

REVEALED - EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

Neferet

The reflection from the past that had suddenly manifested in Zoey Redbird's mystical mirror had been a terrible reminder of the death of Neferet's innocence. It had been so unexpected to see herself again as a broken, beaten girl that the memory had shattered Neferet, leaving her vulnerable to the mutinous attack from the creature that had been her vessel. Aurox had overcome her, gored her, and hurled her from the penthouse balcony. When she had hit the pavement below, Neferet, former High Priestess of Nyx, had, indeed, died. As her mortal heart had ceased beating the spirit within her, the immortal energy that had made her Queen Tsi Sgili, had taken over, dissolving her broken shell of a body and living...*living*.

The mass of Darkness and spirit nested together, going to ground, waiting, waiting, surviving, while the Tsi Sgili's consciousness struggled to continue to exist.

The violated girl in the mirror had resurrected a memory that Neferet had believed had long ago been dead...buried...forgotten. That past had risen with a force that she had been utterly unprepared to battle.

Alive again, the past had killed Neferet.

Neferet remembered. She had once been a daughter. She had once been Emily Wheeler. She had once been a vulnerable, desperate child, and the human male who should have been her most vigilant protector had molested, abused, and violated her.

The instant Emily's reflection had flashed within the magickal mirror, all the decades of power and strength that Neferet had fashioned into a barrier she had used to repress that violation, that murdered innocence, evaporated.

Gone was the mighty vampyre High Priestess. Only Emily remained, staring at the ruin of her young life. It was Emily who Aurox gored and hurled onto the lonely pavement at the base of the Mayo Hotel. It was Emily who took Neferet with her in death.

But it was the spirit of Queen Tsi Sgili that survived.

True, her body had been broken, her mind shattered, but the energy that was Neferet's immortality lived, though her consciousness hovered on the edge of dissolution. The comforting threads of Darkness welcomed and strengthened her, allowing her to first borrow the likeness of insects, then of shadows, then of mist. The spirit of the Tsi Sgili drank the night and vomited the day – sinking into the sewer system of downtown Tulsa and moving slowly, but inexorably in one direction – what remained of Neferet had a never resting compulsion to seek the familiar – to find that which would make her whole again.

The Tsi Sgili was aware when she crossed the boundary between the city and the place she knew best. The place that, even disembodied, her spirit recognized because it had drawn her to it for so many years. She entered the House of Night in the form of fog, thick and gray. She drifted from shadow to shadow, absorbing the familiar.

When she reached the temple at the heart of the school, the specter recoiled, though smoke and shadow, energy and darkness, cannot feel pain, just as it cannot feel pleasure. The malevolent energy of the Tsi Sgili recoiled in reflex, much like the severed leg of a frog twitches in response to a hot skillet.

It was that inadvertent twitch that changed her course, causing her to drift close enough to the place of power that she *did* feel. The Tsi Sgili could not recognize pain or pleasure, but what remained of Neferet knew power. She would always know power.

In sticky drops of oily wetness, she sank into the hole in the earth. She absorbed the energy buried around her, and through it she drew to her the ghostly residue of what was happening above her.

The Tsi Sgili might have remained like that – formless, faceless, simply existing – had death not chosen that moment to approach.

Like wind that blows clouds to shroud the sun, death's approach was invisible, but the Tsi Sgili felt the brush of it before the fledgling began to cough.

Death was even more familiar to the specter than was the school or the place of power. Death drew her up from the pit in the ground. In a rush of excitement the Tsi Sgili's spirit manifested in the first form that had come to her near the beginnings of her power – that of the ever-questing, ever-curious, ever-resilient eight-legged insect.

The black spiders, moving as one, materialized to seek out and to feed from death.

Ironically, it was the fledglings' circle that opened the energy conduit which enabled Neferet to gain enough consciousness so that she was able to focus and borrow the ancient power of death and, ultimately, to find herself once more.

I am she who was Emily Wheeler, and then Neferet, and then Tsi Sgili – queen, goddess, immortal being!

Until that moment, finding the familiar had been her focus. As death descended upon the fledgling, the Tsi Sgili's spirit fed from it, gathering energy so that finally her memories coalesced from fragments of past and present to one true *knowing*.

The shock of that knowing caused raw energy to surge through her spirit, fragmenting the threads of Darkness and fueling the refashioning of her body. She had been almost fully formed when the elements had expelled her. Exploding from the circle, Neferet fled.

She made it only as far as the iron gate that served as barrier between the human street and the vampyre school grounds. There, her body solidified, and she had burned through all of her siphoned power until she'd been left gasping, weak as a newborn, barely clinging to consciousness. Neferet crumpled against the wall that was boundary to the House of Night.

She must feed!

