

A blurred city street scene with a manhole cover in the foreground. The background shows buildings, cars, and pedestrians, all out of focus. The overall tone is warm and slightly desaturated.

# THE SCIENTIST

A Short From the  
Arie's Story Series

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# The Scientist

*A short in the Arie's Story Series*

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“Nobody said it was easy. It’s such a shame for us to part. Nobody said it was easy. No one ever said it would be this hard. Oh, take me back to the start.”

*THE SCIENTIST, COLDPLAY*

## SYNOPSIS:

Arie's best friend Alaina deals with the aftermath of the events in *Surviving on a Whisper*

Alaina reorganized the glasses on the bar for the hundredth time. Organization wasn't really something Alaina cared about—Mara would be mad she was screwing it all up—but she wanted to keep her hands busy. Letting her mind wander was a bad idea right now.

She felt off. Not necessarily *bad*, but something was different. The track record of her life had proven that it usually meant something was wrong, so rather than making up a ton of possible disasters, she focused on moving the glasses, listening to the clinking sounds they made against the counter.

Alaina hadn't heard from Arie in weeks. Ever since Arie took off to who-knows-where, they emailed each other every Sunday and Arie never forgot. Ever. They missed each other too much to skip out on talking. Why would Arie stop now?

*That's just stupid*, Alaina told herself. *Arie is fine*.

The truth was, Arie sounded better than she'd

been in awhile. Alaina could tell that something was going on—something big—but Arie didn't want to talk about it. Alaina figured it had something to do with Alexis finding out about Sark. It scared her half to death when they all showed up at the club after escaping: Erika looked sick, Sark was beat to a pulp and Arie couldn't even walk. But Arie had wanted to say goodbye and warn them before she left. Alaina had been worrying about her constantly since, but Arie seemed to be getting better. Alaina knew that Sark would take care of her. What else could she ask for?

Her siblings burst into the room, interrupting her thoughts. Mark and Chelsie were arguing as if the volume of their voice would dictate the winner—that was normal. Alaina didn't care to listen or pick a side. Andrew had his headphones on and seemed oblivious to the world around him. Again, normal. Liam stopped when he saw what she was doing, but she just shook her head. He nodded and continued through the door into the kitchen. Their relationship had improved drastically since they'd been living under the same roof again, and Alaina was grateful. In the past few months she'd realized more and more how much she'd missed the times playing in their backyard sandbox together.

Mara was the last to come in. She went and sat on a stool by the bar, rested her chin on her hands and just watched Alaina. This annoyed Alaina to no end, hating when people just watched to judge, but she held her tongue. She'd learned the hard way that Mara was a bit more sensitive than the others and

she didn't want to offend her. After all, her cup arrangement was shot, thanks to Alaina. Not snapping at Mara seemed like a good trade.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Everyone besides Andrew looked up, startled, because it was coming from the side door that only certain people were allowed to use—certain people named Arie who no longer lived there.

Mara went over and opened the door, her face flashing surprise and concern. But she composed herself in the next moment, just like she always did.

“Hi,” she said politely, angling her body towards the room. “Do you want to come in?”

Sark stepped past her and into the club. Alaina expected, and hoped, that Arie would follow, or at least Erika. But Mara shut the door behind him. He was alone.

Habitual suspicion shot up in Alaina and she tried to force it back down. Sark had saved Arie's life—and Alaina's—several times now, whether it was from scary people who could slaughter them or empty potato chip bags. He had more than proven himself.

Sark kept his eyes on the ground and Alaina noticed his skin was slightly darker. Wherever he'd been the past few months must've been sunny. He looked a million times better than when she had seen him last, all bloody and bruised. He looked healthy, but that wasn't the problem. There was something underneath the skin. Something wasn't just different—something was wrong.

He automatically went and sat on the leather

couch in the middle of the room, where he always used to sit when he came over. Mark and Andrew greeted him, trying to hide their confusion, and Liam came in from the kitchen. All was quiet for a moment.

Of course, Mara was the one who broke the silence.

“How are you?” she asked, motioning for Alaina to get him a drink. She had a set of manners that Alaina could never learn.

Sark leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and stared at his hands. No answer.

That broke the spell for Alaina. She turned back to the glasses she’d been arranging, filling one with water from the sink as she spoke.

“Where’s Arie?” she started, an unknown urgency building in her chest as she unconsciously filled another glass. “You know, she hasn’t answered my emails in weeks. What’s so great about the beach, huh? Is she—”

Sark’s almost inaudible voice interrupted her.

“Arie is gone.”

*Gone? What?* Alaina spun around, ready to ask what that was supposed to mean. The words got caught in her throat when she saw an agonized expression on Sark’s face as he choked something else out.

