

A Wild Hunt

by Mercy Loomis

Smashwords Edition

Ebook released 2011 by Mercy Loomis

Originally released 2009 at www.mercyloomis.com and mercyloomis.blogspot.com

Cover design by Mercy Loomis and Jon Conner. Images by the Morguefile.com community

This ebook by Mercy Loomis is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 license. You are free to share, copy, distribute, and transmit the work, but you must attribute the work to Mercy Loomis. You may not use this work for commercial purposes and you may not alter, transform, or build upon the work without the express written permission of Mercy Loomis.

More information at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

This is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead (or undead), is entirely coincidental.

Madison, WI

October 30, 2009

“You're going to start drooling in a minute, and there is nothing sexy about drool.”

Emma's whisper made Ariane Conant jump, her eyes snapping away from the hot bod sitting three rows in front of them and instead staring daggers at her friend. “I'm not going to drool,” she hissed back.

Emma smirked at her, tossing her head so that her long dark ponytail was draped over her left shoulder instead of her right. “Only because I'm watching out for you. We're going to have to start sitting closer to the front, or you'll never hear a word of lecture. Look at your notes! We stopped covering nuclear attraction half an hour ago.”

Ariane glanced down at her notebook with a chagrined grimace. “Damn. Can I borrow your notes later?” The page in front of her was nearly blank. Could she help it if the only attraction that could hold her interest right now was the inescapable pull of Kiran Eckhart? He was one fine specimen of human masculinity, a classic American mutt with his clear Indian complexion and shocking leaf-green eyes, and a slightly bulky muscular physique that came from who-knew-where. The speculation was Ariane's favorite lecture-hall pastime. *If only his lab wasn't full! I don't care how badly I'd have to rearrange my schedule...*

Emma's elbow jabbed mercilessly into her ribs. “Ari! You're doing it again!” She shook her head. “Why don't you just ask him out already?”

Ariane bit her lip, wishing she could. Why did he have to be a human? “What's wrong with looking?”

“Because you don't just look,” her friend explained with limited patience. “You brood. Obsessively. And despite what the media says, that's not sexy either. Maybe if you had that dreamy-eyed look that girls with crushes are supposed to have. But no, you look like a lion stalking a young gazelle.”

“Oh, I do not.” Lion was not one of her skins. In fact, she didn't know anyone who had a lion skin. Ridiculous form for Wisconsin, anyway.

No one ever says “the way a bobcat stalks her prey,” even though one cat stalking prey acts pretty much like any other. Hrmph. Stupid lions get all the glory.

“Seriously, you need a date. I promise, I can hook you up. There will be a ton of guys at Gary's Halloween party.” Emma's expression was as solemn as if she were recommending a grief counselor.

Ariane shook her head. “I told you, I've got family stuff going on this weekend.”

“How can your folks make you come out on Halloween? It's cruel!”

The ley lines pressed against Ariane's awareness, as if they were as eager as she was for the Hunt. *Tomorrow*, they seemed to whisper. *Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow*. “It's not my fault Halloween's on a Saturday this year. I promised I'd come home this weekend, Em. It's not the end of the world. You'll just have to have my share of the fun for me.”

Her eyes drifted back to Kiran, who was watching the professor with calculated interest. Ariane had seen him take few notes today, and his manner was that of someone who wanted to be paying attention, but wasn't. His gaze would flick to his left, then he would wrench himself back to the lecture. With a silent sigh, Ariane followed the line of his glances.

Gloria Vess was in her chemistry lab, which at least meant that Gloria wasn't in Kiran's lab either, even if the bronze-haired girl seemed to hold Kiran's attention just as much as Kiran held Ari's. Ariane disliked her intensely, and had even before Kiran began to show interest. She'd been partnered with Gloria on an experiment or two, and there was just something off about the girl. For all that Gloria was human, she acted like she knew something was odd about Ariane and was determined to ferret it out.

Not that Ari hadn't run into humans before who, consciously or unconsciously, had noticed that Ariane was not a normal human being. But there was something different about Gloria's attention, something greedy, covetous and calculating.

In short, Gloria got her hackles up, and Ariane tried to listen to her hackles. They were usually smarter than she was.

“Can we at least go out tonight then?” Emma persisted, jarring Ariane from her contemplations.

“I suppose,” Ariane replied, a little sharply. “Really though, what has gotten...” She trailed off, turning to face her friend with a wary look. “Em, no.”

Emma didn't even have the courtesy to look ashamed. “I really think you'll like this one, Ari.”

“No. No more blind dates!”

“It's not a date. It's just a bunch of people mingling at a bar. C'mon, Ari, please? You worry me.”

Ariane sighed. She liked Emma, she really did. She had to remind herself of that at times like this, or she might be tempted to tell Emma more than was good for her. Humans who knew about the fae tended to come to bad ends.

And that is precisely why I don't date them.

If only she could find a skinshifter to match Kiran.

The lecture ended, the sudden clamor of students getting up startling Ari and Emma both. Ariane saw Kiran detour past Gloria, a fevered excitement in his eyes. Gloria smiled at him and shook her head. Over the din, Ariane's sharp ears picked up the other girl's murmured, “Later.”

Oh, it's probably just as well. Dammit. “If it'll make you lay off for awhile, fine,” Ariane muttered, watching Kiran's admirable backside as he filed out of the room. “I could use a drink, all of a sudden.”

* * * *

Ariane glanced over her shoulder warily as she headed down the alley, glad to leave the noisy bar behind. Emma's friend had seemed nice enough, which normally made Ariane feel like a heel. She hated fending off the ones she'd really rather get to know. But tonight she was on edge, and it wasn't just due to the approaching holiday. There wasn't any one thing that made her feel she was being hunted, no single scent or sound—more like glimpses out of the corner of her eye, nuances in the crowd's movement. If she didn't know better, she'd swear—

Her toe caught against something and she went sprawling with a startled yelp, turning her face to one side out of habit to avoid smacking her nose into the concrete, catching herself in a sort of controlled push-up. With a disgusted sigh for her own clumsiness, she raised her head and found her view blocked by a black leather boot. Her heart sinking, Ariane followed that boot up, her eyes skimming over the tight, worn blue jeans and the even tighter t-shirt until she got to the vampire's face.

She bit back a groan.

“I thought you fae were supposed to be graceful,” Gabriel Chapel said, raising one eyebrow. The dim streetlights made his odd grey eyes shift from almost green to a pale blue.

“Some more than others,” Ariane replied cautiously, too wary of him to fire off the shrewish retort that immediately came to mind. She stayed sprawled out on the cold concrete until Gabriel

bent down and offered her a hand up. His skin was cool and dry, and he lifted her to her feet with frightening ease, but Ariane was used to that part.

“I'm glad I caught you,” he continued, holding onto her hand despite her gentle attempt to disengage. Oh, this was not good at all. “I almost thought you were avoiding me.”

“I didn't expect to see you here.” Ariane glanced behind her. The alley opened up onto State Street, only a few blocks from Library Mall, and Madison's resident vampire typically avoided the university campus.

Gabriel smiled his warm friendly smile. It crinkled the corners of his eyes and everything. “I was looking for you, actually. I thought perhaps you might be able to do me a favor.”

He still had hold of her hand. Ariane was not bound by being caught like some of the other fae were, but even skinshifters like herself were more inclined to be helpful under the right circumstances. “What kind of favor?”

“I've heard whispers, not even rumors really, of a gathering of mages.” The smile vanished, replaced by a more genuine frown of distaste. “I know November Eve is a special day for you, but I would consider it a personal favor if you and yours might swing by Picnic Point and make sure no one is getting up to mischief.”

It was Ariane's turn to frown. “What kind of rumors?”

“So you'll go?”

She sighed. Vampires and skinshifters avoided each other on principle in most cities, but Madison was not your average college town. The ley lines running through campus attracted a host of mages, as well as spirits, demons, and fae. Gabriel and the skinshifters had an uneasy alliance, made more amenable in recent years since Ariane's little brother Marty became best friends with the son of Gabriel's pet mage. Ari's father, Martin Sr., was the usual liaison between the shifter community and the vampire, but Dad was in Wales right now visiting family.

All of that made Ariane an all-too-convenient contact if the vampire wanted something. Still, having him owe her a favor... “Yes, I'll at least look into it.”

He nodded and released her hand. Finally. “Recruitment, from the sounds of things, though none of my contacts can get much more than that.” Ariane snickered to herself, knowing his “contacts” were the club-going twenty-somethings he usually fed from. “One expects a certain amount of secretive behavior with that, but it's been surprisingly difficult to get any more

information, especially considering how many people I've heard the whispers from. Even the mages I've asked couldn't tell me anything."

Not that they necessarily would. Ariane pursed her lips. "Mages form cadres all the time, you know..."

The look he gave her withered the words in her throat. "I'm quite well aware, Ari. I'm not asking you to intervene. I just want to know what they're up to. If all they want to do is worship the full moon, wonderful. If they're summoning demons, I need to know. I hate competition."

"Right." She swallowed hard. "Spying. I can do that."

The vampire smiled, his real smile this time, cold and thin and with the distantly fond air of a craftsman admiring one of his tools. "I know."

