



Midlife Vampire Unexpected

Author: *Melle Amade*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: When I decided to “start-over” in my mid-40’s, that did not, I repeat, did NOT include being turned by a vampire. It was not my idea of a good time. I mean, it was a good time, but the eternal damnation and never die bit is a little hard to swallow. My name is Chloe Preston. I came to Cougar Creek as a cop and ‘died in the line of duty’ when I got tangled up with a coven of witches. I’d asked for the transfer. I needed to get away from the lonely grind of my life. But now I’ll never escape this mess. As if that isn’t bad enough. This coven of witches is real. Like they really have powers and apparently, they’ve been fighting against an evil power that is trying to make its way through the cemetery. And I’m the one who is supposed to help them do that. Or better yet, do it for them. Now I must do creepy vampire things to help save not just the coven, but humanity. The only problem I’m having is that I can’t decide between saving humanity and the bartender with the golden eyes who seems likely to whisk me away at any moment. Being middle-aged has taught me one thing; you must seize the day, the time, and the guy you have. Because even as a vampire, you never know what the future holds.

Total Pages (Source): 58

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

Chapter 1

There was something about the name Xavier Santiago that stuck in my head. It was a vague memory floating around but I needed to know why it was there.

Xavier Santiago.

I couldn't remember things from the last few days but I could remember that name. It made me question everything I found out about him. His records were crazy. He didn't show up anywhere except in one old social security account that deemed him as dead. He was a ghost in the machine and yet I was going to find him. There was something stuck in my mind that he was doing something I needed to know about. He was doing something wrong. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it kept me awake at night. It had brought me here to this cabin in the woods by Big Bend river. I had taken a week off of working at Cougar Creek to come and find him.

There was something about him when he came to Cougar Creek that made me suspicious of him. I'd seen him at the cemetery. I vaguely remembered I had seen some bodily injury happen to him. I couldn't remember it outside of my dreams. but still, my dreams had brought me here to the strange cabin in the woods. It was as if I was being called here.

The brown leaves of the trees crunched under my feet as I stepped up to the edge of the porch. In two creaky steps I was at the front door. I knocked on it resoundingly.

"This is the sheriff's office," I said. "We're just doing a routine check,"

Silence greeted me. I saw that the front door was slightly ajar.

“I’m going to come in,” I said quite loudly, catching my reflection in the door. I had put my uniform on that morning. I was trying to make today as routine as possible. I’d even taken a police car. If this man gave me trouble, I was going to make sure he knew who he was dealing with. My shoulder length sandy brown hair was pulled back in a functional ponytail which was my standard style. In my reflection, my pale gray eyes blazed with a fierce determination to get to the bottom of this.

It was the same determination that had gotten me in trouble back in Indianapolis. I’d stuck to a case long after I was told not to, but here I didn’t think Sheriff Ted was going to care very much if I crossed the line and looked in another county. What he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt me.

I hoped.

I couldn’t afford to move homes again. At forty-four, I was ready to retire. I couldn’t afford it, but mentally and emotionally I was done being a cop. The only thing I still wanted was to catch the bad guy. I just didn’t want to do it with a bureaucracy that was required of me by all the regulations. I’d never been that person, even though I had tried to fit in for twenty years of my life.

I pushed the door open and stepped into the dimly lit cabin. It smelled of must and dust and something else. Decay, the sweet smell of decay, whether it was the wood or fabric or somebody’s body. I walked into the living space and as I slowly scanned the area, I realized what was calling to me was not in this room. It was through the wooden door and in the back hallway.

My gun was in the air, ready to take aim on anyone that made the wrong move towards me. The smell of decay was getting stronger as I walked into the back room.

There was somebody in the bed. A lump of non-moving blankets. But I knew it was Xavier. Deformed and decaying, lying there. I stared down. It was like I was looking at the corpse of an old, wrinkled man.

But he moved slightly. I gasped and stepped back, taken by surprise.

I looked again. Clearly this creature was of no danger to me. I got closer, leaning over. I put my hands against his neck. He was missing an arm.

This was him.

This was Xavier.

Then I felt it, barely even a movement, but it was there. There was no pulse, but his arm twitched. It caught me off guard and as he swung up with his one free arm. He grabbed me by the neck then pulled me down, and clamped his teeth against it. I screamed as his teeth pierced my skin. I struggled against him as I felt him begin to...Drink. My. Blood.

What the actual fuck?

I thrashed against his grip, unable to break free.

I could feel myself getting weak as my blood was being drained out of me. He was going to take every last bit of blood and there wasn't a damn thing I could do to stop that from happening.

His greedy hungry lips sucked at my neck with a disgusting slurping sound.

A vampire. It couldn't be the case. This was just some creepy old guy with an injury doing some damage on my throat.

I whacked him upside the head, breaking his teeth loose from my neck.

“Let me go, you fucker,” I said. “Creepy motherfucker.”

I’d come across a lot of creeps in my days as a police officer, but this one was something else. His eyes rolled in all sorts of crazy, with red blood smear across his lips. He licked them. Blood was pouring out of my neck and I saw the excitement that was building in his face

“Not today,” I said, swinging around and knocking his mouth with a fierce elbow, which actually cracked both of his canine teeth.

“You can’t beat me,” he said.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

“Fuck I can’t,” I said. And even as I said it, I snapped my head forward, cracking it against his forehead. It was kind of a stupid mistake because I was already weak and hurt. It dislodged the cross on my necklace, which fell against him, burning his skin. He screamed and his hand on my neck loosened just enough for me to pull back. I stood up and fired shots at him, but the bullets didn’t do a thing. He just laid there and laughed. I ripped my necklace from my neck and held it over him.

My head was spinning and my body was weak. The blood he had drained out of me had made him stronger. I was losing consciousness, but I swore no matter what, I was going to come back and arrest this motherfucker if it was the last thing I did.

Chapter 2

The meaty wild scent of game stew drew me from the darkness. I remembered it from when I was a kid. Being from the Midwest, everybody hunted. My dad used to come home to the trailer park bringing squirrels and bobcats and all sorts of crazy meat. We ate it all, too. Didn’t matter what it was. That was how my father provided for our family. Smelling the game stew gave me a warm sense of home.

I wasn’t home though.

I opened my eyes. Wooden walls faced me and my peripheral vision showed me the trappings of a rustic cabin. Another smell pervaded the room hovering just below the scent of the cooking food.

A man.

My gun wasn't anywhere I could readily see without moving. I was going to have to trust that if he hadn't killed or maimed me yet, it wasn't the top item on his to do list.

