kept her face stony straight.

"Aradia," Roy began while holding up his hand. "Look, I don't know what drugs you're hopped up on, but I'm sure once it's worn off you're really going to laugh about this."

"Roy, I saw you," Aradia stated.

"Saw what?" Roy asked.

"I saw you as a wolf last night. I read your mind, I figured out who you were in your wolf form, and just a few minutes ago I saw you transform back into a human. I know for a fact that you are a werewolf!"

Roy opened his mouth to argue once again, but then clamped it shut after her words reached him. "What do you mean you read my mind?"

Aradia had considered not telling Roy about her own powers, but after all the freaky stuff that had happened, she decided that it was better to take the gloves off and be perfectly honest with him.

"I said I read your mind. I probed it. It's something I can do. That's how I knew you were the wolf that attacked me."

"Attacked you?" Roy repeated.

His gaze fell upon her left arm. All of a sudden, his face turned as white as a sheet of high gloss printer paper.

Aradia expected him to deny it even more furiously, but instead he rushed her and grabbed hold of her shoulders.

"My God, Aradia, I am so sorry. I am so very sorry, but I swear to God I did not mean to turn you. Don't worry, though, I won't abandon you. I will help you adjust to your new powers, okay? I'll introduce you to the others of the pack. We will protect you, and teach you our ways. It will be hard, and it'll take some adjusting. You will be fine, though, I swear!"

"Roy...Roy...Roy...dang it Roy, would you shut up!" Aradia shouted in the middle of Roy's ranting.

Roy's look of pity only deepened. He felt a bit like a policeman who had taken a bullet for a child, a child who instead of thanking him, had turned around and bit him. He was hurt, but she had no understanding of her situation. He couldn't help but pity her.

"I'm sorry, Aradia," Roy responded. "You were right though. I am a werewolf. And now, so are you. I was just trying to let you know that I was willing to help you get used to it."

Aradia's head spun. "Okay," she said. "First things first, we need to get out of here."

"We need to talk," Roy said.

"Walk me home. We can talk on the way."

"Um..." he said, glancing down at himself, bashful for the first time in the conversation.

"Fine, I'll walk you home. Let's go."

They headed for the rear door. "Hey," Roy said before she pushed it open. "You don't suppose this is alarmed or anything, do you?"

"Hmm," she replied. "I don't think so."

She pushed the door open. Neither of them heard anything unusual, but they hurried for the tree line just the same.

"I'm sorry, Aradia, but despite what you may have read in books and stuff, it really only takes one bite or scratch from a werewolf to turn you."

Aradia responded, "Do you remember biting me?"

Roy had the decency to blush. He shook his head and said, "No, I don't know. I don't always remember what I do when I transform. Most of the time I can control it okay, but on a full moon..."

Aradia didn't know what to think. *A werewolf? Really?* She sighed and asked, "How long does it take for the bite to heal?"

They crept through the woods as they talked. Roy led the way, as Aradia had no idea how to get to his house. They stayed out of line of sight of the road. Dawn had broken, and Aradia wanted to

explain being out with half-naked Roy almost as little as she wanted to explain being out with unconscious werewolf-Roy.

He replied, "It won't heal until the next lunar cycle, when you undergo your first change. Until then it will... well, it'll be pretty nasty. Why?"

Aradia had taken the opportunity in the jail cell to retreat her arm, replacing the impromptu bandaging with a more thorough one. It had been a couple hours, but she had an idea of what to expect. "Well Roy, feast your eyes on this." With that, Aradia ripped the bandaging off her injured arm and held it out for him to view.

It did not look good. Her arm was red, puffy, and swollen. Her veins were clearly visible beneath the skin which had become pale and almost translucent. Upon first glance, an observer would think she needed immediate and emergency medical attention.

Roy looked at it more closely than that, though. He saw that the puncture marks made by his fangs and bicuspid had closed and scabbed over. The flesh around the edges of the wound was less ragged and distressed than he'd have expected. It was quite a trauma, but her body was managing to repair it.

"But how?" he managed in shock. "I mean, I am sure I bit you..."

"You did," said Aradia solemnly, nodding to the bite.

"But a werewolf bite can't possibly heal like this. It will stay open and raw until the next cycle."

"Can this mean I won't be a werewolf?" she asked him.

"I... I don't know," he replied. "Maybe. I'm not an expert on this kind of thing. Aradia, how?"

"Well," she replied, "I did say I read your mind. I also knocked you out while you were still in your wolf form. I don't think a strong healing factor is that big of a deal, all in all."

Roy walked on in silence, completely stunned.

Aradia was feeling much better. Roy was right, she couldn't be sure of anything until the next cycle, but her fate was no longer sealed.

She'd finally broken through Roy's barriers and gotten him talking, and she wasn't about to let him stop now. Coolly she asked, "So are you going to tell me what the hell is going on, or am I going to have to go all Michael Vick on you again?"

"These dog jokes are going to get old real fast," he replied. He did allow a cautious grin at Aradia's joke, though, and added, "Okay, I'll tell you what you want to know, but on one condition."

"Name it," said Aradia, eager to finally get answers.

"Full disclosure. I tell you everything about me and my kind, you promise to tell me what you are."

"You mean you'll show me yours if I show you mine?" asked Aradia, coyly raising an eyebrow.

Roy snorted and said, "Yeah, something like that."

"Okay," said Aradia.

Roy was a little taken aback. "I'd expected you to be a bit more hesitant at revealing your secrets."

Aradia just shrugged and said, "Roy, if I've learned just one thing, it's that it's better to tell the truth, especially to your friends, and we are friends, aren't we?"

Roy stopped and looked Aradia square in the eye. He said, "Rai, not only did you stop me from killing anyone but you personally put me someplace safe and stayed by my side the entire night." His eyes grew tender and locked intimately with hers.

Aradia just shrugged casually and said, "Hell, the real reason I stayed was because my dad's office is in the same complex. I've done a lot of tidying there recently. I was worried you might wreck the place."

Roy, crestfallen, asked her, "Really?"

"No," she said with a teasing smile, and nudged him to start walking again.

He grinned his goofy ear-to-ear grin and Aradia asked, "So are we friends or what?"

Roy smiled even wider and affirmed, "Definitely."

"So, tell me why my best friend is a werewolf."

He took a deep breath. "Ok."

It took approximately two hours for Roy to explain everything to her. They reached Roy's house long before he was done with his tale. He took a quick break to dart inside for some clothes. He returned promptly and picked up where he'd left off.

He was indeed a werewolf, and he was not the only one Aradia knew. All four of his brothers were werewolves, as was his father

and presumably his mother. He really wasn't sure on his mother, because she had left right after his youngest brother was born.

“Why don't you just ask your dad?” Aradia asked.

“We don't really talk about her much. Dad gets upset, and my brothers and I hardly remember her. Most of us don't remember her at all.”

“Why do you think she was probably a werewolf, then? Because you all are werewolves?”

He shrugged. “I don't know. Many people say only pure bloods can make offspring werewolves.”

“So do you think your bio-mom was a werewolf?” she pressed.

“It's just... uncommon... for a hidden to mate outside his kind.”

“His kind,” she repeated distastefully.

He raised his eyebrows. “It is how it is, Aradia. You're the one who asked.”

She sighed. “I know I did. Go on.”

He explained that his pack included his brothers, father, cousins, aunt, and uncles. It was basically his entire family. “Except for the Ortega branch,” he added.

She paused at the name. “You mean Officer Ortega?”

He nodded. “They're not werewolves. I'm not sure how we're related, to be honest. By marriage through a great-aunt, or something like that.”

“I thought you said werewolves only mate with other werewolves?”

“I said it was uncommon to be otherwise. Not unheard of though.”

Together he and his werewolf relatives were known as the SilverMoon pack. The moniker stood to reason, given that they pretty much lived at the diner as if it were a second home.

Roy explained that he was a full-blood werewolf, meaning he'd been born one. Aradia, if she were a werewolf, would be an initiate. Roy reluctantly admitted that initiates are generally looked down upon in werewolf culture.

“Hey, you said ‘hidden’ earlier. What did you mean?”

“That’s what we are, all of us. Rai, there aren’t just werewolves living in Salem. We’ve got vampires, fairies, shapeshifters, gargoyles, unicorns, elves, gnomes, and plenty of other things you didn’t think existed living here too.”

“Why haven’t I noticed them before?” Aradia asked. “Why hasn’t anybody noticed them? How can we have fairies and werewolves running around in secret? I feel like it should be on the news, or something.”

Roy's face grew serious the moment she made that remark. He then said, voice quiet, “There is a generic name for our people. All of us. Humans call themselves the human race. My race of people and the other races like mine are together the hidden race. That’s what I meant earlier when I said ‘hidden.’ We call ourselves that because the highest, most important law we have is that we must remain hidden from the human world.”

Aradia asked why she had not met any hiddens when she lived in Arizona.

Roy explained, “Many hiddens choose not to live among the humans. Instead, they live in their own separate communities, even cities, where only their kind dwell.”

“But not Salem?”

He chuckled. “No, not Salem. The hiddens out west are old school. They keep to themselves. Most places, really. There are some more progressive hiddens though who choose to integrate.”

“With other hiddens?”

“More with humans. There’s some of that everywhere, really. Hell, you might have had a faerie or a vampire in your class and not known it. Some places there’s more of it than others.”

“Salem?”

“Hidden central,” Roy explained. “Salem, Paris, Tokyo, Las Vegas, Amsterdam, Beijing... a few other places. It’s a growing trend the last century or so.”

“Who else that I know is a hidden?”

“Well, just about every third student at Salem High is a hidden.” Disdainfully he went on, “Dax and the Coppertone boys are vampires. Tristan’s a fae.”

“Fae?”

“That’s what they call themselves. They think it sounds cooler than fairy.”

Aradia snorted, thinking how ironic it was that a jerk like Tristan could be a fairy. Ironic, she thought to herself, and yet strangely satisfying.

“Most hiddens you meet will be fae, werewolves, vampires, or shapeshifters.”

“You said there were a bunch more?”

He shrugged. “It’s kind of a regional thing. Like humans. Most humans from a certain place look a certain way. They talk about having different races themselves.”

Aradia nodded, finding the analogy helpful. “But all sorts of people came to America.”

“And even in America, anybody who isn’t white is called a minority. Depending on where you live you’ll mostly have some combination of people who are white, black, Latino, or Asian.”

She nodded again.

“Hey, why did you stand me up?” Aradia asked unexpectedly.

“Huh?”

“I’ve been wondering. It seemed kind of funky, and now that I know about the whole hidden thing, maybe I can get a straight answer.”

His brow furrowed while he tried to connect the dots. Then he saw it. “Oh, the day I met you.”

“First day of freshman year, lunch. You said you’d meet me, then you never showed. Where were you? Something hidden?”

“Yeah. My brothers were chewing me out.”

“Why?”

“For racing you.”

Aradia thought that over. “You’re not allowed to take part in sports?” she asked, although she had a good idea of what he really meant.

“Nah, we can, we just can’t go all out. It’s not a hard and fast law. Honestly we don’t have many of those. But staying hidden is the key. Running like that draws too much attention.” Ashamedly he said, “I let myself be a showboat.”

“Hmm,” was all Aradia replied. She knew exactly what he meant. Ever since that day, De Sylva had been pestering her to join the Track and Field team. Of her own accord, to protect her own secret, she’d actually made sure not to run at her full capacity in front of the coach again. “Maybe that’s a good policy. Okay, tell me more about hiddens.”

He continued dispensing information. Aradia found plenty of it distasteful, but she absorbed it all. One thing she found truly interesting was that, according to Roy, he was not allowed to associate with other types of hidden.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I’m a werewolf,” he replied, as if that was a full and complete answer.

“Before you said hiddens in Salem are more progressive.”

“We are. We don’t wage wars with each other,” he replied, quite seriously.

“You said you integrate.”

“We do. We go to school together, some of us work together. We make an effort to generally get along, when we have to. But we don’t hang out or go to barbecues on weekends.”

“But why not?”

“Aradia, I have my people to worry about. I can’t jeopardize my pack by associating with those who are not. I would risk exposing us all to danger!” Roy answered.

Aradia drew away from him. She said, "So basically, you are not allowed to hang with other hiddens because they are different."

"Exactly," said Roy. Aradia was silent. Upon reflecting on what he’d just said, he added. "No... no... wait, it’s not like that."

"Then what’s it like, Roy?"

"Well, um," Roy hesitated before explaining. "With other werewolves, you share a kindred spirit. You are of the same people. Even with different packs, we’ve all got the wolf in us. You understand one another. With people who aren’t werewolves, they don’t know anything about you. They live differently than we do; they obey different laws and sometimes disrespect our way of life. They call us 'animals' or 'mutts.' It’s just how it is."

"Seems to me, Roy, that while we of the human race have gotten rid of segregation, your people still practice it."

Roy snorted disdainfully. "There’s a big difference."

“Yeah?” she replied sarcastically.

“Yeah,” he said, anger rising. “My people are segregated for good reasons. For safety, our own and everybody else’s. Yours were simply ignorant bigots.”

Aradia had had enough. She was tired of arguing. Instead she made a mental note that this was an issue she would need to confront again, when she knew more and was better prepared.

She then got up and said, "Okay, Roy. Whatever you say."

"Hey!" Roy snapped. She shot a warning glare at him. He clamped his jaw shut and seemed to suddenly realize he was yelling. "Hey, Rai, I'm sorry. I, uh... so soon after a change, we can get a little heated."

"Werewolves?" she asked.

"Yeah," he replied. "It's... well, it's something you'll have to learn about us, if you want to still be my friend."

She sat back down and took his hand. "Roy, of course I still want to be your friend. But lose the whole 'kind' thing."

"It's not that simple, Aradia."

"Maybe not. But make an effort, okay? For me?"

He thought about it. "Okay," he agreed.

"I have another question for you," she said. "At the party, we were talking about Dereck, you remember that?"

"Yeah. Sure I do."

"I felt like you were keeping something back. You seemed dead certain about why nobody was talking to the authorities, but I didn't buy your explanation for why. Was it a hidden thing?"

He nodded. "It's... well it's our highest law not to let detailed knowledge of our kind out into the human population."

"That just doesn't make any sense to me, though," she replied. "Humans know all sorts of supernatural stuff."

“Mistakes get made over time,” he replied. “More recently, the hidden community’s engaged in an active campaign of spreading disinformation. That way if somebody finds something real out...”

“Plausible deniability,” Aradia said.

Roy nodded.

“So you think that’s why nobody who knows anything is talking.”

“And no hidden who knows anything will talk, not if that information might lead the police to knowledge of the hidden race.”

“What’s your take on the murders, Roy?” she asked. “From a hidden perspective.”

“I’m not really following too closely, but look, it’s one of two things. Either a human’s committing the murders, or a hidden is. If it’s a human, I’m not much help to you. But let’s say it’s a hidden. Then you’d need to stop thinking of this as a human crime, with human motives. The killer isn’t trying to evade human authorities. He’s trying to evade hidden ones.”

Without thinking about it, she held her hand up to protect her eyes from the ever rising sun. Realizing what she was doing, she said, "Yikes. It's been quite some time." She looked at her watch. “Double yikes. I need to get going. Hey, do you have plans for tonight?”

Roy beamed. “You mean, like a date?”

“What? No,” Aradia said matter-of-factly. Realizing how callous she’d come across, she went on, “Oh! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean plans

like those sort of plans. I meant, plans for when you turn. Transform. Change. Whatever you call it.”

“Oh, uh, transform is good,” he said awkwardly and dejectedly. “Or change. Either way. And, well, I do. Have those plans.” He said the last bit hesitantly.

Aradia did not miss the intonation. “You do, but...”

“Well, I had arrangements last night, too.”

She rubbed her arm mindlessly and winced. “Yeah, we saw how that went. Maybe a new plan is in order? I mean really, Roy, you could hurt somebody.”

“No, you don’t understand.”

“I don’t think I do,” she said coldly.

“Aradia! You aren’t hearing me. We have... preparations we take.”

“What kind of preparations?”

“It’ll be better if I show you.”

She shook her head. “No, I have to be going. My parents are probably freaking right now.” She had intentionally turned her cell phone on silent hours ago. *Plausible deniability, right Rai?*

“Another time then,” he said. “Like a date, maybe?”

More like a PETA inspection of the zoo’s wild animal section, Aradia thought. She wasn’t going to let another night go by without being personally assured, one way or another, that he’d be locked up. Out loud she just said, “I’ll call you later.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” said Roy.

It was later in the day, and Roy was letting Aradia into his family's home. Amazingly, they were the only two there. Aradia assumed that meant the SilverMoon Diner was packed.

"Oh?" asked Aradia as she crossed the threshold. "How does it work then?"

The question had been whether Roy only shifts on a full moon. "I can change into the wolf whenever I want. It's not a clear division between the me you know and the me you saw last night. There's some of each of us in the other. After I change, I'm more wolf-like for a while. That's why I was quick to anger this morning. It has a mind of its own, but I'm generally in control."

"So," she dragged out the word, not exactly sure how the phrase the next part, "you wanted to bite me?" Her tone was somewhere between playful and accusatory. For effect, she held out her forearm. She'd applied the last of her healing salve at home and finally had the chance to properly dress the wound. It looked neat and tidy, but Roy still grimaced, knowing what lay beneath the bandages.

"No!" said Roy shaking his head furiously. He led her deeper into the house and opened a door to the basement. Aradia noted that there was evidence of recent damage to the walls and floor. "When the moon is full the wolf takes over almost completely. We lose every ounce of control. It's the only time we're really dangerous. Any responsible werewolf has a plan for the full moon."

"And your family?"

"Very responsible," he replied, guiding her downstairs.

"So what about last night?" asked Aradia.

Roy had never looked so serious. “At first I figured I must have just gotten loose,” he said. “So after you left this morning, I checked out the place.”

He flipped a lightswitch.

“Holy guacamole,” Aradia muttered.

The lights flickered on in a very seventies B-grade scifi creature feature kind of way. The fluorescent bulbs lit what looked a lot like the prison she’d been in only that morning. Cells lined both walls of the basement. There were actually more cells here than there had been at the jail. The big difference, though, was that here there were no windows.

“Yeah, it’s a standard feature in werewolf homes,” Roy replied.

“Major selling point?” she asked in a low tone, checking out the area. “Or celling point, I suppose.”

He raised an eyebrow, not catching the play on words.

“One for each of us,” he said. “Outside, in the wild, on a full moon, we might hunt in packs, but confined we’d turn on each other.”

“Hey, what was with the torn clothes?” she asked.

“They tore when I changed,” he replied simply.

“Duh. I mean why were you still even wearing them? You knew you were about to change.”

“Oh,” he replied. “Well, we don’t change until after sunset.”

“Right, you told me that this morning. So why not take them off at sunset? Lay them outside the cell, put them back on in the morning. Boom, safe, done.”

“We don’t change until after sunset,” he repeated, “but not always right away. There’s no real way of knowing. Sometimes we change as soon as the sun’s down, but other times we can go past midnight still in our human form. Usually it’s around nine or ten, but we can’t know in advance. It just sort of happens. And when it happens, it’s fast.”

“I’m not getting it,” Aradia said. “Why not just strip at sunset, save yourself the clothes.”

She saw he was blushing like a tomato, but didn’t see why.

“Oh!” she said, understanding flooding her. “It’s your whole family in here, and you’re all wearing those weird, skimpy elastic underwear.”

His blush deepened, passing red of tomato, hitting that of beet. Talking to his feet, he said, “It wouldn’t be so weird, but my aunt’s down here for the change too.”

She returned to her inspection of the room and its facilities. After a bit more studying, she abruptly turned and looked at him from across the room.

“These cells look pretty sturdy,” she said. The whole setup gleamed with factory shine.

“We keep them in good condition. Lives are at stake.”

“What I mean is, I don’t see you breaking out of one of these.”

“I didn’t,” he replied.

She made a curious noise.

“Look,” he said, bringing her to a cell on the right side of the room.

She checked her watch. She still had several hours before sundown.

There was a key in the door, turned to the open position. She hadn't noticed it earlier.

"This is the cell I used last night. The doors lock automatically. There's two ways to unlock them. One, a timer. It opens an hour after dawn, just to play it safe."

"Two," Aradia butted in, "that key."

He was mildly annoyed that she'd stolen his thunder, but he nodded his agreement. "The key's mostly just in case one of the kids locks himself in here by accident. Otherwise we'd have to wait until dawn the next day."

"And you keep it..." she asked.

He doubled back toward the weird dungeon's entryway. "Right here," he said pointing to a hook next to the door.

"Hmm, I guess that brings a whole new meaning to the phrase 'who let the dogs out?'" Aradia said grinning.

Roy gave her a dirty look.

Aradia retorted, "I wouldn't be so judgmental of my jokes if I were you, Roy."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because then I would be tempted to come up with some joke about how you get your 'time of the month!'"

Roy looked completely aghast, which made Aradia grin wickedly as she rushed past him through the basement's exit.

Roy ran after her. Upstairs he got a pitcher of lemonade out of the refrigerator. He gestured with it toward Aradia, and she nodded. He poured two glasses.

“You may have been joking, but you were right,” he said.
“Somebody let me out.”

“Okay,” Aradia said soberly. “Who?”

“I’ve got my share of enemies,” he replied melodramatically.
Aradia stared him down for a few seconds, then burst out laughing.

“What!” he exclaimed. “I do!”

“Oh, yeah,” she replied. “Sure you do.”

He started to blush. Aradia knew she was being a little mean, but he looked so cute she could only laugh harder.

“Look, Roy,” she said, “the werewolf thing, yeah, it’s pretty badass. But don’t overplay it, ‘kay?”

He considered his options, then reluctantly nodded.

“Until we know who it was, I suggest keeping that key somewhere else. Why not take it into the cell with you at night?”

He thought about the suggestion. “Yeah, that works. We still need to figure out who it was.”

“Well, we can rule out vampires, right?” she asked. Roy had spent a fair portion of their long conversation earlier briefing her in the chief weaknesses of his fanged foes.

He considered, then agreed. “The first time they enter a mortal dwelling, they must be invited. After that they can come and go as freely as they please. Remember that.”

“I got it, thanks,” she said, angry at Roy’s loathing of another race. “So what about fae? They seem like jerks.”

“They are,” he replied, “but this isn’t their style. They’re more... white collar criminals. Ponzi schemes and that sort of thing.”

“Hey!” she asked. “Bernie Madoff, was he a fae?”

Roy shrugged. “Not to my knowledge, but you never know.”

“Okay, so probably not a vampire, probably not a fae. Shapeshifter?”

He squinted, then shook his head. “Probably not. They’re political, but they’re generally pretty straightforward.”

“That’s ironic,” she replied.

“I suppose,” he said.

“You think this is related to the Vampire Murders?” she asked.

“I can’t prove it’s not, but I don’t see any obvious relation.”

“Yeah, neither do I. What about one of those other races you mentioned?” she asked. “You said there were lots of them.”

“Maybe. It could have been anyone, really. Whoever it was knew enough to be afraid. They left the key in the door. I don’t think they opened it. They just unlocked it then got out of there. Eventually I must have kicked it open and left.”

“Roy,” she said gently, “they didn’t need to know much to be afraid. One werewolf was... well, terrifying. A whole roomful would be close to a nightmare.”

He puffed his chest out and smiled. “You thought I was terrifying?”

“Let’s get back to the bad-guy hunt,” she said, rolling her eyes.
“Have you considered humans?”

He shook his head again.

Seriously, he’s going to give himself a concussion with how much he’s doing that.

“Not an option,” he said. “I told you about the law.”

“Only about a million times.” She shrugged. “Maybe somebody slipped. Or maybe you were followed last time you turned. Who knows?”

Aradia finished off her lemonade and glanced at her watch.
“Well, time flies!” she said. “I’ve gotta head out and finish my weekend homework. This has been educational, but they don’t quiz on this stuff at Salem High.”

