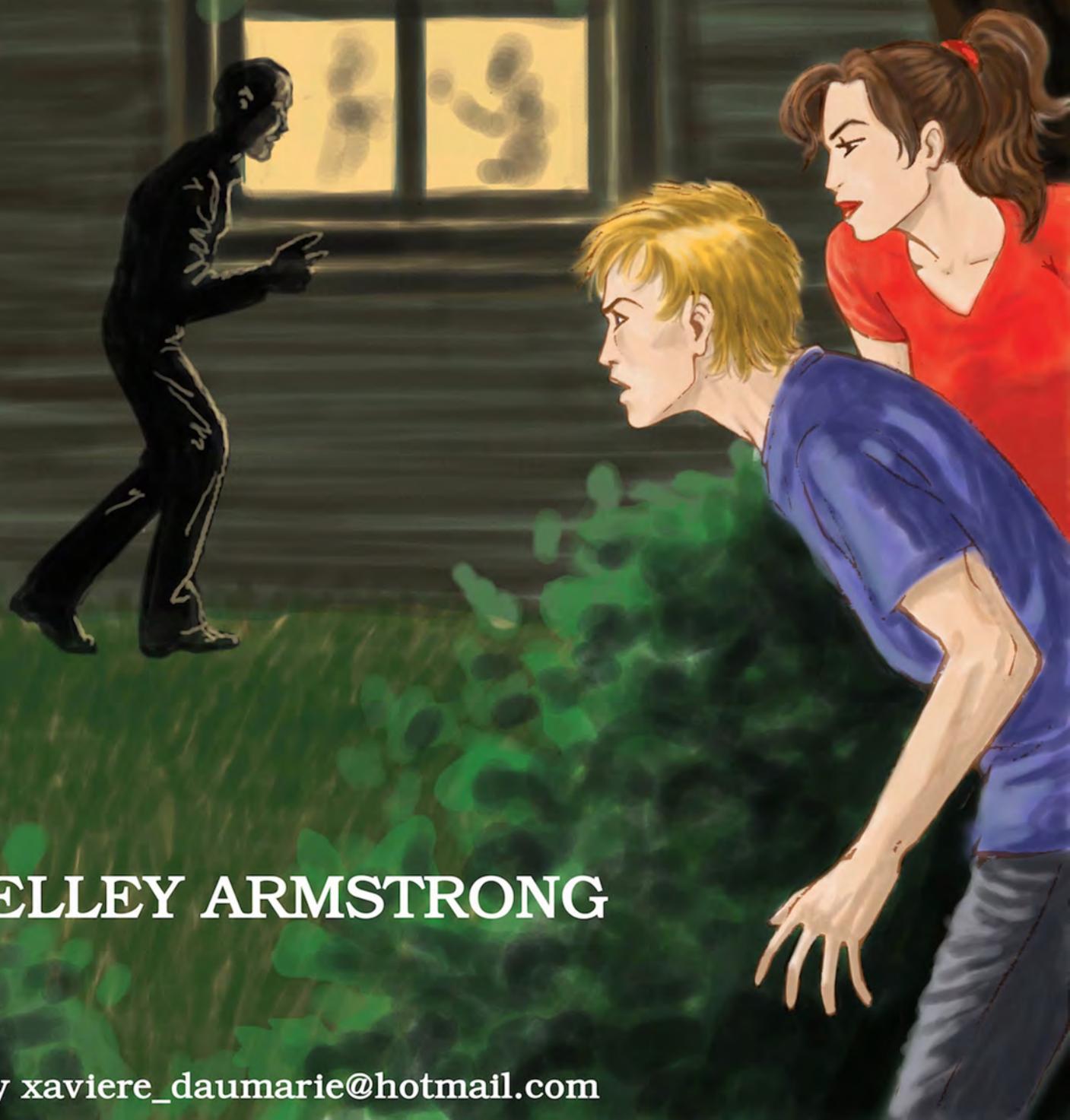


PAIGE AND ADAM SUPER SLEUTHS!

