



Arcane Circle (Persephone Alcmedi, Book 4)

By Linda Robertson

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Even magic can't solve everything. . . .

After facing down the forces of Fairy in mortal combat, Persephone Alcmedi still must deal with the aftermath. Not only does Seph now possess deadly secrets she must hide from the arcane and mundane world alike, but the dozens of magical creatures who've taken up residence behind her cornfield need food and shelter, and there's still her foster daughter Beverly's tenth birthday party to plan.

And that's not all. . . . Seph's boyfriend Johnny has revealed himself as the wærewolf Domn Lup, and the ruler of the wære world is en route from Romania to make sure Johnny really is the "king" he claims to be. But Johnny's hiding a dangerous secret: his magic is locked in his mysterious tattoos. He and Seph must find a way for him to reclaim it—fast—despite those who have no intention of letting Johnny gain his full powers. Seph knows that, in the arcane world, strength is always a necessity and power must be constantly proven, but how far is she willing to go to succeed . . . and at what cost?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Linda Robertson is the mother of four wonderful boys, owns three electric guitars, and is followed around by a big dog named after Bela Lugosi. Once upon a time she was a lead guitarist in a heavy metal cover band and has worked as a graphic artist. She still composes and creates art, when time permits. Linda currently writes and rocks in northeast Ohio. Visit her at AuthorLindaRobertson.com and @authorLinda.

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CHAPTER ONE

Nearly dragging the veterinarian behind me, I raced up the tight and twisting stairs, desperate for him to treat my boyfriend. It was just after two P.M. and the vet, Dr. Geoffrey Lincoln, was already well acquainted with his patient, Johnny Newman. What other type of doctor would make an emergency house call to treat a wærewolf?

Johnny, wearing only dark jeans and an Ace bandage wrapped high around his rib cage, lay on his narrow bed in the attic bedroom of my saltbox farmhouse. Despite a grimace of pain, he made no sound.

As soon as Kirk, a wærewolf from Johnny's pack, saw the doc and me enter the room, he rose from the folding chair next to the bed. He hadn't moved since we'd gotten Johnny in the bed hours earlier. Kirk nodded at us and then walked quietly to the foot of the bed.

Dr. Lincoln set his bag on the chair, pulled latex gloves from it, and bent to inspect Johnny's wound. It kept seeping blood and had completely saturated numerous gauze pads and two of the elastic wraps already. In the time I'd been gone, the blood had again soaked through layers of padding and was darkening the bandage like an ever-expanding Rorschach blot.

I hoped that I appeared to be holding myself together and functioning, but my shaking hands threatened to expose my counterfeit calm. *This is all wrong. Johnny was in wolf form when injured. These wounds should have healed when he transformed back, but they didn't.* My fears ricocheted inside me like wild bullets—the crossfire could shatter my cool and collected façade at any moment, exposing my panic.

A veterinarian by trade, Doc Lincoln had experience with the traumatic wounds animals sometimes inflicted on each other, and he had treated Johnny and other wæres before. At five-foot-nine, with receding brown hair, brown eyes, and glasses, the doctor appeared at first glance to be an average man, but the fact that he was willing to provide care to wærewolves—albeit secretly—made him very special indeed.

He took a pair of scissors from his bag and cut carefully through the wrapped bandage. "I need more light."

When Johnny moved his rock 'n' roll self in a few weeks ago, he'd brought a table lamp made from a guitar neck. I jerked the shade off and twisted the little knob. A hundred watts brightened the narrow, slope-sided room.

"Hold it closer."

I stretched the lamp's cord as far as possible. Under the harsh illumination, he peeled the bandage back and

exposed Johnny's gruesome chest injury. The three jagged slashes were deep, each at least six inches long. Despite the swelling, each time Johnny inhaled the wounds gaped wider. Fresh blood welled up, flowing across his chest. It was thick enough to hide the winged pentacle tattoo that spanned his pectorals.

Dr. Lincoln examined the gashes, and even though his touch seemed light, Johnny grimaced, compressing his features so tightly the Wedjat tattoos around his eyes almost disappeared. But the "wolf king" does not whimper. He had recently revealed to his pack he was the fated Domn Lup, able to make a full transformation at will, not just when the moon was full.