Hunger was all she knew until she heard his raised voice, spiteful and sarcastic, quipping, "Yes, dear. Of course you're right. You're always right. I don't want to stay for the ridiculous raffle either – I'm absolutely not interested in the five hundred dollars worth of tickets I bought on a chance to win that 1966 T-Bird the vampyres are giving away. No, no problem! And, as you said *so many times*, we should have called a driver and taken a limo. So, so sorry you're inconvenienced by waiting for *me* to walk all the way to where we parked, get our car, and drive it back to pick you up while you sit on a bench and rest yourself. Oh, and I'm so, so glad you were able to allow those two City Council assholes to stare at your boobs while you whispered to them and spread your crazy gossip about Neferet. Ha! Ha! Ha!" His sarcastic laughter drifted to her through the night. "If you actually paid attention to anyone but yourself you would know that Neferet can take care of herself. Penthouse vandals no one so much as got a peek at? Not hardly. That mess looked like the result of a female temper tantrum. I feel sorry for whoever caused Neferet's temper to explode, but I don't feel sorry for Neferet."

Neferet forced herself to sit up, listening with all her being. The human had said her name. It must be a sign that he was a gift from the gods.

The Lexus not ten feet from where she crouched lit up as he touched the key fob and muttered, "Damned woman. All she does is gossip and manipulate, manipulate and gossip. I should have listened to my father and never married her. All I've gotten from my twenty-five years with her is high blood pressure, GERD, and an ungrateful daughter. I could've been the first single mayor Tulsa's had in fifty years and had my pick of the young daughters of old oil money if I hadn't already been chained to her..."

His grumblings trailed off into unintelligible background noise when her super sensitive hearing honed in to his heartbeat.

She sighed gratefully. He did, indeed, sound like dinner. She would not thank the gods of fate who had sent him to her. She would accept their aid as no more than what she deserved – an acknowledgment that they were pleased to have her return to their immortal ranks.

He was opening the door to the sedan when she stood. Neferet put all of her longing and hunger into the one word that was his name: “Charles!”

He paused, straightened, and peered her way, trying to see through the darkness. “Hello? Is someone there?”

Neferet did not need light to see. Her vision moved through the Darkness easily, comfortably. She saw his carefully combed hair, the well-tailored lines of his expensive suit, the sweat on his upper lip, and the pulse in his neck that beat steadily with his life’s blood.

She stepped forward and shook back her long auburn hair, exposing the lushness of her naked body. Then, as if an afterthought, she raised her hands in an unsuccessful attempt to shield her most private parts from his widening eyes. “Charles!” Neferet repeated his name. This time she added with a sob, “They’ve hurt me!”

“Neferet?” Obviously confused, Charles took one step towards her before halting. “Is it really you?”

“It is! It is! Oh, goddess, that it would be you who discovered me out here, naked, wounded, and all alone. It is so terrible! So much more than I can bear!” Neferet wept as she covered her face with her hands, allowing him to get a more thorough look at her body.

“I don’t understand. What has happened to you?”

“Charles!” his name shrilled behind them from the school grounds, making them both pause. “What is taking you so long?”

“Dear, I’ve found—” Charles began to call back to his wife, but Neferet moved quickly towards him. She clutched his hand, cutting off his words. “No! Don’t tell her it’s me. I couldn’t stand for her to know what they’ve done to me,” she whispered desperately.

His gaze was completely focused on Neferet’s bare breasts when he cleared his throat and continued, “Frances, dear, be patient. I dropped the car fob, and just now found it. I’ll have the car there in another minute or two.”

“Of course you dropped it! You’re so damn clumsy!” came the venom-filled retort.

“Go to her! Forget that you ever saw me.” Neferet whimpered as she scrambled back within the shadows beside the school wall. “I can care for myself.”

“What are you talking about? Of course I won’t go and leave you out here naked and hurt. Here, put on my coat. Tell me what has happened to you. I know your penthouse was vandalized. Were you kidnapped?” Charles spoke as he moved to her. Taking off his suit jacket he held it out to her.

Neferet’s gaze went to his hands where they gripped the jacket, offering it.

“Your hands are so large.” Overwhelmed by images from the past, Neferet found it hard to speak through lips that had gone cold and numb. “Your fingers. So, so thick.”

Charles blinked in confusion. “I suppose they are. Neferet, are you in your right mind? You seem very out of sorts. How can I help you?”

“Help me?” her ravenous mind thrust Neferet forward from Emily’s past. “I shall show you the only way you may help me.”

Neferet did not waste any more of her energy speaking to him. In a single predatory movement she knocked aside the offered jacket and slammed Charles against the wall. His breath left him in a shocked *oof* and he fell to the grass, gasping for air. She did not allow him time to recover. She pinned him to the ground with her knees and, making her hands into claws, Neferet ripped open his throat. As his thick, hot, blood sprayed from his jugular, she fastened her lips over the gash and drank deeply. Even as he died, he did not struggle. Completely under her spell, he moaned and tried to lift his arms to more fully embrace her. His breath gurgled, ending his moans and his legs kicked spasmodically, but Neferet’s strength grew as he moved more closely to death. She drank

and drank, draining him body and spirit, until Charles LaFont, mayor of Tulsa, was no more than a bloodless, lifeless shell.