“Arie is dead.”

Alaina froze. The glasses she was holding slipped through her fingers and shattered on the floor. Water soaked her shoes, making her feet squelch and sending a numb chill up her body. Her

mind was blank.

*Arie is dead? Dead. Arie. Arie is dead. No, Arie was here. Arie can't be dead. Arie doesn't be dead. Arie always makes it. Arie's not dead.*

Sark finally looked up from his hands to meet Alaina's gawking expression. A sound came from the back of her throat when she saw the torment in his eyes, and she sunk to her knees.

*No. No, it's not possible.*

"Who?" Alaina asked through her teeth, words shaking with unbelieved anguish and fury. Alaina knew with the lives they led it wouldn't be a 'what' that killed Arie. "Who was it?"

*Alexis, Jefferson, Lennon...* The list could go on and on, and Alaina would butcher every last one that had anything to do with it.

Sark gritted his teeth and opened his mouth but nothing came. He struggled like that for a second, running a hand through his hair, as if he physically couldn't get the name out. Finally the two words came through, mangled with hatred. "Richard Dalton."

*What?* Alaina whipped her head back and forth in a rapid 'no.' That couldn't be right. That couldn't be real. "He's Arie's case officer or something. With the government. Why would he do that? She didn't do anything wrong."

"I don't know." The words were exasperated, as if he had spent his whole life trying to find a different answer. "He needed an edge to keep his job. He thought...there was something about her that could help his case, but I didn't think he knew."

“Knew?” Alaina’s mind flashed to the way Arie’s face looked, tears in her eyes, when she was about to tell her something. Something big. “Knew what?”

Sark sighed, running a hand through his hair again. “Arie...Arie was the key. The key to the formula.”

“The key?” Alaina breathed. Realization dawned, hitting like meteors from the sky, leaving catastrophic craters she couldn’t recover from. “No.” Her voice got louder the more she spoke, fresh tears streaming down her face. “The key is just some stupid bedtime story Alexis likes to tell. It’s not real.”

“Alaina.” Sark’s gaze held her eyes. “It is. It was her.”

*Arie the key?* She couldn’t believe it. There was no way. That would’ve been hell. That couldn’t be Arie.

But despite the absurdity of the accusation, it almost made sense. That would explain so much.

“No! Stop lying!” She almost choked on her own tears as she yelled. “Arie would’ve told me! We are best friends! She’s my best friend. My best friend...”

*My best friend is dead.*

Alaina wrapped her arms around her stomach and leaned down, forehead against her knees, as the sobs overtook her.

*Arie is dead. Arie is dead. She’s really dead. She’s really gone.*

“I told her,” Alaina gasped, her words barely understandable in between her cries. “I told her it

was stupid to go to the police. I tried to keep her away from that idiot but she wouldn't listen. She was *so* bent on getting you..." She trailed off, putting the pieces together, as she lifted her head to meet Sark's gaze.

Sark's eyes seemed to break, whispers of tears forming. "She could never let me find out she was the key. The risk was too high."

Alaina shook her head. There had to be a decent explanation for this insanity. "But Dalton is an idiot. The key...Arie...she's strong. Could he really kill her? She could survive, couldn't she?"

Of course she could survive. She was Arie. Arie had to survive.

"I..." Sark exhaled as though his lungs were the size of a hot air balloon. "I don't know. She survived an incredible amount..." The inkling of doubt in his voice was torturing. "But this? I mean, she was barely recognizable."

"What did he do to her?" Liam asked in a shaky voice. His question reminded Alaina of his presence, bringing her out of her own crumbling universe for a moment. She glanced over to see Andrew hugging Chelsie; Mara on the ground next to Mark who was curled in a ball, tears streaming down both their faces; and Liam standing in between Alaina and them, as if he could stretch to be a giant umbrella and protect them all.

Sark shrugged and his voice broke. "Charred to the bone."

Silence rang out, the settling quiet like the settling of rubble after an earthquake, everyone

trapped underneath the remains of the broken world and waiting for a rescue that would never come.

*Charred to the bone. My best friend. Arie. The key. Dead. Charred to the bone.*

Mara's fragile tone finally shattered the stillness.

"And...and Erika?"

Sark rested his forehead in his hand, his jaw squared. "She was his assistant. He put a bullet in her head like she didn't even matter."

*Erika's dead too.* Alaina never really liked Erika, but she knew Arie and Sark both loved her. *How could this happen?*

"I'm so sorry," Mara cried softly. "I'm so so sorry."

"I am too." Sark cleared his throat and lifted his head to look at them all. "Arie...she cared for all of you deeply and truly regarded each of you as family. And I wanted to thank you for that."