THE CASE of the HALF-DEMON SPY



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The Case of the Half-Demon Spy

Adam watched as Paige put an empty water glass to the meeting room door and pressed her ear against it. Her brow furrowed in concentration. After a moment, she tried the same thing with a coffee mug.

“What the hell are you—?” he began.

She waved him toward the supply closet. “Go in there.”

Adam shook his head, grabbed his new Walkman and changed the cassette.

“Fine,” she said. “*I’ll* go in the closet.”

“Again . . . what the hell are you—?”

“Stop swearing. It doesn’t make you sound cool. Not that anything could . . .”

He balled up a napkin and pitched it at her. “At least I don’t have a huge zit on my nose. Makes you look like a witch.” He snapped his fingers. “Hey, maybe it’ll help you cast spells. You can use all the help you can get.”

“Ha-ha. Put the music away and give me a hand. I’m doing this for you.”

“Doing what?”

“Saving you from a boring afternoon hanging out in this hallway waiting for the council meeting to end. Now, do you want to go into that closet or should I?”

“We both could,” he said with a sly grin. “That would be one way to pass the time.”

She just gave him a look. Couldn’t blame him for trying, though, even if he knew the answer wouldn’t change and, really, he wasn’t sure what he’d do if it ever did. They’d been friends for over a year now, ever since his father and her mother decided their kids should start attending meetings of the interracial council, planning for the day when they’d be delegates themselves.

The council was in charge of keeping the peace between supernatural races and protecting them against exposure threats. It sounded cool and exciting. It never was. Talk, talk, talk, that's all they seemed to do.

So Adam spent a lot of times at those meetings hanging out with Paige. And there were times when, alone like this with a cute girl, who at fourteen—his gaze flicked to her chest—was already bigger than a lot of grown women... Well, sometimes he *did* entertain thoughts of darkened closets and misplaced hands and—

“Adam?” Paige glowered up at him. “Are you going in there or am I?”

“If you do, can I lock the door?”

A roll of her eyes, and she strode past him, opened the closet door and waved him inside.

“What am I supposed to—?”

“Just talk. That should be easy enough.”

As he opened his mouth to retort, she shut the door in his face. Christ, like he'd *want* to be in a closet with her. She'd probably spend the whole time giving him orders. Do this, do that...kiss me here . . . touch me there . . .

Damn it, stop that. If he ever *did* get Paige in a closet, he'd regret it. She'd make sure of that.

“What am I doing?” he asked.

Her voice was muffled by the door. “Helping me conduct a scientific experiment.”

“Science?” He grabbed the handle, but she'd spell-locked the door shut. “You promised you wouldn't spend the weekend doing homework again.”

“I'm not.” She opened the door and held up the water glass. “Glass works better than china. Or maybe it's because of the shape. I'm not sure.”

“Works better for what?”

“Conducting sound.” She handed him a glass. “Let’s find out why they kicked us out of that meeting.”

“We’re going to spy on them?”

“Of course not,” she said, heading for the boardroom door. “Spying means watching. We’re going to eavesdrop.”

The interracial council meeting was being held at a remote location in Vermont. When witches, demons, wizards and vampires got together, you had to be discreet. This particular place was a rustic lodge often rented out to church groups, Boy Scouts and such. The meeting room was long and narrow with the door at the far end . . . too far from the boardroom table to successfully eavesdrop, they discovered. Even with high-tech spy gear like empty water glasses. After ten minutes outside the door, they’d caught no more than a few words.

“Maybe I should burn a hole in the door,” Adam whispered. He was a fire half-demon.

Paige snorted. “If you could scorch it, I’d be surprised.”

“Someday I’ll be able to put a hole in it.”

There was, he knew, no guarantee of that, and Paige could certainly point that out, but she only said, “Not today. Now *shhh*.”

She put her ear to her glass again.

Adam leaned against the wall. “I don’t know why we’re bothering. They’re probably discussing something boring, like interracial politics.”

“Do they ever kick us out when they’re doing that?”

She had a point. There’d been many times when Adam had wished his dad *would* boot them out of some endless policy discussion.