The next night was November Eve, and Ariane regretfully found herself winging toward Picnic Point. She hadn't bothered to ask any of the other skinshifters if they wanted to join her—most preferred to keep as much distance from Gabriel and his lot as possible, even if the information to be gained would benefit the whole host.

She clacked her beak in irritation. Marty would've come, of course, but the last thing she needed was a teenage boy to look after. Besides, he spent too much time with the vampire ilk as it was. Ariane suppressed a shiver that would've sent her off course. Despite their immunity to psychic tricks, a lone skinshifter was no match for even a young vampire, much less one as ancient as Gabriel was purported to be.

A quick pass over the park, and probably ten minutes or so of watching some boring ritual, and then I can try to catch up with the rest of the host.

They'd be out in the countryside, Hunting through the farmers' fields till morning. Though the skinshifters had broken free of Faerie's rulers and fled to the mortal realm, the shifters were still fae, and the Wild Hunt was in their blood. Each May Eve and November Eve they joined the faerie host, riding through the wild places in search of mortals to carry away, and bestowing blessings on those few who remembered to honor the host.

Ariane followed the ley lines over Bascom Hill and along the lakeshore toward the Point, already thinking ahead to where she might rendezvous with her fae kin.

The ley lines shivered under her.

Ariane's wings stopped rowing the air. She glided, concentrating on the energy sense that let her kind find the faerie paths and pookha holes that led to the Underground.

Something was definitely stirring up ahead. With new determination Ariane followed the dissonance in the lines, crossing briefly over Lake Mendota until she came to a clearing on the small peninsula that was Picnic Point. She landed quietly on a tree branch and studied the figures before her.

Three women in long, dark robes stood before two men and a woman dressed in apparently whatever white clothes they happened to own. Ariane stared hard at the man closest to her, hardly able to believe her avian eyes. Without meaning to she spoke aloud, a surprised crow squawk that echoed through the trees.

“Kiran?”

None of the figures below paid any attention to her. Kiran's dark face was solemn, his wavy black hair whipped by the stiff breeze into an unruly halo. Was he a mage? He sure as hell didn't smell like one. But then, neither did Gloria, and Gloria was standing directly in front of Kiran in one of the long robes.

The three initiates—or so Ariane supposed they must be—each handed something to the robed woman in front of them and then knelt at her feet.

“All that I am is in your hands,” the initiates said, more or less together.

Ariane shifted uneasily on her branch. *What a stupid thing to say.*

Each of the dark-robed mages held up her left hand, placing her right hand on the brow of the initiate in front of them. “Then give yourself into my keeping, and open your mind and soul to Magic.”

The bottom dropped out of Ariane's stomach as the surrounding ley line energy was diverted from its usual course and channeled, roaring and unfiltered, into the initiates. Though she couldn't touch or use the lines herself, like all skinshifters she felt them resonate, a hum in her ears, a breeze against her cheek. This disruption of the lines rattled her bones so badly that she was nearly shaken right out of her skin. While Ariane clung to her crow form, the three initiates began to scream.

The diverted energies surged through the shrieking humans, forcing open all the paths of their psyches before finally escaping back into the ground.

The other male initiate evened out first, his cries subsiding into harsh sobbing breaths. Though his face was haggard with pain, a look of wonder came over him, and Ariane felt the current running through him shift as he touched it.

The mage in front of him switched the position of her hands, and spoke. “What I have given, I may take.”

Ariane caught her breath as the screams started again. The mage was drawing energy out of the man now, and the more she drew, the less was able to flow through him, until the ley line disengaged completely and settled back into its normal course.

The man dropped unconscious onto the ground, just as Gloria switched hands on Kiran's forehead.

“Oh Hell no,” Ariane snapped.

Launching herself from her branch, Ariane released her crow skin, breathing out her aetherial self and pulling the skin after her. Both slipped through the crow's beak like thread through the eye of a needle. Sight fled, but her energy sense fed her the shape and taste of everything around her far better than eyes could do. As the crow vanished into the aether, Ariane took hold of her horse skin. The misty ball of air—all that was left of her ancestors' true form—swirled and condensed, pouring through the needle's eye from the other direction.

Her front hooves struck the ground with a *thud-thud* that was lost under the humans' cries. Another *thud-thud* as her back feet landed, hindquarters bunched, tail high in indignation. She heard Gloria speak, heard Kiran screaming anew, before her sight returned and the energy sense faded into the background. Five seconds, maybe less, but Kiran needed help *now*. With all the momentum of the crow's stooping dive, Ariane charged Gloria.

Unfortunately, she had to come at them from the side to avoid hitting Kiran. The sound or the movement caught Gloria's attention. The mage's head snapped around, her eyes widening as over a thousand pounds of angry black horse came barreling toward her. Yelping a curse, Gloria dove behind Kiran.

Drat. Well, at least she's not touching him anymore. Ariane snorted and switched targets. The mage draining the female initiate was right in front of her, and apparently having a harder time of it than her compatriots. She'd barely looked up before Ariane was on her.

Her forefeet struck the mage's legs, knocking the robed woman to the ground. She fell a little to one side, so only two of Ariane's hooves made contact as she deliberately trampled the

mage. One went *crunch*, and one went *squish*, but the lumpy body or the long robes caught Ariane's feet and she tripped. She stumbled and nearly fell, catching her stride in a drunken lurch that almost sent her careening into a tree.

Neighing a stream of expletives, Ariane wheeled around. The male initiate was still unconscious on the ground. The mage that had drained him had stumbled back a few steps, staring at the mage Ariane had just crushed, who was hopefully in the process of gasping her last. The female initiate was curled in a ball, clutching her head and apparently still trying to come to grips with the ley line. Kiran was on his knees, shaking his head and looking like a hung-over man in a fog. Behind him, Gloria scrambled to her feet. With an angry hiss, Gloria grabbed Kiran roughly by the hair, pointed at Ariane with her free hand, and started chanting.

Eep! Move, move, move! Ariane leapt forward, darting toward the unconscious man and the mage next to him.

Her tail burst into flames with a *whoosh* that singed the hair off her rump.

“Ow!” Ariane shrieked in horse. “You miserable witch! I have a show in two weeks!” *This is definitely going to put a kink in Marty's 4H project.*

Without slowing, she ran between the unmoving initiate and his attacker. The mage jumped out of the way, but all Ariane had hoped for was that the proximity would make Gloria hesitate with her next spell. Ariane flicked her tail as she ran past, and had the satisfaction of hearing the woman yell as her robes caught fire.

“That's what you get for wearing synthetics.” Ariane turned her attention back to Kiran and Gloria. “Let's see if you can cast with my hoof down your throat!” She charged again.

Gloria had let Kiran go. She was kneeling with both hands pressed to the earth, whispering feverishly. As Ariane approached Gloria chanted faster, a language Ariane didn't know rolling through the clearing, gaining strength until, with one last shrieked phrase, Gloria shot triumphantly to her feet and pointed.

The ground beneath them rumbled, the trees swaying and groaning in protest. Ariane's charge faltered and broke as the earth in front of her heaved upwards, splitting apart. Desperately she veered to the side as a craggy hand reached up out of the crevice.

“Kiran, run!” Ariane yelled, knowing he couldn't understand her but unable to help herself. Her words came out as a high-pitched, frightened squeal. “Run, run, run!”

The confusion in Kiran's gaze gave way to terror as a second huge hand shot out of the ground, nearly catching one of Ariane's hind legs as she dodged around the opening. Kiran staggered to his feet. "What the—?"

"It's an earth elemental, you idiot! Go!" She ran straight at him, as if...*as if my tail were on fire. Ha!* With a half-hysterical whinny, Ariane pounded toward Kiran. Bless his heart, he finally turned and ran.

Ariane glanced back over her shoulder. Gloria was sprinting in the opposite direction, and the giant—now head and shoulders above the earth and slowly squirming farther out—blocked her view of the others. It looked frightfully annoyed, glaring across the small space at Gloria, but Ariane knew better than to think that it would turn on its summoner. It might take its sweet time getting out of the ground, but if Ariane got within its reach, she had no doubt it would kill her.

She had expected Kiran's strides to get stronger as he got going, but instead he lurched and tripped and looked likely to fall over at any second.

"Oh, love of Epona!" she snapped, skidding to a stop in front of him. Awkwardly she bent her front legs as he staggered to a halt. "Get on!"

Kiran stared at her, sobbing for breath, his brilliant green eyes drowning with confusion and fear. "What are you? How do you know my name?"

"I'm your ride out of here, and I am *leaving*," Ariane retorted, out of patience. "Get *on!*"

The giant roared at them, and suddenly Kiran was scrambling onto her back. As soon as she felt his legs close around her ribs, Ariane hauled herself to her feet and bolted. She raced for the nearest nature trail, and was halfway down the path before she realized that he'd understood what she'd been saying.

There was no time to wonder how a human could understand a horse. Ariane raced down the peninsula, heading for the closest faerie mound. The ley lines shivered and cried like frightened children, more distracting than useful. She pushed her energy sense to the back of her mind. She knew where she was going.

"Hang on!" she called to Kiran. His arms were wrapped around her neck, his cheek pressed hard against her. He moaned, and Ariane hoped it was in response to her words, because she didn't dare stop yet.

There were barrows scattered all around the lakes. As they approached one, Ariane demanded entrance. This wasn't something that she did with words, or even conscious thought.