Mark curled tighter into a ball, covering his head with his arms as his body trembled. Mara patted his shoulder, eyes red and puffy. Chelsie had buried her face in Andrew's shoulder; he stood shocked and still. Liam broke his frozen stance and sat next to Alaina, putting his arm around her, his body trembling slightly. Sark remained on the couch and stared at the ground.

They stayed like that forever, nobody moving, the occasional sound of Mark's quiet sob or Alaina's snuffle breaking the silence. The shocked grief paralyzed them all, slowing down time and drawing out the agony of realizing reality.

*Arie is dead.* Alaina couldn't shake the thought

from her numb mind. *She's gone forever.*

A small part of her just wouldn't accept that though. After all, Arie was Arie. She didn't die. Other people died, but Arie didn't. Arie was Alaina's best friend. Best friends didn't die.

There had been a girl in Alaina's high school that died—they didn't know each other, but Alaina remembered the mini service they did in the cafeteria for her. She remembered the way the girl's best friend bawled her eyes out during lunch and always left class early to go see her counselor.

Other people's best friends died. Alaina's didn't.

Eternities had passed when Alaina finally shifted her gaze to Sark. His eyes were distant as he stared at the floor, and she knew he wasn't really here—the carnage, the images, would forever replay in his mind. She wondered how many times he'd already seen Arie's dead body, limp on the floor.

*Charred to the bone*, he had said. *Hardly recognizable.*

Sark must've felt Alaina looking at him, because his eyes focused and he met her gaze. They exchanged something, a mutual understanding linking them together in a way Alaina never thought possible. After all, Mr. Sark was the psycho that tortured her best friend. Sark was the guy Alaina tried to get along with *because* of her best friend. She was only able to make that distinction because of Arie and that's where it had always ended with Alaina and Sark, but for the first time she could see they had an actual bond: through Arie. Their shared grief connected Alaina to a man she used to dream

would get hit by a train.

Sark sighed, the closing kind of sigh that meant he was done. He gave Alaina a nod before tensing to stand up.

“What do we do now?” Alaina blurted. Up to that point, she wouldn’t have thought she cared about Sark, but he was the closest thing she had to Arie, and she wasn’t ready to let either of them go yet.

Sark froze. He continued to stare at Alaina for a moment, as if contemplating whether to accept her offer. He knew she was asking him to stay. They both knew he shouldn’t be alone anyway. Like he said, Arie had felt they were all family—any family of Arie’s was family of Alaina’s. And with this heavy of a loss, Sark needed some family.

After a minute Sark relaxed back into his seat.

“Do you have any alcohol?”



Alaina tapped her foot against the ground in agitation. She wasn’t ready for this, the finality. She wasn’t ready for anything, really. Part of her was still naïve, holding onto the hope that she’d wake up and realize it was all just an insane nightmare she would never think of again.

She looked over the handful of kids who were standing in the basement, somber, waiting for Alaina to start. Brennan and Lucy stood in front: Lucy had tears in her eyes and Brennan gave Alaina a solemn nod of encouragement. Alaina recognized several

others from her time on the run and the rest she'd met over the past two weeks as they arrived. Everyone was waiting. But not everyone was there.

*Where is he?* It wouldn't be right to do this without him, but Alaina was starting to lose patience. Six thousand strikes and you're out.

As if on cue, Sark came down the stairs and stood in the back, looking like a ghost in a leather jacket. Alaina hadn't had the time to talk to him about the incident at the bar the night before, but she hoped he knew that he was in for it. Grieving and mourning and hating life were all acceptable responses in Alaina's mind for what Sark had been through in the past month—getting completely wasted and brawling in random bars until she could drag him away weren't.

Liam took a step toward Alaina, giving her a nudge. "Let's get this going."

Alaina nodded, nerves spiking, and she walked up to the wall, front and center before the small crowd. She already had everyone's attention, but she cleared her throat to buy herself another second of not having to speak.

"Thank you all for coming down here for this," she started, trying desperately to keep her voice from shaking. "It's, uh, pretty important. For everyone, I think. Because...unfortunately we're going to be in this situation...a lot in the next few months."

A small sea of eyes watched her. She took a deep breath, deciding to just jump in and get it over with. "Arie was my best friend. Yeah, she was the key to the formula but you would've never known." Her

eyes dropped to the floor. “I...I never knew. She was so good at taking...taking care of everyone else.”

Another deep breath as she watched her hands fidget. This was already a train wreck. If the roles were reversed, Arie would’ve had this long and beautifully eloquent speech complete with a sonnet or something. Alaina was barely going to stammer through four lame sentences.

“And, uh, she...” Alaina’s voice started trembling. She cleared her throat but it didn’t help. “She was a...good friend. She’ll be missed. A lot.” Her voice broke on the last word and she decided that was it. Gaze still glued to the ground, she took a step to the side and gave a small nod to Liam.

