

Gaia Hunted

A Novel

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To Drappie and Lala

CHAPTER ONE

City of Peace

It is an irony that I can be surrounded by thousands and still feel utterly alone. I thought coming here would shake things up. But as the crowd of strangers grows and presses the air out of me, I feel like I'm drowning in people. A vampire with translucent skin and bloody fangs holding the hand of a seminude cowgirl in heels pushes past me, almost knocking me to the ground. I wrap my hands around my worn tote bag, shivering in my thin, and in retrospect, poorly chosen Wonder Woman costume. Why did I come to Salem on Halloween?

I'd been in my apartment, feet on the couch, laptop resting on my knees, eating Reese's Pieces out of a bowl and feeling sorry for myself. Hearing groups of rowdy children scampering outside, I'd sequestered myself in my living room with the lights off and the blinds closed. Only two months had passed since losing my teaching job. The last thing I wanted to do was interact with children.

But hiding out wasn't me, so I pulled an old Halloween costume from college out of the depths of my closet, wiggled into it, and took small pride in the fact that it still fit. Then I grabbed a tote bag, filled it with the rest of the Reese's Pieces,

and left the apartment.

Now here I am.

Desperate to escape the throng of partygoers, I step onto a side street and run into Aladdin's Jasmine.

"Hey! Watch where you're going!" the girl cries, sweeping aside her hip-length wig of black hair. "You scuffed my shoes."

Looking down, I see that her blue slippers are, in fact, smudged and say, "Sorry, didn't mean to."

She takes a pull from a neon-green vape pen and exhales out her nostrils. "People today, they have no manners."

"I couldn't agree more," I reply, turning to walk away.

The next moment, we're shoved to the side of the street by a group of Kim Kardashian wannabes who strut past. "Clear the way," says a girl wearing only a miniskirt and bra.

"Well, that proves our point," I say.

Jasmine rubs her shoulder and shoots the group a murderous look. "I hate those types of girls."

I glance pointedly at her ballooning, shimmery blue pants and matching halter top, complete with ample cleavage.

She notices my expression and crosses her arms. "First off, my costume is awesome." She tosses back her black mane. "And second, I highly doubt they're in costume." She nods at me. "What's your name?"

"Mattie."

"I'm Alice."

"Well, Alice, it was a pleasure meeting you." I turn to leave and see hordes of costumed strangers swaying to a rock band of mummies playing Donovan's "Season of the Witch." A creeping sadness comes over me. I'm ready to go home.

"I hate crowds," says Alice.

"Me, too," I spot a gap in the crowd. "Got to go."

But as I turn, she says, "Holy shit, what's that on your face?" She reaches up and tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear.

I step back surprised and brush away her hand.

"Whoa," she says. "Sweet birthmark."

The birthmark is a skin discoloration in the shape of a jagged crescent moon. "You think? I usually try to hide it with my glasses."

"Hey, you should be proud of that mark."

"Why?"

"You just should be." She keeps staring at my face.

We press against the brick wall of a building to avoid being trampled by a gaggle of tweens carrying brooms.

Alice takes another pull from her pen.

"Listen," she says. "I have to give you a psychic reading."

"You're a psychic?"

"One of the best in the world."

"Yeah, and I'm Marie Antoinette."

"Have you ever had a reading before?"

"No," I reply.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't believe in any of that stuff."

"I don't really care if you believe in it."

"I should be going—"

"Hey, wait. I'll show you how good I am." She closes her eyes and presses the back of her left hand to her forehead. "You came here alone."

Well, that wasn't too hard to figure out.

"You live in Cambridge," she continues.

My jaw drops a tad, but then I remember that my tote bag reads "Cambridge Public Library" on the side.

"Yep, you got it. You're a real phenomenon." I break away from her and head back onto the main street.

But when I spin around, I see something that sends chills rippling across my skin. Maybe fifty feet away from me is someone wearing the mask of a bull—except there's something not quite right about it.

The twisted, moving face has a bristling snout, jagged horns,

and black olive-pit eyes, which stare into oblivion. Hanging around the person is a brackish green aura resembling exhaust belched from an old pickup.

"What the hell . . ." I whisper, an ice cube of fear skittering down my spine. I rub my eyes. This can't be real.

The next moment, the bull mask dissipates like an ocean fog, and I can make out the man beneath—ink-black hair molded into a widow's peak, cheeks sunken like a bayou swamp, smoldering brown eyes.

A hand squeezes my elbow, and my pulse rockets. I jolt, twist around. Alice. I sigh, my heart still rattling. Then I blink, uncertain if this woman is also a hallucination.