He hurried in front of her, blocking her path. "Hey, remember your promise."

"What?" asked Aradia.

Roy rolled his eyes and said, "You know. I showed you mine. Now you tell me what you are."

"I can't do that," Aradia said without missing a beat.

Roy's expression turned furious. "We had an agreement!"

"What I mean is, Roy," Aradia interrupted and turned around to face him. "I can't tell you what I am because I honestly don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"Exactly what I said. I don't know what I am," she repeated.

Roy tried to determine her level of sincerity. She looked him in the eye and let him judge.

After a while, Roy inhaled sharply. "You really don't know, do you?"

Aradia nodded grimly.

He walked her to the door and asked, "So you aren't going to tell anyone about me, are you?"

Aradia looked back at him and gave a half smile. "Roy, you're my friend and I would never betray you. Plus, you told me about the whole hidden law thing. But come on, even if I told someone that you are werewolf, would anyone believe me?"

He chuckled. "I guess not."

Chapter Sixteen

"Well, you're certainly the talk of the town," Tristan remarked as he, Roy, Roy's brothers, and Aradia sat together at the diner. It had started as just Roy and his brothers. When Aradia came in they eagerly invited her over. Tristan invited himself.

Roy's brothers were both seventeen and juniors at Salem High School. Al, short for Alejandro, was Roy's eldest brother, eldest by twelve minutes. D, for Diego, was Al's fraternal twin.

Like Roy, Al had tanned skin and a wide smile which he flashed freely. Where Roy's grin was goofy, almost doofy, Al's was perfectly charming, to which many of Salem High's female students would

attest. He was muscular to the point of being bulky, thanks to a minimum of an hour a day, six days a week at the school gym. He was sexy and he knew it. His penetrating brown eyes were so dark as to appear almost black. In violation of the SHS student codebook, he sported a black goatee. Every couple months he'd serve detention for it.

D bore a strong resemblance to Al. The biggest difference physically was that by comparison, D was positively scrawny. On his own, he looked like a normal teenage guy. Standing next to his brother, though, it was hard to compete on physique. Beyond that, D kept his hair short, had somewhat darker skin, and had a little isosceles triangle of three moles on his right cheekbone.

Even if they'd looked completely identical, though, there would have been no mistaking the two. Their entire demeanors were at opposite ends of the spectrum. Where Al was outgoing and flirtatious, D was withdrawn and quiet. D's idea of a good time on a Saturday night was sitting by himself and practicing bass guitar.

Where their interests overlapped, they did everything together. When D went out it was with Al, and when Al stayed in he hung with D.

Neither of them had better than a rocky relationship with Roy. Al teased Roy relentlessly while D would quietly look on. Their father couldn't stand seeing his sons fight, though, so he had a rule. "When you're at the diner," he'd say whenever they started acting up, "you get along or you get out."

He meant it, too. Once they'd made the mistake of getting into a loud bicker match. Their dad physically expelled them from the SilverMoon in front of many of their friends. The experience didn't help any of their reputations. After that, Al, D, and Roy got along at the diner.

"And how's that, Tristan," Aradia asked lackadaisically as she twirled her straw.

"Before you were just the new girl with the weird smell," he began.

Immediately Aradia was interested, mostly because Tristan seemed like a total freak talking about how she smelled.

"From what my sources tell me, at least. Fae are too civilized to go around sniffing people."

Al and Roy growled.

Tristan continued. "Now you're the new girl that knows about us, can take apart a wolf form werewolf, and yet no one can determine what type of hidden you are. Yes, everyone has definitely been talking about you."

Aradia smacked Roy on his arm, hard.

"Roy!" she whisper-yelled. "So the first thing you did was blab about me to the school?"

"It wasn't me!" Roy protested while Tristan laughed.

Turning to the faerie, he added, "And I didn't get taken apart!"

"Officer Schaefer says otherwise," Tristan gloated gleefully. "I am told she actually dragged you into jail by your hind legs?"

Al said, "You know, Tristan, no matter how much you say, nobody values your opinion."

Tristan scowled.

Al added to his insult, saying, "Wait a minute, that's not true."

Tristan scowled again when Al went on to say, "I bet the rats in the dumpster out back value your opinion, at least a little."

Sensing an opportunity, Aradia grinned, and said, "Of course the rats value his opinion, Al. He is after all one of them."

Tristan stood up, and without saying a word, he straightened his distressed-look Armani Exchange blazer, cast a dirty look at all four of them, and turned to go.

Determined to have the last laugh, though, before leaving he said, "I think you have the back alley confused with your diner's kitchen, Al. It's pretty obvious which place would be more infested."

Al shot up from his seat and stalked around the table menacingly. With surprising speed, D was out of his chair with his hand on his brother's chest. He exerted very little pressure. He couldn't hold Al back physically if he tried. That's not what his gesture was about.

Al got the message. "You better hope I don't see you later," Al warned. "All the fairy dust in the world won't help you."

"Tristan," Aradia pleaded, "just go, will you?"

His eyes narrowed on Aradia. He seemed about to speak, but then he surprised her. He merely nodded his head, once, sharply, and left.

Roy's face was sullen as he stared at Al and D. He was the one person at the table who hadn't participated in kicking out Tristan. *Does he feel guilty?* Aradia wondered.

Then realization struck her. He hadn't gotten involved because he'd had to have taken his arm off her shoulders. She didn't even have to read his mind to see it.

He had been acting differently toward her since they'd met in the woods two nights earlier. He took every opportunity to hold her hand and generally wouldn't take his eyes off her. In short, he was making her very uncomfortable, but she didn't know what to do about it.

Roy soon noticed Aradia looking at him and turned his head toward hers. He smiled at her, doing his best Al impersonation. She smiled back innocently. Emboldened by the moment, Roy brought his face closer to hers. Aradia panicked and froze. His face came closer still. The air grew hot and heavy, crushing her. *What do I do?* She had only moments to decide.

Aradia found herself saved by the brothers. When his face was mere inches away, Roy noticed something in his peripheral vision and suddenly turned from her. Al and D were still there, of course, and they were watching the two of them. Al had a cocky grin on his face and was looking completely amused. Aradia's relief turned back to panic when she realized that they must have seen her distress. She knew Al would mock Roy for that later.

"Don't mind us," Al said holding up his hands in a faux peaceful gesture.

Roy buried his face in his right hand. Aradia shrugged his left one off her shoulders. She didn't mean to cause him further embarrassment, but she was irritated with his behavior.

"C'mon D," said Al, clapping his twin on the shoulder. "Let's leave the two little love birds alone and go find ourselves some company."

"Ok," D said cheerfully.

"We should follow them," Roy muttered to their retreating backs. "It'd be fun to watch them on the prowl."

"Why?" Aradia asked him.

"Well, I'm sure you've noticed by now, Al is the ladies' man. It's funny seeing them out together. D wouldn't recognize an interested girl if she walked right up and flashed him."

Aradia chuckled and said, "Actually, I do think he would recognize a woman if she did that."

"Don't be so sure," Roy warned.

They both burst out laughing.

Roy again put up his best attempt at a seductive smile.

"So...now that my brothers are gone, we're all alone. You know what that means, right?"

"There's actually a lot of people in the diner," Aradia replied, still chuckling, but hoping to dissuade him subtly from his obvious course of action.

"Really?" said Roy softly, as he reached out to cup her chin. "I hadn't noticed at all."

"Uh...Roy, what are you doing?" Aradia asked him.

His only response was to lick his lips and bring his face forward again. Aradia considered her options. If she pushed Roy away, he would definitely be hurt. If she went along with what he obviously wanted to do, she would give him a false impression.

Yet, as Roy got closer to her and she started to feel the heat from his face and even his lips, Aradia began to wonder if what he wanted would really be wrong at all. She leaned a fraction of an inch toward him.

The bell hanging from the entry door jangled as someone entered. Aradia could feel the atmosphere change, and she jerked her face toward the sound. Her eyes locked with Dax Dayton's.

He stopped as soon as he noticed Aradia sitting with Roy and Roy's arm around her shoulders. Dax stared at Aradia who met his gaze with fierceness and intensity equal to his. Everything just seemed to freeze, leaving Dax and Aradia entranced, even as Roy's arm rested on her shoulders.

After what seemed forever, but was only a few seconds, Dax smiled with charming cockiness and winked before turning to the counter. Aradia gulped and felt blood rush to her face. She imagined that with her red hair and flushed face her head must look like a giant strawberry.

After that, Dax went through his regular routine. He purchased his daily Coca-Cola bottle and left the diner without further interaction.

By then, Roy had finally removed his arm and was sulking. Aradia didn't notice any of it until after Dax was gone. She turned back to Roy and saw the look on his face.

"What's up, Roy?" she asked.

Roy said nothing and did not make eye contact.

She playfully punched his arm. "C'mon, what's with the sad face?"

Roy grunted.

"What, you want a belly rub?" said Aradia laughing a bit.

She had meant it as a joke, but Roy did not seem to see the humor.

He looked at her with narrowed eyes and said, "I'm not your puppy, Rai, and I'm certainly not a Twilight fan!"

"What?" Aradia asked, sounding completely confused.

"You know what I mean!" he snapped.

"No, I really don't," she stumbled, confused. "I don't read those kinds of books. Um..."

"Talking to you is either the easiest thing in the world, Aradia, or completely impossible."

"Just tell me what you mean," she pleaded.

"I mean I don't understand the idea of a beautiful, perfectly decent girl falling for a vampire!"

"You think I'm beautiful?" Aradia asked playfully.

"Aradia!" cried Roy.

"Sorry!" Aradia exclaimed. The look Roy gave her was so serious it rivaled even her father's.

Her own face grew stony. "Roy, I really am sorry that you're upset, but I don't know what your deal is."

Roy opened his mouth to argue but Aradia cut him off. "Look, you said you don't understand? Allow me to explain some things. We've been through some stuff the last couple days, but neither of us has talked about there being anything between us other than friendship. Until we do, it's none of your damn business who I date, or don't date, or find attractive."

"So you do find him attractive," Roy muttered.

"Yeah, I do!" she replied emphatically. "I really do. Listen Roy, I do what I want, when I want, anytime, and anywhere I care. You can't do a damn thing about it."

Aradia stood up, shoved her books into her backpack, slammed her hand on the table, and concluded, "So there!" She stomped out of the diner.

Chapter Seventeen

Roy let her go without chasing her, and for that Aradia was grateful. If he had pressed the point, she would have admitted that she did have feelings for Roy which went beyond friendship.

"That doesn't matter, Rai," she muttered to herself as she hurried away from the SilverMoon. She didn't have much experience in the romantic department, but she knew it wasn't fair to

be with somebody if you were constantly thinking about someone else.

Roy was sweet, kind, good looking, and fun. They had a connection, and he was obviously crazy about her. No matter how long a list of positive attributes she came up with for Roy, though, she could not stop thinking about Dax.

Aradia groaned in frustration.

She'd left the diner far behind. She had hurried past the school, around the Olde Salem Golf Course, and was now at the edge of the Salem woods. She had discovered a great number of trails and paths through the woods, but that wasn't what she wanted today. She plunged between the trees, making her own way.

Once she was deep inside the forest, completely alone and isolated, she stopped and stood straight up. She took a deep breath, tasting the clean air and its many different fragrances like pollen, White Pine, wildflower, and rich, fertile dirt. As she inhaled and exhaled, she thought over what she said to Roy. She especially remembered the part where she had said she can do what she wants, when she wants.

Her magic behaved like a sort of nervous energy, which if she bottled up, would only make her feel more stressed. *More stressed, or explode*, Aradia thought to herself with a snicker.

"To hell with it!" Aradia cried out to the forest. The forest's only response was the fluttering wings of a woodpecker which was startled by her sudden outburst. "I can show you better than that, Woody."

She searched in all directions to ensure she truly was alone. When her normal senses confirmed it, she closed her eyes and extended herself into the forest. This sensory power only worked away from civilization and structures, and was most powerful when surrounded by life. So far as she could feel, the only organisms in her vicinity were animals. Eventually, she felt satisfied in her isolation.

She set her backpack into a nook formed between two small boulders. It was a snug fit, and she thought the stones would provide good protection for her things. She then fished out her iPod touch and shuffled through her music library.

“If I am going to show off, I must have music,” Aradia spoke as she searched for the perfect song. Finally, she found one that struck her fancy: an Avril Lavigne song entitled “One of Those Girls.” She held her iPod touch to her belt. After holding her hand over it and concentrating for a minute, she managed to fuse it to her belt. She pumped up the volume.

Mouthing along to the words of the song, Aradia danced. She did a back flip and smiled at the crunching of leaves and twigs when she landed. With a mischievous smirk she did another back flip, but this time she intentionally landed on a fallen tree, using her power to shear it clean in two.

As the lyrics progressed, she formed jets of fire from her hands, being careful not to set the woods ablaze. She ran as fast as she could through the foliage, and with each step felt deep into the earth beneath her, sensing every living thing burrowing around in the soft

soil. Flame licked from her fingers through the swiftly swirling wind and it seemed as if threads of golden silk were being spun from her fingertips.

She waved her hands in circles to alternately form small voids of darkness or balls of light. When Avril Lavigne mentioned being high, Aradia saw a huge tree and grinned. She ran towards it and jumped as high as she could, grabbing hold of a branch at least fifteen feet off the ground. In just a few seconds she climbed to the tree's apex. The day was clear, and from that height she could easily make out the smokestacks of the Salem Harbor Power Station, and beyond that, the Atlantic.

When the song got to the word die, Aradia turned and held out her arms. Pushing off with her feet, she fell backwards. As she neared the ground, she actually slowed her descent, flipped, and landed on her feet as swift and satisfied as a cat.

Then she turned and darted off in the direction of Quiet Lake. She ran and launched herself off the ground as if to dive into the lake, fully clothed, in the middle of October. Once she reached the water, however, she somersaulted along its surface and ran atop the softly lapping waves. With every step the water underneath her feet froze into thick, solid ice, creating any icy trail behind her.

Aradia managed to maintain her balance. She even kept her shoes from getting wet. Her iPod was now playing "Fighter" by Christina Aguilera. As the song reached the chorus, Aradia stopped and stood on her ice plank. She still stood on the ice, but waving her arms in a rhythmic motion, she made the water around her rise and

swirl. Using not only her hands and arms, but her entire body, she danced, and the water obeyed her every motion.

As the song reached its climax, Aradia raced back towards land dragging a soaring tail of water behind her. The wind ripped ferociously at the living waves, and fire erupted from their crests as she ran faster and faster.

The song was ending, and Aradia truly cut herself loose. When her feet touched solid land, the water and flames crashed about her, intermingling, and she rode a wave of sand, dirt, and stone as a surfer would ride an ocean wave on her board. The earth itself seemed to obey her will in a way it never had before.

She wanted her finale to be as grandiose as possible, and so she shot bolts of light and darkness into the sky like ethereal fireworks.

Invigorated from her workout, Aradia went back to get her stuff. She was feeling energized, exuberant, and cheerful.

She had no idea that only a few dozen feet away stood Dax Dayton, with his wavy blonde hair as perfect as always, a completely mystified look on his face, and an iPhone in his hand.

“Well now,” he murmured to himself as he ended the video recording. He continued following Aradia. He watched as she trotted off happily towards the road and dialed her mother on her cell phone. “This just got a whole lot more interesting.”

Chapter Eighteen

That night, Mr. Dayton watched the recording on his PC. Dax had burned it to a DVD for his father. Both vampires' faces remained impassive together they watched Aradia shoot fire from her hands and not just walk, but dance on water.

"You are quite certain of this recording's veracity?" Mr. Dayton asked when the screen went blank.

Dax nodded. "I am."

Mr. Dayton knew Dax's loyalty, and decided he was in earnest.

He said, "It is a difficult story to believe."

In exasperation Dax said, "You don't believe me. You suspect I've altered the recording. I guess I'll just be on my bloody way."

He turned to go, but his father clasped him on his shoulder. "I did not say I don't believe you, son. No matter how difficult, I do believe your story."

Dax smiled. "To be honest, I'm not sure I'd believe it if I had not seen it myself, even with the video."

"You have no idea what this girl is?" his father asked. "Not even a suspicion?"

Dax shook his head. "No. Nobody does. Not even her closest friends."

"What about her family?"

Dax shrugged his shoulders. "My guess is they know about her powers, yes, but I doubt even she knows what she truly is."

"Hmmm," is all Mr. Dayton said in response.

Mr. Dayton showed very little emotion, but Dax was able to note and read what little did show through. His adopted father knew

something, Dax was sure of it. He was also sure that if his father wanted to share his suspicions, he would.

After a while in silence, Mr. Dayton finally spoke. His demeanor was such that it seemed he was merely thinking aloud, but Dax knew it was for his benefit. “This warrants investigation. I think I can learn what she is if I get a sample of her blood and confer with my friends at the hospital. Based on what I’ve seen and heard, I suspect her parents are too wary to take her there.”

He made a curious, “Hmm,” noise as he removed the DVD from his computer, then got up to leave.

“Oh, and Dax, do consult me if you learn anything else.”

“Of course, father.”

Mr. Dayton pulled out his cell phone to make a call as he left the room.

Dax grinned. His father was pleased.

He rose and made for the stairs on the way to his room. From behind him, Xan spoke, “I do hope you don't think that that is the end of it.”

Dax whipped around to stare at his brother.

“What do you mean, Xan?”

Xan shrugged and said, “Sure, Dad can have one of his hematologist buddies look into this chick, but her blood is not going to be enough to explain everything about her.”

“You doubt our father’s judgment?”

“Dax, have you ever heard the expression ‘news straight from the horse's mouth’?”

Dax nodded. "Of course. It's a bloody stupid one. What are you on about, Xan?"

"My point is, if you really want to learn about this girl, you'll need a better source than her blood."

Dax played along. "What better source is there than her blood?"

"Her," Xan responded with a wicked grin. "If you really want to know what this girl is all about, you should ask her."

Dax snapped his fingers and said, "Fantastic idea. Tomorrow at school, maybe after English, I'll saunter up to her and say, 'Hello statue girl, would you please be so kind as to tell me what kind of hidden you are? Nobody seems to know. How is it you can do all the things I saw you do in the forest when I was spying on you? Don't forget to trust me and answer me truthfully!'"

"You'll just have to give her a reason to trust you, then I doubt you'll have trouble."

Dax raised an eyebrow.

His brother went on, "Look, it is obvious she's interested in you. Give her what she obviously wants. Spend some time with her. Earn her trust. She's bound to tell you all kinds of interesting things about herself. There's no crime if you're curious about what she has to say. Girls want a guy who is interested."

Dax said, "You are suggesting I betray her trust, trick her."

Xan shrugged. "It's not trickery if she tells you stuff willingly."

"But I would still be pretending."

"Would you be? From what I can tell, you're just as into her as she is to you. If you don't learn anything and don't care to continue

seeing her, tell her straight out that you're not interested. It will be true, and that will be the end of it."

"Xan, I've been watching her. I doubt she knows what she is."

"Maybe not, but she knows at least some of what she can do. Mark my words well, for I won't say this often. There is more to this girl than just her blood."

Dax scowled and said sarcastically, "Gee Xan, maybe someday I'll objectify women as easily as you."

"It is easy once you get the hang of it," said Xan smiling.

"You could rationalize staking our sisters if it suited your purposes."

"If it suited my purposes, it would be only rational to do so. Just think on it."

Dax's only response was to turn back towards the stairs. He was tired, and the sun had worn on him. He locked and deadbolted his door then climbed into his coffin. He doubted sleep would come to him so late in the day, but he needed to replenish his strength regardless.

He bristled at his brother's suggestion: seducing a girl to get at her secrets. Xan was coldhearted, even for a vampire. Still, the idea did indeed have some merit.

He thought back to the night of Jayce's party when he watched Aradia dance with the werewolf. He remembered watching her long red hair swirling magically down her shoulders, glowing like molten steel. Her smile had been as wide and as perfect as an angel's, and her body was so pink and correctly proportioned. Most of all, he

remembered hearing the music, seeing her body sway with the beat, and wanting her so badly.

He was no prude. He had been with many women since he had become a vampire, and he was not proud of all the circumstances. That was not what had offended him in Xan's proposal. Out of all the women he had met in his long life, Aradia definitely fascinated him in a way no one else ever had. Dax wanted to believe it was just her secret which enticed him.

Chapter Nineteen

Aradia sat in second period Biology, peering through her microscope, trying desperately to determine what it was she was supposed to be doing. Much of this class came easily to her. Yet, although she loved making potions and could do incredible things with her powers, Aradia was a very poor student. Aradia was used to earning Cs, and considered herself lucky to get a B in any class.

Today's lab was a veritable nightmare for her. Calvin, her usual lab partner and straight A student, had been forced to bail on her because of the flu.

She welcomed the distraction when she heard the door creak open, and glanced up to see who was coming in late. She felt her heart flutter when she saw it was Dax Dayton. He strolled in and handed a note to Ms. Flora, who barely glanced at it before waving him to take a seat. Aradia returned to her work knowing that he

would probably sit at the front as he usually did. However, Dax walked right past the first row of seats, and slowly edged up to the empty spot at Aradia's table.

He smiled at her in a way she had never seen before. He was sinfully handsome. "Is this seat taken?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact, it is," Aradia snapped before returning to her work.

Dax still smiled as he sat in the chair. "Taken by me, then."

Aradia rolled her eyes, but a faint smile of amusement began to curl upon her lips. "You any good at biology?"

"I have a working knowledge," he replied.

"Alright then," she ceded. "You can stay."

"So," Dax asked, weaving his hands together and stretching them out until the bones cracked. "What are we supposed to do?"

Aradia shrugged and said, "Damned if I know."

Dax seemed surprised. She hastily added, "I'm a lousy student, okay?"

"It's nice to learn a weakness in you," he said with a shrug.

"Even you're not completely perfect."

"You got that right," Aradia muttered.

Dax grabbed the microscope and after peering into the lens he said, "*Lilium bulbiferum*."

"What?" Aradia asked, frantically grabbing the microscope back and peering into it again.

"We are given slides of plant cells to identify. This particular slide is taken from a *Lilium bulbiferum* stem."

"Oh!" Aradia nodded eagerly, finally understanding, and jotting the information down in her lab worksheet. "You know, lilies are really beautiful plants. You can find them almost everywhere from Europe to southeastern Asia, and through most of Canada and the United States. Usually people just think of them as garden flowers, but some are even harvested for their edible bulbs."

Dax was shocked at how easy it was to get her talking. "So, not much of a student?"

She blushed slightly. "I'm not. Sometimes I find stuff interesting, so I research it myself. I can't stand following somebody else's set course plan, though."

"You know," he replied, switching you the slides and adjusting the magnification, "Einstein was the same way. He actually failed math in school. He said it bored him."

"I think there may have been a compliment in there," she replied, and finally returned his smile.

They made remarkable progress. Aradia quickly realized that Dax was an even better lab partner than Calvin.

She was just starting to get comfortable with the idea that maybe he was more than eye candy when she noticed a weird sniffing sound. She stiffened and realized that Dax was smelling her hair.

She whipped her head around angrily, planning to tell him off in front of their classmates, but instead her face colliding forehead-to-nose with his.

"Oh!" she cried as her hand instinctively went to her mouth. "I'm sorry! Are you okay?"

Dax raised his own hand to his nose, but did not seem to be in any pain. He had a wicked and satisfied grin on his face. "That's quite alright."

Right, Aradia reminded herself. Vampire. I wonder if that sort of thing can hurt him at all.

Realizing he was fine, and determined to salvage her dignity, Aradia tore her face away from his and muttered under her breath, "You're a lot more charming from a few feet's distance. You could at least buy me dinner before you break out the weird freakiness."

Dax chuckled and said, "No wonder Tristan and Roy are completely besotted with you. You are positively charming."

Aradia snorted and looked up at him, already planning an insult, but instead her eyes locked with his. For a few delicious seconds, the two of them just sat staring at each other.