I rolled over slowly and sat up. The man sat at a rustic table, his back to me, his hair a shock of white on top of his head. His shoulders were broad with chiseled muscles. In hand-to-hand combat, I wouldn't stand a chance. Without my gun, all I had to rely on was my wit and charm. In other words, I was screwed.

"Where am I?" I dropped the words out as my feet hit the floor.

"You're awake," his low voice growled. I immediately didn't like his tone. He sounded like a disgruntled union worker who thought I was in middle management.

A stabbing pain coursed through my stomach. Damn, I was hungry!

"Yeah, I'm awake and I'm hungry." There was no point in beating around the bush. He didn't need any pleasantries as far as I could see. Memories came flooding back to me. Me lying on the ground. This guy over Xavier Santiago, killing him. "And you're under arrest for murder."

This brought out a little raucous laughter from the man and he turned around to look at me. I almost recoiled at the brilliance of his bright blue eyes. His hair was almost completely silver, but his face was smooth and free of any lines. He looked like one of those people who goes gray early. His full lips spread wide as he laughed in my face.

"Are you trying to make an arrest, Deputy?" he said, clearly not taking me seriously in the slightest.

I looked down and suddenly realized I didn't have any pants on. "Why am I in my underwear?"

“You were throwing up a lot. I didn’t want you to get your clothes dirty.” He nodded his head to the corner where my clothes were neatly folded and stacked.

I searched my memory, vaguely recalling moments of being held by this man as I’d vomited up my lunch and dinner. There was something more though. I touched my fingers to my lips.

Blood.

I moved my hand away from my lips, expecting to see blood on my fingertips, but there was nothing there. I looked incredulously at the man sitting at the table.

“You made me drink blood,” I said. “What sort of sick motherfucker are you? And where is my gun?” My holster was by my uniform, well out of reach.

I was dealing with a crazy man. I had to be aware of that. I had to move slowly and think clearly. “I’m going to get dressed. Could you keep your back to me?”

He gave me a slight nod, as if he really didn’t care if I was butt naked or wearing a Burka. It didn’t appear that there was anything about me he found the least bit compelling.

I wasn’t sure if the feeling was mutual or not. There was something about him that was repulsive and compelling all at the same time, but there was no way I was going to think clearly about anything sitting here in my bra and underwear.

Keeping a careful eye on him, I stood up and made my way over to my clothes. At forty-two I was physically fit and still had a solid workout program. It kept my body trimmed. I still ran a marathon every year. I couldn’t say my knees felt as good as they used to or that I could run quite as fast as before, but I tried to keep up and do some obstacle courses. I wasn’t afraid of a good Spartan race now and again. I’d

never had kids. I ran my hand over my flat stomach. I would've given anything to have had a child, but instead, I'd been forced to give up my marriage when we found out I couldn't have kids. Somehow having a biological child was more of a priority to my husband than staying married to me. I didn't know that I could blame him. The sense of wanting to leave a legacy or wanting to have a child was still strong in me even though my body was incapable. I dressed in seconds and then strapped my holster on. Pulling the gun from it, I pointed it directly at the man in the chair.

"You're under arrest for the murder of Xavier Santiago," I said, cocking the trigger as the man's hands went deathly still on the table.

"You don't wanna do that, lady." The man stood up and moved to the stove, completely unperturbed by the gun I had aimed at him.

"I saw you do it." My voice was cold.

"No, you didn't," He glanced at me over his shoulder. "There's something there for you to eat," he said, pointing at a cup at the end of the table. I frowned at him, keeping my attention where it should be.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

“I saw you kill a man,” I said insistently.

Even as I said it, something felt really wrong. There was a tightness in my stomach and an emptiness. Whatever it was he had in the cup at the end of the table was calling to me. It was saying drink me, drink me, drink me. The thought of putting a bullet in his head or arresting him was quickly overwhelmed by my sudden desire to drink whatever was in the cup.

“Xavier Santiago’s been dead for hundreds and hundreds of years.” The white-haired man began ladling stew into a wooden bowl.

“No. No, he’s not,” I insisted “He was biting my neck and... and...- and sucking my blood” My words caught in my mouth because this guy was telling me that Xavier was dead, but he’d been moving. He had survived his arm being torn off for weeks and then he had fed on me.

He. Fed. On. Me.

The memory struck me head on like a truck.

“What the fuck was he?” I asked, my voice a hoarse whisper.

“A vampire.” The guy shrugged like it was obvious.

I took a step back from him, my gun slightly unsteady. “Are you one?”

He grimaced and looked for a moment like he was about to spit on the ground in

disgust. “My name is Antonio Lago. No. I’m not a vampire.”

The pounding in my ears grew louder. Whatever was in the cup was distracting me. I slowly lowered the gun and found myself walking over, insistent on smelling it. The scent of copper made my mouth salivate. I wanted it so badly. “What is in the cup?” I tried to keep the gun trained on the back of Antonio’s head but we both knew my attention was elsewhere.

“Senorita, unless you have a silver bullet in your gun, it is not going to do a damn bit of good against me.” He sat down and began spooning stew into his mouth.

Silver bullet?

Blood sucking?

I started laughing. I couldn’t help it. The situation was preposterous. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You think you’re a werewolf and the other guy was a Vampire? Maybe I should take you to the lunatic asylum instead of prison.”

“Just sit down and have a drink.” He motioned to the cup. “You should be feeling pretty weak and confused by now. You need to feed.”

I sniffed at the cup. As soon as I scooped the cup up, I realized exactly what was in it.

Blood.

My glands swelled causing my mouth to fall open. I wanted it so badly that I was no longer training the gun on Antonio. It was pointing down at my foot. My other hand grabbed the cup and before I could stop myself, I was choking back the blood in big heavy draughts, desperate for the nutrients it would provide.

I slammed the tin down on the table. I wiped the blood from my mouth and stared at him in shock. “What the fuck is going on?” I insisted.

The blood flowed through my body. I could feel it spreading out into my veins. A flush of pink deepened the color of my skin, turning it from its usual pasty white.

I stared at Antonio. His silver hair was cut short, his tan skin appeared bronze in the golden evening light, and the angular planes of his face left me with no doubt he had a mix of Native American and Hispanic blood in him. His ice blue eyes made him drop dead gorgeous.

And I felt a deep repulsion to him.

I raised the gun again. This guy was way too massive for me to take down alone. If he put up a fuss, I’d be toast and he looked like the kind of guy who would put up a fuss.

“Put your hands up. You’re under arrest.”

He shook his head and smiled at me. I snarled, curling my lip as I fired the gun into his leg.

Chapter 3

“What the fuck!” he exclaimed, falling back in his chair and grabbing his leg.