She'd traveled this way too many times to question it. She ran at the side of the little hill, knowing that the doorway would open, and it did.

A human, watching her, would've seen horse and rider vanish into the hill, but to Ariane it seemed as if there was a cave ahead of her, one that had always been there but that she might have missed seeing because of a shadow, or from standing at the wrong angle. Ancient, weathered, and overgrown with hanging grasses, the cave was little more than a dark hole that looked far too small to fit Kiran alone, much less Ariane's current form. But she ran toward it, and while the cave seemed to grow no bigger, and she no smaller, still there was room to spare between her pricked ears and the cave's ceiling as she entered.

The tunnel twisted and writhed, but her hooves always found solid ground beneath them, and after a few nearly-blind moments she shot out into the Underground. The sky glowed a brilliant, pristine blue, and the long grass brushed against Ariane's belly. She slowed, blowing out a relieved breath. "Okay, we should be safe now. Just stay on my back, all right?"

Kiran clutched at her mane, his legs trembling against her sides. "Where are we?"

"The Underground." Ariane picked her way down the gentle slope toward the river. She didn't trust the forest's sense of humor, not tonight. "Avalon. Arcadia. Faerieland. Take your pick."

"Faerieland?" he asked, as if he hadn't heard her correctly.

"Yes." Her tail swished back and forth in agitation—or would have, if she'd still had tail hairs to swish. The scorched skin of her rump and the dock of her tail protested the movement, but she couldn't help it. "Look, sit tight. We're just passing through."

"But—"

Ariane stopped in a huff, twisting her head around to look at him over one shoulder. "The Underground is not a safe place for humans at the best of times, much less tonight, so unless you want to get stuck here for *eternity*, be quiet!"

To Kiran's credit, he shut up.

Keeping her pointed ears pricked, Ariane navigated the steep bank. The river was shallow here, more a babbling brook, easy to wade across. Ariane knew better than that, though she couldn't help getting her hooves wet as she followed the riverbed. *All I need is a few minutes...*

There was a great splash in the middle of the stream. Kiran choked in disbelief as what looked like a horse made of water burst up out of the fountaining spray. It stood on the moving surface and cocked its head to one side.

“Is that a human?” it asked Ariane.

She gave it a polite nod, but kept walking. “Yes, but he's with me.”

The kelpie laughed, a sound like water over little stones. “I didn't think your kind trafficked in humans. How delightful!”

Ariane felt Kiran tense, but she had to ignore him for now. “We don't. He's a guest.”

The kelpie lifted its flowing, cascading tail, and Ariane gave it an envious glance. “I could give you a ride, pretty human. Wouldn't you rather come with me, and see the ocean in all its glory? The blue of the Mediterranean, the craggy shores of the Scottish Isles?”

“And the dark vasty deeps, with no air to breathe?” Ariane added lightly, as if sharing a joke. “No, he'll stay where he is.”

The kelpie tossed its head, spraying them both with drops of water. “You mortals. No fun at all.” It giggled, sinking slowly back into the stream. “Better hope the King doesn't find you.” It vanished in a tiny whirlpool that was quickly swallowed by the gentle current.

“Crap. Hang on.” Ariane broke into a canter.

Kiran threw his arms around her neck, sliding around on her back in a most distracting way. “Wait!” he cried. “You said we were safe now!”

“We were. Briefly.” Ariane spotted the little overhung hollow she'd been looking for and altered her course, hugging the edge of the river, which was growing deeper and wider as they headed upstream. “But that kelpie will tell every fae it sees, and they won't all be so polite.”

Almost there. Ariane dodged into the water so she could swing around and find the tunnel. “Don't let g—”

An explosion of water rocked them as her hooves broke the surface. Ariane couldn't quite see what it was, but something huge rose up behind them, and Kiran yelled, a desperate, terrified sound. Ariane felt the weight of him lessen as the water fae tried to snatch him off her back, but before she could even try to check her headlong flight there was a burst of hissing steam, and a roar. Kiran dropped hard against her spine, his sobbing breaths loud in her ears. It was all the encouragement she needed. With one wild leap, Ariane found the tunnel and ran.

They emerged moments later in Ariane's backyard. She stumbled to a halt next to the back door, sides heaving and head low. On her back, Kiran shook like a fever victim.

"You can get down now," she said finally, when they'd each caught their breath.

Slow and awkward, Kiran swung one leg over her withers and slid to the ground. His knees buckled, and he landed in a shivering, boneless heap.

Changing back to her birth skin was nearly as easy as breathing. By the time Kiran had blinked once, the horse had been replaced with a brown-haired, brown-eyed girl kneeling at his side. Ariane wished she'd worn something a little more attractive than ratty cut-offs and a t-shirt when she left the house earlier, but hey, she hadn't expected to be human again until morning. "Let's get you indoors," she said, reaching down to him.

Kiran fell onto his back with a yell, his eyes showing white all around.

"Oh, for...it's me, you idiot." Ariane stood up, hands on her hips, and glared down at him.

"I know you." He sounded more panicked than ever, which made no sense to Ariane.

"You're in my chem lecture." His voice rose until it cracked.

He noticed me? There have to be fifty students in that lecture at least. Ariane tried not to preen. Or blush. "Yes. Well. That's how I know your name." She tried to gather her scattered wits. "Kiran, calm down. Please. We need to get inside. It's safe there."

He eyed her up and down warily, but his exhaustion was overcoming his fear. "I've heard that before," Kiran muttered, but didn't protest when she put his arm over her shoulders and helped him to his feet. Even with her guidance his feet wandered in every direction. "What's wrong with me?"

"Want a list?" Ariane half hauled him up the few stairs to the back door and fumbled her keys out of her pocket one-handed. Grumbling under her breath, she finally got the door open.

Kiran staggered over the threshold, and she nearly dropped him as his legs gave out. "What was that?" he gasped, hanging like a dead fish from her shoulder.

Ariane glanced at the doorway. "Wards. I forgot, I'm so used to them. You felt that?" She pulled the door shut behind them and gave a relieved sigh as she shot the bolt home.

He shuddered. "It's like...like static electricity, all over, even on the inside. Ugh." Kiran grasped her arm and tried to stand, but his legs still wouldn't hold him. "What is *wrong* with me?"

Ariane gently lowered him to the ground, then scooped him up in her arms.

“What, girls can't be strong too?” she snapped when he gave her a disbelieving stare. With a toss of her head, she started down the hall.

A laconic voice drifted through the doorway ahead of them. “That hardly sounds fair, Ari. Who are you tormenting now?”

Ariane carried Kiran into the living room and set him down on the sofa. “Dave, this is Kiran. Kiran, my roommate Dave.”

Dave turned his computer chair around, but didn't get up. His mahogany brown eyes narrowed as his gaze swept from Kiran's muddy sneakers to his damp tousled hair. “Well, you do know how to pick the lookers,” he said, but there was concern and puzzlement in his tone.

Kiran moaned and Ariane looked down at him. He was pale under that lovely dark skin, and sweat had broken out on his forehead. “Oh, God. It's getting worse,” he gasped.

“What is?” Ariane asked, but Kiran just shook his head.

Behind her, she heard Dave rise to his feet. A gentle touch on her shoulder made Ariane step back. Dave moved up next to the couch, his form blurring in her sight as his soul leaned out of his body. He passed his ghostly hands over Kiran.

Kiran didn't seem to notice any change in Dave's appearance, but then, few humans would have. Then again, few humans liked to spend much time looking at Dave. Ariane was used to him, but most others found him obscurely off-putting; something to do with the remoteness of his gaze, or maybe the slightly grayish tinge to his ebony complexion.

“What are you doing?” Kiran asked.

Dave's eyes were half shut, the astral specter of his hands getting lower and lower until they finally touched Kiran's body, dipping just under the skin. Kiran noticed that, all right; he jerked like he'd been touched with a live wire.

“You are missing something,” Dave murmured, his words echoing faintly. His hands settled on Kiran's head, while Kiran's back arched and his mouth gaped like a fish's. After a few seconds Dave moved again, his hands tracing a line upward. Kiran's posture didn't change. “This is not good.”

Dave turned and walked back to his chair, his soul settling back to its usual place. Kiran collapsed against the cushions like a puppet whose strings were just cut. With great heaving breaths he curled up on his side, eyes squeezed tight shut.

“Dave, what is it?” Ariane had never seen him look so grim. “What's wrong with him?”

He shook his head, his gaze even more distant than usual. “Ari, where did you find him? I thought you were running an errand for G—”

She cut him off. No need for Kiran to hear that name; at least, not yet. “I was. Kiran was there, and there *was* some kind of ritual. A mage, Gloria, she pushed a ley line through him, and I think she had started to try to steal whatever powers she woke up when I interrupted her.”

Dave looked up at her, startled. “How much do you think he—”

“Stop talking about me like I'm not here!”

Dave and Ariane both turned to look at Kiran. He'd lifted his head, his glassy eyes bright with fierce and fevered defiance. He struggled to raise himself up on one elbow and Ariane hurried over to help, propping him up with some pillows.

“Is that better?” she asked, starting to step back.