Dax finally broke the hot and heavy silence between them. "But speaking of dinner, would you like to have it? With me that is?"

Play it cool, Rai! Aradia shrugged casually and said, "I'll think about it."

"Okay then," Dax responded, still grinning just as wickedly as ever.

For the rest of class their conversation stayed mostly focused on the work at hand. Too soon for Aradia's liking, the bell rang. She found herself hoping that maybe Calvin would take another day off from school. *To recover from his illness, of course*, she thought.

Aradia dropped her pen as she shuffled her books into her rucksack. She set her bag on the table and turned to get the pen, but

Dax was already there. He raised it towards Aradia's outstretched hand, taking his slow and careful time, grazing his hand against her pants leg.

It's a damn pen, Aradia reminded herself as her heart raced at his sensuality. *Settle down there*. When she finally took the pen, Dax said softly and seductively, "My Aradia, what long and beautiful legs you have."

Aradia swore her heart stopped a moment as she chuckled nervously. Dax then took her wrist and raised himself up slowly. He was gazing into her eyes, and Aradia was staring up at him completely entranced. He still had his hand on her wrist, and was now rubbing his thumb over it slowly. Aradia felt tingles all up and down her spine.

"Now," he said, his voice as soft and silky as a designer scarf. "Have you thought about it yet?"

"Yeah," Aradia said slowly.

"So you will have dinner with me?" he asked, leaning in closer still.

Aradia took a deep breath and said, "Make it a movie."

The acting was terrible, the dialogue was horrible, and the plot was stupid in the movie they picked. It was both Aradia's and Dax's second choice. Aradia had wanted to see a Paul Rudd romantic comedy; Dax's first pick was the Salem Film Revival showing of *Dracula's Daughter*. Instead they ended up with a lame remake of a movie which Aradia thought was originally based on a TV show.

It was enough to make Aradia want to demand her money back and rob the movie theater while she was at it. Dax kept his face impassive, as he often did, but Aradia suspected strongly that he was doing his best not to throw his soda at the screen. They still managed to sit through the film, sharing a bucket of popcorn in the process. Aradia had to admit, although the movie was complete tripe, it was worth it just to feel Dax's cool fingertips constantly brush against hers.

While they and the other moviegoers were shuffling out, quickly and eagerly, Aradia voiced her opinions.

"That," she said in a loud voice that prevented any argument. "Has got to be without a doubt the biggest load of cinematic pig crap I have ever seen in my life!"

People stopped and stared at her in complete awkwardness. Dax, though, was completely amused.

In fact, he chuckled, looked to the crowd, and said, "It's not like it isn't true."

Aradia was already smiling at the fact that he'd backed her up. Her smile grew when he intertwined his fingers with her own. She was practically giddy as they walked hand in hand towards the exit.

They'd made it outside the movie theater and into the cool of the night air when a loud angry voice came from behind them.

"Hey!"

With a start Aradia let go of Dax's hand and spun around to face the speaker, terrified that it was Roy. Thankfully, it was not Roy confronting them. Unthankfully, the voice belonged to Kaiser, the

alpha of a werewolf pack Roy had warned her about. He and several of his cronies were advancing upon the two of them. He was several inches shorter than any of his cohorts, and not nearly as impressive in build. Roy had warned her not to be deceived by his appearance. “He’s one of the meanest, nastiest mutts you will ever meet. Don’t cross him,” Roy had warned.

Oops.

The pack looked threatening and mad as hell.

Dax turned to them. If he sensed their intentions, and Aradia had to assume he did, he did not show it. Politely he replied, “Yes, can I help you?”

Kaiser marched straight to Dax and stared up at him with murder in his eyes. Incidentally, that was precisely the topic he wished to discuss. “I don’t know why you leaches targeted my dad, but you’re going to either tell me who did it, or pay for it yourself. I think we’re pretty much all tired of taking crap from you vampires. Aren’t we boys.” His goons growled their assent.

“I honestly don’t know what you are talking about,” Dax answered nonchalantly.

“Like hell you don’t!” snapped Kaiser.

“You’re talking about the Vampire Murders, aren’t you?” Aradia asked.

The werewolf and his crew whipped to look at her warily. Dax immediately intervened. “Relax, gentlemen. Whatever else is going on here, she knows about us. She is hidden.”

Aradia noticed the werewolves' noses flaring as they took her scent. *I will never get used to that*, she thought. Despite the circumstances, she was relieved that they did not push the issue of her lineage. They seemed satisfied that they were not violating hidden code by having this candid argument in front of her.

"Yeah," Kaiser replied, "yeah we're talking about the fact that one of your boyfriend's clanmates killed my father."

"There are actually several clans active in the vicinity of Salem," Dax replied as if he were standing at a chalkboard. "Unlike werewolves, vampires are not territorial. The vampire you seek could hail from any of them, or he could be an unaffiliated rogue."

"You say that like I care. One of your people did it, and unless they confess to the crime we are going to make every vampire's living death in Salem hell!"

Aradia watched the two males stare each other down for a while. Finally, as if caught by a sudden realization, Dax said, "Oh. I am sorry but is this the part where I am supposed to be intimidated by you?"

That was dumb, Aradia thought. *Kind of hot, in a cocky way, but really dumb.*

She didn't need mind-reading to know what was about to happen. Before Kaiser could lunge, she jumped to plant herself firmly between them. She held up her arms and pleaded, "C'mon you guys, chill out, okay?"

"Stay out of this, bitch!" The werewolf snapped as he angrily shoved Aradia's hand away.

Dax moved like a spider. From the moment the confrontation had begun, he'd known how it had to play out. He would firmly, but carefully, nudge Aradia aside. She would be disoriented, but would easily catch herself. He would quickly engage Kaiser, before he could shift into his wolf form. After subduing their leader, he would threaten the pack. They would disband, and he and Aradia would leave, unharmed.

However, he never got the chance to execute his plan.

In swatting at Aradia, Kaiser had left himself precariously balanced. Aradia grabbed Kaiser's outstretched arm and twisted it so swiftly and viciously that before he had a chance to react, he was on the ground. His friends were taken just as by surprise as he was. Aradia knew she only had moments before this erupted into an all-out brawl, so she pressed her edge while she had it. She flipped the pack's leader onto his belly and jammed her knee into his lower back. She took hold of a handful of his scruffy hair and yanked his head as far back as she dared. He would be in pain if he struggled, but more importantly, he was facing his crew and his ear was right next to her mouth.

"Now listen up, you thug!" Aradia whispered angrily. "I wish I could say something to help you feel better. The truth is I can't possibly understand what you are going through, so I won't insult you by saying I do."

"You—" he interrupted her, but she gave his head a yank and with her other hand squeezed at his throat. "When it's time for you to

talk, I'll tell you. I do realize the magnitude in how you want to find the guy who killed your dad and make him pay."

She surveyed his pack, making eye contact with each one before going on. "But that is no excuse for vigilante justice that is why we have laws to prevent crimes in the first place. When they fail, we have laws to punish the perpetrators. Now it's time to talk. Do you understand?"

The werewolf nodded feebly. He hadn't strictly obeyed her command, but she him go.

The werewolf's face reddened as he got up rubbing his shoulder where he'd slammed into the pavement. He glared at Aradia murderously.

"C'mon Aradia, let's go," Dax said casually as he threw his arm around her shoulders and steered her down the street.

"Not yet," she said.

Dax broke from his normal stoicism enough to reveal that he was nervous about where she was going with this.

She said to Kaiser, "I'll help you get justice, real justice. You find anything or hear anything that can help us find who did this, you come to me first. I can be your ally. You keep up your macho bigotry, though, and I swear I'll be your worst enemy. It's your choice."

At this point Kaiser had all but completely forgotten Dax. Now he stared Aradia down. She returned his stare. Finally he gave a brief, sharp nod.

Aradia was satisfied by that. "Alright, Dax. Now we can go."

Aradia was quiet for most of the walk home. Dax did not know her well yet, but he knew her well enough to realize that silence was completely out of her character.

"You are pensive," he finally stated.

Aradia shrugged Dax's arm off her shoulders. She walked two steps in front of him with her eyes on the ground and her mind deep in thought.

She then turned to look at Dax as somberly as she'd ever looked at him. "Tell me neither you nor anyone you know did it."

"Did what?"

"You know what I mean," Aradia responded coldly.

"You're asking if I killed that boy's father," Dax replied. "Given what I thought I knew about you, I am surprised by your lack of trust."

"I'm asking you to remove any doubt from my mind. Tell me you don't know who did it and I'll believe you. If I didn't trust you, I wouldn't bother asking."

He seemed about to say something, but then stopped.

With the hints of a smile at the corners of his mouth, he replied, "I affirm on all I've ever loved, I know nothing of the responsible party's identity."

She chewed on that for a moment before saying, "Look, just tell me you don't know who killed Kaiser's dad."

He shrugged. "I don't know who killed Kaiser's dad."

Her demeanor towards him warmed about twenty degrees.
“Okay, good. Look, that guy and his friends and probably everyone in Salem think that a vampire killed that poor man, but that's not true. A vampire is not responsible.”

Dax raised an eyebrow, which for him represented utter bewilderment.

“If you are confident of this, why did you suspect me?”

“It doesn't hurt to double check,” she said.

“Do you have knowledge of who did it?” he asked. In truth, he did not care much about the murder for its own sake, but he was curious about all things Aradia, and she clearly felt passionately about this subject.

“No.”

“So,” Dax argued, “you can't say for sure that it was not a vampire.”

“I think I can,” said Aradia.

Dax's eyebrow climbed higher. “How?”

“I'm new to this whole hidden thing, but I've picked up a lot already. Vampires are slick and egotistical. You're one of the few I like, and even you're kind of a douche sometimes.”

Dax smiled like nobody had ever smiled at being called a douche before. “You are unique.”

He was obviously amused. Aradia couldn't help but find his expression damned sexy.

“How old are you?” she asked.

“I have lived many lives,” he replied without missing a beat.

“I guess we’re not there yet,” she replied. “Okay, that’s fine. Here’s how I see it. Roy says he doesn’t know of anybody ever being turned into a vampire from personal experience, but there’s a ton of you around. I figure most of you have to be pretty old.”

“A fair assessment,” Dax granted. “By human standards.”

“Well I don’t think you get that old by being sloppy. You’d get caught by the law, either human or hidden.”

“Go on,” Dax replied.

"Vampires are overconfident," Aradia teased.

Dax played along and pulled a face.

"But they aren’t stupid. Look, I’m still learning, so you tell me. How many vampires do you know who would be stupid enough to feed on someone, a werewolf at that, and leave a body with two puncture wounds lying about?"

“There are those who would do just that,” he replied. “Though few would feed on a werewolf. They taste worse than wet dog smells.”

She rolled her eyes and continued, “The real point of committing a crime is getting away with it. You don’t leave obvious evidence and expect to get away with murder.”

"True, in general," Dax agreed. "But you oversimplify the scenario. The killing could have been committed with the intention of sending a message. Or the assailant could have intentionally left evidence, knowing people such as yourself would overthink the situation. Or maybe it was simply a fledgling."

Those are good points, Aradia had to admit. *I hadn't thought of that*. Still, her gut instinct was that she was onto something. She was curious about the last bit. "A what?"

"A vampire which has just been turned," Dax explained.

Aradia nodded her understanding. Then she argued, "According to my father, there was no sign of forced entry, and the police believe the perpetrator entered through the front door. At eleven at night, I doubt the victim would have opened his door to a fledgling."

"He would if she were a woman," Dax stated simply, earning a nasty glare from Aradia.

"Or," he went on, "if the fledgling were formerly a mortal the victim had known. The wolf could have inadvertently issued an invitation without realizing the change."

"The relationship between the two victims suggests a non-random nature to the murders," Aradia argued. "It seems thought out, so I doubt the fledgling hypothesis. So far no one has taken credit, though, so if they're trying to send a message, we haven't received it yet."

"Vampires are patient beings, Aradia."

"Look, are you trying to convince me it was a vampire that is responsible? Because if you are, I might have to rethink this whole dating thing."

"Perhaps I am merely testing your open-mindedness."

"Stop being so contrary and agree with me!" She playfully stomped her foot for emphasis.

Dax chuckled. He was amused by Aradia's thinking and wasn't nearly as confident of her conclusions as she was. Still, he had to admit that what she said made sense.

"In truth, the alternative conjectures I offer are less than likely."

"There we go, that's closer to agreement," she said, sliding her hand back into his.

The two of them just stood looking at each other in silence on their deserted, windy road. They forgot their debate about murder and suspects, and they stood again completely entranced. Aradia leaned in closer and raised her head up to his. He leaned in toward her, but at that moment Dax remembered exactly why he had asked her out.

He quickly shifted his face away from hers.

Aradia looked at him in shock. "Dax, what's wrong?"

He sighed, looked at her out of the corner of his eye, and said, "We must get you home."

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

Chapter Twenty

"I hear you've been hanging out with Dax lately," Roy remarked to Aradia.

His timing was just as awkward as ever. He and Aradia shared a long art table with Rhonda, Calvin, Frank, Billy, Al, and D. *This is*

exactly the kind of conversation I want to have in front of most of the people I know in this school, Roy. Thanks for that.

Al and D were two of the only non-freshmen in the room. According to them, when Aradia had asked why they were taking the class, they needed an art credit, and metal shop had been full. Roy had a different take, suggesting it might be due to the fact that for two consecutive years they'd failed the class.

Either way, they all sat at the same table at the back of the room, wearing smocks and attempting to paint half-decent still lifes.

Aradia had enjoyed the company of Al and D quite a bit since she and Roy had outted each other's hiddenness. Quite of their own accord, they'd taken on the role of her bodyguards. They knew perfectly well that she could handle herself in a fight, but when she pointed this out, Al had replied, "This is high school, Aradia. It's your reputation that needs protecting."

Truth be told, she had noticed that ever since the older guys had started hanging around, no one had bothered her or her friends.

She had to wonder if that was their only motivation. Even if they'd heard how she'd bested Roy in his wolf form, and on a full moon at that, they hadn't seen her in action. Plus, several dangerous accidents had happened to her over the last couple weeks.

At the track, while running relays, Aradia had grabbed the baton from her running partner, only to discover it was badly damaged and painfully jagged. It gauged deep into her palm where she'd taken it. Her partner had been deeply apologetic, and Aradia was sure she'd had no idea.

The next day, in a stairwell, Aradia was heading down amid the crush of students changing classes. Another student, on his way up, tripped and his books went flying. Aradia, caught off guard, slipped on one of his textbooks and stumbled down half a flight of stairs. She was fine, but bloodied her knee pretty badly.

Another time, a fellow student had bumped into her while she was cutting a canvas with heavy scissors. The unexpected shove knocked her off balance, and she had sliced a thick bloody cut across her hand. It was after the scissors incident that Roy and his brothers had started guarding her.

She did feel touched by Roy's concern for her safety, but she worried he might interpret it as a sign that they were more than friends. Her concerns were emphasized when, in front of everybody, he brought up her dating Dax.

On the one hand, she wanted to snap at Roy that it was none of his business. On the other, the mixed signals Dax was sending made her want to spill her guts so Roy might beat the crap out of him.

It was true she and Dax had been hanging out a fair amount since their first date, but it was always casual. In fact, whenever she tried to be more intimate with him, whether it was an attempted kiss or even something as minimal as placing a hand on his shoulder, he would grow cold and hastily take her home.

"I'd focus on my painting, Roy," Aradia said, dipping her brush in the water. "Maybe you can break your family legacy and actually pass this class."

"Not cool, Rai," D said with a reluctant smile on his face.

“Hey, Al,” she asked, attempting to change the subject Roy had so awkwardly raised, “how’s your arm?”

He glanced at the cast on his arm and shrugged. “Doctors say it is a clean break, no complications. Another month and I’ll be good to go.”

Lowering his voice so the humans at the table wouldn’t hear, D whispered conspiratorially, “Ready to go show that punk clan of fledglings what happens when you mess with the SilverMoon pack. Not to mention what happens when you mess with my bro.” He and Al gave each other a pound, then blew it up.

Aradia glanced around nervously. Even if Rhonda or her human friends did overhear, they probably wouldn’t make too much of that. She commented, “I think it was that attitude that got your arm broken in the first place. Look, guys, this whole thing hasn’t spiraled completely out of control just yet. At least don’t spur on the violence, okay?”

That was basically the end of that conversation.

I’m not doing so well with any of the Morales brothers today.

Roy just moped in stony silence. He slid his chair closer to hers, propped his chin onto his hand, and looked at her. After a few minutes of his intense silent scrutiny, Aradia got up.

"Where are you going?" asked Roy, grabbing her hand.

Aradia snatched it away and snapped at him, "I’m going to get more paint. Is that okay with you?"

Realizing people were staring and that he was being really weird, Roy backed off and turned back to his own painting.

She couldn't take any more of his staring, but she really did need more paint. She opened the cupboard and perused the various bottles and colors.

Painting had proven to be a real outlet for Aradia. Firstly, it was a subject she found she excelled at. The instructor, Mrs. Mancini, gave the students just enough guidance, but plenty of freedom. Aradia liked the mix. Moreover, though, she found it therapeutic. She'd even picked up a starter kit of acrylics and an easel for her home use.

Today, though, she just wasn't feeling the art. Thanks to Roy's prodding, all she could think about was Dax's distance, Roy's jealousy, and the unsolved murder.

Of the three topics, the Vampire Murderer weighed upon her most heavily. He or she had been plaguing her conscience since day one. She knew she could help, but she'd so far been unable to convince her father to let her in on the investigation.

Now the murders were creating tension amongst the factions of the hidden community. Tension was always high, Aradia had determined, but the murders had pushed things to a breaking point. Packs of werewolves were beginning to act on their feelings, engaging in acts of vandalism and violence. So far, there had been no vampire retribution, which Aradia suspected was because they seemed to be slightly more organized and a hell of a lot more patient. She knew the situation could easily get much worse.

She'd even complained about the state of affairs to Tristan, who had explained that gang-like fights between the hidden races were not uncommon.

"In fact," he'd said, "what you call justice is rare among our people. Secrecy is part of who we are."

"That doesn't mean you can't have justice," she'd replied.

"It's not about justice, simple girl. When an offense is perceived, you retaliate. If you fail to strike back with sufficient strength, you will be hit again and again and again."

"That's the way you see it, maybe."

"That's the way it is. The only way a major conflict could be resolved is for the culprit to be found and put to death. Until that happens, the violence will continue. It's not unheard of for whole clans or packs to feud practically to extinction. More often the pack gets wiped out. Vampires are cold bastards, but they know how to wage war. Whoever wins, though, as long as they leave the humans alone, no one will stop them."

Aradia did not know what bothered her more: the fact that such behavior was considered acceptable in the hidden world or the fact that she'd spent so little time trying to fix it and so much time fretting about boys. She found herself torn somewhere between guilt and the incredibility of the whole matter.

As if on cue, who should glide up to her but Dax. She was holding a bottle of red paint. She had opened it to see the paint itself. He surprised her with his stealthy approach and said, "That's a good color. It is the color of love and passion."

"Huh?" Aradia said, startled. She was so surprised that she dropped the bottle. Dax not only managed to grab the bottle midair, but also grab the lid that she'd set on the countertop. He screwed it on tightly and held it out to Aradia, smiling. This he all did without spilling even a drop.

Aradia was not impressed.

"Yeah, well," she said as she grabbed the jar from him. "Red may be the color of all that, but I think it's also the color of dishonesty."

"No, that's yellow," Dax countered, still smiling with irritating charm.

"So what are you, then? Red or yellow? Passion or dishonesty?"

Dax was no longer smiling.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Aradia threw him a sarcastic look and said, "Dax, I like you, but I'm getting the feeling that the reason you are hanging out with me is not because you like me back."

Crap, Aradia thought, I really didn't want to have this type of conversation in art class!

"I like you, Aradia. Of that you can be certain."

"That doesn't exactly answer my question. I want you to be honest with me, Dax. What exactly do you want from me?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yeah, I do," Aradia replied.

"Well," said Dax as he leaned in seductively. "The truth is, what I really want from you Aradia, is to know all of your secrets."

"You want to know all my secrets, Dax?" she finally asked him.

"More than you know," Dax replied.

Despite his eagerness, he maintained his seductive tone.

"Well," Aradia began as she lowered her voice and leaned in towards him. She brought her face right next to his chest and tilted her head to look up at him. She appeared as innocent and naive as a baby lamb. "I don't have many secrets, but I do have one that I guard with my life."

"What is it?" Dax asked his voice now low but positively tingling with excitement.

"My biggest secret is..." Aradia paused for dramatic effect and then rushed on to say, "I think you have a staring problem."

Dax's jaw dropped open. Aradia turned on her heel and sauntered back to her table.

Chapter Twenty-One

If there was one thing the conversation with Dax accomplished, it was to expose to her how truly trivial the whole situation with him and Roy really was. The unsolved "vampire" murders had weighed increasingly heavily on her mind for over three months, and the police had not so much as a person of interest. In fact, according to her father, the probability of solving the murders was growing increasingly slim.

The poor victims would never get justice. Kaiser, fueled by his rage, was that much closer to becoming exactly the type of criminal he so despised. Yet what bothered Aradia the most was the sad truth

that if this person got away with the murders, there was an alarming chance that he would kill again.

And what if the killer really was trying to send a message, like Dax had proposed? To get the message across, who might they kill next?

As she dabbed some more red onto the gala apple in her still life, she vowed she would postpone her boy troubles and focus all her attention on solving the murders. *Unsolved isn't unsolvable*, Aradia quoted one of her father's favorite sayings.

"Dad," Aradia said the moment her father got home. She ambushed him in the garage; he hadn't even gotten out of his car yet. "I want you to take me to the crime scenes."

Aradia figured most fathers would either scoff or explain in a parent-to-child way that it was not possible, or too dangerous, or some other such response. Ross Preston, however, did neither.

They'd had the discussion more than once. Aradia knew all of his concerns, and Ross knew all of her arguments. This time, though, he could tell something was different. He was seeing in her his own relentless determination to come as close as possible to righting a wrong. For whatever reason, he replied, "Alright. Tell your mother where we're going and put on something warmer. It's chilly."

First they drove by the second crime scene. It was a law office. "A place of business," Aradia muttered. "No invitation required."

She'd told her parents everything about the hidden world. She also impressed upon them the importance of keeping what they knew as closely guarded of a secret as they'd ever held.

Ross grunted.

The office was part of a small strip center, wedged between a kids' shoe store and a Quiznos. "The Quiznos has actually benefited from the murder, from what I understand, between the police, the press, and the onlookers."

"Possible suspects?" Aradia asked.

"Nah," her father replied. "Too Daphne du Maurier to be a real suspect. Or maybe Scooby Doo. I looked them up all the same. Straight as arrows."

"You know what arrows are good for," Aradia said.

He smiled darkly, but shook his head.

"Well, let's go take a look around."

"Take a look around?" her father asked somewhat incredulously.

"Yeah. See what I can see. So to speak."

Again he shook his head. "No can do, firecracker. This crime's too recent."

"Dad," she said, "you know I can help."

"The first scene's older. The police have given up on finding anything new there. Let's swing by."

On their way to the scene of the first Vampire Murder, it struck Aradia that she didn't even know which victim was Kaiser's dad. She'd seen the victims' names in the headlines, of course, but she

only knew the feisty werewolf as Kaiser. She had no idea to which victim he was related.

She brought her concern up to Ross. “His father was the second victim.”

So if I'd gotten involved right from the start, he might still have a dad.

“And Kaiser’s his real name, alright. Kaiser Wilhelm Hitzig.”

“Kaiser Wilhelm?” Aradia asked.

Ross shrugged. “Distant family relationship. I didn’t make much of it. You, ah, think it means something?”

“What?” Aradia replied. “Oh! You mean something hocus pocus? Like he’s a reincarnated German leader?”

Ross didn’t reply aloud, but he gave a meek nod.