*That was so stupid. If Arie could’ve heard that, she’d be laughing at me.* Actually, Alaina knew she wouldn’t. Arie would be hugging her. And Alaina would trade anything in the world to get that hug.

*You just need to come back.*

It was silent as Liam and Mark stepped forward, fastening a paper to the wall. Alaina didn’t look. If she looked, it would be official. If she saw their pitiful proof that Arie was gone then it meant Arie was really gone.

*Please come back, Arie. I want to stop crying and feeling pathetic and guilty and alone. I want Mark to say some lame joke we laugh at. I want Sark to look like a person again. I want you to sit and reason through my irrational attitude because you were the only one who would.*

Once their job was done, Mark turned and nearly ran out of the room, Mara trailing to make sure he

was okay. He wasn't. How could anyone be okay?

*I'm sorry I was annoying all the time and I complained so much. I'm sorry I didn't let you talk enough or ask you about your problems or let you tell me you were the key. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. Heck, I couldn't even help you stay alive. Come back and I'll be a better friend, I swear. I'll make it all up to you. Just come back.*

Liam put his arm around Alaina, giving her a small squeeze. They were waiting for her. All these kids, some she knew and some who were complete strangers, were waiting for Alaina to finish. To dismiss. To do something. They were in Denver now, in hiding, and needed someone to be in charge. Alaina didn't want to be in charge. The weight of the responsibility she felt was crushing, and even with her older brother next to her she felt so alone. She needed a true confidant, a rock of support, a buddy to make fun of dumb people with, and someone who spoke sarcasm.

She needed her best friend.

Anyone who knew Arie loved her guts, but she wasn't exactly the most popular kid on the playground—she had never put herself out there and now Alaina knew why. Most of the infecteds who heard Alaina's pathetic speech didn't even get it. Sure, they felt bad but they didn't understand. They missed out on knowing someone great and they didn't deserve to stand by her stupid memorial and pretend to grieve the loss of someone they would never have the privilege of meeting.

Instead of sticking around to console the few

people who actually cared about Arie, Alaina sidestepped out of Liam's hug and went for the stairs. The party was over. Back to real life.

On accident, she met Sark's eyes as she crossed the room. They were focused, sober, and nearly empty besides the haunting grief he couldn't hide. She gave her best 'thanks-for-making-me-do-that-alone' glare with the intent to scald him. Sark was in a fragile state—small things shook him to the core, even if he tried not to show it. He still hadn't even been able to stop wincing every time someone said Arie's name.

Sometimes she really loved having him around. So many nights they had drank together—without telling Liam, of course—as they wallowed in their mutual grief. It was their bonding time. The more time like that she had with Sark, the more Alaina understood how Arie had learned to trust him, to feel safe when he was around. But other times he was too much, last night being a prime example.

Alaina hated being his babysitter and that's basically what he had turned her into, despite hating it himself. Scouring through every bar in Denver, trying to reason with him in his drunken state, which only ended in screaming and yelling and dragging him back to the club or having him disappear again...sometimes it made Alaina wish Sark had gone with Arie, for both their sakes. It wasn't like Sark actually cared about his existence anymore.

Alaina wouldn't care what he did with his life either, if it weren't for the tormenting obligation she felt to the corpse that used to be her best friend.

Keeping Sark alive was the only thing she could think of to do for Arie, even if her attempts were mostly futile. At least it was something, right?

*But it's still not enough.*

Sark's face was a cold stone, hard and prepared to deflect the pain that came from the ridiculous memorial service. He gave her a small nod but didn't stop her or say anything, even when she purposely bumped him with her shoulder as she passed by.

*Smart of him.* She needed time to cool off before she could talk to him. She needed to cry or scream or break something, and put the last thirty minutes behind her so she could somehow face the insane challenge ahead. Alexis was slaughtering infecteds faster than Alaina could warn them, and it was going to take a crazy amount of work and patience to keep their safe haven safe. They would try it, attempt to survive, but the game would be dicey. They had already lost so much.

Alaina hated to admit it, but she was scared. She didn't think she could keep just herself and her family alive, let alone every stray infected that found their way to her.

*The dead ones have it easy,* she decided bitterly. *Maybe she's the lucky one after all.* Too bad Alaina hadn't kicked the can already. Then she wouldn't have to deal with all this crap.

*Oh well. We can't have everything.* The thought was automatic, and she cringed. Someone she used to know would say that all the time. Someone who wasn't here.

Alaina reached the door and paused, taking a

deep breath before turning to give one glance to the wall—to the dreaded paper—before heading upstairs.

Arie Nolan: November 1, 1995—May 6, 2013

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