

Havoc's Cry

Victoria Novak: Paranormal Division

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Havoc's Cry/ Loren Weaver. -- 1st ed.
ISBN 978-1492958840

PROLOGUE

CHANGED

"I'll head this way," Ned said, pointing into the woods at his left. The three young men stood just inside the tree line, considering their late-night hunting expedition. Each carried a rifle in the crook of his arm; each wore a determined expression on his sun-browned face. "John, you go that way. August, you keep on straight ahead. If you catch something, holler."

"Sure thing," August answered. They split off, each to find a separate place to sit quietly and wait for a deer's appearance. Ned's favorite tree worked well, but that was off in his direction. August kept walking, searching the ground for prints to see where a deer had traveled and might return.

A sudden gap in the trees allowed him to look up at a tiny bit of the sky. He could see the moon, shining full and bright. They had chosen this night because of that full moon which would give them just enough light to be able to see.

That's when he heard the first howl. The town had not had a big problem with wolves in the woods; so even though his thoughts immediately raced to wolves, August dismissed the thought. Probably just a dog.

He kept walking, not finding many traces of deer in this part of the forest. Angling north, he kept going. Another ten minutes brought him to a promising-looking clearing. Kneeling in the undergrowth, he studied the signs.

Another howl split the air. That stupid dog would run off all the prey in this area. If he kept going off like that, there would be no game at all tonight. August knew his family desperately needed the meat. Needed it just to survive this coming winter.

The deep baritone growl stopped his thoughts in the middle. He whirled, still on his knees, instinct taking over, and brought the gun up to his shoulder. Sighting down the barrel, he searched the semi-darkness for the source of that sound. For a frozen moment, he stared down the length of his gun in perfect stillness. Nothing moved in the dark. He could find nothing lurking in the shadows. Nothing.

Slowly, he stood to his feet. Out there, somewhere, was something he did not want to meet face-to-face. Something too animalistic to be friendly. He began to back away from where he had heard the sound. He knew his brother was out there somewhere, and he had to get him out of the woods before whatever that was got any closer.

And then ... there it was.

The huge shape prowled the edge of the darkness just under the trees using the shadows to its advantage. The faint moonlight in the clearing could not touch whatever was growling there. Instantly, August brought his gun back to his shoulder, barrel pointed at the object, finger on the trigger. But since he did not know what it was, he could not shoot it. If it was a bear, the shot could just make it madder. If it was a wolf, there was a fifty-fifty chance. If it was something else, then he didn't even want to think about it.

With thoughts swirling chaotically, he began to edge away, still moving slowly. His whole focus was on that darker bit of blackness, so he did not see the tree branch he tripped over. In the moment he fell, the thing moved. August got off a shot before he landed on his back, but it went wide and never reached its target.

The thing was not a bear; it was a wolf. But this wolf had drool running down its chin and madness in its dark eyes. This wolf was unlike anything he'd ever seen before. August did not know if wolves could get the madness disease, but that was the first thing he thought. Its dark brown fur was matted and clumped in tangled knots. Its snarling teeth in its open jaw were a sickly yellow and its breath smelled of rotting things he did not even want to consider. All this he noticed as it crouched above him. Not attacking, but boasting, he thought. Boasting in having bested a human.

"What do you want?" August asked it, like a fool. As if this slaving monster of a wolf could answer him. His gun was trapped under its body. To shoot now, he risked hitting himself as much as it. The thing growled at him. Deep, menacing, and slowly building. He glared defiantly back at it, but the growl truly scared him.

Then, it began to bite.

The first ripping sensation hit his shoulder. August screamed with the blinding pain of it, but the thing did not stop to feed. Again, it ripped at his other shoulder. He could feel its claws in his arms, his sides, and his stomach. Feel its teeth sink into the meat of his flesh, ripping, tearing, pain.

Overwhelming, deep, and red. The pain flashed before his eyes, ate at his skin, and stole his world. He heard ... something.

The growling stopped, instead replaced by a whimpering. A shot rang through the clearing, loud and stark. That one sound brought him back better than anything else. A shot. His brother. Ned. Ned was in the clearing with that monster!

"No!" August screamed. He tried to get up, to move. Tried to do anything, something! He could not let that thing get his brother.

"Hush, August, hush," Ned's voice. Ned's face, before his eyes. "Just hush now, I am here. I am here."

Another, darker figure behind him. This one still had the gun raised to his shoulder. John. John was here also, watching over Ned. Good.

The pain washed over his vision. He saw red. Then black. Then nothing.

~~*~*~*

August opened his eyes. Everything came back to him in a rush, and he sat up quickly. He felt no pain. No pain?

The room was dark. Room? He recognized this room. He had only been here once, when John's brother-in-law died a few months back. John had come to check the coffin, and needed moral support. August had been the one to do it, since Ned had a weak stomach and aching heart.

Yes, there they were. The coffins of all sizes along the wall, just waiting for death. Waiting for someone to come and claim one to be lowered into the ground. August looked down. Someone had dressed him in his best suit. The one he wore when going to church or calling on his betrothed. But the scariest part... nothing hurt.

Where his wounds should have been, there was no pain. Nothing hurt, even when he moved. He could use his arms, sit, even stand. When he climbed out of the coffin, there was something different. Something foreign.

Looking out the window, he could just barely see the sun. In just a few moments, it would vanish beyond the horizon and true dark would fall. What day was it? Why had his family left him here, rather than at home in his own bed? Why was he wearing his best suit?

That was when he knew. They had thought he was dead. Dead from those terrible wounds. Wounds that should have killed him. Yet here he stood. Why?

The sun. August glanced out the window again just as it vanished. Something about that sky. The full moon, but not quite, was already high in the sky. His body twitched.

And he began to Change.

He leapt through the window, growling his joy. His body twitched, jerked, and convulsed, but somehow he kept moving for the forest. He did not know why, but that open space drew him in. Drew him towards it like a river moving downstream.

Then he was running, but on in an awkward almost four legged motion. His body fell over, just inside the tree line. He could hear his bones crack and tendons pop. He could feel his skin rippling, like waves in the lake. The pain laced up his back, down his limbs, shot through his head like a shotgun blast.

He screamed, but it was not his voice that came out. Something between a human scream and that pitiful sound a dog will make when you hit it too hard. A whimpering. Fur sprouted on the back of his hands, his legs. It grew in clumps and patches, covering parts of him, and then fading away.

Suddenly, the bones stopped crunching and the fur grew evenly. When the pain faded, he could stand. But not on two legs, like before. Now he walked on four. The posture was as instinctive as it was unnatural. His four-footed gate was clumsy at first, but gained confidence as he moved. Soon, he was running full out.

Then he stopped. What was he doing? He had to go home and tell his family he was alive.

August Middleton looked down at his body. Covered in fur, running on four feet, a tail wagging behind him. He was a wolf. Lifting his muzzle to the sky, he screamed. Only, that's not what it sounded like this time.

His mournful howl split the night in two.

REVELATION

"You're it." Trey thumped my shoulder. He took off into the woods, a huge grin on his face. His sandy blond hair was a beacon in the darkness, but even that faded into the woods in a matter of seconds. Trey was fast, much faster than me, and we both knew it. But I laughed and obligingly raced after him. I could hear him crashing through the undergrowth ahead of me, but distancing himself. He was too fast.

That's when I heard the howl.

Whatever the legends have led us to believe, werewolf howls sound exactly like normal wolf howls when the lycanthrope is in animal form. Most people can't tell the difference. The reason I could tell had nothing to do with the howl itself and everything to do with me. Well, aside from the fact that we don't usually have wolves around here.