At least the doctor was here now. He'd know what to do to help Johnny. Doing something, anything, was better than the helplessness I'd felt while waiting for him to show up.

As he completed his examination, the doc's thin lips pressed into a firm line and he announced, "I've sewn up worse on you, John, but this doesn't show any indication of that accelerated healing you wærewolves are notorious for. Was it silver that cut you?"

"Nope." Johnny shot me a grim look that, in effect, passed the task of answering the doctor's question to me.

Johnny's wounds had been inflicted by a phoenix raking him with her claws during a dawn battle with fairies. Another consequence of that battle was the myriad elementals—unicorns, griffons, dragons, phoenixes—now grouped in the wooded grove behind my house. I was planning to ask the doc if he'd serve as their vet—several of them were injured.

But, for now, if I told him the source of the injury was a creature that supposedly didn't exist, he'd go all skittish and spew questions. He wouldn't believe it until he saw it for himself, so I answered cryptically. "It was a creature of magic that cut him."

"Magic?" The doc rubbed at his brow. "Then some residual effect must be preventing the healing."

Magic had a negative effect on wæres. It could force them into a partial shift and leave them forever stuck that way: neither human nor wære. "He's the Domn Lup," I said. "He isn't as susceptible to magic as other wæres." Even as I said it, I realized I'd dismissed the obvious. Mad at myself for missing it, anger squashed most of my worry. The doc's theory was a good one. "This wasn't exactly magical energies being stirred up around Johnny. Magic made *physical contact* with the intent to damage him. Any wære without the powers of the Domn Lup probably would have bled to death from an attack like this."

"Can you cleanse the magic away?" The doc mimed waving a wand.

The answer wasn't going to make Johnny very happy. "Yes. With salt."

"Salt in my wound," the wære grumbled.

My hand gripped Johnny's. "Sounds like a song title," I said. Being the guitarist and front man of a band, he could make lyrics out of just about anything.

The doc peered at me over the tops of his glasses. "Is using salt like that something you specifically, as a witch, have to do?"

"You mean: Does it take magic as well as salt?"

“Medicine *is* magic to me. But,” he reached into his bag, “I was thinking more along the lines of washing the wound with this.” He lifted an IV bag of saline solution. “It’s sterile.”

He was a thinker. That made me even happier he was on our side. “Saline should be fine. Give it a shot.”

“Are you sure?”

“I use it to magically cleanse a space, but mundane humans often use salt to protect themselves. Ever spilled salt and then tossed a pinch over your left shoulder? You were supposedly protecting yourself from evil.”

Dr. Lincoln turned to Kirk. “Would you fetch some towels from the bathroom? Wait, I-I didn’t say *fetch* because you’re a ... I mean, I would’ve said it that way to anyone.”

The handsome Asian wære smiled and replied, “That political correctness shit is for pansies who can’t stomach the truth.” He left the room.

The doc laid the IV bag on the bed and clasped Johnny’s shoulder. “I can try just stitching it, but cauterizing it first is my recommendation.”

“Just do what you need to do,” Johnny said.

“My stitches aren’t quite as refined as those of a plastic surgeon working on a starlet, but then my usual clients don’t worry much about scarring. Wære healing is good, but I don’t know how the magic will play into this. It could leave a scar. Cauterizing it is even more certain to leave a mark.”

“I don’t care.” Johnny’s teeth were grinding.

I set the lamp back in its place while the doctor dug in his bag and brought out a small tray and what must have been a cautery tool. It looked something like a soldering iron.

When Kirk handed me the towels, I rolled them up and tucked one on either side of Johnny’s rib cage.

The doctor punctured the IV bag. “I just want to make sure you know it’s possible the scar will show in all your shirtless rock-star pictures,” he said, squirting the fluid into the cuts. I lifted the lamp again—and saw a white flash of rib bone as the solution washed out the slashes. Johnny sucked air through his teeth. The doc blotted around the injury with another of the towels, then dabbed the wounds directly with gauze.