She smiled weakly. “No, I definitely don’t. Just curious.”

Aradia recognized the hardware store from what she’d seen on the news. Ross parked around back. It was a two story facility. The first floor was the retail store, and the second was a storage area which had been converted after the fact into a suite of adjoining apartments.

It had been cleared of investigation equipment, and the crime scene tape had vanished as well. It was still private property, so they had to be very careful when they broke in. With his flashlight in one hand and his daughter's hand in the other, he lead her up the stairs.

Aradia looked around. It was obviously a bachelor pad. She was surprised to see that, considering the grisly nature of what had happened, the apartment was remarkably clean. It had been cleared

of decorations like pictures and rugs and the assorted chachkis which build up over time, and Aradia found herself wondering who had taken those things. The furniture remained. The place looked Spartan and spotless.

"They're planning on renovating," Aradia's father explained.

"They want to renovate a place where a guy got killed?" Aradia asked, sounding shocked.

Ross chuckled darkly and said, "The victim didn't have any family nearby. His closest relatives are cousins in Baltimore. They were the only ones named in his will. They plan to sell the whole place, including the hardware store. The renovation is to make it sellable after what happened."

"Who could blame them?" Aradia asked her father as she tiptoed around the apartment as softly as possible.

Ross wasn't quite as supportive. "The first thing I ask when I look into a crime is who benefits most."

"You think these Baltimore cousins did it?"

"Not by their own hands," Ross said. "Ironclad alibis. They were at some kind of architecture convention at the time of the first murder. One was a keynote speaker."

"What about the second? The Hitzig one?"

"That one's a little fuzzier, but the distance involved makes it unlikely."

"Doesn't mean they weren't involved somehow," Aradia muttered. She hated having to be suspicious of people who, for all

she knew, were right that very moment mourning the loss of their cousin.

“I hate to see them sell it,” Ross said, surprising Aradia. “The victim probably intended to have kids someday and pass it on to the next generation. It was his legacy. The store has been in the Stanley family for years.”

“Yeah, well,” Aradia said with a shrug, “Mr. Stanley was also part of the Stanley family for years.”

Ross became silent but after staring at his daughter for a few seconds, he used his flashlight to find the light switch to the apartment and flipped it on.

“Power’s still on,” Ross said, clicking off his Maglite.

“Don’t you think the light might draw attention?”

Ross shrugged. “I doubt it. The police have been in and out of here at all times of day and night. We’re in a commercial area. No nosy busybodies around. Besides, I don’t intend to stay long.”

Aradia got the message. “Be thorough but quick,” she translated.

He made a clicky noise in the corner of his mouth.

Aradia shrugged and looked a little deeper. She took a deep breath, then a few more. *I guess it’s time to find the truth.* Aradia closed her eyes and cleared her mind completely.

Aradia wished the place hadn’t been cleared out of personal belongings, and also that she’d thought to sneak in sooner. The more the place changed and time passed, the cloudier her vision would be.

She stood in the middle of the room, spread her arms out, feet apart, and readied herself. She extended herself into the essence of

the building, rooted herself in its foundation, spread her senses into its wires and outlets. She probed back into the building's memories. She knew that buildings can't remember events, of course. She had no better way of wording what she was doing though. She'd found that if she became one with a location, she could essentially remember things that had happened there.

Aradia opened her eyes and in a blurry blue-yellowish haze, she found herself on the night of the murder.

A man stumbled through the apartment from the kitchen to the couch. She immediately recognized him as Mr. Stanley. He had a beer in his hand, and from his unsteady gait, she assumed it was not his first. He half sat, half collapsed onto the sofa. He gazed at the blank television. Aradia assumed he had been watching something, but her vision did not reveal what it had been. He leaned forward to the coffee table and leafed through a stack of papers which, from Aradia's perspective, magically appeared from her vision's yellow mist.

Angrily, he threw the stack across the room and returned to his beer.

His head jerked sharply toward the door. Aradia assumed he'd heard knocking. She could not hear it herself, for her ability only revealed surroundings and events. She could see people and move in her visions, but she could not hear the words or sounds.

The soon-to-be victim kept his eyes glued to the ground gloomily as he shuffled to the door. When he opened the door and

saw who stood there, he issued a weak smile and extended his arm, waving the newcomer at the door to enter.

The moment the person at the door crossed the threshold, the atmosphere in the room changed entirely. The yellow faded and the blue disappeared entirely, being replaced by a heavy and ominous and almost opaque glare of red. The colors of Aradia's memories were often very indicative of the emotions she was witnessing, and Dax, damn him, had been right when he'd said red was the color of passion.

Aradia felt slightly gratified. She had been apparently correct in her hunch that the victim knew the killer. She angled herself to get a clean look at the killer's face. What she saw made her feel as if she were the one who had been exsanguinated.

Although the killer was walking right towards her, his face was blank. He or she showed no eyes, ears, mouth, or distinguishing characteristics of any kind. His face was a complete blank canvas. Even his or her form was so shrouded in cloudiness that Aradia could not tell whether she was seeing a man or a woman. She jumped back as the killer strode confidently past her.

She was shocked and bewildered by what she was seeing. Aradia could not understand it. Her place-memory was shaky at best, as far as her powers went, but until then it had always either worked or it hadn't. It had never given her a half measure like this. Why should this time, which mattered so much more than any other effort, be any different?

The only detail she was able to make out clearly about the killer was that the person wore loose-fitting clothes and had a sack slung over his or her shoulder. Aradia had a bad feeling about that bag.

Victim and killer began arguing. *Or not*, Aradia realized. The victim was arguing, heatedly it seemed. The killer was mostly just ignoring him, though, stalking through the apartment. *Oh God*, Aradia realized, *he's planning his kill*.

The faceless person's body tensed up. Aradia tensed up too, sensing that this was the part where the killer finally became the killer.

What happened next came in a blur. Mr. Stanley was bent over gathering the papers he'd strewn about. The killer pulled a heavy cloth from his jacket pocket and methodically soaked it from a vial. He stealthily advanced from behind upon the unsuspecting, drunk man. When Mr. Stanley stood, the killer pressed the cloth against his nose and mouth.

"No!" Aradia cried out.

She knew she couldn't change the past, but that didn't mean she couldn't protest the brutality of it.

The victim did not go down without a fight. He struggled against his assailant, and she saw his body grow tense. His skin rippled. She recognized the effect. She realized he was shifting into his werewolf form. Or he was trying to, at least. When Roy had changed, it had been fast. Mr. Stanley wasn't changing, though.

What's more, though she could make out few details, she saw similar skin tightening and rippling in the killer.

Then the scene changed. She had the impression that some time had passed and that she had missed some possibly crucial details. A wispy trail of red memory streamers led to the bathroom. She followed them there in a hurry.

Aradia clasped her hand to her mouth to stifle her scream. In the shower of the guest bathroom, the killer had strung Mr. Stanley up by his feet and was bleeding him dry like a kosher cow. Blood pulsed from two small holes in his throat. His heart was still pumping.

What truly shocked her most was the cold viciousness of the killer. He had removed Stanley's shirt and folded it in a neat bundle at the sink. Calmly he adjusted the showerhead and turned on the water, rinsing it over the victim's neck and head and helping the blood flow down the drain. He passed an ice pick through the water, rinsing the blood from it, then scrubbed it with a Brillo pad before drying it and putting it away in his sack.

The way he moved he seemed more like a painter cleaning the paint from his brush than a bloodthirsty psycho committing a grisly crime.

Thankfully, it was over soon.

The scene jumped again, and Aradia rushed back out into the main living area. Mr. Stanley, or his corpse rather, was laid on the ground where the police had found him. His shirt was back on and he was dry. He was very pale.

The killer stepped into the scene and surveyed his or her handiwork. Apparently satisfied, the faceless monster rushed out the front door, running right through Aradia in the process.

That was all she saw. The memories faded back into the past, and Aradia was standing in the here-and-now again, with her father.

She could not help but feel the faint hot pricks of tears in her eyes.

Aradia awoke in her bed. She had no idea what time it was. Her tongue was dry, and there was an awful chalky taste at the back of her throat. She swung her legs out of bed and staggered to her feet. She saw she was wearing the same clothes she'd had on at the crime scene. She changed into her PJs, splashed some cold water on her face, then carefully made her way downstairs. She found her parents sitting in the kitchen as if they had been expecting her. Her father had a cup of steaming coffee. Her mother just looked relieved to see her.

“We called in sick for you at school,” her father said.

Her mother rushed forward and hugged her. Aradia felt too weak to return the embrace.

“Twice,” Liza added. “We called you in sick twice. I did too.”

She did some slow mental math. “So it’s Friday?” she croaked, realizing she’d been asleep over twenty-four hours.

“Saturday, actually,” her father said.

“Huh,” she replied, still not quite grasping the situation.

“I gave you water and juice,” her mom said, “while you slept. You took some.”

“Like after the house fire,” her father added.

“Huh,” Aradia repeated. She looked at Liza and hopefully asked, “Mom? Maybe you could make me some toast please?”

“Of course, Rai Rai.”

Two pieces of toast later and Aradia was beginning to feel almost halfway decent. Her appetite was returning, at least. Two more pieces of toast, half a grapefruit, and a glass of milk after that, and she was ready to talk.

Aradia explained everything her vision had showed her. She described the victim’s reaction to seeing the killer, the brutal slaying, and the murderer’s cold demeanor.

“I don’t know why I couldn’t see the killer’s face,” she lamented. “It was the only thing I truly needed to see.”

“Maybe that’s why you couldn’t see it,” Liza suggested. “This is a bit outside my specialty, but in cognitive psychology, sometimes the harder you try to force a memory, the deeper you end up burying it.”

“My power has just never done this before,” she pouted.

“Hey, Aradia,” her father mildly chided. “Your, ah... powers. They’re still new to all of us really, and they’re constantly developing. You haven’t used this one much in the past. The fact that it didn’t show you exactly what you were looking for does not mean you failed.”

“If you use this power again,” Liza began, then stopped herself. “When you use this power again, relax and don’t force it. It could be that you pushing yourself to remember details is what landed you in bed for two days straight.”

She chewed on that for a moment before nodding. “I still can’t believe it took so much out of me. And we don't even know anything.”

Her mother shook her head and said, "Not so, Aradia. We know a great deal."

"But," Aradia sputtered, "we still don't know who the killer is."

"True," her father conceded, "but you're mother is right. We know much more than we did. We now know that the victim knew his killer. Stanley made some effort to show him financial information regarding the store, which reinforces the notion that it might have been a business associate. We know that the murder was premeditated. We know what the murder weapon was and how the victim's body was drained of blood."

“And,” Liza added, “based on what you saw, it seems as if the killer was also a werewolf.”

“Are we any closer to solving it, though?” Aradia asked both her parents.

“What do you think?” Liza replied.

Aradia thought it over. Excitedly she said, “I can tell Roy and Kaiser and everyone the truth and they’ll all stop fighting!”

Ross shook his head and said, “I don’t think it will be that simple, honey.”

Aradia asked, “Why not?”

“Because Rai Rai,” said Liza, “Roy might take your word for it, but Kaiser is hurting. Even if he believes you, he’ll want revenge, and your father still has no suspect.”

“It’s true,” Ross said. “I’m not opposed to you telling Roy and Kaiser what you learned. But don’t expect the violence to end just yet. This could still get worse before it gets better.”

Aradia groaned, ran back up to her room, and threw herself onto her bed. She was tired and frustrated. It drove her nuts that her parents did not seem to realize the magnitude of hatred between the hidden races and how likely the situation was to explode into war.

Well, I won’t let that happen, Aradia vowed to herself as she lay in her bed. *Dad has his leads he’s following. I’ll follow mine.*

“You think it was a werewolf who perpetrated the Vampire Murders?” Roy asked incredulously.

“I can’t be sure,” Aradia said. “It sure looked like the killer was getting ready to shift.”

Roy thought it over. “He might have just been reacting to Stanley shifting. It’s kind of like dominos with us, sometimes. Especially during conflict. How did you get this vision, again?”

Aradia took a deep breath. *You knew what you were getting into when you came over to his house to talk about this. No going back, Rai.* “I can get visions, when the circumstances are right. See things that happened in the past. Sometimes see things that haven’t happened yet. I don’t really understand it.”

“Tell me exactly what you saw,” Roy said. She left out some of the gory details. She didn’t see any benefit in providing him more fodder for his fury. But she mostly gave him an accurate description.

“When the killer came up behind Stanley, you said it looked like he was trying to change, but couldn’t?” Roy sought confirmation.

“I don’t really know,” Aradia said. “I don’t have much experience with this sort of thing. That was the impression I got.”

“And the killer held a cloth to Stanley’s face?”

“Definitely. He’d poured something into it just a moment before.”

Roy replied, “Succs.”

“To say the least,” Aradia answered.

“No, it’s a chemical. SUXAMETHONIUM chloride. It’s used in surgery on werewolves, and sometimes on humans. With humans it’ll put you under. For us, it keeps us from changing while we’re unconscious.”

“That can happen?” Aradia asked.

“I guess. I don’t think it’s common, but if a werewolf shifted while in surgery, it wouldn’t be pretty.”

Aradia shuddered at the thought. “So that’s why Stanley didn’t shift to fight his attacker. Would that knock him out?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Aradia?”

“Yes?”

“Who else have you told about this?”

“Nobody hidden, if that’s what you mean.”

He paced the patio. “I think you probably shouldn’t repeat any of this until you know more. Or can prove it.”

“Roy, I can protect myself.”

“Aradia, this is bigger than that. If a vampire found out a werewolf was trying to frame vampires for murder, it would be very bad.”

“Oh,” Aradia said, realizing what he meant.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I am frightened, Xan,” Dax stated. He and his brother were in their somewhat ironic ‘living room.’ He was standing near a window while Xan lounged on the couch reading a Maxim.

Xan glanced up at his brother scornfully. “You could at least make an effort, you know. At being a man. Even if that’s where you’re going, being afraid, you don’t need to lead right out with it.”

Dax rolled his eyes and said, “What I mean is I am afraid that my approach with Aradia is not working out.”

Xan raised an eyebrow.

“Why not?” he asked.

“It just isn’t, Xan. I don’t want to do this anymore.”

Xan slammed the magazine down and stood up to face Dax.

“You are afraid to get too close to her,” stated Xan.

Dax did not reply, which was all the confirmation Xan needed. He raised an eyebrow, but before he could say anything else, Dax had already gone from the room.

For the most part, Dax's bedroom looked like any other guy's bedroom. His simply boasted a few modifications. His room's single window was covered with thick boards of black wood. There were no mirrors at all. Oh, and instead of a bed, there lay a large black coffin with red velvet cushions.

Dax threw himself into his coffin and rolled onto his back. He reached over and grabbed his headphones from his bedside table. After jamming them on, flicking on their noise cancellation, and pumping up the volume, Dax folded his hands behind his head and closed his eyes.

Aradia's face haunted him. He imagined her smiling at him, throwing her head back in laughter, and flipping her long red hair behind her head when someone called her name. He thought about her green eyes and how they sparkled in any light, her thin rosy lips moving as quick as lightning, and her pale skin shimmering in the sun. He could almost hear her shrill voice cracking sometimes-clever jokes, inevitably followed by either groans or roars of laughter. As much as he didn't want it to, a happy grin crept onto his face as he pictured her slender body, her quirky, Pollyanna-like personality, and the small little smiles she threw so freely at her friends.

He pulled his right arm from behind his head and grabbed a fistful of dirt that lay on the bottom of his coffin. It was taken from

the soil of his mortal grave, as was the coffin itself. He held the precious dirt in his fist and squeezed the contents.

As he listened to the crunching sound of the dirt he reminisced onto the times he had spent with Aradia. They had gone to their favorite coffee shop where they'd sat and talked for hours. They had taken long strolls on the beach together. Even though it was already October, the cold didn't bother him, and she never seemed to notice. They'd discussed everything from Wall Street to their preferred shampoo.

Dax had to admit that Aradia was not like any other woman he had ever met. She was so honest, non-judgmental, caring, considerate, perceptive, insightful, and sweet. Even with the secrets between them, they'd formed a bond. The more time he spent with her the stronger his feelings for her grew. He did not know if he was falling in love with her. He didn't think he'd ever truly fallen in love with anyone. Whatever it was he was feeling for Aradia, he knew that if he kept seeing her, the emotion was bound to get deeper.

Moreover, he thought to himself, it is bound to make things difficult.

“This Dereck character seems suspicious,” Aradia insisted, trying to get her dad to talk to her. Ever since the crime scene, he'd been extra reluctant to talk about the case with her.

“Sure. He is,” her father finally replied. “He was an early person of interest. The police didn't find anything on him, though, and neither did the DA's office.”

“What about money?” she asked. “That’s got to be like, one of the top five reasons people have ever been killed.”

He nodded agreement. “It’s a good hunch, Rai. But there’s not a shred of evidence to back it up.” He briefly considered his options. “Ah, to hell with it. Come here.”

She jumped onto the couch next to him. He popped open his laptop as he explained, “I could probably lose my job for showing you this, so please keep it between us?”

“Cross my heart,” she replied.

“Hmph,” he said. He pulled up an Excel spreadsheet. “Look, here, and here,” he said, jabbing his finger at the screen.

“Uhh,” Aradia replied, boggled by the columns of densely laid information. “I’m not really sure what you’re showing me. Maybe you shouldn’t risk your job for this after all.”

“This is a document we found on Herr Hitzig’s office computer.”

“Ooh!” she exclaimed. “Did you subpoena it?”

He shook his head. “Nah, didn’t have to. So look here. It basically outlines several aspects of Dereck’s business relationship to the deceased, Mr. Stanley. Does anything jump out at you?”

She stared. She could probably figure it out if she had some time, but she didn’t feel like sifting through the details to find what her father was talking about. “Not really my strong suit, dad. I view the past, you decipher spreadsheets.”

“Fair enough. Dereck had an incredibly favorable agreement with Stanley. Either he is a brilliant negotiator, or Stanley was very

desperate. Or both. Either way, here's how it worked. If the store did well, Dereck got a pretty sizable share of the profits. If it went under, Dereck would take the lion's share of the sale price."

"Sale price?" Aradia asked. "If the store's not profitable, how much would it really go for?"

"The store's irrelevant," her father explained. "The land is what's valuable. My guess is Dereck got involved as an investor simply to make off like a bandit when the shop ultimately failed."

"And bandits go to jail," Aradia prodded.

"Only like a bandit, not just like one," Ross countered. "But look. The store didn't fail. At least, not at the point that Mr. Stanley was killed. Stanley's next of kin, the Baltimore cousins I mentioned, inherited it. The agreement Dereck had with Stanley is iffy on what happens now."

"So maybe he's trying to take the whole thing? You know, fight the cousins for control, since he was a business partner and they're estranged distant relatives."

"I trust your instincts," Ross said. "Tomorrow in the office I'll take another look over everything we have on Dereck. But there's nothing here in the financials. He's not challenging the cousins at all. They made him an offer, a reasonable and fair one, to buy out his stake in the store, and he's already accepted it."

Aradia's shoulders sank in defeat. She was stubborn, but she had to admit the case against Dereck was a weak one.

Ross concluded, “Basically, yeah, Dereck Caradoc’s a shady dude, and not one I’d ever get involved with, but there’s nothing financial pointing at him as the murderer.”

Aradia’s next step in identifying the killer was interviewing Kaiser. That was a harder task than she’d thought at first. His number was unlisted, he wasn’t enrolled at Salem High, and even Roy had proven thoroughly unhelpful when she’d asked him for help finding Kaiser.

“There are a lot of werewolves, Aradia,” he’d replied a bit antagonistically. “Just because we distantly share some genetics doesn’t mean we all hang out together on weekends.”

She was disheartened. *Dig deeper, Rai*, she reminded herself. That was how she wound up at the Salem Police Department on a Saturday afternoon holding an Edible Arrangement.

For all its fame, or infamy as it were, Salem was a small town, and its courthouse and police department were adjoined into a single structure. As such, Aradia had had ample exposure to the station in her punishment of tidying her father’s office and brewing his coffee. She hadn’t actually been into the police side of the building, though, since her experience with Roy and Scruffy.

“Knock, knock,” she said as she strolled through the front door.

“Who’s there?” Officer Ortega replied. He was visibly surprised when he saw who it was. “Ms. Preston. What brings you to our humble half of the building?”

“Well, Officer Ortega, I have been feeling a little guilty. You and your partner did me a favor driving me home that night, and not arresting me.” She lowered her voice for the last bit. Ortega winced, but other than that let the point pass. She held out the bouquet of fruit. “I just wanted to thank you guys.”

“Well, that’s really sweet of you. Honestly I’m not sure how appropriate it is for me to accept a gift from you, though, especially given who your father is.”

She’d anticipated that. From everything she’d seen, he was pretty by-the-book. “That’s okay,” she said. “I won’t give it to you.”

“Oh?”

“No. I would, however, like to make a charitable donation to the Salem Police Department in the amount of one Edible Arrangement.” She set the bundle down on his desk. “You and Goat Chin can eat as much or as little as you like.”

Ortega did his best to stifle his surprised guffaw, but all he ended up doing was snorting while he laughed.

“Well, thank you. On behalf of the station.”

“No problem,” she replied while she plopped herself down in the chair opposite him.

“What’s going on?” he asked, seeing concern on her face.

“Well, I have a friend. More of an acquaintance, really. I don’t know him that well, but he’s going through a tough time.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Ortega replied.

“I wouldn’t be, if I were you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’d be sorry he’s going through some stuff. But I wouldn’t be sorry to hear it. You’re only hearing it because he has somebody who cares about him.”

He nodded. “Well said. I’m sorry he’s having a hard time, but I’m glad he has a friend looking out for him.”

“Acquaintance,” she corrected.

“Acquaintance, then. Is there, ah, anything I can do to help?”

“Well, since you ask,” she replied, “I could use some assistance. I need to get in touch with him. I need to talk to him. I just don’t really know where to find him. I found out he goes to SCCS, but he hasn’t been going to class. I don’t know where he lives. Basically, I can’t help him if I can’t find him.”

“I sympathize with your situation, Ms. Preston, but if you’re asking me to use my position to divulge personal information about another citizen, that would be highly inappropriate.”

“Not at all,” she replied.

“Oh,” Ortega replied, surprised. “What can I do for you, then?”

“I would like to know where drug deals go down. Hypothetically.”

“Pardon?”

“I’m leveling with you. I know you can’t give me his personal information. But you can give me generalities that apply to everyone. He’s wrapped up in some stuff. Gangs and drugs. That was easy to find out. The hard part is where I can find him.”

“I’m not sure I feel comfortable assisting in this,” he replied.

“Look, if I came here and lied to you and said I was doing a school project or writing an article for the Broomstick, you’d have told me what I’m looking for, right?”

He didn’t reply, but she suspected she knew the answer.

“Well, I was honest. Are you really going to punish me for honesty? Because that seems very un-policey.”

He sighed. “Look, I’m not going to direct you to a drug deal or anything like that. But during the day try the Willows.”

“The park?”

“The arcade is closed for the winter. Some of the more unsavory sorts frequent it during the winter months. It’s a convenient location, I suppose, out of the way. Just don’t go after dark.”

After seeing Roy’s dark side, I might follow that advice.

She nodded. “Thanks, Officer.”

“Don’t mention it. Oh, and let your folks know they can claim the donation as a deductible on their taxes.”

Aradia sat on an iridescent unicorn hobby horse at the Willows historic 1866 carousel, waiting. She’d been there well over an hour already, and hadn’t seen a soul. In between wondering whether Ortega had led her completely astray and what she would say if Kaiser did turn up, she considered the bizarre string of fate which had led her there.

Before turning to Ortega in her Hail Mary attempt at information, Aradia had approached her father. He’d been distinctly unhelpful. “Aradia, I appreciate your gusto for solving this murder,”

he'd said, "but even if I wanted to urge you on this path, I couldn't. I don't have anything on the Hitzigs beyond what you already know."