But my special witch charm that I'd had made specifically to hide me from the paranormal world protected me, and had for years now. That werewolf couldn't have been here because he sensed me, which meant his howl of challenge was for another. I had no idea who, but I had to get Trey out of the woods. Werewolves in bloodlust sometimes have difficulty controlling the killing urge if prey dashed across their path, running for its life. They were still wolves, after all. Trey was human. He'd be prey.

"Trey!" I yelled as I sprinted faster. The sound of his footsteps had died away when the wolf howled. I hoped that meant he was standing still and I'd be upon him soon. He'd never know what killed him if that werewolf found him alone in the woods. "Trey!"

The howl came again. Closer this time. Then a snarl. The sound of trees crashing and a wolf growling directed my running feet. To my horror, it sounded like two wolves, and they were fighting. I'd only heard one, but two was worse. I kept running for the sound, but it took me a few minutes to get there. The sound of snarling, growling, and crunching leaves had fight scenes flashing in my head. I knew first-hand what kind of damage wolf claws could do to skin. I'd seen the aftermath of bloody battles.

I ran through the woods, trying desperately not to stumble in the darkness. I didn't have wolf eyes to guide me through the trees. Trey was here somewhere, and I kept calling him. He didn't have paranormal speed or enhanced senses. He was lost in the woods, and I couldn't find him. I couldn't find him! The woods seemed to go on forever. The shadows were no longer friendly invitations but hundreds of blind spots where anything could be hiding. The leaves didn't whisper peaceful lullabies anymore; instead they mocked and jeered at my desperate attempts to find my friend. Where was Trey?

When I stumbled on Trey, he wasn't standing still like I'd hoped. He wasn't even leaning against a tree, trying to hide. No, he was lying face down on the ground. The leaves around him were scattered, riled up in the

struggle. A beam of moonlight illuminated Trey's head and upper body, leaving his legs in shadow. Only a quick glance up at the dark sky, that's all it took. An almost full moon. Three days or so ago it'd been full.

Strangling my cries, I knelt by Trey's side and turned him onto his back. His shirt was a bloody mess, barely recognizable as a shirt. Worse, his chest and stomach were covered in bright red lines. The angry scratches carved into his skin were deep and blood welled from many of them to run down his unmarked skin. I could see the inside of the meat of his body gaping in the wounds. Both shoulders and arms were covered in bite marks. The imprints from the animal's teeth were clearly visible in some places, and a bloody mess in others.

For a moment, the sheer amount of damage froze my hands on his body. My hands, now covered in his blood, had nowhere to touch him without hurting him. His normally pale skin was more red than white. The front of his shirt was in bloody tatters and was sticking to his wet skin. His arms and chest were split open in more places than I could count with only one look. His jeans had fared better, but they too were a mess. His thighs bled as much as his arms and were cut and torn just as bad.

I felt the tears running down my face as I realized the horrible truth. My friend would turn into a wolf next full moon, if he survived. Which, with this kind of damage, wasn't certain. He could die, or in little more than a month, he'd be an animal too. My thoughts raced through what I knew of lycanthropes in less than three seconds.

Werewolves aren't cursed to turn into a wolf just on the night of the full moon every month. They can change forms whenever they want after their first full moon. That's how this monster had used his other form to completely ruin Trey's future. The more moon in the sky, the easier the Change is. Lycanthropes have to shift forms on the night of the full moon; they can't help it. The night before, of, and after they are trapped in animal form. Three nights.

The best way to become a lycanthrope is to be bitten. One little bite won't do it though, not like the movies. The Change needs several bites, usually a lot of claw marks, and almost dying before the virus infects the system. The victim was left a bloody mess, just like Trey. If the lycanthrope doing the Changing isn't careful, the human is likely to die in the process. Just like Trey.

The paranormal world "came out" about fifteen years ago. Modern America was in uproar to suddenly find vampires and werewolves were more than myths. Of course the natural human fear of the paranormal won out and vamps and shifters were hunted like animals. Prejudice and terror turned them into the monsters of myth and they were hunted like it. They'd hidden themselves away, keeping secret what they were. I'd lived most of my memorable life that way. Fifteen years ago, I was only nine. I'd known about the paranormal world since I can remember, but I spent most of that time underground living with vampires. When you're nine and live in a tunnel, sometimes you miss certain things. Like the violence in the streets. The stories I'd heard and the news were enough. I was glad I'd missed it.

About four years ago, a law had finally passed through Congress that made them partial citizens, the paranormals that is. When the witch-hunt had died down, people realized that they weren't the monsters of myth. I knew they were, but they showed their best face to the public. So the new law made killing them outright into murder and gave them back their jobs and their houses. Not that it stopped everyone from trying to destroy them. But still, vamps and shifters could work in the modern world just like normal humans. Supposedly.

And this was the life Trey was doomed to face. Doomed to a life of hiding in corners, groveling before monsters that were more big and bad than you ever could be, and fear. Oh, yes, fear. Fear that you are becoming what you hate the most. A monster. Fear from your friends, who always wondered if you'd eat them

in their sleep. Fear from coworkers and apartment tenants that at any moment you would go animalistic on them, and they would die. Trey, I don't know what that would do to him. He was fun loving and gentle, not a monster. Fear didn't rule his world before, and now it might.

A groan brought my attention up to Trey's face. Somehow, his face had escaped the worst of the damage. Blood streaked his cheeks, but nothing was actively bleeding. His midnight blue eyes fluttered open, and I leaned over him so he could see my face. One of my tears fell on his face.

"Tor," he whispered. The sound was ragged and broken.

"Hush, don't talk," I said. There wasn't much I could do for him. If I took him to a hospital, I'd have to tell them a werewolf attacked him. Humans are funny when it comes to the paranormal. The doctors would probably go crazy and might even refuse to treat him. The stress would be bad for him, especially with how weak he was. If he went into shock, that'd hurt his chances of coming out of this alive.

Actually, there's a crazy law that all lycanthropes must be treated in a secure facility. Most new hospitals, at least any built in the last two or three years, have a special ward, usually a couple rooms that are reinforced and have the ability to be closed off with silver. Lycanthropes are strong, but even they have their limits. Plus, silver is always painful.

If it got into the records that he was a lycanthrope, he would immediately be transferred into one of these rooms. Sometimes, it was a really long time before lycanthropes left those fancy prison cells. Prejudice at its most dangerous, but that's how it is. And the rest of his life would be ruined. If I thought he was dying, I'd take him. But if he looked like he was healing, I would fight to keep him out of one of those glorified jails. And the werewolf curse might be enough to help him heal on his own, there was no way to tell yet.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, hoarsely. Nothing he could have said in that moment would have shocked me more than those words. He shouldn't even be talking. The pain from those wounds would be terrible.

"It's not your fault," I tried to say. I tried to give him the words of reassurance, but they stuck in my throat. I didn't know what to say to make this any better. My tears fell faster, dripping onto his face.

Then, to my astonishment, his skin began to ripple. I moved my hands away from him, my eyes going wide. I heard the popping of bones and saw fur sprout from his skin. The movies make you think the Change is like the skin just tearing and suddenly a wolf bursts out. They lie. How it really works, I don't understand. But the mass of the person actually changes, reconfigures. Trey already had an arm bone, but in his wolf form his arm was shorter. So his already there arm bone actually shrank. Sound painful? Very.

He writhed on the ground as the Change swept over him. It was messy and in the middle of it even his own mother wouldn't have recognized him. Popping and ripping noises filled the air. I didn't move away from him through the long minutes that he writhed, but I almost wanted to. The Change is that violent. But when he was done, I was looking down at a dirty blond wolf with Trey's midnight blue eyes. A dark stripe ran along his back over his spine and colored his tail. If he were a horse, he'd be a dun. But I don't know if wildlife people name the colors of a wolf's fur.