Kiran grabbed her wrist. His skin kept shifting between cool and hot, but his grip was almost painfully hard. His eyes locked onto hers and held her, and she fleetingly wondered if this was how Gabriel's prey felt. That look demanded her full attention, determined and desperate, and made her breath catch in her throat.

“What are you,” Kiran growled through clenched teeth, “and what is he, and what the hell is happening to me?” A note of pleading entered his voice, and a hint of fear showed in the line of his brows. “Talk to me.”

She swallowed, and gave him a shaky smile. “Well, I'm Ariane Conant, and I'm a skinshifter, and he's Dave Larue, and he's a zombie, and you're Kiran Eckhart, and you're a human psychic. I think.”

Kiran looked from her to Dave and back, but only said, “Go on.”

He still hadn't let her go. *Just like Gabriel.* Ariane sighed. *Men.*

She knelt next to the couch, hoping to avoid a crick in her neck from looking down at him. “Honestly, I don't know entirely what's going on. What were you expecting to happen on Picnic Point?”

Kiran's lips thinned, and he closed his eyes. “She said she could awaken my psychic powers. She said she knew the minute she saw me that I had a lot of potential, and she could help me unlock it, learn to use it.” He shuddered, his hand tightening on her wrist. “She didn't say that it would hurt.”

Dave snorted. “There is a price for all things. Ari, you said she shoved a ley line through him?”

Ariane briefly described what she had seen. “Kiran, what was it that you gave her?”

“Some hair and nail clippings and three drops of blood wrapped up in a little piece of my pillowcase.”

“You *what?*” Ariane cried in dismay. Dave only groaned and muttered something about fools. “Kiran, you gave her total magical power over you by doing that. Basically, as long as she possesses that talisman, she can do whatever she wants to you.”

“No wonder the attack is getting through the wards,” Dave said, starting to pace. He spoke quietly, thinking out loud. “It's not quite the same...still, I don't think it will be possible to sever the connection...except... Excuse me a moment.” He turned and hurried out of the room. Ariane heard him run up the stairs to his bedroom.

“Where's he going?” Kiran asked.

“Probably to consult the *loa*, his spirit guides.” Ariane shivered. “They kind of creep me out.”

“He's really a zombie?” He sounded doubtful.

“Yes. He got his soul back, but the connection's been a little loose ever since, apparently. I don't know anyone else that can partially step outside himself at will like that—usually it's all or nothing. But he knows a lot about certain kinds of magic.”

“What about you?”

Ariane shook her head. “I don't do magic, and I try to avoid it as much as possible. Although, Dave's wards are kind of nice.”

Kiran frowned, his eyes searching her face. “But you changed shape.”

He's got such beautiful eyes. “That's not magic. I'm a skinshifter. That's what we do.”

He gave her a smile that was part admiring, part self-deprecating. “It sounds like magic to me.”

Ariane was very suddenly aware of just how close they were, with her kneeling next to the couch, and him all propped up on the pillows. Mortified to feel her cheeks heating, she glanced down. “You seem to be doing a little better.”

“A little. It's not so strong when I'm touching you.”

Her gaze snapped back to his. “Really?”

He nodded, but there was something in his expression that made her think that wasn't the only reason he was holding on to her. "In, uh, in the Underground it wasn't too bad at all, but when we were outside the house it was worse even with you touching me. The wards messed me up, but the other wasn't as bad, until you set me down." He shuddered. "Even with the wards, it's worst when you aren't touching me."

"Oh. Well, then, I'll just stay right here." She knew she sounded breathy, but she couldn't help it.

"Thanks. And thanks for saving me." He let go of her wrist, lacing his fingers through hers instead. His hands were bigger than hers, but not uncomfortably so. His eyes traced paths across their joined hands, and Ariane swore she could feel the warmth of his gaze moving across her skin. "I didn't know what it would mean, giving Gloria what she asked."

She gave him a comforting squeeze. "I know that." *Not that it makes a difference.*

Kiran swallowed hard. "I'm scared, Ariane. I feel like I fell in a river and I don't know how to swim."

Ariane reached out with her free hand and tipped his chin up until he met her gaze. The heat she'd imagined feeling on her skin seared into her, but she tried to push it aside. "I'll help you as much as I can, Kiran," she told him softly, and then, to break that scorching electricity she added, half-laughing, "And call me Ari, everyone does."

Kiran's expression shifted, the worry fading, the fear morphing into something sharper, more confident, as if he had found the riverbank and regained firm footing.

"Ariane," he said just as softly but with firm assurance, and she shivered at hearing her name spoken with such intensity. A lump of longing rose in her throat, making it hard to breathe. There was a roaring in her ears, an inferno of soundless emotion that made the air around them almost shimmer with the heat of it.

Kiran cupped her cheek with one hand, his thumb tracing lines of fire over her lips, before drawing her to him. Ariane let her eyes slip closed, and kissed him.

Ariane's heart gave a hiccup as her lips met Kiran's. She'd been imaging this since the first day of class, but those dreams had not involved running for her life beforehand, much less doing it twice. What started out as a slow, cautious kiss quickly escalated, passion mixing with adrenaline and igniting a bonfire in Ariane's heart. She shuddered against him, overcome with

desire, and Kiran only kissed her harder, pulling her to him like a drowning man clutches at a branch.

From upstairs came the *thud* of Dave's bedroom door, and the sound of his footsteps on the stairs. Ariane broke away with a gasp, her cheeks flaming so hard they felt sunburned.

Kiran had that same glazed expression he'd had when Gloria grabbed his hair, like a man waking up from a stupor, cast adrift on a calm sea. "I'm sorry, I...I'm not normally this impulsive." He touched her cheek with a fingertip. "It's like I'm on fire."

"I don't mind if you don't." Ari was still trying to catch her breath. *Oh, wow. There needs to be a bigger word than wow for that.* But she couldn't think of one. She could barely think at all.

"It's just as I thought," Dave announced as he strode into the room. He paused at the threshold and gazed at their joined hands. "Oh, excellent idea, Ari, that should help."

"Why? I mean, he said things were better when I was touching him..." She struggled to let go of the impulse to leap up and pin Kiran to the couch.

"Your aura is helping to shield him. It won't stop the attack, but it will slow it down. Skinshifters," he explained to Kiran, apparently interpreting Kiran's blank expression as confusion, "are bi-planar, partly in this plane and partly in another, and tend to warp certain magical energies—"

"What Dave is trying to say is that skinshifters are immune to having our thoughts messed with or controlled." For all of Dave's theories, she'd never had proof of "warping" or anything else beyond the fact that the vampires couldn't use their usual psychic tricks on her—an immunity she was grateful for every time she had to deal with them. Although Gabriel still managed to get her to do what he wanted nine times out of ten... "Anyway, maybe that's why you could understand me, because you were touching me."

Kiran shook his head. "No, I heard you before that, when you tripped and started swearing a blue streak."

Dave cocked his head to the side. "You understood Ari in a non-human form? On this plane?"

With an uncertain glance at Ariane, Kiran nodded.

Dave started pacing again. "You shouldn't have had that ability after the attack...but then, the gift of tongues is not a human gift..."

Ariane interrupted him before he could get too caught up in puzzling over whatever had his attention this time. “Dave, what was it you found out? What's happening to Kiran?”

“The mage, Gloria, she is stealing his power from him.” Dave shook his head, bemused. “It's quite clever really, akin to how living zombies are made. Instead of stealing his *ti bon ange*, she is taking just a small piece of it, the part that lets him use his abilities.”

“My T-bone what?” Kiran asked.

“*Ti bon ange*. Your soul,” Ariane said before Dave could get into the explanation.

Dave frowned, but after a brief internal struggle he shrugged and let her definition stand.

“But couldn't I have just taught her how to do whatever it is I do?” Kiran looked from Ariane to Dave and back while they shook their heads at him.

“You can't teach someone to be taller, and you can't teach them to be telepathic. Either you are born that way, or you're not. It's part of the confluence of body and soul. For example, a disembodied person cannot use their psychic powers, even if they take over someone else's body.”

Dave was starting to warm to his topic, so Ariane interrupted him again. “But because she has part of his body to attach it to, she can draw the psychic part of it to the talisman and bind it there. No wonder Gloria doesn't smell like a mage.” Mages were humans, but normally Ari could smell the extra energy they learned to store in their blood. Gloria wasn't storing it in herself, but in the talismans; hell, she might even still be leeching energy off the original owners whenever she needed to use their abilities.

“Yes.” The zombie looked a bit disgruntled at her breaking his train of thought. “You stopped her before she could complete it, but her spell is still working, still stealing his powers. Eventually it will drain them totally.”

“There must be a way to stop it,” Kiran said desperately.

“There is, especially while it's still ongoing...” Ariane trailed off.

Kiran's expression had suddenly changed, brows knitting in confusion, his gaze going distant like he was listening to something far, far away. He started to try to get to his feet, but Ariane held him down. “Kiran, what is it?”

“I have to go,” he mumbled, staring past her toward the door. He began to struggle, but she was stronger than a healthy human, much less one as weakened as he was.

“She can't be summoning him,” Ariane said doubtfully. “He's human.”

Dave looked even grimmer than before. “I think she is. He must have some other blood in him, Ari, and the ritual woke it up. The gift of tongues is a fae gift, not a human one, and it doesn't appear to be impaired by the draining spell.”