“I told you, I’m taking you in,” I glared, rounding on my stack of clothing and grabbing the handcuffs.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

He hunched over his leg using his hands to stem the flow of blood from the bullet wound.

“You didn’t have to shoot me,” he said.

“I didn’t want you putting up resistance.” I glared as I reached towards him to pull his hands behind his back. His hands whipped off his wound and grabbed my wrists. He propelled himself up from the chair and flung me back against the wall. I fell to the ground, the wind knocked out of me.

“Lady, I’m not going anywhere with you,” he growled.

With shock I saw he was standing on his wounded leg. “My name is not Lady. It’s Deputy Preston.” I clambered to my feet. This perp was going to put up a fuss.

“Unfortunately, for you, Deputy, you’re dead. You were killed by the vampire Xavier Santiago as he tried to feed on you to keep himself alive. Fortunately for us and the world in general, Xavier died.” Antonio didn’t seem interested in escaping me in the slightest. In fact, he turned his back on me and began cleaning up his bowl.

“He didn’t die of natural causes, though,” I insisted. “He died because he was stabbed with a wooden stake through his heart.” I listened to the words coming out of my mouth. This guy had literally staked an old man who had been sucking my blood. Antonio must think Xavier was a vampire and he was a vampire killer.

“You don’t remember anything, do you?” Antonio asked me.

“How are you moving?” I asked as he walked around on his leg as if I hadn’t just shot him. “How did that bullet wound heal?”

Antonio finished rinsing the dishes and turned on me. “Do you remember anything?”

“I remember you staking the guy. I remember...” My voice faded as memories flooded back to me. “He was feeding on me. You staked him and...and...”

“You died.” Antonio’s broad shoulders shrugged.

The world had closed in on me. Dark... Black... Empty.

“But I was only out for a minute,” I murmured.

“I fed you his blood to bring you back to life. That’s how vampires do it. You must feed on your maker’s blood immediately. That’s how they turn you.”

I sat down in a rickety wooden chair. “You’re insane.” There was a niggling feeling in my gut telling me his words were truth.

“Look, Deputy, I’m sure it would be a very convenient if I was insane and none of this were true, but unfortunately for you, everything I’m telling you is the truth. He finished putting away the dishes and grabbed a rucksack that was lying in the corner. “If you want more blood, you can have it, but then we need to be going.”

“We don’t need to be doing anything.” I stood up and gathered my things. Trying to figure out my next move. The thought of more blood whetted my appetite. “Why are you feeding me blood?”

“You would have died if I hadn’t.”

“I am dead. That’s what you keep telling me.” I pulled my hair out from in front of my face.

“Right. I meant you would be dead dead.” Antonio shrugged. “Instead of undead dead.”

I sighed. “I just wish you made more sense.”

There was a deep knowing inside me that I wasn’t ready to admit to, but I could feel it like a hollow balloon floating inside my stomach and chest. My life had irrevocably changed because of one stupid decision I’d made to hunt hunted Xavier Santiago. But what Antonio was saying to me was impossible to believe. It was so hard to understand. My stomach growled.

“Would you like some more blood?” he asked dispassionately.

Blood.

“What sort of blood is it?”

“Bobcat blood. I shot an animal.” Antonio explained.

“You killed it?” I asked.

“No, I shot it with a dart and sedated it and then took some blood from it, enough to feed you for a day or two. The last thing anyone wants is you drinking human blood.”

A burst of nervous laughter erupted from my lips. “Drinking human blood. Are you crazy?” I asked, but as he put another cup of blood in front of me, I didn’t even hesitate to pick up the glass and suck it back in a big healthy draught.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

It tasted it better than cold beer on a hot summer day. It tasted like having a glass of life. I could feel my heart race and my blood pumping. My pupils dilated and everything became brighter or clearer. It was as if I'd gotten a new pair of glasses that made everything sparkle with life. I closed my eyes as the blood poured through me, nurturing me. My gaze turned to Antonio. Goodness he was one tall drink of water in the desert. He wore a dark t-shirt over that fit snugly over his bulging muscles that popped with the veins of a body builder. I'd never seen anyone so striking.

"What are you?" I asked.

"Not a vampire." The words came out like a growl. Suddenly his face began to transform! A white furry wolf ear began to jut out of his head. The cracking of bones heralded his hands turning into paws with extraordinarily long claws. His white hair grew longer all around his neck as his mouth stretched out and his teeth gnashed.

"What the actual fuck?" I dropped the drained cup of blood onto the floor.

Just as quickly, his features smoothed back into the handsome white-haired, tan man I had seen before.

"You are a beast?" I asked.

His laughter filled the air.

"Seriously, that's the best you can come up with?" he asked. "I understand if you've never seen a werewolf before, but surely you've heard of them?"

“Yeah, I’ve seen Underworld,” I said.

“Underworld’s a little high tech for what really goes on, but the lycans’ and vampires’ dislike of each other, that’s all completely true.”

“Then why did you save me?”

He stopped for a moment. His eyes grazed over my body. My skin flushed. He was built like some mutant Hispanic god and there was no way he’d be interested in an older woman. Much less an older vampire woman.

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” he said quietly, turning back to his rucksack. “You are just some innocent cop who tracked the wrong vampire.”

I leaned on the table. It was all flooding back to me. “You’ve been nursing me,” I said, my stomach roiling. The slipping in and out of consciousness, the light days, the dark days, but Antonio had been constant. He’d wiped my forehead as I had writhed in the bed sweating, my body transforming. Dying.

He had fed me.

My eyes widened as I saw the bandages on both his wrists.

“Bobcat blood?” I asked, motioning to the cup.

“Yeah, I can’t give you more now.”

“I didn’t want any of yours in the first place.” I glared at him.

“You would’ve died if you hadn’t had my blood.”

“Now what? I’m supposed to be ingratiated to you for saving my life?” I asked. “I mean, I’m not completely ungrateful.” I clarified. “Xavier got me good. I don’t really know a whole lot about this vampire werewolf thing, but last time I checked, a vampire kind of needs a vampire to show them what to do.”

“I killed your maker.” He didn’t look apologetic in the slightest.

“You killed my maker before you even realized I was there, didn’t you?”

“Get your things,” he grumbled.

“And that made you feel responsible for me.” The truth was clear to me. “You didn’t realize you were killing two people with that stake.”

“I didn’t kill you,” Antonio said. “I saved your life.”

“You turned me into a goddamn vampire!” I exclaimed. “I’m going to spend the rest of my very, very long existence having to drink blood to survive.”

“It’s possible to live on animal blood. It doesn’t have to be human. That’s why I gave you my blood.”