I sat beside the wolf that had been my friend in utter astonishment. The moon wasn't full, so for him to shift now meant that he'd already been a werewolf. A new wolf wouldn't be able to transform yet. I remembered the snarling of the two wolves and was suddenly sure that one of them had been Trey. How I was so certain, I couldn't say.

I'd known Trey for over a year and in all that time I'd had no idea he was a werewolf. My magic almost always told me someone's paranormal abilities. Besides that, I knew the subtle signs that all lycanthropes showed. I knew how they moved and how their energy felt. I knew the dominance games they played almost

without thinking. To have been able to block me so well for so long, Trey must be a really powerful werewolf. My brain stuttered on applying that word to Trey. Trey was a werewolf. Trey had been a werewolf since before I'd met him.

The wolf in question whined at me as he got to his feet. I looked into his eyes, the color of a midnight sky. A shifter's eyes don't change. That's the only difference between real wolves and werewolves, the color of their eyes. I looked into his eyes and knew that it was Trey. Not his animal mind but his human one that looked out at me from those dark depths.

Tentatively, I reached out to his shoulder and trailed my fingers lightly in his fur. A deep-throated rumble came out of his chest and I jumped. But it was a sound of contentment and I had to smile. Even through the maze of confusion I felt because my best friend was a werewolf and I didn't know, I had to smile at that primitive sound coming from his mouth. In the world I'd grown up in, I'd seen more abuse than any one child should have to. Growing up with vampire guardians wasn't exactly a cakewalk, especially not after you're old enough to start being a walking meal for any passing bloodsucker. But I'd seen wonderful things too. The eyes of a human looking out through the face of a predator were truly amazing.

I ran my hands down his back and he leaned against me gently. Lycanthropes are more physical than humans. They touch more, hug more, and need a higher level of social interaction. That was one of the things that set them apart from a human, especially an American one. Modern men just don't hug as easily as a lycanthrope, and after a while it is sort of noticeable. In animal form, a wolf can be like a big puppy. They want to be petted, rubbed, and loved on. At least, when they're not in super focus hunting mode.

Trey stepped away from me and I let him. He gave a sharp but not loud howl and began to Change back. The fur seemed to retract back into his skin, his bones cracking and popping, and his limbs lengthening. The Change back to human took even longer than the Change to wolf, but it was just as messy. For almost five minutes, I sat and watched him reform himself into a human.

Actually, I was astonished he was shifting back. Most werewolves have to spend several hours in wolf form. Changing shape takes magical energy and they need time to replenish it before they make the Change back to human form. Plus, healing the wounds like he did took some energy too. The Change naturally heals the wounds to an extent, but it still takes energy. That Trey could Change, partially heal his wounds, and Change back all in a matter of minutes was astonishing. It meant an extremely powerful as a lycanthrope. I wasn't dealing with your run of the mill recently Changed wolf. Trey was a powerful dominant, and probably had the potential to be an Alpha. He'd been a wolf for a long time.

When it was finally over, he was left lying on his side, eyes closed. He could make the Change back, but he was evidently weak. He lay like the dead, completely limp with no movement but the barest rise and fall of his chest. Trey groaned and opened his eyes. I leaned over him to look at his face through the mask of blood from the fight. He blinked slowly several times.

His sandy blond, chin length hair was dirty and leaf encrusted. Midnight blue eyes winked up at me through long eyelashes. His face was pale with high cheekbones and dark eyebrows. My gaze traveled down his well-toned chest and six-pack abs. On his stomach, just above his belly button and peeking over the line of his torn jeans was a tattoo of a paw print. A wolf print, I thought.

When lycanthropes shift form, they lose anything not organic. Trey's jeans must have been more cotton than anything else. His shirt was gone, probably polyester. But the lack of a shirt let me see just how fully his wounds had been healed. The scratches looked weeks old rather than minutes. I could no longer see into the meat of his body, even on the scratches that still hadn't closed.

"Tor?" he asked in a horse whisper.

"Hush," I said. "Rest up."

"Sorry I didn't tell you," he said, eyes fluttering closed for a minute.

"I understand," I said. I didn't tell him that I'd been keeping secrets from him too. Maybe when he was more awake. For now, I needed more information. I needed to get him out of here. The other wolf was still out there. But I had to know a little before I moved him. "How old are you?"

If they're an adult when they're bitten, lycanthropes, like vampires, are stuck at whatever age they are Changed. Trey looked my age, but he could be hundreds of years old and still look that way. And with age usually came power.

"One hundred forty-eight," he muttered. That could explain it. The oldest werewolf I'd ever met had been only sixty-something. Trey was over twice that, which was part of how he'd hidden from my Sorceress abilities and Changed so quickly. At least I knew how he'd kept the secret from my magic, but not from the other visual clues I'd learned from the cradle. "You're not scared?"

"I'm a Sorceress," I said, the words just coming out before I'd even had time to think them. Sudden fear sliced through me, as his eyes went even wider. Telling him that could get me killed, or at the very least end my life here. I'd have to run, create a new identity and new life. He understood, he knew. That was the end.

A howl split the air around us. Both Trey and I looked to the sound. No natural wolf had made that call, and we both knew it. Trey tried to get to his feet, but he wasn't strong enough. I had to wrap my arm around his waist and pull him upright, heaving with all my strength. At least he didn't flinch away from my touch. Other paranormals had.

"They're coming," Trey whispered.

And in that moment, I could feel them. Four werewolves were out in the dark. They were trying to surround us. The sudden revelation that I could actually sense the wolves scared me so badly that I froze for a moment. My charm should prevent me from feeling them out there in the trees. The charm had worked on Trey, so it should still be working now.

"Come on," Trey said, trying to go forward. He only knew about the one behind us. If we went that way, we'd be walking right into two of them.

"No, no, no," I heard my own voice whimpering. With the hand not wrapped around Trey's waist, I pulled my necklace from under my shirt. The charm was a ring of stars with a quarter moon carved in the middle. It was shiny silver, pure silver. The witch that made it said the silver helped because the paranormals of any flavor don't like silver. I didn't understand the magic, but I knew it works. Had worked for five years.

Now, a huge gash slashed through the surface. The charm was breaking. All the magic the charm contained would start to leak out and make it useless. Even now with only the gash, I was already able to sense the werewolves. This was bad. Very bad. Freaking terrible.

One of three things had to happen to break the charm: I destroyed it, the witch who made it destroyed it, or the witch died. Witches, like so many others in the paranormal community, are extremely long lived. They don't die from old age or disease. Especially not the powerful and paranoid witches like the one that had made my charm. They didn't die from mobbing humans either, not when they made themselves almost impossible to find. No, they had to be hunted with purpose by someone that knew what they were doing. Someone talented.

"I have to get out of here," I said numbly. I started pulling Trey towards camp. The werewolves were still out there; I could feel them. Before long, they'd be able to feel me too. Most of the younger lycanthropes

wouldn't know what that feeling meant, but some of the old ones might. Some of the old ones could have met other sorcerers years ago. They'd know.

"Tor, what's wrong?" Trey tensed against my shoulder but kept walking beside me. Mutely, I held out the charm. "What's the necklace?" he asked. But his eyes were focused into the dark. He was trying to listen for the wolves. Werewolves have better hearing than humans, so he could probably tell more than I could just by listening.

"They're all behind us," I said. I'd been directing him away from that glowing presence in my mind almost without thought. He looked at me with startled eyes. "One there," I pointed out into the woods to my left. "There," his right. "And two behind us."

"How did you know that?" he demanded, walking faster. I could see the flinching in his face, but it was the only outward sign of the pain. He didn't hesitate, even though he was seriously limping, and I had too much of his weight. The tone in his voice said I was right.