“And tonight of all nights, with the veil so thin...” She broke off as Kiran surged against her. He was getting stronger. “Well, this is one way to find her,” Ariane muttered.

“Be careful,” Dave told her, regret in his voice.

“I will.” She knew he wished he could come with them, but the energies of November Eve wrecked havoc with his soul's connection to his body. With all the people running around, their drunken boisterous energies adding to the already volatile mix, not to mention the mages and the non-humans that tended to be attracted to such things...well, it was the same reason Gabriel always left town.

Cautiously she eased up on Kiran, who scrambled to his feet. “We're going, we're going,” she murmured as he tried to bolt for the door. “Calm down.”

Now that he was able to move, a little sanity came back into his eyes. He walked like a man with a mission, but he gripped her hand tightly, pulling her along when she didn't follow fast enough. “I have to go,” he whispered, despairing. “Please, Ariane, don't leave me?”

“I'm right here,” she said. “I won't let her have you.”

Kiran gave a tiny shudder as they passed through the wards again, but it didn't slow him. Ariane closed her eyes as they stepped outside. The air was vibrating with energy, the wind rattling the now-bare branches, the nearly full moon playing peek-a-boo with the high, thin cirrus clouds, like a belly dancer peering through one of her veils. The night called to her, pulled at her, and somewhere to the south she could feel the wake of the Hunt's passing, a ripple in the ley lines that she itched to follow.

“Come on” Kiran tugged her after him.

“Where are we going?” Ariane asked, a little breathless from the rush.

His free hand rose, pointing. “She's still there. She never left.”

Ariane frowned. Her apartment was smack in the middle of downtown, and with Freakfest in full swing there'd be no way to get a car through without going all the way around the lakes. With such a close call the last time she was leery of cutting through the Underground again, but Kiran was pulling her straight toward the pookha hole. She held back, refusing to think about opening the way. “I really don't think we should—”

The hole stretched wide before them. Ariane cursed, clutching Kiran's hand. "Don't! You don't what you're doing yet!" But Kiran ignored her, plunging into the tunnel, and she had no choice but to dart after him.

The darkness was total, and went on and on and on. Kiran's breath echoed off the walls, a harsh panting that grew as the minutes kept going by.

"What's wrong?" he finally asked. "Why aren't we there yet?"

"Because you don't know where you're going. You're trying to cut straight over to Picnic Point, but you can't do that. You could wander in here forever trying. I need you to stop walking."

"I don't know if I can!" he said, his voice rising. "Whenever I think about stopping, it feels like I'm smothering. Like there are a thousand little hooks in my skin pulling me forward."

"Well, try, or we're going to be stuck here for a very long time."

Kiran paused, stumbled forward a few steps, paused again, stumbled some more, but eventually managed to halt, quivering like a frightened horse.

"Now let go of the path," Ariane said. "Clear your mind of any destination other than following me."

That took even longer, but the moment Ariane felt control shift—the airflow changing, the echoes coming back from new directions, a slight change in the grade of the stone under her feet—she started walking. Kiran came after her gratefully.

In less than a minute they emerged into the Underground, coming out of an old hollow tree into a dark, menacing forest. Sighing, Ariane pulled Kiran after her when he started to head off to their right. "Not that way," she scolded. "You can't trust your direction sense down here. Let me lead."

Kiran winced, but came along without protest. "This is awful. It's like...like being tortured, and they keep giving the thumbscrews another twist."

"That about sums it up. Why do you think demons are always so angry in stories? Getting summoned sucks." She paid little attention to what she was saying, more concerned with getting out of there. The branches above them creaked and clattered as the trees whispered to each other. Ariane had heard them hundreds of times before; tonight they sounded nervous. "Just passing through," she called softly. "No need for alarm."

“I'm not scared,” Kiran said, thinking she had spoken to him. “I like it here.” He sounded surprised. “It feels...right. Homey. Not exactly familiar, but like it should be, you know?”

The trees around them murmured appreciatively, and Ariane let out a long breath. “Yeah, definitely fae blood in you somewhere. Once we get this spell off you, we need to have a nice long talk.”

The trees around them shifted subtly, causing them both to blink hard. Just ahead of them was what looked like a fox's den. “Blessings on the forest!” Ariane cried in relief, pulling Kiran forward. Grateful as she was, you just never knew when the trees would decide to hinder instead of help, or switch from one to the other. “You do make an impression, Kiran.”

“What?”

“I'll explain later.” She all but dragged him into the tunnel.

Kiran looked back wistfully as the darkness closed around them. “Couldn't I have tried to take us up? I know where I'm going this time.”

“But you don't know when. I mean, what time do you think it is, up top?”

“I dunno, it felt like we were in that tunnel for hours. It's gotta be past one.”

Ariane smiled. “See, that's just it. I can take us out five seconds after we went in.”

Any reply Kiran would have made was cut off by the glow of the exit ahead of them.

“What's the plan?” he whispered.

Ariane squeezed his hand. “I have no idea.”

Kiran swallowed hard. “You're not very comforting, Ariane.”

“I never claimed to be.” Ariane let go of his hand as Kiran stepped reluctantly toward the mouth of the tunnel. He sucked in a startled breath as Gloria's spell took a firmer hold, no longer buffered by Ariane's presence. “Resist her as best you can, Kiran. Don't let her touch you if you can help it. I'll try to take her out before it comes to that.”

Kiran turned, walking backwards, hand outstretched toward her, but Ariane shook her head. She released her human skin, Kiran's pleading eyes fading from her sight in a heartbeat, his protesting words growing distant as she spun herself out into the air. Before Kiran had finished three steps she was flesh and blood again, darting up into the sky on crow's wings.

She climbed quickly, her gaze searching the landscape. The faint crunch of leaves echoed up from below her as Kiran made his way inexorably back to the clearing. It was that dry carpet of leaves that had made her decide on the crow—there was no hope of sneaking up on anything if

she had to go overland. Marty might have been able to do it in his squirrel skin, but Ariane had never bothered with that form.

The clearing came into view as she rose above the trees. The earth was undisturbed, as if the giant had never made an appearance. Typical, and a sign that it had most likely been dismissed already. Gloria stood alone in the middle of the clearing, staring fixedly toward the sounds of Kiran's approach.

Where is the other one? Ariane wondered, scanning the trees anxiously. She didn't dare attack Gloria without knowing...*wait, there!*

A dark form stood shrouded amongst some bushes just within the treeline, perfectly positioned to see both Gloria and the end of the trail Ariane had taken earlier. The mage's hood was pulled low to hide the pale skin of her face, and a human would have easily overlooked her, but the crow's eyes saw her shape against the branches.

Gloria's out in the open like bait. I don't think I'll take it. Maybe if I get this one out of the way, it'll distract Gloria from her spells...

Kiran was already nearly to the clearing from the sounds of his footsteps. Ariane dove, planning on changing forms just before the branches got in the way. *Let's see how you like a bobcat on your head—*

Impact shook her. A sickening *crack* as her left wing folded mid-bone, and she was free-falling, flapping uselessly with her right wing, the pain and sudden nausea of the break stealing her breath. She struggled to let go of the wounded form, but she was crashing through the branches now, out of control, her wings catching in twigs and leaves and sending new shocks of agony through her that shattered her concentration. It was only that stupid instinct to keep flapping that saved her from a brutal landing as she finally broke free of the grasping branches, half fluttering and half falling at the mage's feet.

Except the robed figure wasn't the mage at all, but the female initiate. Ariane had last seen the girl curled on the ground clutching her head; apparently Ari's rescue of Kiran hadn't bought the girl enough time to get control of her new powers. The girl stood slack-jawed and glassy-eyed, arms limp at her sides, and took no notice of the bird trying to right itself in front of her.

An unseen force lifted Ariane from the ground, and she froze.

"Julianne here was telekinetic," a feminine voice said brightly. The air next to the tree wavered, and the missing mage stepped out of her camouflaging spell. She tossed a stone into the

air, which hung suspended for a moment before dropping back into her hand. She'd been wearing jeans and a t-shirt under her robes, apparently, and a necklace festooned with what looked like bulbous homemade glass beads. "I think I've picked up the basics very quickly, don't you?"

"Show off," Ariane squawked.

The mage cocked her head to the side. "See, that's how I knew you weren't just an animal. I can touch an animal's mind, understand what they're thinking. But you, I get nothing." The spectral hand holding Ariane tightened. "Should I snap your neck now, or see what use we can make of you?"

"Tabitha, have you got it?" Gloria called.

The mage—Tabitha—pouted. "Yeah," she called back, and started across the clearing toward Gloria. Ariane floated along in front of her, and Julianne stumbled behind looking like a movie zombie that hadn't started to decay yet.

Craning her neck, Ariane saw that Kiran had stopped at the edge of the clearing by grabbing onto a tree. Remembering his affinity to the Underground forest, she wondered just what kind of fae his ancestor had been. Still, from the look on his face she didn't think he'd be able to resist the summons for very long, assuming Gloria didn't just go to him.

Gloria didn't. Instead she waited for Tabitha to join her, reaffirming Ariane's belief that Gloria had been waiting in the middle of a trap all along.

"Stop fighting. Come here, Kiran Connor Eckhart," Gloria called, and Ariane made a mental note to get Kiran a new true name if they managed to survive until morning.