Licking her lips, Neferet stood, staring down at what was left of him. Energy surged through her. How she loved the taste of death!

“Charles, goddamned it! Do I have to do *everything* myself?” His wife’s voice was coming closer, as if she was moving towards them.

Neferet lifted her bloody hand. “Mist and darkness, I command thee. Shield my body. Now! Cover me!”

Instead of obeying her and hiding Neferet from seeking eyes, the deepest, darkest of the shadows only quivered restlessly. Through the night she felt more than heard their reply: *Your power wanes, reborn Tsi Sgili. Command us now? We shall see...we shall see...*

Rage was a luxurious emotion Neferet could not afford. She kept her anger close to her, choosing it over Charles LaFont’s crumpled suit jacket. Clothed only in blood and rage and fading power, Neferet fled. She had reached the ditch on the opposite side of Utica Street when LaFont’s wife began screaming.

Her screams made Neferet smile, and though Darkness did not obey her command and cloak her, the Tsi Sgili ran with the otherworldly liteness of an immortal. As she fled through the opulent midtown neighborhood, Neferet imagined how she must appear to any mortal who might be lucky enough to glance out her window. She was a scarlet wraith, a Banshee from ancient times. Neferet wished she could bring to life the Old Magick curse of the Banshee – that any mortal filled with hubis enough to dare to look upon her would turn to stone.

Stone...I wish...I do so wish...

The death of the mayor did not fuel her far. Too soon Neferet’s fleetness faltered. Waves of weakness broke her body with such intensity that she stumbled over the next curb, gasping for breath.

No houses here. Where am I?

Confused, Neferet looked around, blinking at the brightness of the 1920’s style streetlights that dotted the park. Instinctively, she moved away from the lights and deeper into the shrubs and winding paths in the heart of the park.

It was on the small ridge, surrounded by sleeping azalea bushes, that Neferet’s breath finally returned to her, allowing her thoughts to clear enough that she recognized her location.

Woodward Park – not far from the House of Night. Neferet looked up, searching for Tulsa’s downtown skyline. *The Mayo is too far away. I’ll not make it there before dawn.* And even if she could reach her penthouse before the sun lifted from the horizon and sapped her of what remained of her strength, how would she get past the humans that worked at the front desk? Darkness was not obeying her. Uncloaked, she would be a naked, blood-covered vampyre – a thing to loath and imprison – especially on the night their mayor had been killed by a vampyre.

Perhaps she should have considered her alternatives more carefully before she’d ended LaFont’s miserable life.

Neferet felt her first sliver of panic. She had not been this alone and vulnerable since the night her father had killed her innocence.

The Tsi Sgili shuddered, remembering his large, hot hands, his thick fingers, and the stench of his fetid breath.

Neferet sobbed, remembering also the shadows that had comforted her as a young girl, and the Darkness that had soothed her broken innocence. “Have all of you deserted me? Have none of my dark children remained faithful to me?”

As if in answer, the bushes before her whispered with movement, and from within a fox emerged. The creature stared at her with no visible fear. Neferet was awed by the beauty of its amber and red fur, and the intelligence in its brilliant green eyes.

The fox is my answer – my gift – my sacrifice.

Neferet gathered the remnants of her power. Silently and swiftly, she struck, breaking the fox's neck with a single blow. While the light faded from its eyes, Neferet laid the body across her lap and clawed open the dying creature's throat. She lifted the fox so that its blood ran sluggishly down her arms, and her breasts, pooling around her like a warm spring rain.

"If it is a sacrifice you need, then for you doth this creature bleed! This blood only opens the door. Return to me and Tulsa will pay you more...more!"

The deepest shadows beneath the azalea bushes stirred. Slowly, almost tentatively, a few threads of Darkness slithered towards Neferet.

The Tsi Sgili blinked tears from her eyes. They hadn't abandoned her! She bit her lip to keep from crying out in gratitude when the first of the tendrils brushed its frigid flesh against her while it sank into the warmth of the fox's blood and began to feed. Others soon joined it, and though there didn't come forth the hundreds, even thousands, of tendrils she had once commanded, Neferet was pleased that there were enough of them who answered her call that it seemed the ground around her had been transformed into a nest of Darkness. She inhaled the night deeply, feeling the power that pulsed through it. If she could just remain with her familiar threads she could feed them, and in turn they would hide her and nurture her until she truly regained her strength, and her purpose.

My purpose? What is my purpose?

Memories flooded her weakened mind with a cacophony of voices and visions: she was a young girl – *your purpose is to be Lady of Wheeler House!* She was a young High Priestess – *your purpose is to follow the Path of the Goddess!* She was a more mature vampyre who had begun to listen to the whispers of Darkness that seemed to drift to her on the wind – *your purpose is to help me break free of my earthly jail and reign at my side!* She was powerful, fed by threads fashioned from night and magick – *your purpose is to amuse me and to be my Consort!*

"Enough!" Neferet cried, burying her face in the soft, musty fur of the sacrificed fox. "I've had enough of others telling me my purpose." Resolutely she stood, drawing the remnants of her pride and power to her. "I killed and you have fed. Now to succor and safety I will be led!"