When I glance back, the man is gone. He never looked in my direction, but for some reason, I'm sure he was searching for me. I'm reminded of my dreams, dreams always forgotten, always just beyond my grasp—dreams that have haunted my waking life, my lost dreams. I let out a ragged breath.

"What's wrong?" Alice looks around, frowning, eyes narrow. "What did you see?" Her tense voice does little to soothe my nerves.

"I – I –" I turn back to where the man had been. But all I find are crowds of Frankensteins, fairies, and vampires. "I'm OK," I reply, voice shaking. "I saw some freak in a costume."

The slight flicker of her eyes shows she's not convinced. Her face remains grim.

"Let's get off the street. Too many assholes out here."

I close my eyes and take a calming breath to subdue my hammering pulse. I need to leave the overcrowded street. I need to forget about the deadened expression in the man's eyes.

"OK," I concede with a nod. I'll give her ten minutes. By that time, I'll feel better.

Alice grabs my hand and guides me through the throng.

CHAPTER TWO

Gaia

We enter a crowded magic shop off the main drag. Shelves overflow with precious stones, books about alchemy, and artifacts ranging from miniature skulls to crystal balls. The smell of sandalwood incense and moss-scented candles overpowers my nose. Navigating around a curio cabinet filled with voodoo dolls, we pass a gigantic mirror bordered with grinning blue gargoyles.

I catch a glimpse of my reflection. My French braid has come undone, and strands of chestnut-brown hair have gone off on wild orbits. Try as I might to tame it with products, my frizzy hair has a mind of its own. My green eyes stand out more than usual. A glow surrounds the buckshot spray of freckles on my cheeks. Maybe I'm kind of excited about learning my future.

Alice leads me past the shop's clerk—a hobbit-sized man dressed in a kimono, standing vigilant at the cash register and eyeing a large, loud group of teenage boys.

“Steve. My booth is occupied in case anyone comes by.”

The man grunts.

A cloth-enclosed cubicle stands at the back of the shop. Once inside, Alice closes a scarlet curtain. She climbs into a high-back chair with velvet armrests and gestures for me to sit on the metal foldout chair across from her.

Alice lays her hands on the round wooden table, palms facing up as if making an offering.

“So, first I’ll tell you about your past and present. Then we’ll take a look-see at your future. Sound good?”

I shrug, my initial excitement tempered by a burst of skepticism. She might as well be offering me an all-expenses-paid vacation to Paris. I’m suddenly struck by how ridiculous this situation is.

“How does this work, exactly?”

Alice moves her head in circles, as if preparing for a round of calisthenics. Her vertebrae pop, and I wince.

“Simple. Place your hands on top of mine. I’m going to hold your hands and feel your energy.”

“My energy?”

“You know, your *Qi*, your life force. Every living creature is bursting with it. I feel that energy and interpret its meaning.”

“Sure—” That was a real SAT answer to the question of how to be a psychic. “What should I do?”

“Relax and don’t worry. I’m good at this.”

Relax? I can’t remember a time in the past ten years when I’ve *relaxed*. I’ve been shuffling from one activity to the next—from school to clubs to sports. And when I started teaching, I was putting in twelve-hour days.

I stare at Alice’s open palms as if they are mousetraps, and purse my lips as I remember my latent fear of fortune-tellers. A part of me doesn’t want to know my future, or at the very least, the future a psychic might tell me. Won’t this knowledge somehow influence my life? Will I subconsciously follow a path ordained by someone else?

Finally, I place my hands on top of hers. She grasps them, and

warmth and calm flow through me. The back of my neck tingles as all the hairs on my arms stand on end.

After a sharp inhale, Alice flutters her eyelids. She lets out a deep breath, and her eyes snap open. "Oh, crap," she mumbles. "You just lost your job."

I feel the blood drain from my face, and I am as exposed as a nudist in a hailstorm. I hadn't told her that. I hadn't told anyone, except Patrick, that my career as a teacher had hit a huge pot-hole. "How do you know that—" It's not a question.

Eyes quivering, Alice continues. "You were a teacher—a middle school teacher. But they let you go."

My stomach drops like a roller coaster dip. I got the pink slip in August from the charter school where I was teaching. It was my first job after graduating from college. They said it was budget cuts. "How?" I whisper to myself.

"So alone," Alice murmurs. "You've felt so alone. Your dad left when you were young—Your mom, she's gone far away. It's been only you in this world."

I'll need a jack to lift up my jaw.