Kiran shuddered but held his ground.

Gloria clicked her tongue. "There's no need to make this difficult, Kiran. You never had use of your full potential before tonight, so how can you miss it? Once we've taken your memories you won't even know you ever had any abilities. You and Julianne will be right as rain in the morning." Gloria laughed, but there was a steely edge to it. "We did have to give Steve to the elemental, but since your little friend killed Deirdre it's only fair, don't you think?"

When he didn't reply, she turned her attention to Ariane. "Is this a pet of yours? Some faerie creature? I knew there was something odd about you, but with a power like yours I was willing to risk it." Gloria smiled sweetly. "A dangerous little thing, this pet. Now, if it were your familiar, the backlash from killing it could do serious damage to you—and I wouldn't want to risk that just yet. But I don't think you know enough to have a familiar, Kiran, so I can avenge

poor Deirdre without losing the chance to finish taking your power.” The smile vanished.
“Unless you come here. Now.”

Even in the dark Ariane had no trouble seeing the blood drain from Kiran's face, and her heart sank even before he let go of the tree he was so desperately clinging to.

“Don't!” she cried, even as he yelled, “Don't hurt her! I'm coming.”

We are so screwed. Ariane closed her eyes and did the only thing she could think to do. Fighting through the pain of her broken wing, she let go of her skin.

The two mages gasped as she vanished. A truly skilled telekinetic could have held her aetherial form even more tightly than a physical form, but Tabitha was too new and still thought too linearly, and Ariane squirmed free. Still, it mattered little. The trap sprang into place almost immediately, just as she suspected it would. It was a common enough circle of confining, but to a skinshifter caught out of her skin it might as well have been a cage of cold iron.

The sad part was that yesterday this spell would've had no effect on Kiran at all, but now that the Underground had accepted him, he could be caught and held just like any other demon.

Suspended in the aether between one plane and another, Ariane gathered her strength and belled. The long, pealing cry of the hunting hound reverberated through the ley lines, a ripple that spread outward with a lightning bolt's speed.

Far, far to the south, an answering ripple.

With a shock like being thrown into a frozen lake, Ariane was ripped out of the aether into her human form.

“You!” Gloria said, staring down at her. “I suppose I should've guessed, the way you're always mooning after him in class. Ariane, isn't it?” She paused, frowning. “Why isn't your arm broken?”

The crow's injury pulsed at the edge of her awareness, echoing down through the aether, mixing with the horse's burned rump and what felt like a hangover from hell. Ariane crouched at the center of her invisible prison and glared, but refused to answer.

Gloria opened her mouth, about to snap a command like the one that had forced Ariane into physical form, but Tabitha interrupted her, nodding toward Kiran. “First things first.”

The ripple in the south was no closer. Despairing, Ariane turned her attention to Kiran, praying he could stall for time, not knowing how to tell him without tipping off the two mages...

Her jaw dropped.

Kiran was crossing the clearing, but no longer reluctantly. He held his arms out from his sides ever so slightly, but that and the set of his jaw were the only signs of tension. He stalked forward with a liquid grace that would've made Ariane melt under the best of circumstances, but now, with the air around him literally shimmering with heat, she thought she had never seen anything so beautiful in all her life.

True, Gloria's talisman was sucking away Kiran's power. But unlike the last time he'd been this close to it, now Kiran wasn't mindless with shock and pain.

It was still his power, and it knew its home.

“Burn it!” Ariane shrieked. “Burn the talisman!”

Suddenly realizing her danger, Gloria tried to shield herself, but the same principle that let her spell keep draining Kiran through Dave's wards now gave Kiran access to the talisman even through the mage's defenses.

Gloria screamed as something caught fire under her robes. Shrieking, she tore at her throat, trying to pull a necklace out from under the cloth, but the metal was melting, running over her hands. The glass beads stuck to her skin, red glowing spots under the fabric of the robes until the heat singed the cloth away.

In the south, the ripple winked out of existence.

Panic seized Ariane in its grip. *Now they decide to come?* “Kiran, you have to stop!” she shouted. “Right now!”

But Kiran didn't seem to hear her. He'd stopped walking, head thrown back, arms outstretched, welcoming back the power that had been stolen from him. The grass and leaves under his feet were starting to singe.

Gloria clawed at her chest, still screaming, her concentration completely shattered. Ariane was free, but she didn't dare approach Kiran—the heat coming off him was painful even from where she stood already.

“Kiran, please!”

He looked at her, his gaze electric with the impersonal passion of wildfire. Welts rose on her skin, but it was the complete lack of empathy in his look that scared her the most.

He could kill her with a thought.

The tears that rolled down her cheeks hissed and steamed.

“Please,” Ariane begged, putting every ounce of emotion she could muster into her face, her voice. “Please, if you've ever trusted me, trust me now. They'll kill you if you don't stop!”

Something flickered in his eyes. Recognition. His face softened, the heat faltering.

The ley lines thrummed as the Hunt burst out of the barrow.

As Kiran released the fire—or it released him—the strength went out of him and he collapsed. Ariane sprinted to him, throwing herself down next to him as the first riders came pounding down the path.

“Say nothing!” she hissed in his ear. “Nothing at all, not your name, not a word, not a sound, do you understand me?”

For one gut-wrenching moment she didn't think he did, but then he met her gaze with dazed but lucid eyes and nodded.

The Hunt swept into the clearing, beasts and riders of every description ever penned in a fairy tale, and some that had never made it into the stories. Kiran stared with mouth agape, but Ariane ignored them all, save the one wearing the antlered crown of the Huntsman. He was one of the gentry, tall and slender, dripping with grace and unearthly beauty just as all the gentry did. She didn't recognize him, but then she tried to stay out of politics. It didn't really matter anyway—whatever station he held normally, for tonight he was the Huntsman, and his word was law.

“You called the Hunt, little hound?” said the Huntsman.

“I did, my lord.” Ariane climbed to her feet and pointed to the mages. “Here are two that have wronged the fae. They have injured and bound me against my will.”

Gloria was curled in a little ball, huddled moaning around her blackened chest, but Tabitha stood wild-eyed with terror. “We didn't know she was fae!”

The Huntsman turned to Ariane. “Is this true?”

Ariane considered. “They didn't *know* I was, that is true.” She pointed to Kiran, still sprawled at her feet. “But they summoned *him*. The trap they bound me with was meant for him. For him, they knew.”

The Huntsman turned his gaze on Kiran, and Kiran lost what little color he had left. “The accused summoned you?”

Kiran nodded.

The Huntsman frowned. “Speak.”

Kiran turned a frantic glance toward Ariane, but she was already answering. “My lord, he has vouchsafed me his voice.”

“She speaks for you?”

Kiran nodded again. Ariane could have kissed him. Except, she realized giddily, she would have anyway.

“Very well.” The Huntsman leveled his gaze on Ariane, but she was a skinshifter, descended from the original faerie hounds, and the Hunt held no terror for her. “And you say he is of the people?”

“The path opened for him. The land aided him. He is of the people.”

The words rang with an undercurrent of the hound's belling, and a murmur went through the gathered host. Ariane tried not to show that she was just as startled as they were.

“The land speaks through you.” The Huntsman was suddenly disinterested. Settled was settled, and there were hours yet until dawn. “Take the condemned.”

The Hunt surged forward en masse, dashing past Ariane and Kiran on either side, a rush of bodies that would probably have pulled Ariane into their frenzy if Kiran hadn't caught her hand.

The Huntsman smiled at them as the host retreated, Gloria and Tabitha and Julianne lost somewhere in the throng. “You'll run with us,” he said, not asking, but Ariane nodded anyway.

I'll have to try and find Julianne, and make sure Gloria and Tabitha can't tell any tales.

“We'll catch you up in a moment, my lord,” she replied, bowing. With a knowing, amused look, the Huntsman turned and set off after the host.

Ariane let out a breath and pulled Kiran to his feet. “That was perfe—”

His mouth descended on hers, and all the passion of the fire's grip was nothing compared to the blaze in Ariane's heart. She kissed him back fiercely until he broke away, laughing.

“I do trust you, Ariane. Enough that I'm going to go with you now and trust that you'll explain what the heck just happened later.”

She smiled back up at him and gave him another quick kiss before stepping back and taking hold of her horse skin.

There was a lot to explain, like how he wasn't quite human anymore, and yet wielded the most feared of all human powers. And how he could never, ever tell anyone he was pyrokinetic, because fire killed almost every living creature on Earth or in the Underground, and there'd be no

end to the list of people gunning for him if it ever got out. And that he'd have to learn how to shield his thoughts or telepaths might be able to find out anyway.

She shuddered briefly and knelt so he could climb on her back. She'd have to try and keep him from meeting Gabriel for as long as possible. *Nothing scares you as much as a firebug when you're as flammable as a vampire.* Ariane didn't think there was a favor in the world big enough to keep the vampire from killing Kiran the moment he found out.

Over my dead body.

But that was all for later, along with teaching him about the Underground, and all the varied creatures on both planes he never dreamed existed.

And, of course, more kisses.

Lots of kisses.

“Hang on,” she called back to him as she headed after the host. “It's going to be a wild ride!”

THE END

Read on for a preview of *Scent and Shadow*, an Aether Vitalis novel set in Madison in 1999.