The tendrils of Darkness rippled, wrapping around her bare legs, gently tugging, compelling her forward. Wordlessly, Neferet followed Darkness to a path that led to a wide stone stairway that meandered down a rocky ridge until she stood on the street level of the empty park, staring into an insignificant, grotto-like area tucked between landscaping and pathways. Rock and shrubs mostly obscured its mouth, which opened to a wide expanse of grass that eventually led to Twenty-First Street. The threads released their hold on her and disappeared into the cleft in the stones. Again, Neferet followed them, climbing to the maw of the grotto. She drew a deep, fortifying breath as she crawled into the utter blackness, and paused in surprise at the musty, wild scent that surrounded her within.

Her threads had led her to the fox's den.

Neferet sank into the earth, welcoming the scent of her prey. She could almost feel the warmth of the animal's body lingering in the nest it had so recently departed. Neferet curled there, with only blood and Darkness covering her, closed her eyes, and finally allowed sleep to claim her.

CHAPTER TWO

Zoey

"Z, there you are! I've been looking all over for you. This is really not a cool time for you to be hiding out here."

Stark's voice startled me and I jumped, rubbing the goose bumps from my bare arms and frowning up at him. "I'm not hiding. I'm just out here . . ." My voice trailed off and I glanced around. *What was I doing out here if I wasn't hiding?* Thanatos had rushed Erin's body from the shocked, gawking eyes of the visiting humans to the infirmary. Automatically, my circle had followed her. She'd called orders to the professors and Sons of Erebus Warriors to escort our guests from the school grounds and close down the campus. I think everyone assumed that I had been helping to guide the humans out. I'd meant to help. I'd even started to, but then I overheard what a group of the

locals were saying, and I'd needed to get away. It was annoying as hell that a fledgling dying in her own blood caused a bunch of PTA moms and politicians to gossip and speculate— and were they whispering about the dead kid, freaked out about the fact that she had barely turned eighteen and was dead? Nope. They'd been talking about Neferet! Whispering about how she'd been fired from the House of Night and then gone public with what they were calling her anti-vampyre opinions, and *then* she'd disappeared after her pent house had been vandalized.

I'd even heard one of the Tulsa City Council members say that they wouldn't be surprised if vampyres had been sending Neferet a message to get out of town, and that "poor Neferet" could have been a victim of House of Night violence.

That had really pissed me off, but what could I have said to the guy? *We didn't so much vandalize and threaten her as we rescued my grandma from her evil clutches and then we tossed her off the roof of her pent house.* Yeah, like that would have gone over great.

Hearing them talking about "poor Neferet" had been more than I could take. Hell, my circle and I had just kept "poor Neferet" from materializing in the middle of our open house and eating the locals! "Poor Neferet" might even have been responsible for Erin's body rejecting the Change. It seemed too much of a coincidence to me that Erin had died right after the gross, semi-formed ex-High Priestess had passed through the fledgling's body.

So, instead of screaming at the locals, I'd taken advantage of the chaos caused by a fledgling dying publicly, and slipped away by myself to sit on a bench at the far side of the stables; take a long, deep breath; and think. I exhaled that breath and continued to think. "Stark, I'm not out here hiding." I reasoned through what I was feeling aloud. "I just needed a second to myself to deal with the poo storm that's going to be caused by all of that—"

I waved a hand in the direction of the main campus, and finished.

"—all of that mess."

He sat beside me on the bench and took my hand in his. "Yeah, I get it. Dealing with death is tough on me, too," Stark said quietly.

"Yeah," I said, and a little sob escaped with the word. Goddess, I was such a hypocrite! "You know what? I'm as bad as those gossiping humans. You were right. I am hiding out here feeling pissed and sorry for myself instead of being freaked that one of our circle just died."

"Z, I don't expect you to be perfect. No one does." Stark squeezed my hand. "You know it won't always be like this."

My stomach clenched. "I think that's the problem. I don't know that it won't always be like this."

"This is the second time we've beaten Neferet— and she didn't look so good to night. Seriously— spiders? That's all she's got? She can't keep fighting us forever."

"She's immortal, Stark. She can't be killed, so she can keep fighting us forever," I said gloomily. "And she'd changed from spiders to yucky, gooey, black crap that was starting to reform her body. Ugh. She's back."

"Well, at least everyone knows she's turned bad," he countered with.

"Nope, everyone doesn't know she's turned bad. Vampyres know it— and the High Council had decided to not do squat to her.

Humans, local humans— hell, our own mayor and his council— think that she's practically Glenda the Good Witch of the North.

What pissed me off to night was that I overheard some of the guys in suits and the PTA moms talking about her and wondering if we had something to do with her pent house being vandalized last week because 'poor Neferet,' " I air quoted, "hasn't been seen since then."