"Sorceress, remember." I was partially pulling him, trying to keep us moving as fast as I could. But he was hurt, and he couldn't run. It was all we could do keep him moving at all.

"We're not going to make it," he whispered, as if he hadn't really been paying attention to my answer. The werewolves were closing in around us. They were moving faster than we could. He was right. We were trapped. Trey stopped moving and pulled away from me. He turned his back to mine, although he had to lean on me slightly to do it. Changing had partially healed him, but another shapeshifter caused the wounds. He couldn't heal them as quickly as he'd be able to do with any other injury.

Huge pines ringed the clearing where we'd stopped. Between the trees, the shadows flickered and mocked our fear. Suddenly, they appeared. Two of the werewolves were in human form and two in wolf form. All four came stalking out of the woods in a half-circle around us. Both men were muscular, taller than me, and very scary looking. Their faces were half hidden in shadow, which only added to the scary act. One wolf was a dark grey, the other a light brown. Both had their teeth bared but weren't snarling yet.

"Good evening," said one of the men. He was stony-faced and menacing. In the dark, his features were shadowed, but I could see the sharp lines of his face. His nose was long and his lips thin. Right now, those lips were curved up in a cruel smile. A smile that said he enjoyed our fear.

"What do you want?" Trey demanded. "You've already given insult."

"My apologies for that," the man said. "Philip got a little carried away. I have taken care of it. Who's the girl?"

"A human. Why are you here, Bryan?" Trey asked again. Oh, great, he knew these guys. He freaking knew these guys! This was about to get really bad. I hate shapeshifter politics. They are always bloody, messy dominance fights.

"Haven't you wondered what's happened since you left us?" Bryan asked. His tone was mocking. A scar ran from the outside of his eye down towards his jawline. A terrible wound, to mar a shapeshifter's skin.

"It doesn't matter," Trey said. His voice was steadier than his body. "Keith made it very clear that I wasn't welcome back with the pack."

At least that explained why he was living alone, and why I hadn't noticed that as one of the signs of lycanthropy I was used to looking for. Most lycanthropes keep their packs close. They don't necessarily live together, but they spend a lot of time together like a large family with a lot of family dinners and time together. Trey hadn't ever done that. If he was outcast, it explained why he was alone.

"Well, Keith has had to do some ... reconsidering," Bryan paused over the last word. "He wants you to come back."

"To my old place?" Trey hissed.

Bryan's face split into a grin. "Oh, you won't be his Second anymore. He has a new Second."

"You, I gather," Trey said.

"Yes," Bryan said. He was gloating. "You've been without a pack for too long, Trey. You're weak."

And it should have been true. If Trey didn't have a pack to draw strength from, he would gradually weaken until he was one of the lesser among the wolves. A lesser wolf wouldn't have been able to perform the quick Change that Trey had earlier. I wondered how in the world he'd done that. How he'd bent the rules enough to have that kind of power.

"I'm not as weak as you think," Trey said. Well, just state the obvious. But I guess Bryan did seem like the kind of guy that needed the obvious pointed out to him. A lot. Or maybe it was just a display of strength.

"Oh?" Bryan said. "Then how did Philip defeat you?"

"He was in wolf form," Trey said. "And I don't think he went away skipping."

"No, but he was not left lying in a bloody mess," Bryan said. He gestured to one of the wolves, the light brown one. The wolf, Philip I guessed, seemed to be favoring one paw and breathing in short, rapid gasps. Bruised ribs, maybe. Darker patches covered his sides. Blood. He didn't look so good.

"I'm not either," Trey said. He opened his arms in a showy move to bare his chest. The wounds on his stomach, chest, and arms were scabbed over and looked days old rather than minutes. They weren't healing anymore. The rest, he'd have to do the slow way. Unless he Changed again, but he didn't have the strength for that yet.

"How?" Bryan exclaimed. He seemed stunned. Of course, I didn't know how long Trey had been away from his pack; except for the year and a half I'd known him. But even after a year and a half on his own, Trey shouldn't have been able to Change so quickly and heal that much damage. He was really powerful. Or he was getting power from some other source. There had to be another source.

"I'm not so weak as you think," Trey said. "Why does Keith want me back?"

"You'll have to ask him," Bryan said. "But he has the right to demand it. Unless some other pack as taken you in?" He made the last into a snarling question.

"No," Trey said. "I am alone."

"Then you should not be that strong," Bryan spat through gritted teeth. I saw his knees bend slightly, his weight shift forward. Preparing for an attack. My fists clenched at my sides. We'd never defeat all four of them, especially not with Trey wounded. But I'd go down fighting. It was my way.

"Why, Bryan, why does he want me back?" Trey demanded. He seemed relaxed still, but I could feel the tensing of his muscles in response to Bryan's seeming change of heart. In his own way, Trey was preparing for an attack too.

"I can't say!" Bryan was shouting now. His breathing was coming fast. Every muscle in him quivered in tense anticipation. Something about this request, or being the delivery boy to Trey, really pushed his buttons.

"Control yourself," Trey said calmly. "Or your anger will get the better of you."

"Keith says to meet him in the mall food court on Monday at six," Bryan said. "If you do not, there will be consequences."

"I'll be there," Trey said.

"Good."

Then the werewolves faded into the trees. I felt them as they started to run. They moved away from us with an incredible speed. The wolves on four legs were in front, but they didn't outdistance their friends on two legs. Even the two-legged ones were faster than anyone had the right to be, especially in the forest in the dark. I guess super senses are good for something.

"What do you think they'll want from you?" I asked as I put an arm back around Trey's waist to lead him out of the woods. A fine trembling had started in his muscles. He really needed to lie down and sleep off the effects of the Change and healing. He wasn't as strong as he wanted Bryan to think. Dominance games.

"I really don't know," Trey said. "It's been twenty years since I was part of the pack."

"What happened?" I asked shocked, but truly curious. Twenty years? Twenty years?! That was a long time for a werewolf to play Lone Ranger. Most will go mad, literally insane, from that much time alone. Shifters aren't loners. They just can't do it. Trey should have been stark raving mad, yet here he was as calm as could be.

"I donated blood to a vampire," he said in a rush, heat climbing up his face. Then, more calmly, barely: "She was staked, but it was silver and missed her heart. She told me it was fanatic humans, so I gave her enough blood to heal the wound. Later, I found out my Alpha was trying to confine her. The local vampire coven wanted her, and I let her get away. Keith, my Alpha, was furious, and he couldn't lose face in front of the vampires. So, I was banished from the pack."

"So why would he want you back now?" I asked.

"Probably a power play of some kind," Trey muttered. "What, exactly, I don't know."

"Is it safe to stay here tonight?" I asked.

"Yeah," Trey said. "They won't be back unless I miss the Monday appointment."

"Alright, lets get out of these woods." I drug him back to camp, trying to be quiet but thinking hard. He'd trusted me with so much of himself tonight, more than he really had to. Just the fact that he was a werewolf and I hadn't known still shocked me senseless. No lights lit the way back, and nothing moved in the tents. The others must be asleep. Three of Trey's friends were here with us.

I have no idea how Trey talked me into this asinine camping trip. Okay, fine, that's a lie. He talked me into it because we'd both just lost our jobs. The company we worked for was bought out, and the new big wigs had decided to move headquarters. Any non-major players and anyone not willing to move was fired. Neither Trey nor I were major players.

So, he'd talked me into this crazy trip to try and cheer us up. Not that I don't like camping, but Dana was really getting on my nerves. Five of us had braved the big, bad "middle of nowhere," according to Dana. Dana, Trey, Chase, Nathan and me. It was all Trey's idea, too.

Dana was a pain. She was dating Chase, her boyfriend of the week. Why he put up with her, I have no idea. I mean, she's like the model perfection of the American ideal for beauty according to popular tabloids. But come on, there's got to be more to life than a size 6 waist band! But here she was, and I got to share a tent with the most annoying complainer ever. Thank goodness she was asleep.