“If they’re going to make us wait out here, it must be something they don’t want us to hear.” She glanced over at him, brows raised meaningfully. “Something not fit for our young ears.”

Adam grabbed his glass and tried again. It was no use. He couldn’t hear more than scattered words. Then came a slow thumping, getting louder, almost like . . . footsteps.

The handle turned. Adam backpedaled, hiding the glass behind his back. Paige began studying the list of “rental rules” on the wall. The door opened. His dad stepped into the hall and closed the door.

“I’m afraid this is going to take longer than we thought.” Robert took out his wallet, reached for a ten, then paused, and plucked out a twenty. “Why don’t you two walk into town and see if you can find something to do. I think I saw arcade games at the General Store.”

Adam reached for the bill, but his dad handed it to Paige, his eyes twinkling. “Just to be sure it’s split evenly.”

“Or split at all,” Paige murmured as his dad retreated into the room.

“Think they knew we were eavesdropping?” Adam whispered.

“Probably. Between my mom and your dad . . .” She shook her head. “We definitely need to work on our stealth skills.” She lifted the twenty. “I saw Mortal Kombat in the store.”

“Half for games, half to the winner?”

She grinned. “You’re on.”

Outside, Adam made for the road, but Paige tapped his arm and pointed at the path leading into the woods. “That looks like it heads in the same direction. I bet it’s faster.”

Inviting him to walk with her into the dark forest? With any other girl, that would mean he was in for something even more fun than video games. But this was Paige. She probably wouldn't even think of that. Not with him anyway.

He watched her walk ahead of him onto the shaded path, her ponytail bobbing as her hips swayed, the darkness of the forest closing in behind her. Maybe she *did* have something else in mind . . .

"Mom said asters grow wild around here," she called back to him. "If I could find some, I might be able to get that second-level wind spell working."

Figures. He sighed and followed along, scuffing his feet as he went.

Something rustled behind him. He turned to scan the path.

"Aster is purple with—" Paige began.

"Shhh. I heard something."

"It's your feet. Try lifting them when you walk. Oh, and while we're here, if you want to practice—"

Another rustle, farther away, like someone moving through a pile of dead leaves.

"Could be a deer," Paige whispered, but her eyes were doubtful as they followed the sound.

"We should check it out," Adam said.

He didn't wait for Paige's nod. He knew she'd be right behind him. As much as she liked to pretend *he* was the adventure-seeking one, it hadn't been his idea to eavesdrop, had it?

Paige was expected to be the responsible one of the pair, only one of many expectations her mother—and others—piled on her. Not a burden he cared to share, but he could lighten it by barreling heedlessly into danger . . . leaving her obligated to follow and "keep an eye on him."

By the time they reached the lodge, Paige had already overtaken him. He tried to brush past her, but she planted a hand against his chest, then leaned to peek around the corner.

She pulled back. “There’s someone there.”

He peered past her. A man stood to one side of the meeting room window. He was tall and lanky. His hair was short on the sides and long in the back—the way Adam had been trying to grow his until his mom used the Walkman to bribe him into a haircut. Tattoos covered the man’s stringy arms. Adam had seen those tattoos before . . .

As he craned to see the man’s face, Paige yanked him back.

“I know—”

She shushed him and gestured for him to follow her back into the woods.

“I know him,” Adam said when they were far enough away to speak. “He’s a half-demon. He came to Dad’s office last week, when I was there. He wanted to talk to him.”

“About what?”

Adam shrugged. “Dad made me stand outside. But whatever the guy said, it really pissed Dad off, and you know that’s tough to do.”

“Did your dad say anything afterward?”

“Not to me, but when he was kicking the guy out, I heard something about the council. Dad told the guy that if he ever came to him again with something like that, he’d bring it up to the council himself. The guy was furious. Kept saying Dad would regret—”

Adam turned to run for the lodge. Paige caught his arm. He should have been able to yank free easily enough—she barely came up to his shoulder—but when she dug in her heels, she was tough to budge.