"Really? I can't believe they're saying that."

“Believe it. Neferet’s press conference set the stage for her to look like a victim if anything happened to her.”

“Doesn’t matter. Doesn’t change the fact that we had to kick her ass to get your grandma back. We were cloaked that night. No one saw us, so all that talk is just bullshit gossip. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Gossip always means something, Stark. In this case I think it means that it’s going to take some major bullpooie hitting the fan for anyone who isn’t a vampyre to know how evil Neferet is.”

“You’re probably right about that, but that’s actually good news,” Stark said.

“Huh?”

“Neferet has never known how to lay low and let a situation cool down. And she sure as hell has never been able to pull off being a victim. If she can manage to get herself together—literally—and manifest a body that’s more than black snot, she’s right back where she was before. She’s eventually going to realize that the local humans aren’t going to bow down and worship her.

A bunch of them even feel sorry for her. That is going to piss her off big time and Neferet will mess up. Again. Then she’ll be outed with the humans, just like she was with the vamps. That’ll leave her no shit pot to stir here, and if she can’t stir up some shit, Neferet will find someplace else to haunt. Getting rid of her for good could actually be, as Stevie Rae would say, easy- peasy.”

“Stevie Rae!” I felt a flush of guilt. “Crap. I pretty much left her alone to deal with the Erin death mess.”

“Thanatos is handling it, and by it I mean Shaunee. Stevie Rae and Kramisha are getting the kids together for the bus. Everyone wanted to know where you were, which brought me out here looking for you.”

“Sorry. I guess my second to breathe is up. I’m ready to dive back into crazy. Let’s go say bye to Grandma before we get on the bus.”

“I’m with you, Z.” Stark stood, pulled me to my feet, and kissed me softly. “I’m always with you, even if that means I’m with crazy, too.”

I was still in his arms, feeling safe, when we heard the screaming start.

“Holy crap, what is that?”

I could feel the tension in Stark’s body. “Someone’s hysterical.”

He took my hand again, and listened for a few seconds before he began guiding me toward the entrance to the field house. “Come on. It’s coming from around the other side of the school. Stay close to me. I have a bad feeling about this.”

Oh, Goddess! Please, don’t let it be another kid dying . . . was all I could think as we cut through the field house and jogged to the school’s parking lot.

We were coming from a different direction than everyone else, so no one noticed us at first, and Stark and I got to get a good look at the creepy scene. In the middle of the parking lot—surrounded by dazed locals, and a gaggle of Benedictine nuns who were herding her from her headlong run from the front gates of the school—was a tall blond woman having an absolute and utter hysterical meltdown. She was wearing meticulously tailored black slacks; a light blue, skintight cashmere sweater; and a thick strand of expensive-looking pearls. Her hair had come loose from a rich lady updo, and blond wisps were sticking out from her head like she’d been electrocuted. Even though the nuns had managed to get her to stop running in circles, she was shrieking and flailing her arms like a crazy person.

I admit that my first reaction was to feel super relieved that it was a freaked-out local and not another dying fledgling. Sister Mary Angela stepped from the crowd and began trying to calm the woman down. “There, there, madam. I know it is distressing when a young person dies, but we all know death is never far from every fledgling. They accept it, and so must we.”

The screaming woman paused in her hysterics and blinked at Sister Mary Angela as if she'd just realized where she was. She drew a deep breath and her face twisted, changed, going from terror to anger so quickly it was scary. Later I realized that should have made me recognize her.

"You think I'm crying about a *fledgling*? That's absurd!" the woman hurled the words at the nun. "I'm sorry. I don't understand wh—"

Aphrodite rushed up, interrupting the nun and looking wide-eyed at the crying woman. "Mom? What's wrong with you?"

"Oh, shit!" Stark spoke under his breath to me. "That's Aphrodite's mom."

I'd dropped his hand and was moving forward before my mind had time to catch up with my actions.

"They've killed him!" her mom shrieked at her.

"Him? Who?"

"Your father! The mayor of Tulsa!"

The crowd gasped along with me. Aphrodite's face went bloodless and white. Before she could speak again, Lenobia rushed up, saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, some of you have already met me. I am Lenobia, Horse Mistress of this House of Night, and on behalf of our High Priestess and our faculty, I am sorry that you were witness to the tragic events of this evening. Let me help you find your vehicles so that you may make your way home in safety."

"It's too late for that!" Aphrodite's mom screamed at Lenobia.

"There is nothing *safe* about tonight. None of us will ever be safe as long as we coexist with you bloodsuckers!"

When Aphrodite just stood there staring at her mother, I stepped forward, surprised by how calm my voice sounded.

"Lenobia, this is Aphrodite's mom. She says her husband has been killed."

"Mrs. LaFont," Lenobia reacted instantly. "There must be some mistake. It was one of our fledglings who met an untimely death to night."