He'd been a little deceptive when he'd said that. He had a phone number, which eventually she weaseled out of him. Neither Kaiser nor anyone else answered when she called it repeatedly, though.

Next she'd tried the second murder scene, also against her father's wishes. He'd discouraged the idea, especially after her forty-eight hour cat nap. She made it clear she would go there and try her memory power with or without his accompaniment, though. He reasoned it was safer if he were there.

She hadn't sensed a thing, though. She wasn't surprised. It was a place of business, not a home. There was less familiar essence.

So she tried the next most reasonable option of which she could think, and ended up alone at a public park on a Sunday afternoon eating salt water taffy on a unicorn.

"Maybe I need to go back to the drawing board," she muttered as she got off her steed to take a walk.

She had patrolled the area several times already. "One more look around, then I'm outta here."

She was almost shocked when she found the werewolf in question. He was sitting on a bench on the pier smoking a cigarette, looking just as gloomy and angry and miserable as he had been the night he confronted Dax and Aradia. He had smelled her long before she noticed him, but didn't particularly care. As she approached, she noticed his nose twitching like that of a hound on the scent of a

rabbit. *I swear, I will just never get used to the whole sniffing thing. I'm so glad I don't do that.*

He didn't turn, but he scowled something fierce, and she hung back, afraid to approach him. After a while of this silent standoff, he just shrugged and asked, "What do you want?"

Aradia breathed deeply and summoned all the courage she could muster. Twisting his arm had been one thing. Getting him to open up emotionally would be quite another. She walked straight up to the werewolf.

"To find your father's murderer," Aradia answered him bluntly.

"It's none of your business."

"The police aren't going to find him," she said. "They're thinking like... well, like humans. I might be able to, though."

He didn't respond.

"So by not helping me, you're saying you're okay with your father's murderer walking around freely?"

She snatched the cigarette from his lips and threw it over the handrail to the waves below. "Look, Kaiser, I know you didn't ask me to do this, but that doesn't matter now. I'm going to find your father's killer sooner or later whether you help me or not."

"Then I guess you don't need me so much."

"I do need you," she said. "I need you so we can find the murderer sooner rather than later. Sooner, before they kill again, before they put somebody else through what you're going through now."

He gave no response.

New angle, Rai.

“When this is all over,” she said, “and you’re looking back, how do you want the story to have played out? Do you want to remember how you helped avenge your dad, or how you sat by and did nothing while a stranger did what you should have been doing?”

“I...” he began. She saw tears forming at the corners of his eyes.

She lowered her voice and removed the confrontation from her tone. “You are going to help me, Kaiser. Do you understand?”

The werewolf was again struck dumb. But this time he nodded.

“Besides, I could always just beat the information I need out of you,” she said. “Wouldn’t be the first time I beat you up.”

He chuckled dryly. “Yeah. That didn’t look so good for me in front of the other guys. It gives them ideas, you know. About my leadership abilities.”

“I’m sure you’re a fine leader.”

“You took me by surprise. You wouldn’t get away with that again.”

“Sure I wouldn’t.”

He stood up and used his greater size to tower over her. He said, “You think you can take me?”

“How’s your shoulder feel?” Aradia snapped.

She fixed him with the most vicious and intimidating look she had, folding her arms across her chest, and looking at him straight in the eyes. At first he just looked amused. After a few seconds, though, he remembered where he was and why he knew this girl, and felt his knees buckle. He sat again on the bench and hunched.

“Okay. What do you want to know?” he asked Aradia, who replied with just a single word.

“Everything.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kaiser told her about his troubles with his dad. He also told her about his mother, his dad’s friends, his dad’s enemies, his dad’s problems, and his own problems.

“None of us ever really had much of a stable relationship. I didn't get along with either of my folks, even when they were together. I got into trouble almost every day.”

“What kind of trouble?”

He shrugged. “You know. Fighting, stealing, drugs. Stuff.”

“You deal, don’t you?”

“Yeah. What’s it to you?”

“I went through a hard time myself. Rebelled against my parents, started smoking weed. I hurt some people.”

“Yeah, well, you got through it fine and your parents were still alive on the other side.”

Back to the topic, Rai. Control the conversation.

“Do you think one of the people from your drug dealing was involved?” asked Aradia.

Kaiser shook his head and said, “I never sold anything serious or worth serious money. Mostly weed and shrooms to college kids. There wasn’t anybody serious enough to come after my ’rents.”

“Not that I am complaining or anything, in fact I applaud you for making the decision, but why didn't you deal serious drugs?” asked Aradia.

Kaiser shrugged, grumbling. “You need to know people. I was a retailer, so I’d have needed wholesalers. Besides, I didn’t want to go that route.”

“You’re using the past tense. You stopped dealing?” He nodded meekly. “Why?”

“I’d have probably stopped anyway, eventually. But my dad caught me.”

“Oh,” said Aradia, sounding out the word long and hard to emphasize her understanding. “And as a lawyer he was concerned how it would look?”

“No!” Kaiser replied emphatically, surprising Aradia with his emotion. “No, he never said anything like that. Damn it, I hated him sometimes, but he never once said anything like that. The last time I saw him we were yelling. I really let him down.”

She let him talk.

“One of the reasons I got booted from my mom's house and into staying with my dad was the drugs,” Kaiser explained. “The only reason. She had custody. She gave me up when she found out, though. She said I was just like my father.”

“Maybe she was right.”

“He cheated on her for years. Said he was working late. That’s how she got custody. I don’t want to be just like him.”

“Then maybe she was right in ways she didn’t mean.” At his raised eyebrow she went on, “You describe him as a guy with some troubles, but who always treated you well. I can’t defend him doing that to your mother, but maybe if you learn from both your mistakes, something can come of it.”

“Yeah,” he replied, pulling another cigarette. “Maybe.”

“My dad’s a lawyer, too,” she volunteered. “ADA.”

“Good for your dad.”

“What were you fighting about, the last time you saw your father?” Aradia asked.

“The gang,” said Kaiser.

“Hmm. He didn’t approve?”

“My dad and I lost our pack with the divorce. They sided with my mom. He thought we’d be better off finding our own way.”

“You think one of them might have...”

He shook his head. “No. My guys are loyal, mostly. There’s a couple guys who are bruisers, Bane, Dope, Munchie, but if anybody wanted my spot, they’d come after me.”

“Another gang, then?”

He shook his head. “Look, we’re not like LA or New York wolf packs. There’s some petty crimes, but nothing hard. Mostly we just bully other hiddens, like you and your boyfriend that night.”

Aradia sighed and asked, “Was your father having any business problems?”

Kaiser shook his head. She wished he would shift his thinking to help her generate leads instead of merely shooting down anything she came up with. For all her bravado, establishing a motive would be nearly impossible without help.

“What about Stanley?”

“What about him?”

“Two murders in a town that normally has none, and all they have in common is the vampire MO and that the first vic was your dad’s client. It’s an obvious link.”

“Police thought so too,” Kaiser replied. “They didn’t find anything.”

“Because they didn’t know what to look for. They don’t know about werewolves.” *Well, Scruffy does. I guess he just wasn’t too helpful in the investigation. Not surprising, he was such a jerk.*

Kaiser sighed. “I’d met Stanley a couple times. The guy was a tool.”

Aradia couldn’t help but laugh.

“What?” he asked.

“The guy owned a hardware store,” she replied. At his blank expression, she spelled it out, saying, “You called him a tool.”

“Oh!” he said, realizing the irony.

He laughed, hard. “Yeah, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know,” she said, smiling sincerely. *Finally he’s warming up to me!*

“Well, it’s still true. He was probably a good guy, you know. But he sweated a lot. He had no confidence. I can tell when I meet someone whether they’re a fighter or not. He wasn’t.”

“From what I’ve learned, he fought pretty hard to keep his store afloat.”

“Yeah, afloat,” Kaiser replied. “Surviving. Struggling just to stay alive isn’t living. That’s what I mean.”

Beats the alternative. She kept that sentiment to herself, given the circumstances.

“What about Mr. Stanley’s business partner, a guy named Dereck?”

“Caradoc?” Kaiser replied. “What about him?”

“What do you know about him?”

“Stanley was my dad’s client for a while. I first heard the name maybe four or five years ago. A business owner always needs a lawyer, I guess. My dad talked about him a lot. He mismanaged a few finances last year. My dad thought his only choice was to sell the place. The land was worth good money, and there were interested buyers. If he didn’t sell, the bank would foreclose.”

“But what has that got to do with Mr. Caradoc?” asked Aradia.

“Well, lots of businesses have been going under lately. Banks don’t want to foreclose. They don’t make money like that. They want businesses to keep paying interest. In order to make a long term profit, some banks are willing to forgive a certain amount of debt if the owner can show a real plan to pay the rest of it over time.”

“Isn’t that kind of shady?” Aradia asked.

Kaiser shook his head. “Shady how? On the contrary, it helps square off the business owners’ debts while helping the bank still get the money it needs. When banks do well, they can lend more money, which entrepreneurs can use to spur on the economy. Healthy banks are crucial for a healthy economy.”

Not as dumb as he acts, Aradia noted. I’ll remember that.

“Where does Dereck come in?” Aradia repeated.

“Well, I don’t know the details, but this Caradoc guy, he offered Stanley enough money to make the shop look better on paper. It was enough to convince the bank not to foreclose, right away at least. In exchange he became a partner.”

“I met him once,” Kaiser continued. “Dereck. Didn’t like him.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “Nothing in particular. Just my overall impression. If there is one thing being a criminal taught me, it’s how to spot another.”

Aradia felt a tingle down her spine. That was exactly how she’d felt just glimpsing him in the hallway. “You think the guy’s a crook?” Aradia asked.

“I don’t know. That would be my guess.”

Aradia nodded with satisfaction. She knew her father disagreed, but her money was on Dereck as the culprit, or at least an involved party.

“Do you think Dereck was stealing money from Mr. Stanley?”

He smiled. “How the hell would I know?”

Aradia grew thoughtful. “I know this is kind of touchy, but you probably could get access to your dad’s computer and books.”

They agreed on a meeting time and place. Kaiser would do the research Aradia requested and meet with her again on Tuesday. That would give him time to find what it was for which he was looking. She was disappointed, but agreed to wait, figuring it would be two of the longest days of her life.

He still didn’t want her to know where he lived, so they agreed to meet at the public library on Essex Street. The library was a renovated Civil War era brick mansion originally owned by a wealthy sea merchant. Aradia was pretty excited when Kaiser proposed it as a meeting place. She’d been meaning to check it out anyway, but hadn’t found the time.

“I won’t tell the other guys you have a library card,” she quipped when he hurried up to join her on Tuesday afternoon.

“I checked my dad’s home computer,” he replied, ignoring her comment. “There wasn’t anything on it. The police took his office one and his laptop. They didn’t know about these, though.”

He emptied his backpack and a half dozen or so ledgers tumbled out, earning him a stern look from a nearby librarian.

“My dad was old school. He probably kept computer records, but everything you want to know is in these.”

“Let’s look at Stanley’s finances,” she said.

He was a step ahead of her and had already bookmarked the appropriate page in one of the books. "I'm thinking your hunch is wrong. Every penny of Stanley's is accounted for."

Aradia's jaw dropped in surprise. "You mean Dereck didn't steal any money?"

"Not that my dad knew of, at least," said Kaiser. He guided her through the figures as proof.

Aradia stomped her foot in frustration.

"It makes so much sense. Dereck kills Mr. Stanley. Your dad, Stanley's lawyer, catches on because money's missing. So Dereck kills your dad to cover his tracks."

"Yeah, sure, it makes perfect sense," Kaiser replied frustratedly. "But it's not what happened."

"Now you sound just like my dad," she grumbled. "So you don't think that this guy had a motive for killing your dad?"

"Nothing in the books, at least," he said, making Aradia feel like whacking herself in the head with a brick.

They went through the rest of the ledgers meticulously, hoping to find some kind of clue, whether related to Dereck or not. Nothing jumped out at either of them.

"Ugh, this is not working," she said finally.

"No," he agreed. "No it's not."

"Alright," she said, "I need to do some thinking. How should I contact you?"

He seemed hesitant.

"Oh come on! Even after all this you don't trust me?"

“Especially after all this, I don’t trust anybody.” Reluctantly, though, he had to agree that if they were going to solve this together, they needed a means of getting in touch.

“Give me your cell number,” he commanded.

She complied. His fingers flew over the keypad as he typed it in.

“You called me a bunch recently, didn’t you?” he asked.

“Guilty as charged.”

“I won’t bother asking how you got my number. You’re in my phone now. I’ll answer when you call, or at least return your messages.”

She nodded as she stood to leave. “Fair enough.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“What are you so happy about?” Roy asked Aradia.

She looked up to see Roy hovering over her. She was reading *Jane Eyre* and crouching in her favorite booth at the SilverMoon. The booth was in a nook toward the back of the main room, adjacent to the window. She had her knees propped against the table. A half-eaten burger lay on her plate accompanied by a half-empty glass of cola. Roy stood looking at Aradia, wearing his usual type of outfit: jeans, sneakers, and a Beatles t-shirt.

At first, Aradia had debated whether she should tell Roy about what she had seen and learned over the last few days, but ultimately decided against it. Her parents had been right that revealing what she

knew, at this point at least, would not fix the problem, and she worried she'd only make things worse.

However, what she did say next still did not improve the situation. "Oh, I was just thinking about my date with Dax this weekend."

Automatically, Aradia blushed. Roy looked like she'd just kicked him. Before Aradia had a chance to apologize, Roy plopped into the seat across from her and asked, "Are you his girlfriend now?"

"No Roy, I am not," said Aradia.

Far from comforted, Roy went on to ask, "Do you want to be?"

Aradia shrugged.

Roy heaved a huge sigh and said, "Rai Rai, I know you like him, but the truth is you can't get serious about him. You can't trust him."

"Why, because he is a vampire?" Aradia demanded angrily.

In fact, she had to agree with his assessment. Dax was definitely keeping secrets from her. Still, when she reached that conclusion, it was based on facts and reasonable interpretation of events. When Roy said so, she suspected it was mostly just his irrational hatred.

"No," Roy replied firmly, surprising her. "No, you can't trust him because his father has been secretly investigating you. He has samples of your blood at the hospital. Aradia, they're trying to determine what you are."

Aradia's mouth dropped open. "What?"

“I went to the hospital today,” Roy explained, “to pick up some medication for my aunt when a nurse walked by carrying a tray of blood samples. I recognized the smell of your blood instantly. When we were discussing our abilities, though, you told me that you don’t really get sick, and you’ve never had blood drawn for fear it might expose you. So of course, when I smelled it, I wondered what the hell was a sample of your blood doing at the hospital?”

“Okay,” she followed along. “How do you know it’s mine?”

“I told you, I’d recognize the smell anywhere.”

“No, I mean, aren’t blood vials sealed shut? I know about your special senses, but isn’t that extreme?”

“I have a very good sense of smell,” Roy replied confidently, “even for a werewolf. Listen, I followed the nurse and watched as she brought it to Mr. Dayton. I don’t think anyone saw me. I hid behind the door as he had a friend, the head hematologist, Dr. Kreukspiel or Kryzpaniel or something, run tests on it. He was comparing it to other hidden DNA trying to find a match.”

Aradia said nothing for a few seconds. She didn’t know what to say or believe. *Roy would not make this up.* And yet, even with her suspicions about Dax’s secrets, she’d mostly just figured it was some weird vampire thing, like he’d been married to her great-grandmother. This?

She wanted to deny it furiously, but as she thought it over further, it tied up a lot of loose ends.

“All the strange accidents at school!” she exclaimed. Roy’s eyes widened and he nodded. “I’ve gotten so many bloody cuts the last few weeks.”

“How would they get the blood, though?”

“I went to the school nurse every time.”

Roy raised an eyebrow.

“For appearances. I didn’t want it to look like I just expected to heal magically.”

“Ah,” Roy replied. “Clever.”

“Apparently not,” she replied. “Okay, so the nurse gathers my blood. Is she a vampire?”

Roy shook his head. “No, she’s human, but vampires can have human allies. Especially Mr. Dayton. He’s very progressive, as vampires go.”

“It also explains why Dax has been holding back from me.”

Roy squirmed unhappily.

“Roy!” Aradia chastised him. “Look, I know you don’t like hearing about this, but if you’re really my friend I need you right now.”

This time he blushed. “You’re right, Rai Rai. I’m sorry. Okay, uh, go on.”

She didn’t need to go into vivid detail with him, of course. “Okay, so we’ve been dating a little while now, right? Dax has always held back, though. He hasn’t even kissed me when I tried.”

Roy wasn’t sure whether to be relieved that they had not kissed, or saddened that she’d tried. He decided to go with a little of both.

“He’s hardly even touched me, really. I think I have more contact with you than him.”

Roy replied, “I’m not sure I didn’t want to hear this, actually.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Look, are vampires really all sex-crazed like on TV?”

“Not really,” Roy replied. “But they’re not priests.”

“That’s good to know, but I wouldn’t expect them to have sex with young boys.”

Roy laughed and said, “Now who’s not taking this seriously?”

“Touché,” she acknowledged.

“Okay, so you’re thinking he was after information on you all along?”

She didn’t want to say it, but she had to. “The way my personality is, Roy? I’ll blab about intimate details of my life to almost anyone. I’d be an easy target for Dax to coax secrets out of me.”

Roy squinted and shook his head slowly. “You don’t have much of a filter sometimes, I’ll give you that. But you’re really good at protecting your secret.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. So I only knew you for a few days and I already knew everything from your favorite candy bar to your childhood fear of your toys coming to life and dancing around your bed. I didn’t know anything about what you were, though.”

“I don’t really know much about what I am,” she countered.

“I didn’t even know that, then. I mean, look at the nurse thing. You’ve kept your secret hidden for so long, I doubt the first vampire to run along could just sweet talk you into divulging that kind of information.”

She ran over every conversation she’d ever had with Dax as well as she could. “He’s a subtle bastard,” she muttered.

He nodded. “He’s old, Rai. Vampires are master manipulators.”

She clenched her fists so hard that she could hear her knuckles crack. Roy looked at her and said, “I’m sorry, Rai.”

“Are you?” she replied. “Are you sorry really? Aren’t you relieved I won’t be seeing Dax anymore?”

“I am,” he admitted, “but I still don’t want to see you hurt. I figured you had a right to know.”

“You’re damn right I did.”

“So you’re canceling your date with Dax, then.”

“Quite the contrary,” said Aradia. “Dax wanted to date me for information. I’ll do the same. I’ll use the date as an opportunity to find out how much he knows and what his plans are.”

“How are you going to do that? Ask him?” Roy proposed sarcastically.

“No,” said Aradia.

“Then how?” he persisted.

Aradia thought about it until a wicked smile played upon her lips. “I’ll handle that.”

Roy made a conscious decision to open his fists and calm down. “Okay,” he said. “That’s tomorrow night, right?”

She nodded.

“Just don’t forget we have a date of our own tonight.”

She grinned. “How could I forget? First full moon of my first lunar cycle as a werewolf.”

“Aradia, this is serious,” he replied. “You could very well turn tonight.”

She understood his concern, but she didn’t share it. Her arm had healed completely after a few days, and she wasn’t seeing any of the early onset werewolf symptoms Roy had described. She hadn’t had any strange visions or cravings for raw or undercooked meat, and her senses were just as human-level as they’d ever been.

Still, she agreed it was better to be safe than sorry. The last thing she’d want to do was turn into an out of control werewolf.

“I’ll be over tonight well before sundown,” she promised.

“Okay, back to the other thing. Can vampires read minds or control people or any of that stuff?”

“Nah,” Roy shook his head. “Not really. That’s been way played up in pop culture. Some vampires have special mental powers, but that’s rare, and I think it’s mostly in the really old vampires.”

“Good,” Aradia nodded.

She was already beginning to formulate a plan. She smiled at the concept of turning the tables on Dax and his father, but she was still depressed. She realized that almost regardless of what she learned, she and Dax as a couple were doomed.

“Is anyone else coming?” Aradia asked.

She was locked in a cell in the Morales' basement. *Funny, just a couple months ago, this would have seemed like a really bad situation.* Also imprisoned were Roy in the next cell, D in the next cell down from him, and across the walkway, Al and Mr. Morales.

There were about a dozen more cells unfilled.

"Not tonight," Mr. Morales replied. "My brother and his family have decided not to spend full moons in Salem for a while, in light of what happened with Reynaldo."

Roy hung his head at his father's words. "It was not your fault, Roy," his dad added.

"And as long as I don't turn tonight, no harm no foul!" Aradia said, trying to cheer her friend.

D had stripped to his funny werewolf undies precisely at sundown and posed a bit before neatly folding his clothes. At first Aradia assumed the posing was for her benefit, but considering the size of his ego, he probably did it all the time.

Roy and the others waited a bit. Aradia had no intention of disrobing. Instead she'd worn old, loose fitting clothes she didn't care much about, and brought a change of clothes which she set just outside her cage.

"So... What next?" Aradia asked.

"Now we wait for the transformation," Mr. Morales replied.

"Oh, of course, sir," she replied, "but we could have hours for that, right?"

Everyone nodded.

"So what do we do now? You know, to pass time."

“Usually we sit in pensive silence,” D replied.

Al nodded. “More or less, yeah.”

“Yeah, okay,” Aradia replied, “you all might not have noticed, but I’m not so good with silence. Come on! Let’s play a game or something.”

Roy proposed, “Charades?”

“Again,” Aradia repeated, “not so good with silence. What about the famous name game?”

She received blank stares.

“Oh this’ll be great! I’ll teach you. It’s more of a car game normally, but I think it’s perfect. I’ll say a famous name. It can be anyone, real or fictional, living or dead. It just has to have a first and last name, and you can’t make it up. Then the next person takes the first letter of my person’s last name and says a new name. We go around in a circle until you all turn. So if I say Stephen Moyer, Roy, you might say Miley Cyrus.”

“I would never say Miley Cyrus.”

“Oh, hush.”

Roy said, “Marlon Brando.”

Next was D. “Bigby Aarons.”

“Who?” Aradia asked.

“Alpha of a big pack in New Hampshire. I spent a summer up there. Cool guy.”

Aradia replied, “Oh, okay. Mr. Morales, that’s an A to you.”

Mr. Morales replied, “Abraham van Helsing.”

Al asked, “Is that a V or an H?”

“Definitely V,” Aradia replied confidently.

“Okay...” Al thought for a moment. “V, from V for Vendetta.”

“No go,” Aradia said, “needs a last name.”

“Oh, right. Victoria Beckham.”

“Nice one,” D complimented his brother, with whom he exchanged an air fist pound.

The game went on like that for just over an hour before the beastly transformation came. Aradia watched in fascination as the four males all seemed to seize up at once. She saw as their skin tightened and rippled, their backs spasmed, and they started to change.

They screamed out in pain as their bodies sprouted wolf hair. After just a few moments, she was no longer in a room with her friend, his brothers, and his father. Now she was in a room with four prowling, growling, ferocious werewolves.

“Well that was different,” Aradia spoke. Apparently she drew Roy’s attention, for he turned and swiped at the bars on her side of his cage. He could not reach his arm through the bars, of course, but he definitely tried, swiping and gnashing his teeth.

“My, what big teeth you have, Roy.”

She sat like that for about five minutes.

“I guess that’s that!” she said, rising up and unlocking the door to her cage using the one key.

“Guys, it’s been fun. Mr. Morales, here you go,” she said, sliding the key under the door to his cell. He pounced at the door,

banging his head hard on it. “Oooh... well, at least you won’t remember that, right?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Is something wrong?” Dax asked Aradia as they drove his 335d into the city of Salem.

“No, what makes you think that?” Aradia responded.

“Since I picked you up you have been so quiet,” said Dax.

“Normally you never shut up.”