The guys' tent was dark too, but we didn't go there. I took Trey to his truck. He drove a pickup, just like I did. One of the many reasons we get along, a proper appreciation for rugged vehicles. I pulled open the back door and Trey fell across the back seats. He kept a first aid kit under the seat. I knew because this wasn't the first time we'd needed it. Come to think of it, Trey was a quick healer. I'd noticed it before, but he'd always been careful to keep it hidden from me. He'd probably worn bandages over smooth skin to hide how fast he'd healed.

"I'm fine, Tor," he told me. "If you bandage me up like a mummy and tomorrow I'm fine, I won't be able to explain it to the others."

"You won't be fine tomorrow," I told him. "These are shifter wounds, they won't heal that fast."

"I know," he said. He let me wrap his biceps and thighs in gauze. His chest was harder. He just didn't carry that much gauze in his everyday first aid kit. I finally settled for rubbing in antiseptic cream like sunscreen over his entire chest and back. He tensed like it hurt whenever I moved him, but he didn't say anything. Neither of us did. I finally snuck back into my tent and pulled out an old T-shirt to rip into strips for bandages. He didn't protest, but his eyes were closed and his breathing was too quick. He was in pain.

When he was finally bandaged up, I moved him back until he laid full length across the seats, his legs dangling out of the truck door. He was already partially asleep, or partially passed out. So I just reached up and turned off the automatic lights inside the car. There was no way to shut the door without crushing his legs, so I just left it open.

"Goodnight, Trey," I whispered, but he didn't answer. He was already too far gone into sleep.

I crawled back into my tent. Dana was snoring, just another annoying quality to add to the already horrendously long list. The night was getting cold, so I snuggled deep into my sleeping bag. Or rather, Trey's sleeping bag that he'd loaned me. Camping had never been my thing, mostly because I'd never really had the chance before. Sleeping outside or on hard ground wasn't new to me, but doing it for fun was.

CHAPTER TWO

EXPLANATIONS

Trey and I spent Saturday and Sunday morning with the others at the campsite. Sunday morning, frustration nearly came to blows between Dana and me, although I don't think she realized that. She tried to convince me to wear one of her bikinis instead of my sports swimsuit with a T-shirt. I have several very harsh scars that would be hard to explain. One of them scars my right shoulder and collarbone, another the small of my back. Revealing clothing and I don't get along so well. I didn't have a way to explain what was obviously claw scars on my back. Anyway, Trey managed to distract me before I actually hit her. Which was probably a good thing because with my stress level, violence wasn't a great idea.

But through the whole weekend, there was an underlying tension. I don't think Chase, Dana, and Nathan guessed the cause, although I caught Nathan studying me several times. He's a perceptive man, really. But the tension was so thick between Dana and me and Dana and Chase that it kind of obliterated everything else. But the real tension, at least the only tension that really mattered to me was that between Trey and me. I knew what he was. He knew what I was, although not who. Of course, he'd be able to make the logic leap pretty easily.

When I'd first met Trey, I'd introduced myself as Torrance Tran. That was the name on my driver's license, or at least the one I was currently using. I was in hiding. Actually, I was running away, but I needed a place to run to. My Torrance Tran persona gave me that place. A place where my history didn't include claw scars down my back and fang scars on my shoulder. Where vampires and lycanthropes were visited at clubs, more like animals in a zoo, than bunking next door like slave masters. I'd carved out a life for myself here, and I liked it. I wasn't looking forward to going back.

My real name is Victoria Novak. The paranormal world knew me simply as the Sorceress. In the year before I'd run away, I'd killed five vampires. Five in one year is a big deal. Five killed in one year by an eighteen year old girl is incredible. I'd had a teacher, the real assassin and the one that had been hired to kill the five rampaging vampires threatening humans, but I was still something of a legend among vampires. The only Sorceress with a reputation for blood couldn't be overlooked.

I'm the only sorceress in the United States. There are two sorcerers, but both are getting older. Timothy had gone into hiding a long time ago and I knew Gavin was a flunky to the paranormal

Council, their version of a government. The Council isn't like our government with everyone getting a say so. It's more a dictatorship by the six Council members. But it worked. The Council can actually scare vampires into doing what they want. Pretty big deal.

I was thinking about my former life and the paranormal world, as I had been most of the weekend, when Trey and I drove back to our apartment building. The drive took the better part of an hour, but Trey just turned up the music and sang along. He didn't have a great voice, but he'd been singing at the top of his lungs so long that he'd learned how to hold a tune.

We'd actually met eighteen months ago at the mailbox. I was a creature of habit and got my mail at the same time every day. I'd see him getting his own mail almost every day. He'd admitted later that he purposefully went to get his mail at the same time I'd be there. Cute, in a freaky-stalker kind of way. But we'd become polite neighbors, then casual friends. After several weeks of mailbox chatting, he'd convinced me to go out to dinner with him. He'd assured me that it wasn't a date, just a friendly thing. I think the only reason I let him get away with it is that I'd had a very bad week at work. One of my co-workers had been fired and I had to pick up the slack. Plus the fact that I had no friends and no social life. Big downer.

Two months later, I depended on our weekly dinner chat almost as much as I depended on sleep. We'd moved the dinners from restaurants to our kitchens when we realized how much of a bill we were racking up. If you've tried to go out to eat on a regular basis lately, you'll understand what I'm talking about. Once and you can write it off as a splurge. But weekly? Then it starts to need its own place in the budget. Neither one of us had a large enough budget to afford that. I mean, I was a grunt accountant trying to get enough experience under my belt to rank decent pay.

Now, we ate dinner together more than we didn't. Seeing him in the hall of our apartment building was a sight as familiar and comforting as family should have been. I'd never known that kind of familiarity with anyone, and Trey always made me smile to see him. That I'd come to know him so well and still missed that he was a werewolf bothered me. Of course, a 148-year-old werewolf could be very powerful. Trey had to be, to hide so well from me. Or, I hoped that's why, and not that I was losing touch with my own magic. Which, after this long being suppressed, was possible. What a terrifying thought.

And the crack in my charm. I knew that it hadn't been smashed, since it had been around my neck constantly. That left one possibility. The witch had died. Died? Or been killed? More likely killed. The real question was had it been because of my charm and me or had she made something for someone else and that was the incentive for murder. She'd made a lot of clandestine paraphernalia for anyone that could pay her price, so it wasn't completely ridiculous to think it had been because of someone else. I wanted it to be because of someone else.

Would I start sensing the paranormal all the time again? Would they start sensing me? That could really put a damper in my job search plans. If I had paranormals chasing me again, I'd have to run. The local Coven Master would never let me stay here a free agent. He'd want to control me, just like every other vampire I'd ever met.

And what about the werewolves? After my friendship with Trey, I couldn't imagine the local pack would want me to stick around. Especially after their little message this weekend. But Trey

was in trouble, and so I'd stick around, at least until he was in the clear. Who knew, maybe he'd end up having to run too and we could be fugitive buddies. He seemed so calm in all this, singing at the top of his lungs. How could he stand to be so calm when there was this massive threat hanging over our heads? Trey had always been easygoing, but this seemed ridiculous even for him. Or maybe it was just his way of hiding his fear.

"Tor, you're a million miles away," Trey said as we carried our camping stuff down the hall to his apartment. Most of it was his stuff, except my clothes. But I dumped that bag near the door and followed him into the back room where he kept his odds-and-ends stuff. Trey has more odds-and-ends than any four other people I know. I guess over a hundred years of collecting stuff can really add up fast. But at least it's not disorganized. Just a lot of it.