"The only mistake about it is that more of you didn't die tonight." Mrs. LaFont whirled around, pointing an accusing finger toward the school wall where it met the main entrance and the open iron gate. I could just make out what looked like someone lying on the ground. "He is still there. Where he was left dead and drained by a vampyre!" Then she dissolved once more into hysterical sobs, this time clutching brokenly at her daughter.

"I will go." Darius's voice was strong and steady. He touched Aphrodite's shoulder gently before he jogged to the dark shape.

Once there, he crouched. He hesitated before he returned to us, standing and taking off his jacket, and draping it over what had to be a body. Then he returned to Aphrodite. She was still holding her sobbing mother. "I am sorry," he told her. "It is your father, and he is dead."

Mrs. LaFont's sobs became a horrible, keening wail. The rest of the crowd had begun to whisper with a restlessness that felt like anger and fear combined. The panic that was building was almost a tangible thing. I knew if someone didn't say or do something quickly, an already awful night could potentially turn dangerous.

I raised my voice, glad I still sounded way calmer than I felt.

"Aphrodite, you need to take your mom into the school. Darius, call 911 and tell them that the mayor is dead. Lenobia, Stark, Sister Mary Angela, and the Benedictine nuns, please help these people to their cars. I'll help get Aphrodite and her mom settled and then go find Thanatos. She'll know what to do."

People had actually started to move and do what I'd told them to do when Aphrodite's mom suddenly pulled away from her daughter. "No!" she shrieked, shaking her head and causing the last of her bound hair to loose around her shoulders. "I won't go inside that building ever again. *They killed my husband!*"

"Mother," Aphrodite tried to reason with her. "We don't know how Dad died. He had high blood pressure. He might have had a heart attack."

"His throat was ripped open and his blood was sucked from his body. That is not a heart attack. That is a vampyre attack!" her mother shouted at her.

I glanced at Darius for confirmation. He nodded slightly and continued to speak into his phone.

Ah, hell.

"Mrs. LaFont, if it was a vampyre attack I promise you that we will find the killer and bring him or her to justice," Lenobia said solemnly.

"It's just like your ex-High Priestess said— you are violent! That's why she broke with you. We should have listened to her. We should have all listened to her. Poor Neferet was only your first victim . . ." Mrs. LaFont sobbed.

"I'm going to make sure the humans continue to leave. Zoey, get that woman's mouth under control," Lenobia whispered to us as she hurried past Stark and me. Then she raised her voice.

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen, again I apologize for the tragedies to night. Let the good sisters and me help you to your cars. The Tulsa police will be here soon, and the last thing they need is to have their crime scene polluted."

"I better help her," Stark murmured.

"No, you better help *me*." I grabbed his hand. He gave me a question mark look. I lowered my voice and leaned into him.

"You heard Lenobia. Her mouth needs to be shut. I need some of your red vampyre mojo," I explained.

His eyes got big, but he nodded and whispered back, "What do you want me to do?"

"Let her cry, but no more screaming or shouting," I said quietly.

He nodded again, and we went to Aphrodite, who was staring helplessly at her sobbing mom.

I met Aphrodite's gaze, willing her to understand the true meaning of my words. "Stark's going to talk to your mom. Is that okay with you?"

Aphrodite's eyes flicked to Stark, then to her mom, before coming back to me. "Yeah. Actually, I think that's a really good idea."

She took her mom's elbow and, speaking to her quietly, said, "Mom, you're right. We don't need to go inside the school. But there's a pretty courtyard right over there, away from the vampyres. Why don't you and I sit at one of the benches while we wait for the police to get here? Okay?"

"The *human* police! I want the *human* police to find your father's vampyre killer!"

"Like Lenobia said, the human police are on their way. Right now Stark and Zoey are going to come with us while we wait. You know, Stark's not a normal vampyre. He's a Guardian. He's, uh, worked with the police before— the *human* police," Aphrodite fictionalized as she guided her mom away from the crowd and toward the small, dark courtyard just outside the professors' quarters. "So, Mom, I want you to let Stark ask you some questions while we wait for the human policemen to get here."

Stark stepped up, nodded at Aphrodite, and then took her place beside Mrs. LaFont. "Ma'am, I'm really sorry about your husband," he said in a soft, charming voice. Even I could hear the mesmerizing red vampyre magick within it as he continued. "I'm going to make sure you're safe and all I want you to do right now is to go with me to the courtyard and cry quietly there. It would really be helpful if you didn't scream or shout anymore."

Aphrodite and I let out twin sighs of relief when we heard her echo back to him, “I’ll go with you to the courtyard and cry quietly there. No screaming or shouting.”

“Are you okay?” I asked Aphrodite while we followed Stark and her mom.

She moved her shoulders. “I don’t know. They—I mean my parents—they have never liked me. Actually, they’ve been mean to me for as long as I can remember. Seriously, it was a relief to have them out of my life. But it feels weird and sad to know my dad’s body is over there by the wall.”

I nodded and linked my arm with hers, wanting to reassure her with touch, even though I knew she wasn’t usually a toucher.