He smiled after the statement, hoping to encourage a laugh from Aradia. She said nothing. She knew she was supposed to be acting normal to keep Dax off balance. In the back of her mind, though, she knew that this was probably the last time she would ever be with him.

Even given the deception, how could she be anything but sad?

“I just feel sick today, that's all,” Aradia replied.

“You should have said something,” Dax replied as he pulled into the mall’s parking garage. “We could have rescheduled if you are feeling under the weather.”

Aradia forced herself to look at him when she said, “I wanted to see you.”

She smiled up at Dax who replied very stoically as they walked towards the mall’s entrance. *I guess I was wrong to think you and I*

had something special, Dax, Aradia thought to herself, so very wrong indeed.

So far, it had not been much of a date. All they had done was walk around the entire shopping mall in awkward silence. Aradia was giving Dax one final chance to come clean, hoping he would admit the truth about his motivations and declare that because of his feelings for her he could not keep lying.

He didn't, though. Dax just walked along at her side, saying very little, looking everywhere besides directly at her.

When he finally did speak, it was to say, "I believe I should take you home." They hadn't even been out a full hour.

As they were exiting the shopping mall, Aradia noticed a group of scrawny, seedy guys following them. There were four of them, and they all wore dirty black clothing and beanie caps. They followed Aradia and Dax into the parking garage. In the closer quarters, Aradia noted they smelled heavily of weed and beer. She had to assume Dax had noticed them as well.

Really? Is it going to be every date I go on I get accosted by some group of no-gooders?

When they stopped in front of Dax's car the scumbags closed in on them. Aradia decided confrontation was the only option left. Regardless of what else was going on with them, she trusted Dax would be good with the decision.

The two of them spun to face the group.

“Hey sweetie, what’s up?” one of the jerks asked her, completely ignoring Dax.

He smelled more foul than the rest of them put together, but worst of all was the way he looked at Aradia. He was leering at her with intense sexual hunger reflecting in his eyes.

“Don’t call me sweetie,” Dax replied dryly.

Aradia laughed aloud.

“Not talking to you,” he replied, still leering lecherously at Aradia.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

“Look in the mirror and you will see,” he joked, revealing his yellow teeth and making his friends all chuckle.

Dax remained impassive. Aradia fought back the urge to throw up all over the offensive man’s shoes.

“Look, um, dude,” Aradia said as politely as she could. “I don’t mean to be rude but my... uh... friend and I were on our way home. I’d really rather not have any trouble, so I would appreciate it if you just leave us alone.”

“Your boyfriend here must be pretty stupid,” the same one said with a nod towards Dax.

Dax stiffened while the guy’s friends all chuckled again.

“Excuse me?” said Aradia.

“I mean nobody but a stupid boyfriend would let a hot looking girl like you out in public,” he said with a fiendish grin.

He was so emaciated that when he smiled, he looked absolutely skeletal. “If you were mine, I would never let you leave my side.”

“There’s so much wrong with that statement,” Aradia murmured. “Look, if I even stand near you much longer, let alone by your side, I’m gonna need me some noseplugs.”

Dax burst out laughing, but the guy and his crew didn’t seem amused. They grew dangerously quiet.

Oh crap.

“Yeah, that was rude. Look, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say that. I apologize,” Aradia said quickly, trying to defuse the situation.

Strangely, the guy smiled at Aradia, looking pleased rather than angry.

“It’s alright, sweetie,” he said to a confused Aradia. “But if you really want to apologize, let’s kiss and make up.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Aradia said. “Leave us the hell alone, now, or we’re going to kick all four of your pathetic asses.”

They didn’t seem intimidated. They formed a loose semicircle around her and Dax.

“You know something, sweetie?” the speaker said. “You talk too damn much! C’mere with you!”

He lunged towards Aradia, but Dax had anticipated the attack. He stepped in front of her and with one solid shove, used the goon’s own momentum to propel him into a concrete support column. His body and face contacted the column with a sickening thud. Aradia winced, recalling the sound when she and Kasey had collided with the pavement.

“Go near her and die, you bloody sods!” Dax snapped angrily.

Although shocked by the turn of events, the attacker, who appeared to be the leader of the thugs, managed to stumble to his feet. The others waited for guidance. Aradia was relieved to see Dax had not killed him.

The leader's expression changed from surprise to anger.

“Get ‘em!” he yelled to his crew, pointing at Dax accusingly.

These guys don't know who they're messing with, Aradia thought, actually pitying them. *Or what they're messing with.*

The biggest guy of the group, who was just as thin and weak looking as the others, only taller, moved towards Dax. When he was two steps away Aradia moved between the two and socked the goon right the eye. He landed flat on his back, out cold.

The remaining two uninjured assailants came at her. Without hesitating, she kicked the first in his most sacred area. As he doubled over in pain, Aradia grabbed the back of his shirt and threw him to the ground in front of the other.

“We can do this all night if you want,” she taunted.

The fourth guy bolted from the garage.

Now all who were left upright were Aradia, Dax, and the leader-goon. He was bleeding from the forehead and looked like his nose was broken, but didn't seem to care.

He reached into a pocket to pull out a switchblade. He grinned evilly as he saw Aradia falter.

For two intense moments, they just stared at each other until the guy lunged at her with the knife. Aradia, a bit intimidated by the knife, nevertheless caught the guy by the wrist. She then squeezed it

intensely and summoned a bit of flame, just enough to burn him mildly. He dropped the knife, howling in agony. Aradia took no notice.

She lifted him and slammed him down on the hood of Dax's car with such force that the glass in windshield actually cracked.

By now the guy was genuinely shaking with terror. "You don't ever talk to a girl like that or try to force yourself on one again, you hear me?"

He nodded eagerly.

"I swear if I ever hear of anything like this again, I will find you."

Then she let him go.

Dax had stood by watching Aradia, speechless.

He stood with his mouth agape, staring at Aradia who just turned to look at him, and said, "Still here, are you?"

"Is there a reason why I would not be?" asked Dax.

Aradia shrugged and said, "Most times when a guy sees a girl be strong and kicking ass, they take off for the hills."

"Can't imagine why," Dax muttered.

"That better be sarcasm," Aradia spat in a venomous tone.

Before Dax could even answer, she made her way to the passenger seat of the car, opened it, and sat down.

"You still want me to take you home?" Dax asked.

Aradia shrugged with total indifference. At first, Dax just stood stunned, but seeing Aradia's expression he decided to let it go.

Nodding toward the cracked windshield, Aradia asked, “You have full coverage?”

“I always insure against the unexpected.”

Aradia shrugged and said, “Good. I’ll pay your copay or whatever for the repair.”

Dax was stunned by her attitude. He just replied, “That will not be necessary.”

As they were exiting the parking garage and getting onto the road, Dax finally looked to Aradia and asked, “What exactly are you, anyway?”

“You really want to know?” asked Aradia.

“Yes,” he replied.

Aradia slumped against the window and said, “Me too.”

Soon they reached her house, and Dax got out to open Aradia's door. She was already out of the car, though, and coldly brushed past him to get inside. Then she hesitated. She realized at this point that if she wanted to know what was going on, it was now or never.

“Aradia, what is wrong?” asked Dax.

She shook her head, then turned to look up at him, eyes moist.

Dax stepped closer and gazed at her.

“Has anyone ever told you how magnificently beautiful your eyes are?”

Boy! Is he pouring it on thick, Aradia thought to herself bitterly.

“I know I haven’t been really good to you lately, Aradia, but from this point on that’s going to change. I will start taking our

relationship more seriously. I will always be there. From now on, Aradia, I will do anything for you. Anything at all.”

“You don’t have to do that, Dax,” Aradia replied, looking down at her feet.

“No, I don’t. I want to, love,” whispered Dax. He hadn’t used ‘love’ as a pet name for her since their first couple of dates.

Aradia said nothing. She just squeezed her eyes and decided that if she was ever going to do it she had to do it now.

“There is one thing you can do for me, Dax,” said Aradia, still looking at the ground.

“You need merely put it to words,” said Dax.

“The thing that you can do for me,” said Aradia as she brought her face up to meet his, “is hold still.”

With that, she wrapped her arms around his neck and captured his lips with her own.

At first, Dax’s eyes grew wide with surprise, but then as the kiss went on, he slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer, savoring it. Aradia, however, was getting a different experience from the kiss than Dax.

Slowly at first, then in a rush, she saw through his eyes the moment he had first seen her in Algebra. She saw and felt his raging jealousy as he had watched Roy and her dancing at Jayce’s party. She saw him hiding in the woods, recording her use her powers on his phone. She heard Xan proposing a strategy of how to investigate

Aradia from the source. The last memory was too much for Aradia. She lost her concentration, and the visions faded.

She ended the kiss. Angrily, she shoved Dax away. He stood confused and perplexed, dazed from the suddenness of the kiss. No sooner did he reach out for Aradia's hand than she raised that same hand to slap him hard across the face. Stunned, Dax withdrew his arm. Aradia looked at him as ruthlessly as a boa ready to pounce on a bird with a broken wing.

"You know, Dax, I really did like you," she sneered. "But I guess for some guys such as yourself that just isn't enough!"

Shaking with anger and sadness, Aradia stomped into her house and slammed the door behind her. Dax stood on her porch and considered her words.

Aloud he spoke, "She knows."

Chapter Twenty-Six

The first thing Aradia did was throw herself on her bed and cry to herself for twenty minutes. Second, she called Rhonda, who did not answer. Third, she called Roy and told him everything. She had not intended to, and she knew sharing this would only add fuel to his fiery hatred of vampires, but at the moment she needed a friend more than she needed to soothe race relations.

He was surprisingly quiet through most of the conversation. She didn't know what he was thinking. It didn't even cross her mind to

wonder. After venting her anger, she felt ever so slightly better. She thanked him for listening and got off the phone.

Afterwards, Aradia stomped about the house looking for her mother and father. In the kitchen she found a note on the fridge:

Dear Rai Rai,

Your father took me on a surprise date night. We're going to the silent film festival. Might be back late. Lasagna in the fridge.

Love,

Mom & Dad

After crumpling the note in frustration, she decided to go to the basement freezer to get some ice cream. What she needed, besides an opportunity to run down Dax with his own BMW, was comfort food, and as far as she knew, no comfort food was better than Chunky Monkey. She made her way towards the freezer, too angry to sense her surroundings. Most especially, most unfortunately, she was too angry to notice the dark green eyes staring at her from the shadows, eyes which tracked her movements as she descended the stairs.

“There you are,” she said to her delicious prey as she pulled it from the back of the upright freezer. She swung the door shut and in the silver handle caught a most unsettling reflection.

At first, she thought it was only the reflection of the vacuum or some other basementy appliance, but then she started thinking, since

when do vacuums creep ominously towards someone? Quickly, she spun around in terror to face whomever was in her house.

She immediately recognized Dereck from when she'd seen him at the courthouse, despite a few differences. Then he'd been dressed attractively in a casual suit, had been clean shaven, and had only seemed mildly menacing. Now he was stubbly and scraggly, carried a stinking wet cloth, and clearly came across as highly dangerous.

"Dereck?" Aradia whispered, jumping back out of his reach.

The man glared with unimaginable fury. "You have nerve, child, meddling in my plans."

She backed away from him slowly. He matched her step for step. The only escape was the stairway, and fortunately she was between it and Dereck.

"Why? Why would you try to stop me?" Dereck demanded.

"Um, maybe because I think senseless murder is bad?"

She took another backwards step, being ever so careful not to stumble.

"Senseless!" he cried. He was hunched slightly and his eyes were wide. "Senseless! You silly, silly girl."

Maybe it's best not to antagonize him. "So killing Mr. Hitzig wasn't senseless, I guess. You killed him to cover your tracks." She took another step toward escape.

"I never killed anybody to protect myself," Derek stated simply and proudly, "or for money or for any other reason so base. I only killed as my role required."

“What about Mr. Hitzig?” she said. “You killed him because he was onto you about Stanley.”

Dereck smiled condescendingly, as if Aradia was a small child trying to convince him that the man in the red suit she’d met at the mall was really Santa. “I killed the lawyer because I needed another werewolf, and he came along at the right time. That’s all, sweet girl. What led you to me?”

Aradia groped for a believable answer, but found nothing. Instead, she said, “Does it really matter now?”

Surprisingly, this answer seemed to calm the killer. He shook his head and said, “You’re right. It doesn’t.”

“What do you want?” Aradia asked.

“To kill you,” Dereck said bluntly.

“Yeah, I got that. Why?” asked Aradia. She was nearly at the staircase.

Dereck gave a short barking laugh and said, “You have no idea, do you? I already had my next sacrifice picked out. My next Vampire Murder.” He cut himself off and cackled maniacally. He could not keep from laughing after speaking “Vampire Murder.” He was frothing at the corner of his mouth.

“Your next sacrifice?” Aradia repeated. *This guy is the biggest nutcase I’ve met yet...*

“Mmmm,” he agreed. “But we spoke, he and I. He had such an interesting story to tell, I thought his time could wait.”

Oh God...

“Who was it?” she asked, terrified of the answer.

“Oh you know already, don’t you?” he asked. “I should really thank you for your role in things. You practically sent him to me.”

Kaiser!

“Did you...” she could not bring herself to ask it. She was no longer thinking about the stairs.

“His role in the Greatness has not yet come,” Dereck said. “He will be the fourth, if necessary.”

“You are a serious piece of work,” she muttered.

“And you are blind to the truth if you oppose me.”

“No, I just don't like seeing murderers go free!”

“History will regard me as a visionary, anointed for a higher purpose.”

“If history remembers you at all, it will be as nothing more than a murderer.”

Dereck gave Aradia a look of pure hatred. “You know so little after all. And your friend Kaiser held you in such high esteem. I never wanted to kill.”

“Then why did you?” Aradia cried out.

“I was given no choice. It was necessary evil.”

His mood was erratic. He was flipping between full blown manic rage and something bordering on remorse. He seemed more indrawn now than he had at any point so far, and Aradia thought it would be the best opportunity she’d have to escape.

Aradia was still holding the ice cream carton, and she slammed it against Dereck's face. He sputtered as Aradia slid herself on top of the counter and kicked him with both of her legs right into the old

moth eaten couch in front of the spare TV. Her mother had fumed when her father had insisted they bring the old sofa with them cross country. He'd been adamant, though. The couch collapsed entirely under Dereck's weight. *Sorry, Dad!*

Aradia had no idea when her parents would be home, and she could not risk putting them in danger. With all her might she bounded up the stairs, using all her strength and agility to take the steps four at a time. She heard him bounding along behind her. When she reached the top of the stairs she slammed the door behind her, but before it had closed she got a good look at her villain.

He grinned wickedly as he pursued her. He flexed his hands which morphed into hideous hairy paws. Halfway up the staircase he jumped and landed on all fours. His teeth grew larger and longer and sharper, his eyes darker, and his body hairier. His clothes ripped apart as his body grew and expanded. His face elongated into a short snout with fangs protruding over his lower lip like sabers. His eyes turned a piercing yellow and were set murderously on her.

So, definitely a werewolf, Aradia confirmed as she deadbolted the door behind her. *That won't hold him long.*

Indeed it did not. She earned herself an extra stride before the basement door exploded in splinters behind her. She was out the front door as fast as she could go, with wolf-form Dereck hot on her tail.

I've got to get him out of the neighborhood, she realized. She wasn't even thinking about him blowing the whole hidden secret.

She just didn't want an innocent neighbor to get torn to shreds by an irate werewolf.

She headed for the woods. It was clear that she could not outrun him. She was running fast, as fast as she'd ever gone, and he was keeping up. She knew she couldn't keep up that pace forever, or even for much longer.

I'll fight him in the woods, she decided. It was as close to home terrain as she'd get, and she'd already bested one werewolf. Something told her he'd be more challenging of an opponent than Roy.

Morgan gasped and rose sharply from her slumber. A smile came to her lips and she summoned her staff and crystal. It grew cloudy, then clear, and she knew all she needed to know.

With pleasure she whispered, "The last witch."

"My, my, my! Aren't you the difficult little bitch?" Dereck sneered at her as he stalked her through the woods. So far she'd managed to evade him. She led him into dense foliage where his greater size would be a hindrance.

"You can talk as the wolf?" she asked. She knew it was no time for such questions, but she was so surprised she couldn't help herself. *Well, I've only seen full moon werewolves so far. I guess the rest of the time they can talk. Weird.*

In response, he showed her he could laugh as the wolf also.

“You lost your washcloth. The one you were going to use to knock me out,” Aradia taunted as she ran. She considered climbing one of the trees, but with those claws and bulging muscles she thought he’d probably be a better climber than she was. “Along with your clothes. Gross, by the way.”

“Shame,” he replied. “Without the process you won’t pass for a Vampire Murder. I’ll have to settle for just killing you. You won’t serve a role in my Greatness after all.”

“Why knock your victims unconscious?” she asked, hoping to keep him distracted by running his mouth.

“The heart must be pumping at the time of exsanguination for the effect to look natural,” he replied.

“There is nothing natural about what you do, Dereck.”

I could try running onto the lake again, she considered. He probably wouldn't be able to follow. She rejected that option too. Her powers didn’t work reliably. She got different kinds of reactions when she tried things all the time. They were especially erratic when she was under immediate stress like she was now. If she attempted to freeze the water and run out onto it like she had when Dax had seen her, she could just as well end up freezing herself in a block of ice.

Then he was in front of her.

“I’m going to kill you now, baby.”

“Don't call me baby!” Aradia snapped.

“It doesn't matter what I call you. All you are now is so much dead meat.”

The time to fight had come. While she'd been running, she'd found a good, fist sized rock with a sharp edge. She waited for Dereck to lunge at her, planning to jump to the side and conk him in the head.

The plan didn't work quite as well as she had hoped. Dereck lunged, but he outmaneuvered her. She jumped to her right, but instead of continuing on his original trajectory, he shifted his weight and came around from her other side.

He's so fast.

Now he was on her right side, and if she swung at him she'd have no power behind it.

With her left hand she summoned a fireball. She was too scared, though, too distracted. The flames sputtered into nothing as quickly as they came.

Dereck gave her no time to try another tactic. While she was distracted, he lunged again and landed on top of her, pinning her to the ground. His muzzle was open, and he was drooling on her.

His breath was so foul that it caused Aradia to call out, "If you were planning to eat me, the least you could have done is brush your teeth!"

"What do you mean 'were'?" Dereck growled.

She bunched up both of her knees and kicked with all her might into his chest. He flew several feet upwards from the sheer force. Aradia rolled on the ground away from him and sprung up as quickly as she could. He landed on his feet, rose on his hind haunches, and the two of them circled each other.

After a few feints back and forth, Dereck finally scored a blow on Aradia, sinking his teeth into her arm, the same arm Roy had bitten.

“Awghf!” she cried.

This isn't what getting hurt is supposed to feel like. When the hero in a movie gets stabbed or shot, he can grit his teeth and get through it. It almost makes him tougher. Aradia did not feel tougher. She didn't feel very tough at all.

Her sense of hearing fell away. At first it was like she was hearing noises muffled by a heavy, damp blanket. Then she heard nothing at all. She didn't feel movement herself, but had a vague sense of activity around her. Her vision sparkled as it, too, failed her. She had a sense of gushing blood, but she couldn't quite feel it. She wondered if she was dying. *This is definitely not what getting hurt is supposed to feel like.*

She was about to pass out. She knew if that happened, she'd never wake up again. She fought with all her will against that. She forced the stars out of her vision, and she started seeing again. She extended herself into her surroundings and her hearing returned. She could hear the growling werewolf gnawing on her arm. She could feel the blood coursing from her arteries onto his face and mouth.

He was confident. She used his attack as an opportunity.

She quickly ripped off her jacket with her uninjured arm and spun. His teeth tore at her flesh, and she cried in the heightened pain, but she kept her wits about her and got her arm free. She jumped on his back while wrapping the jacket around his neck. She squeezed.

For all her strength, she did not think head on close combat was so wise after all. While gasping for air he reached back behind him and tore at her with his claws, lacerating her all over her back and arms. She bled profusely, soaking her clothes.

Just a little longer! she urged herself. If she could knock him out, this would all be over, all of it.

She couldn't do it though. Her strength gave out, and she let go. He gulped air in greedily as he spun around to face her for her death blow.

Then he stopped. His ears perked up and he turned to peer into the woods. Even in his wolf form, he gave a weird shrug and growled, "Until another time, baby!"

He was gone.

She reached for her phone. She needed to call someone. Her parents or 911.

Her phone was gone.

Roy, she realized. After her call with him, she'd plugged her phone in to charge on her bedside table.

She tried to stand. She made it to her feet, but then collapsed into someone's gentle arms.

"Wha?" she mumbled. She'd thought she was alone. Her vision was failing again and all she saw were stars. This time she couldn't find the will to fight it.

This person must be what scared Dereck away. Aradia willed herself to heal, but she couldn't feel it working.

"Aradia! Oh, bloody hell, Aradia!"

The voice sounded so very familiar. “Who...?” she tried to ask.

“Shhh, love,” he said. Dax took off his own jacket and wrapped her in it as well as he could. Carrying her as gingerly as possible, he ran for his car.

“Dax,” she finally whispered. Even with his heightened hearing, Dax could barely make out her voice. “Dax... help me...”

“I will, Aradia,” Dax said, ignoring the nearly irresistible smell of so much warm, fresh blood. He leaned her head against his shoulder as he opened the rear driver’s side door of his car. “I swear it.”

It took them twelve minutes to get to the Dayton manor. Dax hit the horn twice as he pulled up the driveway. By the time he made it to the front door, Xan was there swinging it open.

Xan saw Aradia bleeding and lying limply in Dax’s arms. He chuckled and said, “Wow, Dax, I didn't know you did home deliveries!”

“Just get Dad!” he snapped as he shot past his brother and into the living room where he laid Aradia on the couch.

He raced to the kitchen, got a bowl of water and bandages and returned to her. He dipped a clean cloth into the bowl, held out her arm, and gently cleaned the area to get a sense of the wound. As he went he saw that the bite wound on her arm and the gashes all over her were already closing. The flow of blood had nearly stopped on its own.

No werewolf victim's wounds heal that quickly, Dax thought to himself, *at least not until after they turn. Not even hiddens*. He looked down at her with an impressed smile slowly curving on his lips. For the first moment since he'd found her bleeding, he started to think she might survive the attack.

Just when I think that this girl could not surprise me more... His thoughts trailed away as he reached out his hand to softly stroke Aradia's cheek.

Mr. Dayton cleared his throat and motioned with his head indicating for Dax to leave.

Dax hesitated. He took one last glance at Aradia's unconscious form and brushed her hair out of her eye, then he slowly rose.

“Will she survive?” he asked his father as was leaving the room.

His father said, “I don't know. I certainly hope so. She has better chances here than anywhere else. You did well bringing her.”

Dax smiled and left the room. As he was passing near the front door on his way to the staircase, the doorbell rang. He opened it and said, “You rang?”

Roy stood outside glaring at Dax ruthlessly.

“Where is she?” he demanded.

“Who?” asked Dax.

“Don't give me that! I know she's here! I smelled her blood in the woods and followed!”

Not waiting for a reply, Roy pushed Dax out of the way and stormed into the house.

“You can't come in here!” Dax shouted angrily.

“Sure I can. I don’t need to be invited in!” Roy gloated.

Roy stormed into the living room following her scent and saw Aradia sleeping on the couch, Mr. Dayton hovering over her. He rushed to her side kneeling like a prince from a fairy tale about to kiss his princess.

“I’m sorry, father,” Dax began.

Mr. Dayton shook his head. “It is fine. What’s your name, boy?”

Roy glared at the elder vampire. Seeing that he was tending Aradia’s wounds though, and realizing he was alone in a house full of vampires, he decided to show some civility. “My name is Reynaldo. I go by Roy.”

“I am Mr. Dayton, Dax’s father.”

Roy wasn’t quite sure about the exact relationship. He assumed they’d been a mortal family which had all been turned about the same time, but he didn’t really know. He’d always thought the whole Dayton family of vampires was a strange setup.