“Robert’s in a room with five other delegates, all supernaturals,” she said. “If this guy did come for him, he’s going to lie in wait. Running in there would only scare him off—so he can try another time . . . when you aren’t around to help.”

As Paige released his arm, she shook her hands, and he could see her palms were red.

“Did I burn—?” he said, reaching for her hand.

“Nothing a little healing salve won’t fix.” She put her hands behind her back so he couldn’t see them. “Wait here. I want to get another look.”

When she returned, she was frowning. “It’s weird,” she said. “He’s taking notes. He must be able to hear the meeting, though I’m not sure how.”

“Dad called him an Exaudio. That’s hearing, isn’t it?”

Paige nodded. “A mid-level auditory-enhanced half-demon. Vastly improved general hearing, plus the ability to induce temporary deafness in a single individual.”

She’d recited the information as promptly as if he’d asked for her home address. Any other time he’d have ribbed her about spending too much time with the council research books, but today his only thought was “good thing she knows it,” followed by “maybe I should, too.”

He dismissed the second thought as soon as it came. As long as Paige did the research, there was no reason for both of them to waste sunny afternoons poring over dusty books. When they grew up, that could be her job, and he’d do the dangerous stuff better suited to a fire demon.

She cast a reluctant glance at the cabin door. “I suppose we should go in and tell them.”

“He could be gone before we did.”

“True . . .”

He could see her thinking it over, trying to figure out an excuse for handling it themselves, an excuse her mother would accept. It wasn't so much that Ruth was overprotective of Paige. She just didn't believe in risk-taking in general—kind of like his dad.

“Hold on.” Adam returned to the corner of the building, peeked around and came back. “He looks like he's getting ready to leave. We have to do something.”

She agreed, while making no move to check for herself, as if knowing he was lying to give her the excuse she needed.

“I'll take him down,” Adam said. “Once I have him, you run in and get my dad—”

She shook her head. “First-degree burns aren't going to stop a guy like that. I'm no help until I learn my binding spell.”

“He's not much bigger than me, and I've been working out—”

“Which isn't going to help you if he pulls a knife or a gun.”

“Supernaturals hardly ever use that stuff.”

“What if this guy is the exception?” She laid her hand on his arm. “As much as I'd like to hog-tie the guy and hand him over, all we really need is that notebook. The council can find out what he was up to and go after him. That's good enough, right?” She looked up at him. “For now.”

After a moment, he nodded.

“I'll create a distraction,” she said. “You grab the book. You'll need to have your powers ready, in case he turns on you. Have you been practicing?”

He nodded. Almost since the day they'd met, Paige had been trying to help him hone his powers, helping him learn to control them so he could burn on purpose, not just accidentally

when he got upset. She'd taught him the techniques she used for spellcasting concentration. Trouble was, they didn't work for him.

To cast a spell, you had to clear your mind and turn off your emotions. To invoke fire, he needed to do the exact opposite—turn his emotional valve on full blast. Telling her how he ignited his powers would only worry her. Sometimes reaching down into that darkest part of himself disturbed even him.

“If something goes wrong, I'll have to go for help. You know that, right? I can't—” She swallowed. “I can't do a damned thing.”

“Don't swear.”

He smiled when he said it, but she didn't smile back. Paige had noticed that her mother never undertook any council “business” without backup, not even something as simple as delivering a warning. Sure, Ruth was older than most moms, but his dad was almost as old, and he issued warnings by himself. He might not like invoking his darker powers, but at least he had them.

Paige looked at her mother, the most experienced witch she knew, and saw her future. Leader of the Coven, leader of the supernatural council . . . and completely defenseless except for her binding spell.

Adam left Paige in the forest. Then he circled around to the half-demon's other side. He crouched there a moment and watched him, but there wasn't much to see. The guy was still standing beside the window, head tilted, jotting down notes. Exciting stuff.

Across the clearing, a light sparked in the forest. Paige's signal. Adam hunkered down. A moment later, a bright orb bounced from the forest, hovered there a moment, then evaporated. The spy never even saw it. Adam imagined Paige stamping her foot as her light ball fizzled.