“I totally understand what you mean. When my mom died it hadn’t mattered that she’d been mean to me for years, and picked the step- loser over me. All that mattered was that I’d lost my mom.”

“She was hugging me while she cried,” Aphrodite said, sounding young and broken. “I can’t remember the last time she hugged me.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say in response to that, so I just stood there with Aphrodite, holding tightly to her, and listening to her mom’s sobs while the sound of police sirens got closer and closer.

I was glad to see Detective Marx again, even though the circumstances were what Stark later called a complete and total cat herd.

Marx, at least, wasn’t a vampyre-hating human. He had nice brown eyes, and I remembered how they lit up when he’d told me about his twin sister and how even after she’d been Marked and gone through the Change, the two of them had still kept in contact. It was nice to know that at least one cop in Tulsa wasn’t going to open the doors to a human lynch mob because Stark’s red vamp mojo ran out super fast, and Aphrodite’s mom was definitely in a pro-lynch mob state of mind.

“Arrest them!” Mrs. LaFont hurled the words at the detective.

“Arrest all of them! A vampyre did this, and a vampyre should pay for it.”

“Ma’am, whoever is responsible should pay for this crime, which is why I’m going to thoroughly and carefully investigate your husband’s murder. I will find who did this. I give you my word on it. But I cannot, and will not, arrest every vampyre at this school.”

“Thank you, Detective. As High Priestess here I agree with and appreciate your professionalism, as well as your integrity.” I was super relieved to hear Thanatos’s authoritative voice. “Please be assured we will cooperate fully with your investigation. We, too, want the mayor’s killer to be found and brought to justice, as we do not believe a vampyre to be responsible for this tragedy.”

“My husband’s throat was ripped out and his blood was sucked from his body! That is a vampyre attack.” Mrs. LaFont’s eyes slitted at Thanatos. Her voice was filled with venom.

“It certainly looks like a vampyre attack,” Thanatos agreed.

“Which is the first reason to doubt that a vampyre committed this crime. Why would a vampyre kill the mayor of Tulsa at the House of Night during one of our open houses, and leave his body at our front gate to be discovered by humans as well as vampyres? It makes no sense.”

“You prey on humans. *That* makes no sense!”

“Ladies, please, arguing does not help,” Detective Marx tried to intercede, but Mrs. LaFont ignored him.

“Do you deny that you are intimately allied with Death?” She snapped the question at Thanatos.

“My Goddess-given affinity is, indeed, an affinity for death. I have a gift that enables me to help the spirits of the dead find their way to the Otherworld.”

“Is that what you were doing with my husband? Seducing and trapping him? Helping him find his way to a fictitious vampyre otherworld?” Her voice got louder and louder with each question she hurled at Thanatos.

“Of course not, Mrs. LaFont. I had nothing to do with your husband’s death.” Thanatos turned to Detective Marx. “You may question any of the people who were at the open house to night. I was always in view of the public. Even when tragedy struck and one of our fledglings rejected the Change and died, I remained accessible to our faculty and our students.”

“A fledgling died here to night as well?” the detective asked. Thanatos nodded. “She will be missed.”

“Why are you asking her about the fledgling? Everyone knows they could drop dead at any second. That’s normal for their kind. My husband was killed by a vampyre. That is not normal!”

“If a vampyre did kill my father, I can promise you that vampyre isn’t part of this school!” Aphrodite suddenly said. Then, when everyone was staring at her, she bit her lip and looked away uncomfortably.

“Are you saying you know who killed your father?” Aphrodite’s mom sounded like she was entering Crazy Town again.

Aphrodite swallowed hard and then surprised me by blurting: “The only vampyre I know who would do something like this is one who would want to set up the House of Night to take the blame.” She paused, and I tried to catch her gaze and telegraph a big DON’T SAY IT look, but Aphrodite was staring at her mom, like she could actually make Frances LaFont believe her.

“Mom, our old High Priestess, Neferet, has a big grudge against us, all of us. She’s mean, Mom. Worse, she’s evil. She’d do something like this.”

“That’s ludicrous, Aphrodite! Neferet was a friend of your father’s. He appointed her to be a liaison between vampyres and the city. She wouldn’t have killed him!”

“Neferet was just using Dad and the city,” Aphrodite insisted.

“She’s never wanted to make friends with humans. She hates humans. Actually, the only thing she hates more than a human is our House of Night, especially after she was kicked out of here. So it makes perfect sense that she’d kill Tulsa’s mayor at the House of Night during our open house. She knows it’ll make major problems between humans and vampyres.”

“High Priestess?” Marx turned to Thanatos before Mrs. LaFont could chime in. “What do you know about Neferet and her motives?”

“As I said in an interview for Fox News more than a week ago, Neferet has been let go by our House of Night. I believe what Aphrodite is saying does make sense. Neferet was very angry with us.”

“Angry enough to kill?” the detective asked.