He was in their home, though. “Good to meet you. Sir.”

Dax advanced. He knew he’d already been dismissed, but with Roy’s appearance, circumstances had changed.

“I believe she will recover,” Mr. Dayton said as he continued his work. He cleaned, applied a balm, and wrapped. Cleaned, applied a balm, and wrapped. There were many gashes to treat. “The ointment will help. She is a remarkable being.”

“She is,” said Dax.

Despite the good diagnosis, his father's face remained solemn. Part of him suspected he'd be better off not knowing, but he couldn't help asking, "What's so troubling, Dad?"

His father exhaled and glanced down at Roy, then shook his head sharply. *Not in front of him*, Dax translated.

"Roy," Dax said, "do you, by chance, know the number for Mr. or Mrs. Preston?"

"No," Roy said, realizing Aradia's parents needed to know what was going on. "No, but my dad would. They exchanged information a while back."

"I suggest you get in touch with them. Father, would they be welcome?"

Mr. Dayton nodded his agreement. Roy made the call.

Dax and his father stepped aside and lowered their voices.

"I got the test results back from Dr. Krostenial. I know what Aradia is."

Dax smiled and said, "That's wonderful! Isn't it?"

"It is good that we know," his father said nodding, still looking solemn.

"And yet...?" asked Dax.

"If she is what I think she is, and I have no reason to doubt it, then by all rights Aradia should already be dead."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“This Mr. Dayton, he seems like a good fellow,” Ross said to his unconscious daughter. He carefully held Aradia’s battered hand while he spoke. “He’s not a doctor, but he seems to know more about hidden biology than human doctors would. And I never really liked doctors anyway. What I’m saying, honey...”

“What your father’s saying,” Liza took over, “is we love you, and we’re here for you, and we know you’ll wake up. Please wake up, baby.”

Mr. Dayton had done everything he could. When the Prestons arrived, he and Dax had left the room to give the parents some time alone with their daughter. Roy stayed in the room, but he took a seat out of the way so as not to intrude upon the Prestons.

Mr. Dayton was confident she would wake up and have a full recovery, but he couldn’t say anything with certainty. The Prestons had never seen Aradia hurt before.

“Liza,” Ross said, tenderly placing Aradia’s hand back at her side, “I haven’t felt this way since—”

“Since the adoption,” she cut him off, finishing his sentence.

He nodded. “That was the only time I’d ever felt uncertain that we’d be able to take care of and raise our little girl. Even after the house fire, then more recently, when she’d sleep for days... that was just part of the territory, you know?”

“I do,” she agreed.

“When we finally signed those papers, that was when I knew for sure that she was our little girl, and that we could protect her...” He

trailed off, remembering that day which had set all their lives down this path.

“Well now, everything seems to be in order,” the Social Services worker, an amicable and slightly overweight older woman by the name of Cheryl, had said with a flourish of papers. Ross and Liza had both been grinning from ear to ear, while in the crook of Liza’s arm slept the little girl they had found in the woods.

“All we need is a name.”

“A name?” the new parents had repeated in unison.

“Why yes, a name,” Cheryl had replied, smiling. Tone changing slightly, she’d said, “Don’t tell me you haven’t thought of a name for her?”

“Oh, sure, we have a whole list,” Ross protested. If ‘sweetheart,’ ‘angel face,’ and ‘firecracker’ can be considered names, he thought.

“Well, since you’ve given it so much thought, how about telling me your favorite so I can seal the deal?” she had proposed, chuckling at the implication that adoption was rather a bargain sale than a life-changing decision.

Ross was struggling for a stall tactic, when Liza suddenly announced, “Her name is Aradia.”

“Hmm?” Ross had replied. Cheryl didn’t say anything, but the way her eyes widened showed she’d been expecting something more traditional.

“Yes, her name is Aradia,” Liza had stated firmly.

“Is that one ‘R’ or two?” came from Cheryl.

“Just one.”

Ross had leaned close to his wife as the social worker wrote the name down and asked, “Where did you get that name? Is it from a book or something?”

“It’s her name,” Liza had repeated.

“Is that an ‘E-A’ at the end?”

“‘I-A,’” Liza had replied without missing a beat.

“I’m fine that it’s her name, but... why is it her name?” Ross had asked, looking at her with large curious eyes.

“I just think it’s... *really* her name, you know?” Liza had shrugged, uncomfortable under her husband’s scrutiny. In truth she had felt the same curiosity that he did, but she hadn’t felt at all comfortable exploring it. Instead she just whispered, “Remember when I told you to check the axle again?”

He nodded.

“I didn’t know how I knew to check it again, but I was right. I don’t know how I know now either.”

Their baby opened her eyes halfway and smiled up at them. “I just know that this little girl’s name is Aradia.”

Ross hadn’t been quite satisfied, but he knew when to back off. He never actually did get much of an explanation. At the time, he’d just smiled and added, “You were also right about her being special.”

Liza had grinned back, looking up at her husband, and said, “Yeah.”

Cheryl had cleared her throat. “And for a middle name?”

“You know,” Ross said to his wife as he reached out to stroke his poor, injured daughter’s flame-red hair. It contrasted sharply with the Dayton manor’s décor, which consisted almost entirely of black, white, and grey. “You were right about her name.”

“Of course I was,” Liza replied. “I’m always right. You still haven’t figured that out yet.”

Ross smiled weakly, but that smile grew much larger when he saw Aradia’s eyelids fluttering. It was the first movement they’d seen from her since their arrival. Noting the commotion, Roy hurried over to their side.

As Aradia began to regain consciousness the first thing she noticed was the familiar scent of a greasy spoon diner and a pine filled forest hovering about her.

She slowly opened one eye and murmured, “Hey, Roy-Boy.”

Roy smiled as he replied, “Hey Rai Rai. How are you feeling?”

“Like I was attacked.” She had meant it as a joke, but realized maybe it was too soon for that kind of humor when she saw Roy’s face grow dark.

His skin began to tighten for a transformation. Aradia grabbed his hand and said, “No, Roy. Dax did not hurt me. He saved me.”

“I know,” said Roy.

“You do?” asked Aradia.

“We do,” Ross Preston replied.

“Dad!” Aradia said, realizing her parents were in the room also. She shot bolt upright then winced in severe pain at the motion.

“Oh, Rai dear,” Liza said, seeing her daughter hurting. She rushed to inspect her injuries. “It looks like you didn’t reopen any of your wounds.”

“Hi, Mom,” Aradia replied, smiling.

“Hi, honey,” Liza said, returning the smile.

“But why...” she tried, “how...”

“I came back,” Dax answered, seeming to understand the question. He had returned to the living room immediately when he heard the conversation. “To apologize. Aradia, I am so sorry. I should have been truthful with you from the start. When I found the door wide open, I investigated. Fortunately you had previously invited me in. I found obvious signs of a struggle. I scented you and a werewolf. I followed the trail and found you in the woods.”

“You saved my life,” Aradia replied. “He was going to kill me when you arrived.”

“Thank you,” Ross said to Dax.

“It was pretty much the same story for me,” Roy said. Aradia could tell he was angry Dax had been the one to save the day, not him. “After we talked, I thought you might need some company. I came by, followed the scent. But all I found was a puddle of blood. I lost the scent when it led back to the road, but I recognized Dax’s odor.”

“Impressive,” Dax said. “Vampires are nearly impossible to detect.”

“I have a good sense of smell,” Roy replied. “Anyway, I came here and found you.”

“And we came straight away when Roy’s father called us,” Ross said. “He relayed a message that you’d been hurt and you were here.”

Aradia nodded. It made sense.

“Okay. So, what do you know about what happened? Before all that stuff you just told me, I mean,” Aradia asked, directing the question at the group in general.

Her father took point. “It was all over the seven o’clock news. You were right. Dereck Caradoc, Mr. Stanley’s business partner, is being sought on murder charges.”

“Really,” Aradia replied.

“Yeah,” Roy confirmed. “And I was wrong about Kaiser. He gave the police the hard evidence they needed.”

Aradia’s interest piqued. “Oh?”

“Yeah. He confronted Dereck directly, wearing a wire.”

“No kidding,” Aradia said. More to herself than anyone, she added, “Not as dumb as he acts.”

“It wasn’t a real wire,” Roy clarified. “But he called 911 before barging in on Dereck. The police heard the conversation. Dereck admitted to both Vampire Murders. He rambled about some other really crazy stuff. They’ve only released clips so far, so who knows what else he said.”

That dialogue sounded fairly familiar to Aradia. “I have a pretty good idea,” she replied.

Changing topics, she said, “So, Dad, you were wrong about Dereck, and I was right. And Roy, you were wrong about Kaiser, and I was right? More or less accurate?”

The two guys nodded bashfully.

“Hmm,” Aradia replied. “Weird!”

“So Kaiser and Dereck...” Roy said. “I take it you had something to do with that?”

Aradia smiled. “I’m just glad it’s all getting sorted out.”

“I bet,” said Xan as he and Mr. Dayton joined them.

Roy stood up, planting himself between Aradia and the growing group of vampires.

“It’s okay, Roy-Boy,” Aradia said, tugging on his shirt to make him sit again.

“That’s right,” Xan agreed. “Down, boy. Good dog.”

Roy rose again, angrily, but Aradia tugged even harder on his shirt. Very reluctantly he sat.

“Xan, leave us,” Mr. Dayton directed his son.

“What?”

“Need I repeat myself?” Mr. Dayton asked without turning to look at his son. Xan did not reply again, but instead left the room in a huff.

“I apologize for that treatment,” Mr. Dayton said to Roy. Roy, not sure what to make of the exchange, merely nodded.

After that, none of them said anything until Dax’s father finally blurted out. “We know what you are.”

“What? You do?” Aradia cried out, hastily sitting up again in her eagerness and, again, grunting in pain. Mr. Dayton nodded in response.

“How is that possible?” Ross asked suspiciously.

“Let’s hear the man out,” said Liza.

Roy didn’t speak, but he was closer to Mr. Preston’s mindset. He did not trust the look on Mr. Dayton's face.

“Well?” Aradia demanded. “What am I?”

“Impatient,” Dax muttered under his breath.

Mr. Dayton cleared his throat and said, “The truth, Ms. Preston, is that for quite some time, we have not had anyone around here like you.”

“Isn’t that obvious?” Roy pointed out sarcastically.

Aradia ignored him and stared at Mr. Dayton. She was enraptured by the thought that she would finally have the answers she was looking for.

“Right,” she replied. “So where did I come from?”

“After analyzing your blood, my associates and I have definitively identified you as one of the hidden race.”

“Her blood?” Ross asked furiously.

Aradia touched his arm. “Later, Dad. Mr. Dayton, didn’t we already know I was a hidden?”

“Not necessarily,” he replied. “You can do things, yes, but you could have been a human aberration. A second evolution of the hidden line, so to speak.”

“But I’m not?”

“No, and we were confident of that from early on. You share genetic markers which are common to virtually all hidden races, but are absent from the human line. That was where our initial successes ended. Comparing your blood to samples of all documented hidden races, we found no matches to any of them.”

“So you don’t know what she is?” Roy spat venomously.

Mr. Dayton shook his head and said, “We thought not, at first. But as a matter of fact, I now do.”

Roy raised an eyebrow skeptically.

“Fortunately,” Mr. Dayton continued, “the head of the hematology department at NSMC, Dr. Krostenial, is an old friend of mine in the most literal sense. He has lived more than four thousand years. For four millennia, he has been an enthusiast and advocate of medical science. For our task, there exists no greater resource. He has gathered and preserved blood and tissue samples from other members of the hidden races throughout his years.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Dayton, I thought you said you made those comparisons, but found no match?” Liza asked.

“As it is, he has in his possession samples from not just extant hidden races, but also from those which have long been extinct. It was only upon comparing your DNA to those lost races that he found a match.”

Aradia waited eagerly.

Mr. Dayton said, “According to our analysis, Aradia, you are a witch.”

Roy's mouth dropped open, as did Dax's.

Aradia, on the other hand, looked disappointed.

“That’s all? I’m a witch?” Aradia asked, stunned. “So what? We’re in Salem. There are witches everywhere.”

Roy shook his head and said, “No, Aradia, those people are members of the human race. They are known as pagans or witches by the humans, but that’s not what Mr. Dayton is saying about you.”

“So hidden witches are different than human witches?” Aradia asked.

Roy nodded. Dax said, “Yes, Aradia. Quite. The human witches Roy mentioned are practitioners of Wicca, a sort of belief system which arose around witches of the hidden race. The witches as a people, your people, were something quite different.”

“Were...” Aradia said. This conversation was so overwhelming, so unexpected, it was taking some time to sink in. She heard Mr. Dayton’s words again: *which have gone extinct...*

Aradia opened her mouth to speak, but then she heard her cell phone ring.

Ross looked at Liza. “Oh!” she recalled, and fished for Aradia’s phone in her purse. She explained, “We were home when we got the call from Mr. Morales. I... thought you might want your phone.”

By the time Mrs. Preston gave the phone to Aradia, it was no longer ringing. Aradia looked at it and didn’t recognize the number. Almost immediately it started ringing again. She didn’t want to interrupt this conversation, but she worried it might be important. Aradia flipped open her phone and said, “Hello?”

“Hey baby, what’s up?”

Aradia’s face blanched.

She glanced at the others quickly, and without even bothering to give them an excuse, she walked over to the bathroom adjacent to the kitchen.

She locked the door and asked, “What do you want?”

“Your head on a platter. For starters,” Dereck replied.

“Yeah, well, besides that?” Aradia snapped.

Dereck chuckled and said, “You know the old abandoned manor in the woods near the top of Warlock Hill overlooking the old Salem village?”

“Yeah, why?”

“In twenty minutes, you are going to meet me there, alone and unarmed.”

Aradia scoffed and replied, “Sure. I’d be happy to. Wait, no, hold on a sec, I think we watched a video on this at school once... oh yeah, I’m *not* supposed to commit suicide. Why in the hell would I volitionally meet you again?”

Maybe I’ll just call the cops, Aradia thought, give them an anonymous tip on where the Vampire Murderer is.

“Because if you don’t, I will kill both your parents.”

Aradia’s mouth dropped open in shock and fear.

After a few seconds of gasping for air, she finally managed to sputter, “You’re... you’re bluffing!”

“Am I? Keep in mind I attacked you at your house. I know where you live. I know where your parents work. You can’t protect

them all the time, and the police will never find me. Eventually I'll get my opportunity. So ask yourself, is it going to be you or them?" Dereck asked. "If it has any bearing on your decision, I'll take no pleasure in their deaths."

Aradia's heart seemed to stop. She found the strength to ask, "If I do this you will leave my parents alone?"

"You have my word," he responded.

"How do I know you won't break it?" Aradia snapped.

"Why would I? Everything I've done has been for a reason. You and the Hitzig boy ruined my original plan. The only reason remaining for me to kill anyone is to entice you to meet me. Do this tonight and your parents will be safe. Don't, and they're dead. Even if you don't believe me, are you willing to take that kind of a chance?"

She said nothing. For a few moments there was silence.

"Oh, one more thing. At the first sign of red and blue, I'm out of there and the deal's off," he added casually before he hung up the phone.

Aradia breathed heavily as she snapped her phone shut. This was obviously a trap. No, it wasn't a trap, because a trap implied the victim didn't know about it. She would be intentionally walking into an ambush, practically sacrificing herself. But if her parents were in danger, she knew she had no choice but to give herself up.

A knock came at the door and Aradia jumped in surprise.

Gathering her wits and composure, she said, "Um, occupied."

"It's Roy. Are you okay?"

Aradia inhaled deeply and replied, “Yeah, I will be out in a minute.”

She unlocked the door and said, “What’s up, Roy?”

“Rai Rai, are you okay?” His face was filled with concern.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she replied and pushed past him, not looking him in the eye.

She returned to the living room where Dax, Mr. Dayton, and her parents still were seated, chatting. *That’s just a weird sight.*

Mr. Dayton opened his mouth to continue his explanation of what he thought she was, but Aradia preempted him, saying, “Look, I’m really sorry, but I have to go.”

“What?” asked Dax. “Why?”

“Look, I just got to, okay!” Aradia moved towards the front door but Roy had moved to stop her.

“Rai Rai, be honest now, what’s going on? I can help. We can help.”

“Look, I’m sorry, Roy, but I can’t explain. I have to go now!”

“It’s fine, candy cane,” her father said. “We’ll take you home.”

“No,” Aradia replied. “No, you stay here. All of you. For a little while.”

She turned back to Roy, who still stood between her and the door determined to stop her. Aradia looked him right in the eye and said, “Get out of my way, Roy!”

“No, Aradia! Not like this.”

“Either you get out of my way willingly or I will make you wish you did!”

Dax clasped his hand to his forehead anticipating what would come next. Without a moment's hesitation, she grabbed Roy by both of his arms and hoisted him right in the air. Stunned, Roy struggled to free himself from Aradia's grasp.

She winced at the effort. Holding him up wasn't a problem, but her arms and back were a mess.

"I'm really sorry about this," she said, looking at him sadly. "You should have listened to me."

She then threw him back into the Dayton's living room. He landed safely on the couch, but with such force that it caused the entire sofa to flip onto its back, Roy and all.

"Aradia," Dax spoke. She turned to him. "She who fights monsters must see to it that she herself does not become a monster. When you gaze for long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also at you."

She hesitated a moment, considering the words. She hesitated only a moment, though.

"Don't follow me," she said to her parents and the Daytons. She ran out of the house.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

As Aradia hurried out to the meeting place, she concluded that of all the bad ideas she'd had in her life, meeting a murderer in an abandoned manor completely isolated from town in the middle of the night had to be the worst. However, if Dereck was willing to kill her

parents instead of her, she decided that she did not really have much of a choice.

Breathe, Rai, she told herself. *This won't be like last time. You're ready, and you know what you're facing. You're calm. You're in control.* She summoned a fireball. The flame came to her and obeyed her command.

Of course, you're also going in wounded, you're on his home turf, and you know from experience that he can kick your ass. The flame fizzled out.

It did not take her long to find her destination. What slowed her down was seeing to it that Roy and Dax wouldn't follow her. She'd intentionally doubled back on her path, taken a detour along a stream, and abandoned her jacket in the woods to keep them from tracking her readily.

She stared up at the dark and crumbling manor looming over her. Aradia sighed as she thought to herself, *could this situation get any more frightening?* As if God, or more likely the other guy, had heard her, cold, fat raindrops started to drip onto Aradia.

"Of course," she said aloud and with a shrug of her shoulders.

She tried extending her presence into the structure to see if she could get an idea of what she was walking into. She had no luck. She had to connect to the warmth of a place, and this was a cold, dead house.

She then braced herself for whatever was going to happen, pushed the double doors open, and let herself into the house

confident in the knowledge that whatever the outcome, her family at least would be safe.

It reeked of decay, and little mice scampered around like shoppers at the mall on Black Friday. It was dark and chilly, causing Aradia to shiver all up and down her battered spine. Then again, considering what she was about to face, maybe the cold had nothing to do with the shivers.

“You alone?” Dereck’s loud voice boomed from out of nowhere.

Aradia whipped around, looking the entire room over, and finally found Dereck at the top of a long, winding staircase.

“What do you think?” asked Aradia.

Dereck was silent as he slowly descended the staircase. Aradia gathered her courage and asked, “So? I have kept my end of the bargain, will you keep yours?”

“As I said earlier, I have no reason to kill your parents. I will not harm them.”

“Then my parents are safe!” said Aradia, thankful despite the severity of her situation.

“Yes, they might be,” said Dereck, shifting into his werewolf form again. “But you sure as hell are not!”

With the speed and power of a tornado, Dereck leapt from the staircase towards Aradia. He landed a few feet in front of her, bounded once, and tackled her. She was ready and rolled with him. They wrestled and she ended up pinned, Dereck’s paw-like hands wrapped around her throat. He started to squeeze.

She closed her eyes, and in spite of Dereck crushing her windpipe so strongly that her face was beginning to turn blue, she calmed herself. *You tried it that way once*, she said. *You won't win fighting him hand to hand.* Aradia managed to smile.

Dereck's face became a mask of confusion only to change to pain when Aradia wrapped her own hands around his throat and summoned her flame. She smelled burning fur and flesh. He howled in agony, but still held her throat.

She kned him in his gut and pulled him close enough to headbutt him. His grip faltered and she gasped a deep breath. Following through on her combo attack, she rolled him off of her, sprang to her feet, and kicked him sharply in the face.

“You really should have taken my parents hostage. That way I might have wanted to hold back!”

She clasped her hands together like a praying mantis, and from her clasped hands emerged a huge whip of flame.

Dereck scrambled to his feet. On all fours he stalked a circle around Aradia, just outside her whip's reach. His cockiness was gone.

Aradia cracking the fire whip. He wasn't sure of what he was seeing, or if it were even real. He pounced and came down at her from a high arc, attacking her from above. She whipped at him with her flame construct, lashing him across the torso from left shoulder to right hip. He screeched in pain and completely failed on his landing, coming down in a heavy thud which snapped the decrepit old floorboards.

“Maybe coming here wasn’t the dumbest thing I’ve ever done!” Aradia chuckled, cracking the whip again, this time across his back.

Dereck ran towards the front door.

Aradia, however, had other ideas.

“Oh hells to the no you don’t!” she shouted, stamping her foot on the floor. The doors glossed over and became immovable. Dereck pried at the handles, but they didn’t even shake on their ancient old hinges.

Aradia smiled as she said, “Now this is when it gets good.”

It had been almost impossible for Dax and Roy to find Aradia, but once they noted the flashes and loud booms coming from the manor on Warlock Hill, it definitely narrowed the search. They raced through the forest and Roy smashed himself into one of the manor’s old front doors which, to his surprise, did not crash open.

Picking himself up, he and Dax looked at one another.

Dax proposed, “Window?”

Roy nodded.

In unison the two jumped and crashed through their respective window panes. Dax was careful to use his arms to protect his heart from any wayward shards of wood his arrival might have flung about.

The duo found Aradia and Dereck battling on the second floor.

Dereck tried dodging the fireballs Aradia threw at him, and in return, she tried to avoid him whenever he lunged or swiped at her for an attack.

“I am going to rip you to shreds and feed what is left of you to pigeons!” he threatened.

Aradia sighed as she swung herself around a huge pillar and said, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but so far you have yet to hurt me! And between you and me, I don't think you ever will!”

Dereck roared as he slashed his claws at her, but Aradia ducked every blow.

“Hold still dammit!” he finally cried out.

“Now what fun would that be?”

He furiously slashed as quickly as he could while Aradia tried to dodge the blow again.

Aradia didn't know whether he lured her to overextend herself or if she had merely gotten overconfident, but either way, his claws finally made contact. His hand managed to scrape against Aradia's belly. The wound was not deep, but it was painful, and again there was much blood.

Aradia cried out in pain, and the fireball she was holding dissipated. Dereck grinned wickedly as she dropped to her knees. He moved in for the kill.

He moved in for the kill, only to be sacked from the side by another werewolf. Roy and Dereck rolled over one another, Roy swiping and biting at him more ferociously than he'd ever attacked anything. Dereck was larger, stronger, and more experienced than Roy. He was also injured, tired, and not nearly as incensed.

Still, even with the field somewhat leveled, experience won out over youth. Dereck got Roy on his back, and opened his mouth to bite out the younger werewolf's throat. Aradia summoned a fireball to stop, but the pain from her stomach was too great, and she couldn't.

“Nooo!” Aradia cried out.

Time seemed to freeze. She couldn't believe what was happening. She'd come here to protect her loved ones, and now she was going to be responsible for the death of a loved one. She realized in that instant that she didn't really know for sure how she felt about Dax or Roy, but she loved them both in some capacity, and she couldn't lose either of them.

Wonderfully, she didn't have to.