The bleeding continued. I might have thought it was just a reaction to the wound washing if Dr. Lincoln hadn’t directed a silent question at me with his eyes.

My icy unease returned, wintry fingers stirring my emotions again, nearly forcing me from hidden fear into obvious panic. *He can’t keep on bleeding like this and we can’t take him to a hospital. They transfer wæres to state shelters rather than treat them.* State shelters were more like human dog pounds than hospitals.

I wasn’t going to give up. “Let’s try a higher concentration of salt.”

“Easy for you to say,” Johnny grumbled as I charged down the stairs to my second-floor bedroom. From the cabinet where I kept magical supplies, I grabbed a pouch of coarse sea salt. This was already empowered for use in my spells, intended to cleanse the ritual area into a sacred space. Surely this would counteract the

magic in the injury, but it was going to hurt like hell.

Back in the attic, I apologized to Johnny and dropped an overflowing fistful of the coarse beadlike chunks onto his chest. Immediately, he growled, writhed once and dug his fingers into the mattress. Concentrating, I visualized the salt foaming like baking soda and vinegar being mixed, and imagined it neutralizing the lingering magic.

When a coastal aroma wafted around me, it was a signal that the salt cleansing was complete. I gestured for the doc to take over. He pierced another saline bag and washed away the sea salt.

This time, the bleeding had markedly decreased. My panic receded.

The doc surveyed the wound again, holding the cauterizing tool ready. He motioned Kirk over. “Hold him down.”

“Not necessary.” Johnny set his jaw; Kirk stayed where he was.

Dr. Lincoln leaned in. “I’ll do this as minimally as possible, but your tattoo is going to need a touch up—”

“Wait!” Johnny grabbed for my arm, jerked, and swore loudly. A fresh spill of blood ran across his chest. “The tattoo.”

My breath caught.

Someone had found out long ago that Johnny was the Domn Lup. Whoever it was had magically locked his power into the various tattoos on his body. We needed to find out who had done this and have them reverse it to *unlock* that power.

“Will scars on this tattoo keep it from being unlocked?” Johnny asked.

“I don’t honestly know.” *The real question is: Can magic in a phoenix’s talons sever the magic in a tattoo?*

Johnny’s cell phone rang from the bedside table—the chorus of Ozzy Osborne’s “Bark at the Moon.” It was his ringtone for all the pack wæres. Kirk checked the display and announced, “It’s Todd. Probably wants a status report.”

“Give him one,” Johnny said.

Kirk opened the phone. “This is Kirk.”

The doc waved his utensil to refocus us all on him. “Am I doing this?”

Johnny released my arm and relaxed back onto the pillow, shaking his head. “I can’t risk any more damage. Just stitches. And not where the ink is if you can help it.”

“I’ll do my best.” The doc put the heated tool back on the tray.

“It’s not aching as bad now, Doc, after the salt.”

“But your moving set it bleeding again. Be still.”

“You need to talk to Todd,” Kirk said, offering the phone.

The doc motioned Kirk to stay back. “I need his arms down flat to do these stitches.” To Johnny he said, “Take your calls later.”

Kirk ignored him and said, “It’s important.”

Due to the recent death of the pack’s leader, Todd would have been promoted and given the title *diriija* if Johnny hadn’t revealed he was the Domn Lup. Todd retained his place as second-in-command, but he wasn’t exactly thrilled about anyone leap-frogging him to gain the position, least of all Johnny.

“Put it on speaker, Kirk,” Johnny half-snarled.

Kirk hit the button, kept the phone upraised. Todd’s authoritative voice demanded, “Who else is in the room?”

“Red and the doc.” Johnny called me Red, as in Red Riding Hood to his Big Bad Wolf.

Dr. Lincoln opened another pack of gauze.

“This is pack business,” Todd barked. “I’ll wait.”

Johnny growled, “There’s no one here I don’t trust. Just tell me.”

Todd’s marked sigh signaled his disagreement with the idea.

Johnny growled again in frustration, adding forcefully, “Now.”