Chapter 1 (*Scent and Shadow Sneak Preview*)

Madison, Wisconsin

Friday, May 14th, 1999

The itch burned in the base of his skull, dangerously strong, as Gabriel Chapel watched his prey through the haze of cigarette smoke.

She sat at the bar with her back to him, her face in shadowed profile as she talked to her two friends. Gabriel had no trouble finding her scent amidst the smells of smoke and sweat and beer that permeated the place; the absence of his scent-mark on her was a provocation he found increasingly difficult to ignore. He stifled the need to get up, to go to her. It had been hard to wait, but he wanted her undivided attention when the time came, needed to keep the disruption to her schedule as unobtrusive as possible.

She wasn't smiling tonight. She was jittery, playing with her drink, shifting in her seat, sensing his scrutiny as she'd begun to do over the last couple of weeks. Gabriel reached out with a psychic caress, the thought brushing over her defenses like a breath of wind against closed shutters, and noted with satisfaction the shiver she couldn't quite suppress.

Her searching gaze slid harmlessly past him, foiled by the low-level psychic broadcast he was projecting. *Look elsewhere*, that insidious mental whisper said. *You never even saw me*. His prey was just as susceptible as any other human, and yet, as she passed over him there was a hesitation that hadn't been there before.

He leaned forward, watching her, his lips curling upward just at the corners.

She was learning him already and he hadn't even started.

* * * *

Amanda Bairnes found herself scanning the faces around her—again—and wondered who she was looking for.

The bar was packed with University of Wisconsin-Madison students celebrating the end of finals, just as she and Brandy and James were doing. Normally, Amanda liked the press of people, the odd mix of camaraderie and anonymity that was part and parcel of State Street on a Friday evening, but tonight she couldn't shake the itching between her shoulder blades, the hint of a breath on the back of her neck.

“You know, I thought once the Business Law exam was out of the way I’d stop feeling so paranoid,” she commented to Brandy.

“I told you your professor wasn’t out to get you specifically.” Brandy poked at the sunken cherry of her brandy old-fashioned, the tiny black straw too small to be used for much besides fishing out muddled fruit. “Have another drink, you’ll feel better.”

Amanda shook her head, the very thought making her shoulders hunch defensively. Her gut said she needed her wits about her, and she trusted her instincts. *Even if my instincts have been saying the same damn thing for the last week or more.* “I have to work tomorrow.”

“At noon.” James leaned over the bar so he could see her around Brandy, just to make sure Amanda couldn’t miss the eyeroll. “It’s not like you have to drive home.”

“Drunk on the bus has never appealed to me.” Amanda toyed with her half-empty gin and tonic, spinning the tumbler in idle circles, and unapologetically changed the subject. “Are your parents doing another cruise this summer?” she asked James.

“Yeah, Alaska again. They’re leaving Memorial Day weekend.” He grinned devilishly. “I’m already making plans.”

As she and Brandy made their usual pledges to help with the cleaning up, Amanda forced her paranoia to the back of her mind. Brainstorming ideas for the party James wanted to hold at his parents’ house was just the distraction she needed.

Amanda girl, the only premonition you need to be worrying about is how many pizzas we’re going to need to order.

* * * *

Gabriel stopped probing his prey’s defenses and let her relax for a little while. Her psychic shields were crude but strong: much stronger than the natural defenses of her friends, or most of the humans in the bar, for that matter. All humans had some rudimentary mental barriers to buffer them from outside thoughts and emotions, but most never developed their gifts enough to need the sturdy—if piecemeal—shields his prey had. Not that he couldn’t get through her shields; he just couldn’t do it from here without her noticing. When she was looking at him, though, with her hazel-brown eyes fixed on his, her guarded expression slowly melting in response to a joke or a smile...then it was almost disappointingly easy.

Once she was his, her shields wouldn’t matter. Gabriel watched her nervous fiddling slow and then stop altogether as she fell into animated conversation with her two cohorts, leaning

forward and talking with her hands as she tended to do when she was excited. In no time at all she was dominating the discussion, taking over as if she had every right to do so. Though the bar was loud, Gabriel's sensitive ears filtered out the excess noise, just as the dim lighting and the shadows could not hide her features from his gaze. Her reddish-brown curls were pulled back from her face but fell in careless waves to cover the nape of her neck, the perfect offset to the long, graceful exposed throat.

His head throbbed in time with her pulse, each beat a thundering chorus of *Mine! Mine! Mine!* Anticipation made his fangs tremble in their sockets, but he forced the muscles to relax. *Not yet. Soon, tonight, but not yet.* Despite his efforts he tasted venom on his tongue, bitter as briars, and felt it weeping down the backs of his fangs.

"Fancy seeing you here."

The other chair at his table scraped against the floor. Few creatures would be able to notice him under that look-away aura Gabriel was hiding behind, but Paul Galati was definitely one of those few. Gabriel kept his gaze on his prey and said nothing as his son sat down. He felt the movement of Paul's head more than saw it, but even so his teeth clenched and his lips started to curl back. *Mine.* Gabriel stifled the protective urge, but couldn't make himself relax until Paul turned to face the other direction.

"So that's the way of it." Paul's voice and scent were both carefully calm, but that meant nothing. He stroked his dark beard. "Isn't it a bit soon? Cian was, what, 1848?"

"Forty-nine," Gabriel corrected absently. Cian had left Madison hardly a century ago. Paul was right, it was too soon, but two hundred years was only an average. Gabriel shrugged and dismissed Paul's concern. The itch came when it came, as inevitable as morning.

Paul refused to be put off. "You're making the natives restless."

With a snort, Gabriel finally glanced away from his prey, his eyes finding the growing knot of skinshifters that was gathering in the far corner. Immune as they were to any kind of psychic influence, the shape-shifting fae were, of course, also among the few. While it was true that Gabriel usually left the campus and the Square to the rest of Madison's unseen communities, it was only tradition. A politeness. Without moving his head, he met his son's worried gaze.

"Nothing bars me from the isthmus." Gabriel's mild, even tone betrayed no hint of the eagerness slowly consuming him. "If someone takes exception to my unusual excursion here, they can take it up with me, not hide behind a proxy." His ears caught the grumbles from the

group in the corner, just as he knew perfectly well that they could hear every word he said. Isolde's hearing had always been better than his, and she had taught him well the abilities and limitations of her original people.

"Stop teasing them," Paul chided. "The state you're in, *I* hardly wanted to talk to you."

Gabriel smiled, but his attention was already being drawn back to his prey. "They won't have to put up with my presence much longer."

It was time. While he enjoyed pushing the boundaries of his self-control, he knew his own limits. The itch built over several months to give him time to find a suitable candidate, though often enough he didn't recognize it until it was too late. He would find himself already fixated on his prey, his subconscious having chosen for him.

This was one of those times.

He knew from long centuries of experience that the itch would drive him to take her eventually, regardless of whether he wanted a fledgling. Not that he didn't relish each contest, but occasionally it could be damned inconvenient.

Gabriel closed his eyes and let the need sweep through him, gave himself to it, savored the rush of expectation. The itch grew until his whole body ached with it, his vision growing hazy at the edges; but just like with the hunger, once he stopped fighting it he could channel it, could use all that demanding, shrieking energy in pursuit of his prey.

The ache evened out into a buzz that made every line and shadow jump into sharp focus, every sound resonate with extra clarity, every scent burst with complex nuances of emotion and health, environment and habit. His skin all but quivered under the stirring air. *Yes. Now.*

Gabriel wrapped himself in an aura of harmless amiability, checking one last time to make sure no hint of his true nature peeked through before dropping the aura that hid him from the humans. *Look away* slid into *you like me* with hardly a ripple. He touched the thoughts of the boy sitting next to his prey and told the boy's subconscious it was time to go home. As the oblivious student rose to his feet, Gabriel shot Paul a mischievous grin. "Besides, I wouldn't want to show up to your latest wedding without a date. The last time I was fairly mobbed with female relatives, if you recall."

Paul sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "By all means, bring her to the wedding." *If she survives*, he added, his voice a whisper in Gabriel's mind.

Already moving to claim the vacated bar stool, Gabriel didn't bother looking back. The hunting grin was all in his thoughts anyway, not on his face.

* * * *

Amanda was only dimly aware of the guy next to her leaving, but a moment later a new voice stopped her mid-sentence.

"Well, that's a bit of luck, isn't it?"

Turning away from Brandy and James, she watched Gabriel Chapel settle in on the seat next to her. She smiled at him, her heart speeding up just a little. *Relax, you*, she scolded herself. *You hardly know the guy*. "Hey," she said by way of greeting, her friends echoing her. Brandy giggled. Amanda kicked her. "How are you?"

"Not too bad. Feel like I've been through a wringer, but at least that's done with for another semester." He rested both elbows on the bar and faced her with his chin on his shoulder.

If he wasn't so supremely relaxed Amanda would've assumed he was posing, because the position showed off not only his muscular arms, but also his strong, chiseled features and finely sculpted lips. Not to mention his eyes, which changed color from blue to gray to green, depending on the light. Amanda felt her stomach begin to knot and quickly turned away.