Dax had climbed to the rafters above the pair and crept through the darkness where Aradia and the werewolves hadn't noticed him. Now he struck, like a rock spider snatching its prey. He dropped himself from the rafters and landed on the elder werewolf's back. He used an old, rusty fireplace shovel as a gag, forcing it crosswise into the wolf's gaping maw, keeping him from closing his jaws.

Then he did some biting of his own, flicking out his fangs and sinking them deeply into the wolf's throat.

Dereck screamed, releasing his hold on Roy and clawing at Dax as he had earlier at Aradia. Unlike Aradia, though, his scratches and cuts had little effect.

Dax struck again and again, like a tiger rattlesnake or a black mamba. Now it was Dereck's blood flowing freely.

His injuries were mounting rapidly, and his strength was waning. Soon he was no longer even swiping at Dax. The large werewolf fell to his knees.

“Dax,” Aradia said. Still Dax mounted his assault. “Dax!”

He stopped and looked at her, mouth and chin dripping with werewolf blood.

“That’s enough,” she said. He tilted his head curiously. Roy, too, who was crouched and ready to strike, seemed uncertain of her meaning. “He’s incapacitated.”

“Aradia,” Dax warned, but she only shushed him and waved him back. He complied.

Dereck, still in his wolf form, managed to hold himself up, albeit unsteadily, on his knees. He was burned, bruised, bleeding, and broken.

His mouth opened and closed several times. She wasn’t sure if he was trying to speak, or attempting in vain to bite her. Finally, he spat out, “What the hell are you, you crazy bitch?”

At this, Aradia smirked while balling her hand into a fist.

“I’ll give you a hint,” she stage whispered. “You’re only one letter off!”

Then she clocked him. He fell over backwards, finally, mercifully unconscious.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Holy buckets,” Ross muttered as his daughter and her two companions strolled in the front door. Dax’s mouth and clothes were stained dark red with recent blood, and Roy was in his wolf form.

“Oh my,” Liza agreed.

Between the three of them, the trio carried another werewolf. Roy, on all fours, shouldered most of the burden.

“Dereck Caradoc, I presume?” Mr. Dayton asked.

Dax nodded. Roy shrugged him off his shoulders and onto the Dayton’s sofa, the same sofa upon which Aradia had only recently tossed him. Mr. Dayton wrinkled his nose. Dax interpreted that as a sign that they’d soon have a new sofa.

“You all didn’t, ah...” Ross asked.

“Kill him?” Aradia finished.

“Well...”

“No,” Mr. Dayton replied. “They did not.”

“How do you know. Can you hear his heartbeat?”

“Dead werewolves revert to their human form. If he remains a wolf, he lives.”

“Bah!” Ross replied. “I should have known that. American Werewolf in London used to be one of my favorites.”

“Um,” Liza said, not believing how cavalierly her husband was handling the situation, “what happened?”

“We let Aradia show him what happens to people when they cross her. Poor bloke never had a chance!”

Aradia smiled at him, causing Roy to growl softly. “That’s not exactly how it happened. I got by with a little help from my friends.”

Ross pulled out his phone. “This is amazing. I’m calling the police now.”

Mr. Dayton stepped forward and interrupted him, saying, “I would greatly appreciate if you held off on that for a moment.”

Ross looked at the other man. So far, he liked the vampire well enough, but his opinions could change quickly based on how this conversation played out. “Alright. Say your piece.”

“I believe we can all agree it wise to at least wait until he resumes his human form before notifying your human authorities.”

Ross chewed on that. “Yeah, yeah that’s a good point.”

“Further, though, there is a bigger picture to consider. Dereck has proven himself unpredictable and disrespectful of both human and hidden laws. Even if he were arrested, there is no guarantee that he would not simply shift again, in front of humans even.”

“I hear you,” Ross said, “and I don’t mean to disrespect your people or your customs, but I can’t let that stop me from doing my duty. We can’t just let him walk. He must stand before a court for his crimes.”

“Agreed,” Mr. Dayton said. “But what kind of court? What kind of authorities are more equipped to deal with him?”

Understanding dawned on Ross. “You’re talking jurisdiction with me?”

“After a fashion,” Mr. Dayton replied. “He has violated both human and hidden crimes, but can only be judged by one standard of justice.”

Aradia cringed. She didn’t like the idea of hidden justice.

Ross was wavering, but not completely convinced.

“There are the children to consider as well,” Mr. Dayton played his trump card.

“What do you mean?” Ross asked.

Aradia piped up, saying, “He means what I was telling you about before, the highest hidden law, remaining hidden. If Dereck tells humans about me and Roy and Dax, then the three of us could be punished.”

“Well, that isn’t justice!” Liza exclaimed.

“No, it’s not,” Aradia agreed. “It’s not justice at all. But for now, at least, it’s the way things are in hidden society.”

Ross asked, “What about us, then? All of us? Isn’t everybody in this room guilty of that same crime just by discussing this with Liza and me?”

“Your situation is a special one,” Mr. Dayton explained. “I’d have discussed this more earlier, if not for the interruption. Aradia, you are the last of your kind. As such, you find yourself in an unusual situation.”

“What kind of situation,” she asked cautiously.

“We will discuss the details at length, if you wish. Suffice to say that not all hidden rules apply quite so strongly to you as to others. You are permitted human allies who know our secrets.”

“But if Dereck started telling the world about us...”

“Not protected,” Mr. Dayton finished.

They all mulled on their options. Finally Ross spoke. “If I turn the accused over to your justice system, you give me your word he will answer for his crimes?”

“Indeed I do,” Mr. Dayton replied.

“He will be judged before some form of impartial court which will rule and issue judgment based on the merits of his case?”

“I believe it will be so.”

“That wasn’t exactly a yes.”

“No,” Mr. Dayton agreed, “it wasn’t.”

Ross sighed. “Liza, I’m about to put my phone away, but not without you agreeing with me that this is the best course.”

Liza nodded. “Aradia? What about you, honey. I think your decision’s the only one any of us should really want on this matter.”

She’d been afraid of that. She knew the human world couldn’t handle a creature like Dereck. Yet, if she threw him to the hidden world, anything could happen. She hated her options.

“Dereck is hidden,” she finally said. “He chose that life, and he chose to violate hidden laws. He did violate hidden laws, right?”

Mr. Dayton nodded.

“Alright, then. I say hidden court.”

“I will request a tribunal,” Mr. Dayton said.

“I’ll let Kaiser know his dad’s killer is getting justice,” Aradia said. Her father nodded. He was proud of her. Even now, she firmly and clearly understood that Dereck deserved justice, not vengeance.

It was late by the time they'd finished their preparations. Dereck was bound and sedated. Mr. Dayton had a veritable pharmacy in his basement. The hidden tribunal had been arranged, and as Aradia understood, representatives from all the hidden races with substantial populations in the area would be present for it.

"It will soon be dawn," Mr. Dayton declared. "I sense it's approach, and while I need not necessarily sleep the day, on this one I would prefer to do so."

Ross yawned. "Yeah, I think we're all on a vampire schedule."

"Before you go, though, there is one final matter I wish to discuss. Aradia, there is something you must know regarding your lineage. Your heritage."

"Is being a witch of the hidden race a bad thing?" Aradia asked.

"No," said Mr. Dayton, "quite the contrary, it is an amazing thing. The problem is, Aradia, no one has seen a hidden witch in over three hundred years. It is common knowledge, apparently false knowledge, that all the witches were eliminated."

"Eliminated?" Aradia repeated. "What do you mean?"

"He means genocide," Ross said, recognizing a euphemism when he heard one.

"You know of the Salem witch trials. The victims of the trials were human, every one. The incident coincided, though, with a not-unrelated mass hysteria in the hidden world. The other hidden races at the time believed that the witches had betrayed us, and so they embarked upon the most shameful crusade the hidden world has seen. They hunted down and killed every last witch."

“Every...” Aradia started in disbelief.

“Or so they thought,” Mr. Dayton concluded, looking directly at Aradia. All eyes in the room, in fact, rested on Aradia.

She shook her head and said, “No, surely not everyone. I mean, not everyone but me. They couldn’t. The Nazis tried this in World War II and they failed.”

“I mean no disrespect to the human race,” Mr. Dayton said, nodding toward the humans in the room, “but we of the hidden race, when we decide to do something, we do it very efficiently.”

He emphasized the word ‘very’ in a deep tone to indicate to Aradia how serious he was. Aradia did not want to believe it. Yet, Mr. Dayton wasn’t leaving much room for ambiguity.

“But if what you say is true,” Aradia sputtered, “then wouldn't that make me...”

“Yes, Aradia. Not only are you a witch, but you are also the last of your kind. You, Aradia, are the last witch.”

Chapter Thirty

Aradia sat by herself at a Starbucks, nursing her extra-whip gingerbread latte. Normally she’d hang at the SilverMoon, but after the recent events, she needed a little time to herself.

She was thus quite disappointed when Tristan, of all people, slid into the chair opposite her.

“Tristan,” she said, “I don’t mean to be rude, but I really don’t want to deal with you right now. Say whatever you have to say, and please go.”

“Okay,” he replied, surprising her. “I just wanted to tell you that Dereck wasn’t the lone wolf you and your little team make him out to be. At least, not by choice.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean? How do you know that?”

“I did some digging,” he replied. “He had a pack, once, a pretty good sized one. He even had a wife. They were systematically wiped out, Aradia, one by one, real genocide style. Dereck was the only survivor.”

“Oh, God. Who was responsible?”

Tristan shook his head. “That’s all I got. I do know he blamed vampires, though. I don’t know if he was right to do so. This all happened a while back, and you know our kind doesn’t exactly keep records of this sort of thing. Apparently he was always kind of on the crazy side. Even in the pack, he was something of a sociopath. I guess when they were wiped out, it pushed him over the edge.”

“I guess that explains some of his rage.”

Tristan nodded.

“When did this happen?”

“Over the course of several weeks, a little over six months ago.”

“Tristan, why are you telling me this?”

“Why are you so suspicious of my motives?”

“You don’t do anything for nothing. You don’t do anything good for nothing, at least. What do you expect in return?”

“Nothing. Just take the information as a gift. Maybe it can make up for some of the torture through which I’ve put you and your friends.”

Aradia replied, “Gasp, Tristan, was that an apology?”

“Not at all,” he said, grabbing the back of his chair and rising. “Just a gift.”

Aradia and Roy strode through Salem Woods. Unlike the last few times she’d been there, this time they stayed on a path and enjoyed the scenery.

“What was it like for you?” Aradia asked regarding being called to speak before the hidden tribunal.

“Weird,” Roy said. “They didn’t tell me anything or let me stay after they were done questioning me. There were four of them on the panel. They didn’t introduce themselves, but I could tell they were a werewolf, a vampire, a fae, and a shapeshifter.”

“Sense of smell?” Aradia asked playfully.

“I’m telling you, it’s really good,” he replied, smiling. “What about you?”

“Kind of just a normal human sense of smell. Maybe even a little worse than average, actually. I tend to go heavy on perfume.”

Roy burst out laughing. “Yeah, I’d noticed on the perfume thing.”

She punched his arm playfully. “Jerk.”

He smiled again, and said, “You know what I meant, though. What about the tribunal?”

“They told me a little more than you, but not much. I guess they take the whole ‘hidden’ thing pretty seriously. They said that the decision was that Dereck would be punished for his crimes, and that because his greatest offense was against vampires, the vampire leader would have final say on his fate. Some guy called the Sovereign.”

“Against *vampires*?” Roy bellowed. “He killed two werewolves, nearly killed a third, and assaulted a witch. How did they figure?”

“His goal was to frame a vampire for an ‘unapproved race-based event,’” she quoted with her fingers in the air. “Apparently they thought that was the worst part of it all. Beyond that I don’t know.”

“Unbelievable,” Roy muttered.

“Yeah,” Aradia said. “You know, I still think Mr. Dayton was right. Human courts and prisons just aren’t fit for a guy like Dereck. But after seeing them take him away for what was basically a secret tribunal, then almost totally shutting me out... I don’t know. It kind of makes me question whether I should put complete faith in any system of justice.”

“You probably shouldn’t,” Roy replied.

“I just hope Kaiser and all the other relatives of the victims can find some peace.”

“What’s happening with Kaiser, anyway?” Roy asked.

“He’s heading back to New York,” Aradia replied. “He’s moving back in with his mom. Apparently she really regretted kicking him out. Has him all enrolled in a nice private school and everything.”

“I guess there’s some silver lining to all this,” Roy replied.

“Yeah,” Aradia agreed. “Plus, we’re all friendly again, right? More silver lining!”

“Nothing like combating a sociopath maniac to bring people closer,” Roy joked.

“Not just us,” Aradia replied. “I’ve seen how you and Dax have been interacting recently. If I didn’t know better, I might even call you guys friends.”

“Good thing you know better,” Roy replied gruffly. Aradia just grinned.

“You know,” Roy said, “since you bring up Dax…”

“Yes?” she asked.

“If you did want to date him… well, you could do worse.”

“Why, Roy!” she exclaimed. “Did you just give me your blessing to date a vampire?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he replied. “And he still lied to you for a long time. I can’t forgive that. But he showed his true colors in there with Dereck.”

“So did you,” she said. “Besides, unless Dereck decapitated him, he wasn’t really at much risk.”

“Rai, Dereck is a werewolf.”

She didn't see what he was getting at, so he continued. "The bite of a wolf form werewolf is toxic to a vampire. It can really mess them up, even kill them."

"Oh my God," she said.

"And since he can basically live forever, more or less... he risked a lot facing Dereck like that. He earned some points in my book. I thought you should know. That's all I'm saying."

She nodded. "Well I really appreciate that, Roy. Now, about your love life! There is a girl I sit next to in seventh period World Studies who I think would be perfect for you."

"Yeah? Who's that?"

"Lisa Renier."

He growled softly. "Lisa Renier. You think she's into me? I wouldn't mind studying her world."

She punched him again. "You dog!"

"It's difficult," Ross admitted to Aradia over coffee. Well, he was drinking coffee. She was drinking hot cocoa with extra marshmallows. "Pretending I don't know what happened to Dereck. The police are still looking for him. They're investing time and money in a search which I know will bear no fruit."

"I know," Aradia replied. "The hiddens at school got the memo, but the humans are still talk talk talking about Dereck Caradoc, the Vampire Murderer, and when he'll strike again."

"I was a little miffed the tribunal didn't even want to question me."

Aradia smiled. “You didn’t miss much.”

“This whole situation is like one of those damned police dramas I hate,” Ross said. “The worst part is not knowing how Dereck’s story ended.”

“Yeah. We don’t know much on his punishment. But I do think I’ve mostly put the whole string of events together leading up to it,” Aradia said.

“Oh?”

“Dereck became a lone wolf, but it wasn’t always that way. He’d had a family, a pack, one which was taken from him.”

“Taken from him?”

“Wiped out. He thought it was done by vampires.”

“Ahhh,” Ross said.

“I think there’s more than that. You showed me some files, and Kaiser showed me some ledgers. I don’t think this was his plan from the start. The Vampire Murders, I mean. I think originally he’d been trying to swindle Mr. Stanley.”

“Invest to get a stake in the business, watch it fail, sell the property.”

“Yeah. He never thought the business could succeed. He was basically just buying out a big chunk of the property at a discount price. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d engaged in a sketchy financial investment.”

“That was more or less why the police ruled him out as a suspect,” Ross said. “Because he had nothing to gain by Stanley’s death. He actually lost a lot, monetarily.”

“I think his plan changed. I think even when he had a family, he was still a sketchball and borderline criminal. I think this was his way of financing his lifestyle.”

“The financial thing,” Ross replied, “it just doesn’t sound very werewolfy.”

“Cash goes a long way, Dad. Werewolves like nice things just as much as humans do. Money could get those things for him and his family.”

“And help his pack avoid trouble with authorities,” Ross added.

“Sure. But then his pack was murdered. He didn’t need the money anymore.”

“You know, this is making sense,” Ross replied. “One of our researchers issued me a report saying that the business partner, Dereck, disappeared for a few weeks, just about six months ago.”

“That’s right when it happened,” Aradia replied.

“Then he came back…” Ross said, putting the pieces together.

“He came back with a new plan,” Aradia supplied. “One that had nothing to do with earning a living.”

“So Stanley was the first victim because he was a werewolf, Dereck knew him, and Dereck knew he wouldn’t be a suspect in Stanley’s murder because of the investment scheme.”

“Right,” Aradia agreed. “The police would rule him out, then look everywhere but at him.”

“He turned a plan to finance his family into a plan to avenge his family,” Ross noted. “Very industrious.”

“Then Mr. Hitzig, another werewolf, figured it out, or at least got suspicious. He was the first vic’s lawyer, so it stands to reason he might have had concerns he wished to discuss. Derek was looking to kill a werewolf, why not one who’s sniffing around in his business.”

Ross said, “Hitzig basically handed himself over.”

“Right. Then when Kaiser and I started investigating, he figured Mr. Hitzig’s son would be the perfect candidate for the third Vampire Murder.”

“I’d been wondering about that,” Ross said. “Why didn’t Dereck kill your friend when Kaiser went to him wearing the wire?”

“Because Kaiser was brilliant,” Aradia said. “He knowingly walked into a deathtrap because he figured he could outplay the killer. He let Dereck implicate himself before he ended the call to the police. You might have noticed Kaiser hung up just as Dereck was starting to talk about hidden matters.”

“I did notice that,” Ross replied.

“To any human, it just sounded like more crazy rambling. He was already impersonating a vampire in his murders, after all.”

“So what happened after he hung up the phone?”

“He pretended to beg for his life, and offered Dereck a trade.”

“What kind of trade?”

“Kaiser told him there was a new, exotic hidden in town who was dating a vampire and a friend of werewolves.”

“He gave you up?” Ross asked, suddenly furious.

“No, no,” Aradia said. “He just wanted it to look that way. Think about it. I’d have been a great choice. The werewolves would blame the Daytons, and the vampires would blame the Moraleses.”

“But what was the plan?” Ross asked.

“Call me, warn me Dereck was coming so I get out of the house, then call the police.”

Ross shook his head. “That’s an awful plan. The police found Kaiser unconscious in the warehouse where they traced his cell call.”

Aradia nodded. “Dereck planned to keep killing. He bumped Kaiser to spot four in his lineup. Kaiser never got the chance to warn me.”

“He could have gotten you killed.”

“Yeah, that part of his plan didn’t work so well. Dad, don’t be mad. No harm, no foul.”

Ross fumed, but Aradia was insistent. He drank some coffee and somehow managed to let it go.

“And Dereck’s ultimate goal?”

“To start a war,” Aradia replied. “It’s a hidden kind of goal. He was angry at vampires for killing his family, angry at werewolves for not protecting his family. He was angry at everyone.”

“Aradia, well done,” her father said. “You solved your first murder. Murders, actually. The shame is that we can never tell anybody. But well done.”

“Thanks. Oh! I spoke to Dax. After I was safe at the Dayton house, he came back here, to our house, to see if he could find

anything to implicate the attacker. Dax found the rag Dereck carried.”

“What did he do with it?”

“He bagged it up in a zippy and gave it to his father. Mr. Dayton just got the lab tests back on it. They identified three different substances. Hold on a second, I wrote them down.”

While she fished through her pockets, Ross asked, “Sodium thiopental, mivacurium chloride, and succinylcholine?”

Aradia finally found the scrap of paper and checked over the list. “Um, yeah. I think. How’d you know that? Wait! Don’t tell me. You found the same chemicals in Dereck’s warehouse?”

“Well, the police did,” Ross replied. “But yes.”

“That just about ties it up, then,” Aradia said.

Ross squinted and studied his daughter. “I know you, Rai. You’re still thinking something.”

“Well, there’s one thing that’s still bugging me,” Aradia said.

“Hmm?”

“It’s something Dereck said to me and to Kaiser. He said that history would regard him as a visionary, anointed for a higher purpose.”

“Crazy talk, yeah,” her dad replied. “There are people out there who... their minds don’t work like the rest of us. Their minds are different. I’m so sorry I let you get wrapped up in this all, Aradia.”

“No, Dad, that’s not what I meant. Yeah, he was full-blown mad-ape crazy, but he wasn’t irrational.”

Her dad shook his head. “No, that kind of psycho tends not to be. They see some things that aren’t there, and don’t see other things that obviously are. They make wild claims about the world, but their thought processes and actions make sense once you understand their fundamental beliefs.”

“Right,” she said.

“What are you getting at, Aradia?”

“He called himself anointed, Dad. You didn’t make him to be the religious type, did you?”

He shook his head.

“No, neither did I,” Aradia agreed. “So if he was anointed, then he had to think somebody had anointed him, and if he didn’t think it was a god...”

“Oh crap,” her dad said.

“Yeah,” Aradia replied. “I think somebody killed his family to manipulate him into these murders. His boss is still out there.”

Epilogue

“Did you acquire it?” the Sovereign demanded.

Keon and Saul were on their knees in his throne room, with Aradia's torn bloody jacket in front of them.

“Yes, Sovereign,” said Keon. “We have acquired the item that your Demoness needs to determine if this girl is indeed the last witch.”

“How did you obtain it?” the Sovereign asked, sounding curious.

Keon proceeded to describe how Aradia had managed to solve the murders that took place in Salem, how the murderer had confronted her, and how Aradia had battled and defeated him.

Afterwards, the Sovereign was silent until finally he muttered, “Incredible. How else did you test her?”

“I released a werewolf on the night of a full moon,” Keon replied. “The wolf is one who is very fond of Aradia, a friend and would-be lover. I intended for their paths to cross.”

“That was quite a risk,” the Sovereign replied.

“A calculated one. If she were the last witch, she’d survive the encounter. If not, she was irrelevant. Needless to say, she survived.”

“How did you gain entry to the mortal dwelling?”

Keon smiled crudely. “I have long since had free entry to that particular household. One of it’s residents and I share a history.”

“You summoned me, Sovereign?” Morgan asked as she suddenly appeared.

“The Night Shadow clan has provided the sample you need, but it is no longer necessary.”

“Not necessary?” Morgan repeated suspiciously. She had not yet told the Sovereign of what she had recently felt.

“Why, Sovereign?” Keon asked.

“Because I declare it,” the Sovereign replied. “Unless you hold me accountable to yourself, Keon?”

“Of course not, Sovereign.”

“What would you have us do with the witch?” Saul asked and received a jab from Keon's elbow.

The Sovereign walked to the window, and after exhaling a long deep breath, he finally said, “Spread word about her living in Salem.”

“Why?” Saul asked once more.

Apparently the Sovereign was in a good mood, for he explained, “I'll not waste any more of my precious time or soldiers trying to deal with her. She's already annoyed me more than I can tolerate. When other hidden creatures hear about her, there are many who will seek her themselves for their own ends. She will be buried in the crush of it.”

“But what if they acquire her for their own ends?” Keon asked, “A witch's blood is the most potent and powerful substance in the world.”

“Exactly what will draw others to her,” the Sovereign said, “but I doubt this girl will be an easy captive.”

“But what if she cannot defeat them? Whoever captures her will most likely drink her blood and become very powerful!” Keon pressed.

Amazingly, the Sovereign laughed and said, “As much as it concerns you, I suspect she will not be an easy opponent, and if some foe does seem on the verge of besting her, then I can intervene.”

“The more challenges she faces,” the Sovereign continued, “the stronger she gets and the more potent her blood becomes. And the more potent her blood...”

The Sovereign slowly licked his fangs as he finished, “The more delicious she will be when I drain her dry!”

End of Book One

Read Tales of Aradia: The Last Witch Volume Two to find out what happens next. Feel free to contact L.A. Jones on her google blog <http://lajonestheauthor.blogspot.com/>, follow her on Twitter @LAJonesauthor, and Like the series on Facebook at the Tales of Aradia The Last Witch fan page.

Also feel free to check out the editor’s blog or contact him through his website www.harrisonbradlow.com, follow him on Twitter @Harrison314, and Friend him on Facebook.

Both Harrison and LA like that kind of stuff.