A second later, he heard Paige kick a pile of dried leaves just as she let off another light ball. The half-demon spun. The ball sputtered out. He shook his head and returned to his spying. But he didn't turn his back on the woods, so when the next light ball came, he saw it and headed for Paige's hiding spot.

Adam bolted from the bushes. He made a beeline for the notepad hanging from the man's hand. But he'd jumped out too soon. The half-demon caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and whipped his hand back. Adam tried to check himself, but it was too late. He crashed right into him.

The notepad flew to the ground . . . and the man's hands flew to Adam's throat.

Adam managed to duck, but the half-demon caught him by the arm and yanked Adam off his feet. He tried to invoke his power, tried to pull the deepest, darkest emotions from his brain, but all he could think was that he'd made a fool of himself in front of Paige *and* embarrassed his dad. He wasn't sure which was worse. Then, as he hit the ground, he realized he might have something more serious than humiliation to worry about.

The air flew from his lungs, he saw a blur behind the half-demon as Paige charged the man.

Oh, shit. She'd said she would go inside for help, but he should have known she wouldn't run away and leave him alone. Her mouth opened to call for help, to attract the council's attention that way. Before she could get out a syllable, the half-demon turned to meet her charge.

Paige skidded to a stop, eyes going wide, lips moving in some useless incantation. Adam sprang to his feet and grabbed the man's arm. The half-demon yelped and tried to yank away, but Adam tightened his grip, heat flaming through him.

The half-demon fought, panicked. Adam's grip slid. The man pulled free and ran for the forest. Adam tore after him, but the man was faster and Adam reached the road just in time to see him jump into a car.

At a noise behind him, he turned to see Paige. She stopped in front of him, eyes dancing, cheeks glowing, curls flying free from her ponytail.

Whenever his friends asked Adam what his "Boston friend" looked like, he'd say, "Cute, I guess," but as she looked up at him, grinning just for him, she looked way better than cute. Her lips parted, and he knew if he leaned over—

"You did it," she said, waving the notepad between them.

He looked into her eyes then, saw only the glowing happiness of a friend, and he knew that's all he'd seen before, and probably all he ever would. She threw her arms around his neck, and he hugged her back. When she pulled away, she held out the notebook.

"I'll do the talking," she said. "But you give them this. You're the one who got it."

"No, you should—"

She shoved it into his hands. "Don't argue. Take it."

He grinned. "Our first adventure. The first of many."

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that."

His grin widened. "I am."

Robert handed his half-demon friend, Leo, a bottle of salve. "This should work. It's Ruth Winterbourne's recipe and she finds it works particularly well on the burns Adam inflicts. . . though that one seems to be worse than usual. He's making remarkable progress." A soft chuckle.

“Though I’m sure you aren’t nearly as impressed. I do apologize. This is the first time he’s ever caused second-degree burns—”

Leo waved off the apology. “I’m fine. The kid did good, and I owed you.”

“Well, thank you anyway, for your help. I’ll leave the salve with you. I should be getting back to the hotel before anyone realizes I left.”

Leo took the jar and they said their goodbyes. Then Robert hurried off. He couldn’t afford to dawdle—if Ruth found out what he’d done . . . It was the kind of thing that could threaten a very old and very dear friendship.

Yet even if she did learn the truth, he wouldn’t regret the ruse. It was training. Necessary training. The council was sliding into old age along with him and Ruth, without ever having become the vibrant, active force he’d once imagined.

With Paige and Adam and the next generation, that could change. The will and the desire for innovation was there. He saw it in Paige, and knew it was more than adolescent rebellion. She was questioning her mother’s passivity, looking for a more active delegate’s path. Adam would follow her on whatever path she proposed, particularly if it offered more excitement than endless talk.

When they’d come running into the meeting, notebook in hand, he’d seen by their expressions that his ploy had succeeded—their glow of victory tempered with the knowledge that they’d picked a fight they may not have been ready for. Someday they’d be ready, though. They’d make sure of that now.