"Sorry, just thinking," I said. He took the bags from me and just laid them in the middle of the floor. I gave him raised eyebrows. Trey wasn't OCD, in fact he was a typical guy when it came to cleaning, but he didn't usually leave stuff in the middle of the floor. He liked to take care of his things too much for that.

"I'll come back to it later," he explained. "Let's go sit on the couch and talk. I know you probably have a ton of questions for me, and I have a few for you."

Fear washed over me in a rush. Not of Trey the werewolf, because I wasn't scared of the paranormal part of him. He was still Trey, and being a wolf didn't change that. What scared me was telling him about me. What would he want to know? And could I tell him? The reason I was here, using a different name and working (or had been working) as an accountant was to hide from my past. Did I trust Trey enough to dredge it all back up? Would I send him running for the hills in horror?

He reached out and took my hand to lead me into the living room. It wasn't a romantic gesture, not from Trey. He was always doing stuff like that. Probably the werewolf in him, but I hadn't know that before. It was just Trey.

The living room was very typical living room-ish: a three-seat couch and an armchair, a small TV, a lamp in the corner. Trey wasn't big into TV. Gasp, I know. A guy who doesn't need to watch football every Sunday. Shocker. The TV sat on a small entertainment center with the DVD player and Xbox underneath. His collection of DVDs and video games was on the shelf next to the player. Mostly action movies with a few random animated movies. Trey was as much into the characters on TV making bad jokes as shooting people. But that was just part of Trey.

"Sit down, I'll pour us some tea," he said. Sweet iced tea and sitting on the couch was Trey's idea of relaxation. Actually, it was almost like therapy for him. There's a problem? Okay, sit down, drink sweet tea, and talk it over. Such a simple solution to a problem, but it had worked for me so many times. Somehow, sweet tea cleared his head, and I'd found that it did the same for me. I just hoped it was enough for this kind of news. So, I nodded to him and he changed directions to go into the kitchen.

But I didn't sit on the couch. I sat in the armchair, curled into a little ball. I curled so tight that if my secrets had been able to flow out of me like water, they'd have been stuck in the curve of my own body. He was going to ask me for my biggest secret. But I now had his, so did I owe him

that? Did I trust him enough to tell him? I should be able to, shouldn't I? The bigger question, would he stay one he knew?

Trey came back in with two glasses of tea. He didn't comment about my picking the chair to sit in, just handed me my glass. I took a big, grateful sip and let the semi-sweet liquid soothe over my tongue and wet my throat. So very normal, I reminded myself. Sweet tea and relaxing. Relaxing. That was so not happening.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," Trey admitted. He'd sat down on the couch, but he wasn't looking at me. He looked so relaxed, sprawled out in his normal way over the couch, but I could see the tension in him. He was stiff, his muscles tight. "I didn't know how you'd react."

"I understand," I said. I couldn't seem to take my eyes off him. Because what he was saying was so true. Many humans are still scared of lycanthropes. They fear what they do not understand, and they have not known about the paranormal world's existence long enough to understand it. All they knew was the horror movie version, so of course fear was the normal reaction to shapeshifters, or morbid curiosity. I'd seen so many people go into hysterics and go into pure old fashioned lynch mob mode, complete with proverbial pitchfork to not understand his caution. But more than that, I knew exactly how he felt, because I wasn't sure how he'd react. I was scared. Scared of losing everything good that had happened to me since I ran away and ended up here.

"What do you want to know?" he asked, finally meeting my eyes. For a long moment, we met each other's eyes and said not a thing. It was one of those moments where more can pass between friends than any words could ever say. I trusted him, I really trusted him. Foolish? Maybe, but I did anyway. And the fear started to dim just slightly.

"How much do you trust me?" I asked him. He looked startled; as if that was the last thing he'd expected me to ask. But he answered without hesitation.

"I trust you," he said. I squeezed my eyes shut to avoid the truth in his gaze. He did. He really did. It was there in his face. The confusion that I'd have to ask such a silly question, the utter truthfulness in his answer, the surety that there wasn't anything I could tell him that would make him run screaming. If only I believed that.

"You're going to hate me," I said. Or be scared of me. I wasn't sure which was worse. I was The Sorceress, and paranormals all hated or feared me. Apparently, I had the potential to be that powerful, or that's what the vampires thought. Some of them remembered the last sorceress, who had died before America was a country at all. If they weren't scared of what I could become, they wanted to control me. As if I were a tool to be taken off the shelf, used, then returned to its place until it was needed again. Just a thing, not a person.

"Why? Because I didn't tell you I was a werewolf?" His face showed shock. "Tor, I expected you to hate me. Or run screaming and never talk to me again. I don't know how you're so calm."

"No, I'm not scared of you," I whispered, staring at my knees. And it was true. "I told you what I am too."

"Yeah, you're a witch," he said. "Which I totally should have picked up on. You're really good at shielding."

Witches and sorceresses are not the same thing. Both of them are magicians, true, but not the same. A witch's powers are very specialized. The most common type does small spells, charms, make healing teas, stuff like that. Hedge witches, I think myth has named them. Like the one that made my charm, she was good with spelling trinkets for specific purpose. They're good to have around, but not all that powerful. Handy when you've got a headache, that's for sure. Some of the stronger witches do things like control elements. I met one once who could call a windstorm in a room closed tight. Very creepy. I'm standing in this underground room with no windows, and suddenly there's air movement in the room. Before anyone could react, clothes are whipped around, furniture overturned, and everyone frightened half out of their minds. Needless to say, he got what he wanted.

Other witches are telekinetic. Most of them are limited to fairly small objects, like the size of a college text book or less. And they can only do two or three things at a time. So no mass frenzy of flying objects headed at your face. But a knife in your back can do more damage than a dozen pins in your stomach. Witches were very varied, but very specialized.

Sorceresses... not so much. We deal with the paranormal. Like I said before, I can sense lycanthropes and vampires, usually. I have a certain control over them, but even I'm not sure how exactly it works. They're just more likely to listen to me than a normal human. I can do some strange stuff, like call them to me. Sometimes I can do other things, like force a lycanthrope into its animal form. I've only done that once, and he was a pretty pathetic wererat.

Most witches are trained by other witches. An apprenticeship of sorts. Theoretically, it should work the same way for sorcerers. But like I said before, there are only three of us in the United States. Timothy disappeared about twenty years ago, twenty-two I think. That could mean he's dead ... or just that he's tired of being pestered by the paranormal. His disappearance was the talk of the paranormal community for a while. I don't really remember it, after all I was only one. But the vamps I lived with told me about it.

Gavin is, per previous explanation, a Council flunky. That means that to get near Gavin, I had to get near the Council. For staying safe, that was fine. For staying free, that was very bad. Closer to the Council may be safer, but you pay dearly for that safety with your own free will. Most vampire covens are like that, but not quite so extreme.

I was raised by vampires. Vampire covens are run very different from human families. For one, they're usually a lot bigger. And the biggest, baddest vampire gets to be the leader. Usually, that's the oldest one. When that one makes new baby vamps, they're under his control. When those vamps make more vamps, the new vamps are also under the first one's control to a lesser degree. But since he can tell the middle vamps what to do then they tell the grandbaby vamps... Well, you get the picture.

Sometimes, a vampire will get powerful enough to leave his parent-vamp. Then he becomes the head of his own coven and the whole process starts again. That's referred to as breaking blood bonds, and is extremely rare. Sometimes Coven Masters switch vampires with other covens for political reasons. It all works like a great big kingdom.

Anyway, my Coven Master when I was a kid was Leroy. He didn't really like coming to the attention of the Council. So for the first decade and a half of my life, no one outside his coven even knew I existed. No, I have no idea what happened to my biological parents. My earliest memories are of vamps, no human faces come to mind.