Thanatos sighed. “I’m afraid she is capable of great violence. That is one of the reasons the High Council stripped her of her position here and her title of High Priestess of Nyx. Despite what she said to the mayor and the City Council members, Neferet was the one who advocated violence against humans, and not us.”

“If you knew she was violent, you should have come to us with your concerns,” said Marx grimly.

“They didn’t come to you because what they’re saying is a bunch of lies!” Mrs. LaFont exploded. “Just to night some of the City Council members, Charles, and I were talking about how odd it is that Neferet’s pent house had been vandalized, and that she then disappeared, all *after* she took a public stand against what has been going on here at the House of Night. Charles himself said he suspected foul play.”

Aphrodite looked totally shocked. “Mom, you can’t really believe that.”

“Of course I do! Neferet had the strength to speak out against vampyre killers. Your father took her side. And now she is missing and your father is dead.” She turned her blazing gaze on the detective. “And just exactly what are you going to do about these heinous crimes?”

“Mrs. LaFont, please—” the detective began, but LaFont interrupted him. “No, I’ve had enough of this. My husband is dead, and I will not sit passively by with his murder and allow blame to be cast onto the blameless. I’m going home. I’m calling my attorney. None of you have heard the last of me.” Her spiteful blue eyes found Aphrodite. “And you’re coming with me. Let’s go. Now.”

Mrs. LaFont had walked several steps from us before she realized her daughter wasn’t following her. She stopped, turned, and lifted her lip in a sneer that looked so like Aphrodite at her very worst that I know I must have gawked like a tourist. “Aphrodite, I said you’re coming home with me. *Now*. And I meant it.”

“No,” Aphrodite said simply. I thought she sounded really tired, but her voice was steady. “I am home, and this is where I’m staying.”

“Your father’s killer is one of them!”

“Mom, I already told you, if a vampyre killed Dad, it’s not one of these guys.”

“Aphrodite, I’m not going to tell you to come with me again.”

“Good. That means I won’t have to tell you no again. I’m sorry Dad is dead, and that means you’re alone. But I haven’t lived with you for almost four years. You’re really not my family anymore.”

“Detective, can I force her to come with me?” Mrs. LaFont asked him.

“Actually, that’s a good question.” The detective looked from Aphrodite to Thanatos. “I don’t see a crescent on her forehead. Is her Mark covered for some reason?”

“No. Aphrodite is an unusual member of the House of Night. She was once Marked, but her crescent disappeared, though the gifts Nyx gave her when she was a fledgling did not disappear, hence the fact that our High Council has named her a Prophetess of Nyx. So, though Aphrodite is not fledgling nor vampyre, she has been Chosen by our Goddess, and will always have a home at the House of Night.”

Detective Marx blew out a long breath. “Well, being Marked and Chosen by Nyx means that Aphrodite was emancipated from her human parents. Though the circumstances are odd, I’d say that with the ruling of the Vampyre High Council, her emancipation remains valid. Mrs. LaFont, I believe the answer to your questions is no, I cannot force your daughter to go with you.”

“Aphrodite.” Mrs. LaFont’s voice was frigid. “Will you do as I say and come home with me, or will you choose to remain with your father’s murderers?”

“I choose my real family and my real home,” Aphrodite said with no hesitation, sliding her hand into Darius’s and holding tightly to him as her mother spewed venom at her.

“Then I wish I’d never given birth to you. Don’t ever call me your mother again. Don’t ever speak to me again. I deny your existence completely. You are as dead to me as is your father.”

Mrs. LaFont turned her back to her daughter and walked quickly away.

In the silence her mother had left behind, Aphrodite’s voice seemed very small when she said, “I’d like to really go home now. I’ll be on the bus, waiting for you guys to get done here.”

“Bus?” Detective Marx asked.

“Yes,” Thanatos spoke wearily. “Some of our students and vampyres have chosen to live together off campus. Dawn is nearing. They really should be returning to their home.”

“Is this new off - campus housing because there is a new kind of vampyre?” He glanced at Stark’s red tattoos. “A red vampyre?”

“There is, indeed, as Neferet announced in her public interview, a new type of vampyre among us, and some of them are among the fledglings and vampyres who have chosen to live off campus,” Thanatos said, her voice growing wary.

“And is what Neferet said about these new vampyres also true?”

“If you mean the part about us being violent and dangerous— no. That’s not true,” Stark said, meeting the detective’s gaze. The detective hesitated, and then, with terrible finality, he said, “High Priestess, I am going to have to insist none of your fledglings or vampyres be allowed to leave campus until we have investigated to night’s crime more thoroughly and are able to rule out a killer being from your House of Night. If you require one, I’m positive I can wake up a judge and get an injunction ordering your campus to remain closed, but I have to tell you I think it would look better if an official order wasn’t necessary.”

With no visible hesitation, Thanatos said, “There is no need for an injunction. I will voluntarily comply with your request. Zoey, tell the students to get off the bus. Until further notice, everyone will be living on campus.”