“Hoping I’d turned into a werewolf?” I moaned.

“No,” He slung his rucksack over his shoulder. “You can’t be turned into a werewolf. You have to be born one.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

“Well, that’s a small comfort,” I smirked.

“You can take me to the sheriff if you want,” he said. “But they can’t hold me. All written proof says Xavier died quite a few years ago and there are no bodily remains. Vampires don’t leave bodies. They leave a little smear of sludge that no coroner would recognize as once being human.”

A sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach made me want to retch, because of the words he spoke while looking at me. I realized he was pointing out that one day when I did somehow meet my end, I would become a little smudge, not even remotely human.

“Where the fuck are we?” I asked.

“I’m going to take you to The Estate.” He opened the door to the cabin.

“The Estate in Cougar Creek?” My head felt light. I closed my eyes and focused on the blood in my veins. It felt like it was pumping straight to my brain, giving me greater clarity.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “They’ll know how to help you.”

“Those crazy witchy ladies,” I muttered. “Doesn’t surprise me you know them.”

“They’re not crazy,” Antonio argued, motioning me to move out of the cabin. “They will be able to help. Let me take you to them.”

“Why do you care?”

“Let me put it this way. I’m a werewolf and I killed your maker. Makes me responsible for you.” He said.

“Are you fucking kidding me? I’m a cop, you realize that?”

“You don’t have to be a copy anymore.” Antonio shrugged.

“I have to go back to work.” I insisted. “I’m not a missing person. Take me... take me wherever the fuck you want, but I’m going back to work. I’m going to check in with Sheriff Ted.”

“You don’t get you’re a vampire?” Antonio asked. “You’re falling into a whole different kettle of fish than you’ve ever experienced before.”

“I don’t give a fuck if I’m a two-tailed mermaid.” I picked up all my things and went out the door. “I work for the law. I always have. I always will. So, if it’s some sort of matter of honor to you to drop me at The Estate, go ahead, and then I’m going to go see my boss at the police station.”

Chapter 4

Deep green woods surrounded us as far as I could see. It was pristine with a glistening lake stretching out down a tiny valley. Everything glistened and sparkled and shone as if it had its own radiance. It was stunning and intense.

“Is this how it always is?” I asked.

“What?” Antonio slipped his other arm through the rucksack handle.

“The way I see. Everything is so vibrant,” I explained.

“I’m not a vampire,” Antonio said. “I don’t know what the fuck goes on in your head.”

“You must’ve heard something.” I turned in circles taking in the sparkling auras coming off the trees.

Antonio paused, took a deep breath, and gave me an exasperated look. I didn’t care. The dude killed my perp. He still had more explaining to do. “It’s supposed to be really intense in the beginning,” he explained. “Then it gets clearer and more concise. So, I guess right now it’s a prism or something around everything, right?”

“Exactly,” I said. He knew. I glanced back at the rustic rest cabin hidden in the woods.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“We’re on the Crimson Trail,” Antonio said. “We’re going to hike out to the vehicles. My truck is parked next to your car. You’ve had a couple of days to get used to being a vamp, you should be fine.”

“Should be?” I didn’t like the sound of that.

“I move fast. Try to keep up.” He let out a growl and his body began to transform. The gorgeous human shifted into a white wolf, his bright blue eyes shining in the morning light.

If he was gorgeous as a human, he was fucking beautiful as a wolf. His fur was thick and luxurious. I wanted to snuggle up next to him.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

He turned and looked at me, snarling, twisting his head towards the trail to move me along. Clearly, he was not the snuggling kind.

Fine. Neither was I. Never had been. I bared my teeth. He didn't need to know how his gaze made a fire burn in my belly. It must be the new vampire powers.

Antonio took off racing, a streak of white through the verdant, moss-covered woods. His tail disappeared in and out of the trees as he followed the path out of the valley and up the mountain. He didn't stop to see if I was following him. I wondered what would happen if I didn't. What would happen if I disappeared into the mountains? There was plenty to do and see out in the woods, plenty to eat, and it would keep me safe from humans and human safe for me.

But my curiosity got the better of me. I couldn't help it. We still hadn't solved the murder of the two kids who were dismembered in the forest and now? Now I was a vampire, I'd have a little bit more access to all the mysterious goings on I'd seen at The Estate, if they didn't hate me. They at least had to admit I was part of their world, whatever crazy supernatural world it was.

A howl from the top of the mountain got my attention and I realized Antonio was all the way up there. I moved toward him at what seemed like a normal pace, but the mountain practically spun with each step I took. It was effortless and accurate. My gaze caught every stone, branch, tree and leaf that could trip me up or throw me off my step. In moments I was standing next to Antonio, who, in wolf form, gave me a little yip of appreciation.

He didn't wait though. In seconds he took off again and this time I kept up with him,

racing and following him as he made his way across the mountainside. It was exhilarating. We ran along the ridge with the air flowing through my lungs and across my skin. Every sense was heightened. A feeling of effervescence moved in my chest.

We came down out of the mountains onto a farm. We were clearly still in Southern Oregon with the deep forests and sprawling ranches, but I still didn't recognize the precise area.

Antonio shifted back into a man so fast I barely saw the movement of his change. Apparently, his clothes and rucksack shifted with him and he was fully clothed standing by his beat up truck.

I grimaced. "Maybe you should get a job and fix your truck."

"I have a job," Antonio said.

"The way the truck looks is part of it. I'm assuming."

Antonio threw his rucksack in the back of his truck. "Right."

"You're trying to look like a drug dealer from the outskirts of the inner city?" I asked.
"Or a beat-up hill-billy?"

He looked at me and shook his head as his ice blue eyes stayed steady on me.
"Deputy, we got an hour drive. Maybe we keep it quiet."

Unfortunately for me, as bad as his truck looked, it actually worked while my vehicle wouldn't start. We tried to jump it but that didn't work either.

"Relax," Antonio said. "I'll give you a ride into town and we can get the mechanic to come out and take a look at it later."

I climbed into his truck dubiously, but the engine started, and it seemed to run just fine. After about fifteen minutes on the curving back roads, I knew there was no way in hell I was going to be able to stay quiet. My natural inquisitiveness was too intense.

“So, what’s your job?” I asked.

He didn’t say anything.

“Do you come from Oregon?” I asked. “Are there a lot of werewolves around here?”

His eyes stayed glued to the road. “Only one”

“Do you have a werewolf pack or something?”

He coughed. “If I had a pack, I sure as hell wouldn’t be hanging out with the likes of you, vampire.”