Of course, even Leroy couldn't hide from the Council forever. They found out about me when I was fifteen. They didn't know how powerful I was or they might have done something about me then. When I was eighteen, I had my vampire killing spree. That sure got their attention. They wanted me to come learn with Gavin, and I didn't want to be a vampire flunky. Plus, Leroy started asking me to kill vampires that hadn't done anything wrong. I didn't like that. So, I ran away.

Okay, infomercial highlights: witch ≠ sorceress, big vamps make baby vamps then control them like a dictator, Leroy doesn't like the Council, little sorceress decides not to be a pawn anymore. Get it? Got it. Good.

"I'm not a witch," I finally answered Trey. My musings had only taken a few seconds, but he was looking quizzically at me. "That's not what I said."

"You said you were a sorceress," he said. Obviously, he thought of me as a weak witch and thus poorly informed. A lot of humans make the mistake. Usually, a witch with any kind of training knows the difference. But humans don't, and he assumed I didn't either.

"I meant it," I said.

"But there's only one sorceress in the US," he said.

"I know," I answered, and I looked up into his eyes. His eyes grew wide as he realized what I was implying. For a long moment, time seemed to freeze. I'm not sure what ran through his head in that moment, or if all thoughts just exploded. Then, he started shaking his head.

"But... but..." he stuttered. "What's your name?"

"Victoria Novak," I answered after a minute. My voice didn't shake, which was pretty much a miracle at this point. He was stunned silent. I couldn't look at him. This was the part where he'd throw me out of the apartment and refuse to see me again. The paranormals were afraid I'd start trying to control them. He wouldn't want that. He said nothing. And I knew what had to be going through his head now.

"You're The Sorceress?" he whispered. When I was a baby, my name was cursed. No paranormal could say my name. That didn't include the human witches, but did include vampires and lycanthropes. Every paranormal I met needed a different name for me. It's called a Taboo, and I hate it.

Once, when I was a kid, I'd tried to get them all to call me Sarah. It wasn't my name, right? So it should work. For three weeks, I asked every vampire in my coven to call me Sarah. Leroy thought it was a good idea and I think some of the other vamps were getting tired of "that girl" or Her in that tone that meant you should know exactly who they were talking about.

As soon as a lot of them started using it, they couldn't say it anymore. It wasn't the name Victoria Novak that was cursed, it was my name. When I asked them all to call me Sarah, I'd made that my name and so they couldn't say it. When referring to me in public, mostly they'll call

me The Sorceress. That's more like a title, so they can all say it. I have no idea why it works that way, but magic is sometimes unpredictable.

However, say the name Victoria Novak and 95% of the paranormals will know who you're talking about. Most of what they know of me is hearsay and rumors, many of which have been mangled, unrecognizable in the retelling. But they know who I am. They know what I am.

"Yes," I said.

"Well ..." he took a deep breath. "I guess I'm not the only one that has been keeping secrets."

His voice was shocked, trembling, and afraid. The fear was plainly there, in his voice and body language. That was it. I stood abruptly and set the glass of tea on the coffee table. My eyes were burning, but I kept my head turned away from him and refused to let the tears fall. Gritting my teeth, I started for the door.

"Where are you going?" Trey demanded.

"Away," I said. "When it sinks in, that's where you'll want me to be." The tears were falling now, but I didn't look at him. Strong and silent... yeah, that's me...

Suddenly, he was in front of me. Stupid me, I'd forgotten how fast a lycanthrope can move. They are so much faster than humans. Now that he wasn't playing human for me, he could do stuff like that. I wasn't used to thinking about Trey like that, and I'd forgotten. I tilted my chin down and away from him so I wouldn't have to look him in the face.

"Tor," he said firmly. "You're my best friend. I don't want you to go."

"But the girl you thought you knew doesn't exist," I said. My voice held no trace of the tears. Brownie points for me... "I lied to you."

"No you didn't," he said. He put his fingers under my chin and made me look up into his face. "Not any more than I did to you. I'm a werewolf, but it doesn't change who I am. So you're the Sorceress, but you still like math, the color green, and noodles more than rice. You still keep your shoes in a line in your closet and your movies in alphabetical order. You still like taking walks at night and going to the lake in the summer. You're still you."

He rubbed the tears from my face with his thumb. "Don't cry. I've never seen you cry before." Suddenly, he reached out and pulled me into a tight hug. "Come on, let's refill the tea glasses and tell our stories."

Trey didn't let me go as he pulled me into the living room and sat me on the couch. "Don't move," he instructed before disappearing into the kitchen with both glasses. He reappeared a moment later.

"Sweet tea is good for the soul," he said with a straight face before grinning at me. The fear was still in his face, but he didn't let it show in his voice. I was grateful to him for that. He sprawled out on the couch next to me and cocked his head to the side, as if considering me. "So, tell me which rumors about The Sorceress are true."

"What rumors?" I asked. I was curled into a tight ball in the corner of the couch. "They're probably not true at all."

"Well, I actually don't know much," he said. "I got kicked out of my pack twenty years ago, remember. So the rumor mill only reaches me about half the time. Tell me something interesting about you, and I'll tell you about me."

This was a game we'd played during many dinners. I thought back to all the crazy stories he'd told me over dinner. Stories about his childhood. Now I realized that those stories must have taken place over a hundred years ago. The stories I'd given him had been much edited. Such as leaving out the part about everyone in them being vampires.

"I was raised by vampires," I said. His eyes went wide for a moment before he schooled his features back to curiosity. "I told you about Tonio. He's a vampire."

Antonio had been the vampire given the task of raising me. I must say, raising a kid isn't easy for a vampire. For one, babies don't sleep through the night. And vampires die at dawn. I don't mean they sleep and when the baby cries they get up. I mean the die. Dead. They'll wake up again when the sun goes down, but during the day they're dead. Some of the more powerful vampires can wake up during the day, but can't go outside. The whole sunlight issue.

Tonio wasn't strong, so he died for most of the day. When I was really little, there were others, but I don't remember them very well. Human nannies that came and went. Leroy or Antonio probably fed them some grand story about working all the time and needing someone to take care of the baby. I have no idea who played my mother in these little charades, it hadn't really been something I'd wanted to know.

My first real memories are of Antonio rocking me to sleep just before the sun came up. My days and nights had been truly reversed, like a vampire's. We'd go up to my room and sit in the rocking chair where I'd curl up in his arms. He'd tell me: "Sleep now, princesa," and sing me Portuguese lullabies. When I woke up in the evening, he'd already be waiting for me, and we'd go down to have breakfast. He could cook the best breakfasts, even though he hadn't eaten solid food in two hundred years.

Thinking of Tonio always made me a little sad. I knew how Leroy would react to Antonio losing track of me. Since a vampire cannot lie to its master, Antonio would have to tell Leroy everything. So I had never told Antonio where I was going or even that I was leaving. Leroy would be furious that I'd gotten away and that Antonio hadn't stopped me.

"Yes, I remember him," Trey said.

"He's the closest thing I ever had to a father," I admitted. "The Coven Master, Leroy, was a real nightmare."

"I've heard of him," Trey said, guardedly.

"Bad things or good?" I asked.

"Both, in a way," he answered. "He's liked by many vampires because he is ruthless with those who disobey him."

"He's cruel," I said. "Even if you obey him. He has no pity, no sense of fair play, and thinks that might makes right."

News flash: I don't like Leroy much.

Actually, thinking about him made me mad. My teeth were clenching. Anger was much better than fear. Although fear was definitely the basis of this anger. Leroy was the root of many of my nightmares. He and his Third, Delano. Delano liked to cause pain. Physical, emotional, anything worked for him.

"Alright," Trey agreed. "My turn. Ask me a question."