"We were just talking about...um..." Shit, she'd totally forgotten. She stared at Brandy with wide, panicked eyes. *Why does my brain turn to mush around the pretty ones?* Although it wasn't so much Gabriel's looks as his *looks*; the blatant, unflappable self-confidence and good humor she saw in his face the few times they'd talked had made a bigger impression on her than his features had. He wasn't exactly handsome by conventional standards—his nose was a little too strong, his hair a muddy brown-gold that could barely be called blond—but striking, yes, definitely striking. *Sexy with a capital S, you mean.*

"Finals," Brandy supplied with a knowing grin. "Amanda has also been through the wringer, as you might've noticed."

"Thanks, Brandy," Amanda muttered, spinning her tumbler on the polished wood.

"Happens to the best of us." Gabriel squinted at her as if trying to remember something. "Marketing, right? You said this is your third year in Madison?"

"Yep." The tumbler spun faster, the remnants of her drink sloshing dangerously close to the rim. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him smile.

"So what do you think of my fair city?"

She glanced over at him, furrowing her brow a little. *My city? Arrogant much?* With a mental shrug, she said, “You mean other than being the biggest small town in the country?”

He cocked his head to one side. “How so?”

Amanda spoke more to the tumbler than to him. “Everyone knows everyone here. It’s like, if the rest of the country needs six degrees of separation, in Madison you only need three. I mean, I’m not even from here and I can’t go anywhere without running into someone who knows someone else I know. It’s not a bad thing, but I swear it’s beyond all normal probability.”

Brandy and James were natives to the area and had never understood why she found Madison such an odd city. Gabriel turned in his seat to face her a little more squarely, leaving one elbow on the bar so he could still lean against it, cool and casual, but when Amanda looked up she thought that his eyes were too bright, too interested, to quite fit with his relaxed posture. Her heart gave another little lurch and her cheeks heated under that not-so-casual regard, and to her own mortification, she started to babble.

“And it’s not a very impressive city, visually. From the Beltline or the Interstate it just looks like suburbia, and there’s no skyline because of that goofy law about not blocking the view of the Capitol, and the streets are a freaking mess downtown. It reminds me a lot of Point, er, Stevens Point, you know, up north? But bigger. Except Point has a river instead of these stupid lakes. I mean, why build a big city on an isthmus where there’s limited square footage and then make it illegal to build up?”

She managed to cut herself off and started stirring her drink with the stupid black straw, because if she kept spinning the glass she was going to tip the thing over. With her luck, all over Gabriel. *Nice one, Amanda girl. He tries to start a conversation and all you do is bash his hometown. Assuming it is his hometown. Hell.*

But he didn’t appear annoyed, only curious. “Why didn’t you go to school in Point then, if you don’t like Madison?”

“I never said I didn’t like it.” The words nearly tripped over each other in her hurry to get them out. “I just said it was weird. I like weird. The vibe here, it’s not quite like anywhere else I’ve ever been.” She wasn’t sure how to put it into words. Gabriel and James were both watching her with interest, but Brandy was already bored and looking around for cute guys to gawk at. “Besides, two hours is the minimum distance I want to live from my folks. Since Point is right in the middle of the state, it makes it hard to get too far away from them. I’d have gone out of state

if I could've afforded tuition." *The last thing I need is Mom trying to run my life for me like she did at home.*

"How is the vibe here different from up north?" Gabriel asked. "I've never been up that way."

"Not much reason to go there unless you have family," Amanda replied with a sour half-smile. "It's sort of muted and desperate and hopeless and oppressive." *Or maybe that's just me not wanting to get trapped there.* "It's friendly here. You don't get that whole townies attitude, and there's just so much energy. Like there are big things going on, you know?" *You sound like an idiot.* "It's really...really *alive* here, I guess."

James said something about how she should've seen State Street five or six years ago, but Amanda wasn't listening. Gabriel continued to watch her from under half-closed lids, his gaze holding hers, ignoring James just as she was. Maybe it was the light, or those color-shifting irises, but his eyes glittered in a way that was beginning to make the hairs on the back of her neck rise.

A finger of unease crept up her spine, and she looked down at her glass. An image flashed before her mind's eye: a snake coiled and motionless, staring at a mouse.

You're imagining things, she told herself. She'd talked to Gabriel several times before now and never had the slightest cause for concern. She reviewed each meeting briefly. *A few times on the bus, once or twice at the bookstore, down at the Inferno the one time...* That had been the first, and when Brandy and James had met him, too. They'd been out for Leather and Lace, a monthly techno night at the club, all dolled up and decked out, but Gabriel had just been in black, jeans and a t-shirt, nothing fancy, his gray eyes like bits of old green glass against the pallor of his face. He'd looked almost dangerous, stark and cold, until he'd smiled at her.

I haven't seen him all in black since then, she mused with a speculative look at his dark attire. *Hell, could be the same outfit for all I know. Maybe it's just not his color.*

I really am getting paranoid. I should get some sleep.

"Sorry, guys, but I'm dead on my feet. I think I'm gonna catch the bus home." Amanda gave a short wave and hopped off the bar stool.

Brandy pouted at her until Gabriel said, "Yeah, me too." At which point Brandy grinned at her and James gave her a surreptitious thumbs-up.

Damned matchmakers, the both of you. Amanda rolled her eyes at them as she walked past, and Gabriel followed her out the door, falling in beside her as they headed up State Street to the Capitol Square.

“I hate the new transfer point system, don’t you?” she said to him as they navigated the busy sidewalk. “I mean, used to be you could hop any bus and you’d get to State Street, and any bus you wanted would be there eventually. Now, God knows where you’ll end up if you get on the wrong bus.”

“Why don’t you drive, then?”

He actually sounded interested in her banal attempt at conversation. She wasn’t sure she believed him, but she appreciated it anyway.

“And pay for parking downtown? At least the bus is free with the student pass.” She glanced at him and accidentally caught his eye, and hurriedly glanced away again as she felt her cheeks flush. She’d had guys look at her speculatively before, as if they might be imagining her naked, but his look had been...not cold, far from it, but *dispassionate* almost. *That makes no sense. How can you be dispassionate and heated at the same time?* She fought down the urge to look again until they got to the bus stop, but by then whatever expression she’d seen was gone.

The wait for the bus wasn’t long, which was just as well since Amanda couldn’t think of anything to talk about and Gabriel had given up asking her questions. After climbing aboard, Amanda took an aisle seat and Gabriel took the one across the aisle from her, close, but not too close.

Poor guy’s probably just trying to see if I’m interested and I’m being a total basket case. And she was interested. I mean, we haven’t had any long conversations, but I’ll give him points for persistence. And cuteness. Assuming I haven’t made him think I’m a complete fluff-brain. I wish I was better at talking to people.

Oh, hell with it.

They were coming up on St. Mary’s Hospital, which was where he’d always gotten off the bus before. Amanda turned in her seat as the bus began to slow. “Hey, I’m sorry I had to bug out right away. I’m just totally scattered tonight, you know?” She meant to go on, say something about maybe getting together on purpose some time, but Gabriel was already smiling and shaking his head.

“No worries,” he said as he stood up. “You’ve just got good instincts, and I’m not trying as hard tonight.”

Before she could think of a reply, he turned and walked off the bus.

What the hell does that mean?

She mulled it over as the bus lumbered south to the transfer point, and mulled it over some more as she waited under the brightly lit awnings for her transfer, and was still turning it over in her mind as she rode the second bus to the stop near her apartment. The longer she thought about it, the less she liked it.

Maybe it’s just as well I didn’t get that second part out. She shivered a little in the cool night air as she trudged up the steeply sloping driveway. *Confident is good, but creepy is definitely a turn-off.*

She let herself into the building, grabbed her mail from the lock box, and trotted downstairs to her half-buried one-bedroom. Already thinking ahead to a long, hot shower and some serious zzz’s, Amanda unlocked the door to her apartment, stepped inside, and turned to lock the door again.

A hand reached around from behind her and clamped down over her mouth.

Something thin and cold pressed into her throat. Adrenaline shot through her like electricity, ready to be channeled into movement. Amanda was dimly aware of her keys dropping to the floor as her hands shot upward, closing around the hand that held the blade. Her thoughts raced madly as she realized her attacker was effectively pinning her in the corner. There wasn’t a lot of room to maneuver, and that blade felt very sharp...

“Yes, you should wait until I move you away from the door,” Gabriel whispered in her ear. “You’ll have much better odds.”

About the Author

Mercy Loomis grew up in a haunted house, and has had quite enough of ghosts for one lifetime, thank you. Though she now lives in a 150-year-old house, it is remarkably ghost-free. (That, or they're staying on the down-low. She doesn't care which.)

Mercy finished writing her first vampire novel when she was in middle school, and hasn't stopped writing about them since. She loves stories about the paranormal because monsters are scary, but less scary than real people. Or at least less depressing.

Mercy graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison one class short of an accidental certificate in Folklore. She credits her love of mythology to her mom reading Greek myths as bedtime stories, and her love of fantastical adventure stories to watching cheesy movies with her dad. Her love of history (and coffee!) is completely her husband's fault, but she doesn't know who's to blame for the fascination with physics.

She guesses that hanging out with Dad while he butchered deer also had an effect on her character, but exactly what effect, she leaves up to the reader.

See what Mercy's up to and find links to her other work at www.mercyloomis.com.