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STRANDED SHADOW

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The story, as far as Sarah could tell, was true -- but the thought of being part of a family of witches scared her. She had found a book in the attic, and the story in it was about her family, about the women who had discovered an inner power and had learned to use it. What if *she* had some kind of inner power too? The fact was that she knew that she did. Deep down inside she knew that the few flashes of clairvoyance she had experienced were the tip of the iceberg. She knew instinctively that there was a stronger power that she had never known how to access.

Outside, the wind was blowing, shifting fallen Autumn leaves, stripping more from the trees. Sarah was sitting in her parent's attic amongst boxes her mother had asked her to sort through. She had gone through a box of old clothes, creating a pile for the Salvation Army, but now she was distracted. The book resting on her lap, smelled of old paper and rose petals, from the potpourri in the box.

Shadows seemed to linger in the corners of the attic, and the bare rafters looked like skeletal remains of some ancient beast. Sarah shivered and looked over her shoulder at the boxes piled against the wall. Her mother's wedding dress was hanging near the window, and bouquets of dried flowers, from parties and dances gone by were hanging from the rafters; her mothers treasured memories.

The attic used to be a place to hide and read books, a place that was Sarah's own, but now the memories seemed locked away in a distant time. She had come home from Oregon, where she was

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attending the University, to visit her parents in Utah for the weekend. Her mom had asked her to sort through some old boxes while she was out shopping. The second box Sarah opened held a smaller box that held the book amongst a bed of sweet smelling potpourri and velvet. Shivering, Sarah wondered why her Mom hadn't told her about their family before.

Was being a witch everything she had heard? Frogs and bat wings boiling in a cauldron? She looked around the attic wondering why she was being so superstitious. Of course that wasn't the case -- she knew *that* as soon as she'd even thought the question. Witches had to be everyday people just like she was, just they had a power that wasn't very common.

The story in the old book had told her about the women in her family from the beginning of the century. The first entry had hinted that there had always been a power in their family. The last entry in the book had not been finished, and the writing wasn't her mothers. It had to belong to her Aunt Julie, who had died in a car accident before Sarah was born.

Her unkindled power stirred gently in her; there seemed to be something more about the entry... She opened the book to the page where the writing lay in gentle curves. Something close to intuition, but uniquely different stopped her. The last sentence was unfinished, and she concentrated on the words, trying to remember what her mother had told her about her Aunt Julie.

Her mother and her aunt had been good friends, reading the same books, sharing the same clothes, but after college Julie's job had taken her to California. In Sarah's memory her aunt was frozen in a picture she had seen; shoulder length brown hair and freckles sprinkled on her nose. Every picture Sarah had seen of her aunt showed her blue eyes bright with amusement and happiness. Sarah felt as though she knew Julie from the way that her mother talked about her.

When Sarah had been fifteen she and her mother had driven to California to visit Julie's grave. The tears in her mothers eyes had spilled when they had reached the grave.

"She was so young..." Her mothers voice had broken.

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"It's okay, Mom."

"Oh Sarah, she was looking forward to seeing you."

Sarah watched her mom. Her mother had been three months pregnant when Julie had died.

"She bought you that little stuffed giraffe you loved so much. Julie was always planning ahead."

Her mother's eyes had gone out of focus, she was staring off through the roses that lined the cemetery fence. "Sometimes she just *knew* things would happen..." Her mother stopped talking at that point, and sat lost in memories, wiping tears from her eyes.

In the attic, there seemed to be something almost tangible gathering. For a moment the shadows in the attic seemed to deepen, but Sarah didn't let herself look away from the book. She was spooked, but she felt strongly that this was more important than her fear. She kept her eyes on the page, struggling to understand what exactly she was trying to accomplish. Words interrupted her concentration, and dissolved her fear:

Sarah... The voice was soft and golden. It surrounded her in its warm tones. She wanted to look away from the book, but another inkling of inner knowledge -- something far deeper than she knew how to control -- warned her to continue concentrating.

Ah ... the voice sighed, and Sarah shivered. It had to be Aunt Julie!

I have been alone for many, years... her aunt's voice whispered, filling the air with soft tones, ...
My sister was unable to reach the seedling of power that is in her. But you, Sarah, you have the ability to find yours...

Sarah wondered if her Mother had somehow known to send her up to the attic, if she had known her potential.

I died before my time, Sarah. I was bound to the Earth until the next in our family could find her power... Her aunt's voice was warm with love and tenderness.

You are strong, Sarah. You will learn the ways of Nature and of the power within you. I love you, Sarah...

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The voice seemed to be everywhere at once, and then it was gone. Sunlight was pouring in through the window, catching dust motes. The attic was just the attic again, holding nothing more than boxes, and Sarah with tears running down her cheeks. She had felt a kinship during her aunt's farewell, a feeling as though they had always been friends. Sarah knew that she would still finish college, but she had other things she wanted to learn now. She felt as though she were a flower that had just been put in front of a sunny window.

She crossed the room and stood at the window, watching the October afternoon. A few Jack o' Lanterns were already on porches, though Halloween was still a week away. The neighborhood kids were riding their bikes through piles of leaves, under the blue sky.

Sarah couldn't stop herself from staring at the trees. The trees held a soft aura of life that she had never seen before. Lines and cracks in the bark of the oak tree outside the window were distinct. The tree branches seemed to welcome the afternoon sunshine and she noticed a robins nest in the branches. Orange and yellow leaves littered the neighborhood and she opened the window eager to catch the scent of Autumn. The air was cold and it touched her skin with a new intensity, as though the very life force of the Earth were caressing her with its positive energy.

Chills ran along her back as she recognized a world that she had sensed, even as a child. Every living thing, from the oak tree outside, to the child across the street wearing his vampire cape, seemed outlined in startling clarity. There was a peace in the world, a peace that she had wished for on many nights. The balance in her world, at that moment, was perfect. There were no shadows in the attic now. The late afternoon sun was pouring in through the open window illuminating everything.

Sarah wanted to remember this day forever. She knew that Halloween would never be the same for her again, it was no longer a holiday draped in shadows and trick or treaters. Halloween would be a nostalgic time. A time of remembering when her own magic had blossomed, and her life had changed forever. She went back to the book and without hesitating took a pen from the box and started writing. The book was heavy, but it felt comfortable in her hands. The old leather that bound the dry pages was

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smooth, and as Sarah wrote she felt a connection to the women who had written before her. She would have to buy a new book soon. There were only a few blank pages left.