Todd said, “I’ve made arrangements for the two wæres we lost, we’re contacting and counseling the families.” Some members of the pack had volunteered to fight at Johnny’s side in the fairy battle. Most survived, but a few were incinerated by a superheated beam that had melted sand into glossy walkways. There weren’t any remains left to bury. “You’re going to have to meet with them soon. And ...” Todd didn’t finish.

“And?” Johnny prompted.

“I got a call from Romania.”

Johnny and Kirk shared a look I couldn’t read.

“Word of the Domn Lup has traveled up the ranks. All the way up. The Zvonul didn’t send word back down and have some bean-counting *adevar* call. The personal assistant of the Rege called. The Rege is coming to meet you.”

Sounded like the bigwigs of the wæreworld were taking a personal interest in their new Domn Lup. This wasn’t unexpected, but it was *fast*. Less than forty-eight hours had passed since Johnny had revealed himself to his pack. The wære governing system was unfamiliar to me, so I was listening close, making mental

reminders to ask about these new terms and titles.

“When are they coming?” Johnny asked.

“On Wednesday. Unless their travel plans change.” It was now Sunday afternoon.

“Make sure we’re complying with whatever they need. Call me later if you have anything more.”

The phone’s screen faded to black. Kirk closed it and replaced it where he’d found it.

“I’d like to numb the area and give you a sedative so you can relax and rest,” Dr. Lincoln said.

“No,” Johnny said. “No numbing, no sedatives. Just sew me up.”

My duties as light source monitor continued as the doc worked. It was a front-row opportunity I’d rather have missed. Watching him stitch the torn muscle, listening to him remark how the sutures would dissolve slowly, and then discuss the area where the bone had been exposed, was not an experience for the pleasant memories scrapbook. I had to verify which line went where a few times while he carefully aligned the tattoo, sewing in stitches to either side of the lines. After he had tended to all the inked areas, he worked outward from them.

Johnny’s expression spoke for him; it wasn’t a painless process.

When the doctor finished, he rinsed Johnny’s chest again. “The damage to the pectoral muscle is going to be the worst of it. Any movement of your arm will pull on the wound. I suggest you use a sling for a few days at least, maybe a week. Maybe more, depending on whether or not your usual healing kicks in. No matter what, no activities of any kind that could strain those stitches.”

He wiped Johnny’s skin dry and applied a salve. “Use this. Although you’re averse to the numbing additives in it, this stuff will help minimize scarring.” He placed the container on the bedside table. “Three to four times a day. I’ll bring you more soon.”

The doc checked the temperature on the cauterizing device and, satisfied, put it away in his bag. The bleeding was stanching. Johnny had been effectively tended to. I breathed a relieved sigh. Then the doc stood, ready to leave. “Doc, wait.” My respite from stress was too short. This wasn’t over yet. “I have something to show you before you leave.”

“Red,” Johnny interrupted, “I want a minute with you first. Kirk, you and the doc step out.”

No one questioned him.

I sank down on the bed, grateful for a moment alone with him. My fingers pushed into the jet-black waves of his hair, scrubbing over sand still on his scalp. My mind flashed on the beam cutting a dragon in half, then incinerating a Beholder’s legs as the rest of him burst into flame. I could still hear his final scream.

That grit also reminded me of what Johnny had done. In wolf form, he’d attacked the fairy Fax Torris. She’d dragged him beneath the surface of Lake Erie. They’d been under a long time. Too long. In those moments when my fear was most intense, I regretted terribly not yet telling him that I loved him.

My heart compelled me to say those words now, but with him lying there injured, it seemed that telling him here, like this, would cheapen the words. I didn't want to say them out of pity or as a reaction to fear.

I said nothing and kissed him. Not a sexy, passionate kind of kiss, but a so-alive-in-this-moment kind. I put to memory the feel of his soft lips pressed to mine because earlier today I'd thought I might not ever get to kiss him again.

Johnny, however, took it as a "Let's get naked" kind of kiss. His hands rubbed up my arms—and he jerked in pain and said something very improper.

"Doc said no activities that would risk the stitches," I whispered.

Undeterred, he put on a brave face. "I don't care. Any chance you'll do a little voodoo on me tonight?"

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