"No wonder you came here. You have nothing left to lose, and you're at the point where you need answers. But to what questions? What is it that haunts you? You're different, but there's something more."

My heart pounds against my chest, and my insides twist.

Go now, I think to myself. But it's like I'm watching a car crash in slow motion. I can't turn away.

"You've felt alone your entire life. Something has been missing. Something so essential and crucial that you can't think of going on without it. Your search has finally brought you here."

Goose bumps stud my skin as she creeps closer to a truth that has frightened me my entire life. My throat is as dry as a winter wind.

I fear that Alice is going to trespass into areas of my mind that I dare not tread, but she pulls away. Emerging from the hypnot-

ic state, she lets go of my hands and blinks, then gives her whole body a little shake like a wet dog. Nostrils flaring, she inhales on her vape and grins. "Not bad, right? I told you I was good."

I'm cold all over as though I have snow stuffed under my skin. I'm too shocked to reply, so I nod my head. My leg muscles tense. I'm ready to jump up and run away, but I'm glued to the chair. Some part of me yearns to continue down this rabbit hole. Maybe I'll finally find the answers to the questions that terrify me. "Yeah." I exhale and feel some color return to my cheeks.

Noticing my reaction, Alice smirks and takes another puff from her vape. "I think we're on the right track," she says. "Now, let's check out your future." She grabs my hands again, and her eyes flutter as she enters a new trance.

Something is different this time. The air changes. Alice's face transforms to a blank slate. Her eyes roll up inside her head until all I see are two white globes. Is she having a seizure? But the rest of her body is as still as a marble bust.

Her hands tighten on mine, and nails dig into my skin. I've joined her in the trance. I can't cry out or even open my mouth.

When she speaks, her voice is empty and hollow. It's not her voice. It's as if someone else is speaking through her:

*"The Mother, the life-giver
The Father, the life-taker
One touch to save the earth
Two touches to give the birth
Endless lives, undying soul
Pay the price, suffer the toll
In this lifetime, always asleep
In the next, many will weep
The power she holds will be the end
Her lost love will make all ascend
Black is the heart of evil feared
The Earth Goddess will be revered."*

Alice snaps her eyes open, revealing round saucers of dilated terror. Her hands, still clutching mine, begin to shake.

"Holy shit," she says. "You're her."

That's when I realize it. The air hasn't changed—Alice has. Gone is the snarky Disney princess. Her face droops—some truth pressing down on it.

I pull away, uncertain about this changed person. I force a smile to mask my fear. "So," I begin, "what's my future?"

"It can't be," Alice says. She shakes her head like she's resisting an assault.

"What can't be?"

"I didn't actually think you would be her," she says, still not really talking to me. "I thought this was a test, but you have the mark."

"The mark?" Out of some base instinct, I touch the jagged crescent moon birthmark on the side of my face.

"This is fucked up," Alice whispers.

"What are you talking about?" I glance to the curtain—the exit. "You're scaring me."

"The v-v-vision," she stutters. "I've never had it before."

I throw a wary gaze at her and think about the poem she recited.

"What does the poem mean?"

She thrusts forward, and her eyes tighten to small aqua blue marbles. "It means only one thing." Alice's voice drops to a whisper, and a faint smile appears on her lips. "You're her. You're Gaia."

"Gaia," I repeat, feeling my brow furrow.

Suddenly, it all makes sense. The girl's face twists with fervor and flushes with excitement. I let a stranger, likely mentally ill, take me to a secluded place. This was a bad idea.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I break away and stand up.

"Wait, wait, wait," Alice pleads, desperation crawling in her voice, her eyes wild. "You're the Goddess. You don't understand now, but you will. I need to get the others."

"I don't want anything to do with the *others*," I say. "I'm leaving."

"Don't go!" Alice screams, hysterical. She clamps down on her mouth, surprised at her own outburst. "Please, wait. I can explain everything."

"No, I think it's best that I leave." I step toward the curtain.

Alice grabs my wrist so hard it hurts.

"Stop. Wait. Please," she begs. "We gotta conduct the ceremony."

I stare into her wild eyes and my voice hardens. "No, I *have* to go." I yank my hand away.

Alice falls to her knees, cups her hands, and begs. "Please stay. Please! Don't go."

"No way," I say with a caustic tone. I pull aside the curtain and storm out of the shop, past the artifacts of the occult and the confused tourists, out into the bustling streets. As soon as I'm outside, I'm running.

"Don't leave!" she screams, chasing after me. "You're her."

I push my way into the crowds to disappear. But even when I'm a block away, I hear Alice's scream, like a faint wind on the back of my ears.

"Gaia!"