“Oh, I get it. The hate is real. Fine. I’ll wait till we get to Cougar Creek.” We rode in silence for the remaining half hour of the trip, and I watched the sparkly landscape go by.

About an hour after we left the deep forest, we pulled up outside of the two-story Victorian home that was the center of The Estate. I had been up here recently a couple times and always something weird had happened. The cemetery had had a big fire going on, but hardly any signs of the fire even remained; in fact, none. And then there’d been the night I’d gone up to the house and one of the women and two of the guys had been in the backyard by a bonfire. One of them with his shirt off.

Each time I’d left them confused, with blanks in my memory. Blanks I couldn’t fill. One of the reasons I’d become a detective was because I wanted answers.

Antonio knocked on the front door.

I smoothed my hair out. There hadn't been a mirror in the cabin. I had no idea what I looked like, but I assumed I was still the same blonde haired, brown eyed person I was before and didn't have blood dripping out of the corners of my mouth or anything.

Antonio glanced back at me, motioning me forward. "You better come stand up here in the front. They're going to be a lot more interested in you than they are in me."

Chapter 5

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

The woman who owned the house, the one Sheriff Ted called The Hayes whenever he referred to her, answered the door. I knew her name as it was written in the reports about the killings.

“Hi, Mae,” I said.

The tall brunette’s mouth formed a slight oh before she recovered her composure. “Deputy Chloe, how are you?” She stepped onto the porch and closed the door behind her. “And who is this?” She was looking at Antonio.

“Do you remember when we were in the cemetery?” I asked, trying to jar the memory back into my brain.

“I’ve been in the cemetery many times,” Mae said.

“No, the most recent time. Something happened,” I said. “Something happened in there. There was a man, and he lost his arm. I followed him.”

Mae’s skin went pale. “No,” she said, looking from me to Antonio.

“Yeah,” Antonio said.

Mae reached behind her, quickly opening the door, and holding it as she stepped inside. “You must come in the house. Please.”

I glanced at Antonio, but I didn’t need his approval. It had been his idea to come here and it was definitely the right decision. I needed answers and these women had them.

I moved past him as I slipped into the dark interior of the house.

“Go straight ahead.” She pointed to a room with red painted walls and a large fireplace on one wall.

The room was separated into sections made up for different activities. There was a gaming corner, a table with a bunch of plants on it, and another table with jars of liquids and a Bunsen burner.

“Have a seat,” Mae motioned to us both. “I’ll get the others.”

Antonio didn’t look like he was in any mood to sit down at all. He paced up and down, looking through the door toward the rest of the house. I knew somebody on edge when I saw it. But there was more. He seemed to be expecting something.

I suddenly felt anxious. What if he was here to hurt these women? What if he had an ulterior motive in helping me? I stood up and moved toward Mae as she came in the room with her two friends. Antonio whirled on them and in seconds he was standing by the side of the curvy one with the red curly hair, if I remembered my notes correctly, she was Bianca.

What happened next was so fast I barely understood it. Purple and green sparks flew out of Mae’s hands and bolted Antonio in the chest. He was pushed across the room and slammed into the wall, crashing down on the table full of beakers and potions which went scattering across the floor, glass shattering everywhere.

“Stay back,” Mae said.

A tall dark woman hurried in the door, quickly tying Antonio up with a slim silver string.

“I wasn’t going to hurt her,” Antonio grimaced in pain as the silver string burned his wrists which were already bandaged from feeding me.

I suddenly felt torn. The guy had saved me. I had to stick up for him even though I didn’t know him one bit myself. “He rescued me.” I offered the words to Mae, but she was on guard.

Her hands went up toward me, purple and green lightning sizzling in her palms.

I held my hands up and backed away “Hey, I don’t have any powers and I don’t know what the hell you’re doing.” My voice shook a bit.

The lights in her hands suddenly went out. “Sorry, deputy,” she said. “We know you, but we don’t know him. Who is he? Do you know him?”

“No. Not really.” I admitted. “I was hunting Xavier when this guy-”

“You hunted Xavier?” Bianca asked incredulously.

“You remembered him?” Jane frowned. “My compulsion didn’t last.”

“Could be something to do with the demon fire,” Bianca shrugged.

“I only remembered his name, but it doesn’t matter anymore. This guy, Antonio,” I pointed at the werewolf, “he killed Xavier.”

“Xavier’s dead?” Bianca and Jane spoke in unison, shock on their faces. I had no idea why they cared so much about this random vampire.

Mae chewed on her lower lip. “If Xavier’s dead...” Her voice faded as she grabbed the chain around her neck and pulled out a pendant.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

“Xavier turned you before he died?” Bianca walked closer to me and sniffed, her nose rippling.

“Yes,” I said.

Mae looked to the tall dark woman who stood over Antonio. “What do you think, Jane?”

“She’s telling the truth.” Jane nodded in my direction. “She doesn’t know him. He’s a bounty hunter.”

“I’m not here for the bounty,” he said. “I’m here to protect her.”

“I don’t need protecting,” I said.

“Not you,” Antonio shook his head at me.

I hated the way I felt a little stab of hurt at that. I was way out of my depth in this new world and needed to figure out the rules. The last thing I needed to do was get all caught up in my feelings.

“There’s a bounty out on Bianca,” Jane said. “If you’re a bounty hunter, why do you want to protect her? Wouldn’t you want to turn her in?”

“I don’t think people should make rules like werewolves can’t go to Southern Oregon,” Antonio said with a shrug. “I collect bounties on bad guys. Not on innocents.”

“I already have a bodyguard,” Bianca pointed out. “A satyr.”

Antonio smirked. “Scary.”

Bianca frowned as if her neck was bristling. “He’s a badass satyr.”

“You’re a wolf,” Antonio said. “Wolves have to stick together.”

“I have a boyfriend,” Bianca growled.

“I’m not interested in the position. I’m interested in keeping you alive.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” Mae shrugged.

I turned on Antonio. “I thought you said you were a loner.”

“I didn’t say that,” Antonio said.

“You said you didn’t have a pack.” I countered.

Bianca crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the doorstop. “Why doesn’t anyone want you in their pack?”

“I was waiting for the right pack,” Antonio said. “I’m here for one reason and one reason only. I protect werewolves from the people who hunt them, and when I heard a werewolf had taken up residence in Oregon, I figured there must be a pretty good reason for it.” His gaze went to me. “I want to be part of this pack.”

“I will have to decide about that,” Mae said.

I looked at her in surprise. She held the pendant out in her open palm. It was a

pentacle with a stone in the center. The center stone swirled in green and purple light, like the light that had shown from Mae's hands. One of the stones was swirling with a bright green light, and one was with a turquoise blue light. Slowly a spark appeared above the ruby red stone. The spark grew until the stone glowed with blood red light.