"How old were you when you were changed into a werewolf?" I asked. What I really wanted to know was what happened. But not all lycanthropes like to talk about it. You have to almost die to be turned, so it can be a very painful memory.

"Twenty-six," he said. "I was actually engaged at the time." His voice went softer at the end.

"What happened?" I asked, because I couldn't not ask after an opening like that.

"That was over a hundred years ago," he said. "Werewolves were a thing of legend and myth. They didn't exist. I was out hunting with my brother and a friend of ours. We were trying to feed our family for the winter. We separated, but that wasn't unusual for us. We heard the wolf's howl, but we didn't leave the forest. Our families really needed the meat."

He paused in his story and got a faraway look in his eyes. As if he could still see that time and place clearly, and maybe he could. "It was late at night on the full moon. We'd gone out on the full moon because it gives the most light. The werewolf that attacked me was new, he still didn't have complete control when he shifted to animal shape. He just wanted to rip and tear, that's the only reason I'm still alive."

New lycanthropes actually lose control their first few full moons. They'd go into a wild crazy bloodlust if someone wasn't there to guide them. Other lycanthropes could control the new one, but they had to be around. All new lycanthropes get an older teacher. Kind of like the Big Brother/Little Brother program.

"I don't know what happened to his pack," Trey continued. "But I know I should have died that night. Ned, my brother, tried to save me; but it didn't work. They brought me back, thinking I'd died. We didn't have all the medical wonders we have now and my pulse was too faint. I'd lost too much blood. They thought I was dead."

He stopped for so long I thought he wouldn't go on, but he did. "I woke up that night, in the ... morgue. They'd cleaned my wounds and dressed me for the funeral. There was something wrong with me. I could feel it. I could remember how hurt I'd been. I should have died.

"We have extraordinary healing powers for the Change. We can heal more damage as we become wolves than any other time. After your first full moon, your healing strength goes down again. But before that, we're nearly impossible to kill.

"I Changed that night. Werewolves have to change on the full moon, just like the legends say. But we have to change the day before and after, too. So I became a wolf that night, and I thought I was a monster."

The tears started rolling down his face then, but he didn't seem to notice. His voice never wavered. His eyes stayed unfocused. "I couldn't go back to my fiancée after that, my family thought I was dead. I still don't remember much of my first six months as a wolf. The changes are so spontaneous that sometimes they just rip you apart. I didn't know enough about werewolves to

realize it was tied to the moon. I just knew that some nights I was human, and some nights I was a wolf. Anger or fear can also cause a spontaneous change in a new wolf, and I was so scared.

"Keith found me, although he wasn't called Keith then. Six months of fear and not understanding. Then he found me and took me back to his house. I wasn't thinking like a human anymore. I'd embraced the wolf half of me, so much that I thought of myself as 'we' and 'us' rather than 'I' and 'me'. Keith explained things to me and I met his pack. There were only about ten of them back then and Keith wasn't Alpha yet. Everything changed. I was part of the pack, and they taught me everything I needed to know."

He looked at me then, and this time his eyes actually focused on me. "I don't think I've told that story to anyone in close to a hundred years."

"I'm grateful," I said.

"Tor," he said, his voice a little tentative. "I'm a werewolf." He seemed at a loss for words to say what he meant. He wanted something from me, but I didn't know what.

"Yes..." I said, trying to be encouraging. He gave me pleading eyes and laid his hand on the couch next to him. And just like that, I understood.

Uncurling from my ball, I scooted closer to him. Lycanthropes are huge into hugs and physical comfort. They touch like they breathe. It's just a part of them – a part of Trey that he'd been denying for twenty years. Now that I knew what he was, he wanted that casual comforting touch. Who was I to deny him? A hug from a friend is good comfort, even to a non-lycanthrope.

I leaned my back against his side and he adjusted minutely. His arm went across my shoulders and rested on the back of the couch. We'd been close before, but never this close. I'd known Trey touched more than the average guy, but without the lycanthrope excuse I'd never have let him touch me this much. For most guys, this much touching means you're interested in them romantically. Trey and I weren't like that. We were more like brother and sister than boyfriend and girlfriend. But he was a werewolf, and touching was as much a part of him as eating.

"Trey?" I asked as I heard him take in several long, deep breaths. As if he'd been in pain and only just now felt better.

"Yes," he said, his voice low and slow, an extremely relaxed sound that I hadn't heard from him much.

"Why does your pack really want to see you?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. His arm snaked around my waist and pulled me to his side so that I couldn't have gotten up if I tried. I didn't try. I relaxed. He leaned his head over on mine and sighed again; as if I were a security blanket and he'd wrapped me around him. I'd never seen him this relaxed without being asleep.

"I thought werewolves who were away from their pack didn't do very well," I said. I'd tried to be all polite about it. Truth was, werewolves away from their pack usually do very badly. Some even go crazy. One of the worst things ever is a werewolf in bloodlust without a pack to control him. Slaughter like you have never seen. And once a lycanthrope goes that crazy, usually the only way to stop him is to kill him.

"It was you," he answered. "I have no idea what drew me to you, but I told you how I started going to get my mail when you did. I wanted to talk to you. I thought it was just because I liked you, but it was more than that."

"It was my magic," I said, and my voice sounded sad. He'd been drawn to me because of the magic. Even meeting my best friend had been affected by what I was more than who I was. I hated that what brought us together was magic, but even I couldn't hate it enough to regret where we were now.

"Maybe," he said. "But I was serious when I said you saved me. I told you about my depression problem."

He'd told me he struggled with depression. At the time, I'd thought it was just the normal depression a human gets. I thought he'd just been lonely. But he'd said that becoming friends with me had cured him. I hadn't believed him. Now I wondered if my magic had strengthened him away from the pack. All it would take was contact with my skin. A hug, a handshake, any touch would do it. I hadn't noticed it because of my charm.

"My magic helped you," I said, because I wanted him to confirm it.

"Maybe," he said. "It probably helped the wolf part of me. But you helped the human side of me. I was a mess, Tor. I'd been a mess for eighteen years. But I couldn't be a mess in front of you. Eighteen months ago when we met, you made me care again. I don't think that's magic."

"How do you always know exactly what to say to make me feel better?" I asked. I could feel his smile.

"Because I'm your best friend," he said.

"You're the best friend I've ever had," I said.

"That's sad," he said.

I turned to look at him in astonishment, although his hold on me prevented me from getting very far away from his body. "What do you mean?"

"Your standards aren't very high." But he was smiling softly. He was teasing me. The crazy man was teasing me. But he wasn't scared of me anymore, and I valued that more than anything else he could have given me right about then.

I grinned back and shrugged. "Well, since I've only ever had two friends in my entire life, it wasn't hard."

His face fell. "Tonio," he breathed.

"No, Tonio is my father, in every way but genes," I said. "I had somebody, but only for a while."

"Tell me about them?" he asked.

"No," I said. "No, I won't tell you about them. Not now."

"Why not?"

"Did the rumor mill tell you why I left the vampires?" I asked tentatively.

"No, you just disappeared. At least, as far as I heard."

"I did ... I ... I killed ... I killed five vampires," I said, turning my face away from him. "Leroy wanted me to do more. He wanted me to keep killing for him and I wouldn't do it. That's why I ran away."

"And what does this have to do with your friends?" Trey asked softly.

"Shadow taught me how to kill vampires," I said. "We hunted together."

"And the other one?"

"I buried her," I answered. "I was twelve."

"Ah," he said and pulled me back against him. It was my turn to let out a huge sigh. "Want some more tea?"

I laughed. I hadn't drunk any of the first glass. Just like that, I was better. Trey hadn't run from me in terror of my magical abilities. He'd offered me tea. If friendship had a taste, it would taste like sweet tea.