"One thing's for sure," she said, holding the pendant out in her open palm. "As the child of Xavier, you are the heir to the blood bond of the Cougar Creek Coven. You are one of us."

"Welcome to the Coven." Bianca smiled at me.

Chapter 6

"What the hell is that?" I asked staring at the pendant with its glowing magical lights floating over it.

"It's the Pentacle of Times," Mae said.

"That sounds ominous. Does it kill everyone at a certain time?" I asked.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

“No,” Bianca said. “It’s what shows us who is in the coven. There was a blood pact made and when required, those who are part of the pact will come together to protect the cemetery.”

“And that time is now?” I asked, a little bit surprised.

“Apparently, yes,” Mae said. “But we’re about as new to it as everybody else. The Cougar Creek Coven was established a hundred and fifty years ago here. They still hold the foundation wards on the cemetery. But the blood pact is bound to the coven through the high priestess.”

“That’s her.” Bianca pointed a finger at Mae.

“So, you’ve all just found out about the supernatural world also?” I asked glancing from Bianca to Jane to Mae.

“Yeah,” Jane nodded. “But we’ve met some supernaturals who help us out. Mae has a cougar and Bianca has a satyr.”

“Not to mention, her monster,” Bianca motioned towards Jane.

“Who else is in the coven?” I asked.

“Hilda, Trina and her two kids. They are great and can do a lot of magic but having the unique skills of the blood pact are crucial to us figuring out the wards and protecting the cemetery,” Jane said.

I glanced over at Antonio, who was now standing but still bound by the silver thread.

“I don’t know about the blood pact, and I don’t know much about Cougar Creek Coven, but the whole reason why I became a bounty hunter was to protect lone wolves,” he said.

“She’s not a lone wolf. She’s got us,” Jane crossed her arms over her chest.

“No offense, but you’re an untrained witch, a brand-new Fae, a fresh werewolf, and now what, a baby vamp?”

“I’m not a baby vamp,” I interjected.

“Do you even know what you’re up against?” Antonio asked, his gaze sweeping the four of us.

“Well, so far we’ve been up against vampires, bone creatures, and apparently demons.” Jane listed them off on her fingers.

“Not to mention monsters,” Bianca said. “I took one for the team with the monster.”

“They’re talking about the spider monster, not my boyfriend monster,” Jane explained to me.

This was all still new to me. I tried to nod, but it came out as me shaking my head.

“Well, it sounds like you guys have your hands full,” I said, heading toward the door.

“And honestly I’ve got to get back down to the sheriff’s office. I’ve been on vacation and they’re going to be wondering where I am.”

I stopped in my tracks and turned around, looking around the room, my gaze finally resting on Bianca. “What day is it?” I asked, trying not to let my concern show in my

voice. The truth was, I was hungry. And the more I stood in the room with all of them, with their beating hearts, the hungrier I was getting.

“It’s Thursday,”

“You’ve been gone a week,” Antonio said. He motioned his hands towards Mae. She frowned but waved a hand and the silver thread fell away from his wrists.

“She’s hungry,” Jane said, her expression full of worry as she turned toward me. “It’s pretty bad.”

“How do you even know?” I asked.

Jane shrugged. “Air Fae. Can you believe it? Here I was raised to be a voodoo priestess and the whole time they were my surrogate parents.”

“Well, I am finding,” I concurred, “that truth is so much crazier than fiction.”

Antonio walked over to me and lifted his wrist, preparing to undo his bandage.

“What the fuck?” I said, looking down at his hand. “You can’t do that. Not here. I’m not going to do that in front of all these people.”

I saw the women of the coven exchange looks.

“What, is it kinky or something?” Jane asked.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

“No, it’s gross,” I said.

“I thought it was supposed to be like really magical and amazing, sexy,” Bianca said.

“That’s how it is in the movies.”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” I said. “It’s something gross I have to do to survive.”

“We can’t let you out on the street being hungry. Somebody must feed you and it might as well be me. I’ve been the one feeding you the whole time,” Antonio pointed out.

“You don’t have to feed her,” Mae said. “We’ll take care of her.”

She glanced over at the mess she’d made when she’d flung Antonio across the room. The beakers all came together. The glass picked itself up and the table put itself back together.

“How the fuck did you do that?” I asked. Even though the answer was obviously “magic.” Well, it was going to take me a while to get used to that and I couldn’t focus on anything while I was trying to deal with the sound of the blood pumping in my ears as I listened to it move through the veins of every person in the room.

“She really needs to eat.” Jane’s voice was muffled against the throbbing in my ears. I could feel it with every particle of my body, pulsing in my veins.

Antonio took me by the hand and led me away from the rest of the group, outside into the backyard. I had no capability of stopping him. All I could do was listen to the beat

of his heart, the pulse of it. I wanted it so bad there was nothing I would do to stop him from letting me feed on him.

“They can’t see,” I said, my voice hoarse with hunger.

“Don’t worry,” he growled out the words, sweeping me roughly into the bushes, ripping the bandage off his hand with his teeth and pressing it against my hungry mouth. I sucked and licked at his bleeding wrist, languishing in his blood that tasted like copper and heaven against my tongue. I glanced up at him, wondering if I was hurting him but his eyes were half closed as if...as if he were enjoying this.

“Are you a sadist?” I asked.

He looked out at me with a grim smile. “No. It doesn’t hurt at all. Being fed on like this, well, you’re a vampire. You should know.”

I shuddered thinking about when Xavier had turned me, the old man sucking on my neck and the deep disgrace I’d felt by the arousal of it.

My eyes were wide as I looked up at Antonio. He was aroused by this. I couldn’t stop myself though. I continued to suck at his wrist, drinking his blood hungrily. “How does it work?” I gasped the words out.

“Your fangs have venom that goes into the bloodstream before you start feeding. It has a euphoric effect and calms the victim down, making them completely entranced and comfortable while you drink.”

I wanted to rip into his flesh and empty his blood, but he carefully pulled me off his wrist. Sighing as he began to bandage it up again. I licked the blood off my lips and wiped the corner of my mouth with my finger, licking the tip when I was done.

“That’s enough,” he said. “Between me and some animals, I’ll keep you fed.”

Chapter 7

Once I had blood back in my system, I felt I could take on the world. It was a rush of energy and light, as if my body could leap in high bounds and take on wild animals.

The coven was having a debate when we went back into the house. Half of them thought I should go back to work and half of them were against it.

“I didn’t realize my job was up for discussion,” I pointed out.

“You don’t have to work anymore,” Mae explained. “You’ll get a stipend from The Estate. It’s good forever. It comes from the DGC, the demigod corporation that runs New Attica.”

“New Attica?” I asked.

“North America,” Bianca explained.

“And demigods run it?” I needed specifics.

“Yep,” Mae nodded. “They formed a corporation after they finished the wars with the Fae. We keep them out of our business by managing our own.”

I looked around at the women. “I’ve got a few things I’ve got to do. One of them is solve a murder. So, unless one of you is going to start talking about what happened to those kids in the forest, then I’m going to go back to the office.”

“I think you should go to the office,” Mae said. “But you don’t have to work out the kids’ murder. They were killed by a monster under the control of a demon. Once they

were dead, the demon went in and placed demon blood symbols on everything, trying to free the monster who was trapped in a crypt in the cemetery.”

“Is that all?” I asked, my jaw hanging open. I was going to have to keep up or I wasn’t going to be able to cut it in this new coven or with my new powers. It was like being in the police force; you either suit up and show up or you drop out. Being stuck as a vampire and needing blood every few hours, there was a lot of dropping out I could do. My maker was dead and I had nowhere else to turn, so the best thing I could do was work on trying not to look quite so desperate. “What happened to the Demon?”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

“We freed it from Jane’s body.” Bianca took a cup of tea. “But he’s corporeal now, so he can walk around and interact and talk with any normal human being. He can blend in with the crowd. We thought we were doing a spell to banish him back to Undirheim, but we just gave him freedom to walk the earth.”

“For how long?” I asked.

Everyone looked around at each other and shrugged.

“We don’t really know,” Jane said.

“Don’t forget we’re all a little new with this,” Mae said.

“Listen to me,” Antonio was suddenly very intent on Mae. “You can’t half ass this coven shit. You got that? Do you think they care that you’re new? They do because it gives them an advantage. Whoever you’re up against is thanking their lucky stars you’re new. You’ve got to figure it out and take care of business. Learn the ropes and attack.”

“We are trying.” Mae said through clenched teeth. I could see the stress was getting to her, but she was working hard to keep a solid front.

“Well, that’s why I’m here to help,” Antonio said. “A demon will be corporeal for about seventy-two hours. During this time, he’ll either have to find a host or fulfill the wishes of his master.”

“What do you mean, his master?” I asked. “I thought he was the master of the

monster?”

“Everything in the supernatural has a hierarchy system. We thrive on the idea that one person can rule them all: or one organization or one counsel. It’s a train wreck.” Antonio explained.

It wasn’t hard to understand why Antonio was single and out on his own without a pack. He was definitely not the joiner kind. He had good information, though. I took a deep breath and asked the question. “Who do demons report to?”

“Demons tend to report to the king of the demons.”

“Of course, there’s a demon king.” I remembered shaking my head. “Who is it?”

“Thrain, but he rules the underworld with an iron fist and it’s highly unusual a demon would come through and cause havoc here.” Antonio shook his head.

“But the portal was sealed by the demon king himself.” Jane looked pensively at Antonio.

“How do you know it was sealed by the Demon King,” I asked.

“We did some research on the symbols,” Bianca said. “They’re from the royal family of Thrain.”

“The demon must have a pretty high motive for going against his own king.” Mae pondered out loud.

“All we can think of is that he’s trying to get away from Undirheim and become human,” Bianca said. It means he loses immortality, but I don’t know, maybe there’s something he wants as a human?”

“Well, who could offer him humanity?” I asked. “If you find the person who can do that level of magic, and I imagine it must take quite a lot to make a demon human, then you’ll find the person who is trying to break open the cemetery.”

“It could be a demigod,” Antonio said. “They are the most powerful. A dark fairy, a light fairy, even a powerful witch could do it though. Your coven together will probably have the power to grant humanity to a demon.”

“Maybe the demon’s trying to get us all together to grant him the power?” Mae suggested.

“If he’s trying to get us to do something nice for him, he’s really going about it the wrong way,” Bianca grumbled.

“So, we have a demon on the loose who hasn’t personally killed people but has managed to have people killed for his own nefarious purposes. We don’t know who, but somebody’s cut him a deal and we need to find that person, but we also need to find the demon.” I provided a quick summary of the case as I understood it, looking around the room for additional information.

“Well, the demon’s going to be stalking around here and now he’s going to be in human form, so I think we need to get out of The Estate and hang out in the town. Maybe even split up.” Bianca suggested.

“Branson will stay up here and watch The Estate and the cemetery. Matheus is in the Waldorf, so he’ll keep an eye out there,” Mae said.

“I think Chloe and I should go back to work. I can help keep an eye on her.” Bianca offered.

“I’m coming with you,” Antonio said, standing up. I looked over and my lip curled

up in a slight snarl.

It was a visceral reaction to having him there. I didn't even understand it fully myself.

"We don't need your protection."

"Not yet you don't," Antonio said. "But the reality is I'm not worried about you, little vampire. I'm going to protect Bianca because we still haven't figured out who's got a price on her head."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm

“Wouldn’t it be the same people trying to break open the cemetery?” I asked.

“That would be the obvious choice,” Antonio concurred. “However, the price on a werewolf in this neighborhood has been around for centuries. It’s why there are no werewolves here.”

“Well, it’s got to be a Fae or a demigod. They’re the only ones who live that long,” Mae said.

“Exactly.” Bianca agreed.

“So, we’re either dealing with one or two perps,” I said.

Antonio shrugged and motioned towards the door. “Either way, it’s not safe for anyone to be alone, so I’m going to the police station with you two.”

I wasn’t sure what annoyed me more. The fact he was coming with us or the fact he wasn’t coming with us to take care of me.

Chapter 8

Bianca and I went to the police station together. We told Antonio to stay in his truck because he couldn’t sit in the waiting room staring at us. He didn’t see why not, but he agreed once Bianca told him to. It was also starting to get a little bit annoying. I wasn’t quite sure what it was, but being able to feed off Antonio had made him feel a little bit like my private property.

He wasn't. He was a lone werewolf with a personal mission to protect the underdog, Bianca. I just happened to be here.

"About time you ladies got into work," Sheriff Ted greeted us. His jowls wobbled where they hung out under his sparse gray beard. "I've set up a board in the conference room and we need to start looking a little closer to what's going on here. I made a lot of changes to it last night. "

I looked with concern over at Bianca. She'd been here a lot longer than I had and she knew Sheriff Ted better than I did. She gave me a slight shake of her head, letting me know I probably didn't have too much to worry about.

I grabbed a coffee, but when I took a sip, it tasted disgusting.

Bianca shrugged. "I guess you don't drink coffee anymore."

"Get in here," Sheriff Ted shouted through to us from the conference room. We trudged in, Bianca with her coffee still in hand. I'd thrown mine in the trash. The board was set up starting with a map of the forest around us and a mark where the bodies were found. He showed tracks drawn on the map of where we went out looking for animals.

"The best I can figure out is something tore them limb from limb and marked them with strange symbols. It looks like we're going to have to talk to every crackpot in the neighborhood, and the woods of Southern Oregon there's, well, there's a lot of crackpots." Sheriff Ted explained.

"Who are the people in the photos?" I asked.

"We have cameras up around town, so we've started to gather pictures of new people in town. You know, strangers, people we haven't seen before."

“You can do that around here?” I asked.

“We need to start checking the tourists at the Crown Hotel and anyone who signed the guestbook down at the little museum by the Hot Springs.”

“I guess that’ll be my job,” I said.

“You guessed it,” Sheriff Ted nodded. “Hey, are you feeling okay?”

“Um, yeah,” I replied cautiously. “Why?”

“You look really pale,” he commented. “I hope this work isn’t too stressful for you. It’s an active case and all.”

I looked over Bianca. When I left Indianapolis, it was for a quiet life in southern Oregon. I’d thought I was going to be writing out parking tickets and getting cats out of trees.

“I’m fine,” I responded.

“Well, this is more excitement than I’ve seen in the last forty years I’ve been on the job,” Sheriff Ted said. “It’s a quiet little town. Something strange is happening recently and we have got to figure out what.”

“Have you noticed there are a lot more tourists coming to town?” Bianca asked.

I shrugged. “I imagine murders in town like this will get some attention. Everyone’s always looking for the next mass murderer.”

“That is something we should probably consider,” Bianca nodded towards me.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

I understood what she wanted. “Sure,” I agreed. “We should research similar crimes across state and county lines.” Our goal was to get Sheriff Ted caught up in a case that was nowhere near our demon problem.

“I thought of that,” Sheriff Ted said. “Why don’t I get you on that, Bianca. Start looking around and contact other departments. I want to see if we can solve this on our own. Deputy, you take this list and go to the Crown Hotel. Find out if any of the people there are matters of interest.”

I grabbed the piece of paper off the table and walked out into the reception area.

“I thought you were supposed to wait in the car,” I said to Antonio, who was sitting there waiting for us.

“I’m not a dog,” Antonio growled at me. “I don’t do as I’m told.”

“Well, that’s apparent,” I said. “It’s not very useful when it comes to working with the team. You want to be where you tell your teammate you’re going to be, so they know where to find you.”

“Just because I haven’t been on a team in a while doesn’t mean I don’t know what they are,” he said. “I just got a feeling I should come in here.”

“Now you can have the feeling to go out,” I muttered.

“Antonio, you need to go with her.” Bianca said. “Chloe needs to go down to the Crown Hotel and start talking to people from out of town who we don’t know. The

demon could be there posing as a tourist. We don't know, but we can't send her out alone as bait for a killer."

"My prime objective is to guard you," Antonio pointed out. "You're the one with the price on your head."

"I'm sitting in the sheriff's office. What's going to happen?" Bianca said.

"Anything can happen," Antonio said. "That's one thing I know for sure, I've seen a lot of crazy shit in this world."

"She needs you," Bianca said pointedly.

Somehow those words triggered Antonio. I watched it in his movements. His ears perked up and his back got a little straighter. Still, it was not like he was pleased. He glared at Bianca.

"Fine," he grumbled. "But we're going straight to the Crown Hotel and then coming right back."

"I don't need you to take care of me," I said irritably as we walked toward the police car.

"Well, apparently your teammate thinks you do, and if we're going to do this, we're going to do it right," he insisted. "At least this way, if I'm with you can feed off me rather than off some unsuspecting patron of the crown hotel."

"I'm not an animal," I hissed.

"That's what you think," he said with a smirk, leaving me wondering exactly what vampire thing I didn't know about.

Chapter 9

The Crown Hotel was only a two-block walk from the police station, so I decided I would walk down there. I didn't really expect to find what we were looking for, but I had agreed to do my job, so that was what I was going to have to do. I had to follow the sheriff's instructions. Antonio walked next to me, and his body was a furnace. Even at the couple of feet he walked from me, I could feel the heat radiating off his body.

My body had felt icy cold since I'd been turned. It was a strange kind of cold that didn't bother me the way it would have when I was a human. With Antonio near me, it was like standing next to an inferno without feeling the burn. The idea I wasn't a human anymore still made me feel a bit strange. At forty-five, I was single; I'd never had kids. I had dedicated my life to serving in the police force, but things in Indianapolis had gotten a little bit messy forcing me to leave.

"Do you need to know what we're looking for?" Antonio asked.

"Suspects," I said.

"Suspects to distract the sheriff with," he clarified.

"If that's what it takes," I nodded in agreement.

"We could be out looking for the real killer rather than wasting our time." Antonio pointed out.

"I have a job to do," I said. "I'm going to do it and you never know, we might find the killer."

"Is following the sheriff's commands blindly your job description?" Antonio asked.

My skin flushed. “No, of course not, but he is my boss and I think in this case he’s right.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“But you know the perpetrator is a demon and he’s not shackled up at the Crown Hotel. What we need to be figuring out is where the demon is, what form he’s taken and what he’s doing.”

“In order to keep everything simple and straightforward, I need to show up for work and do what my boss asks me to. And who knows, with all the tourists who are coming into this town, we might meet one at the hotel.”

“Now you’re guessing and stretching and hoping there’s a real solution there.” Antonio dared me to deny it.

“Last time I checked I was a cop,” I said, “so why don’t you leave the sleuthing to the pros. I didn’t ask for you to come with me.”

“What Bianca said about you needing me made sense. I’m saying instead of going to the Crown Hotel and interviewing everybody, why don’t we go and find out where the demon is.”

I looked up at him. “And do you have some lead on this Demon? Maybe you have some place you know where the demons all hang out and we can go there and take a look for him?”

“Can’t say I do,” Antonio said.

“Right, because you’re a werewolf without a pack. You don’t even have a network of people to talk to you.”

“I don’t see you with a pack either, Deputy,” Antonio said, a slight bit of sarcasm running in his voice. “Keep making out I’m a loner, but last time I checked you don’t have a lot of friends or family hanging around.”

Irritation shot through me. It wasn’t like I needed that pointed out. I was used to being alone. It had always seemed a bit strange to me that officers of the law would get married and have kids when their job was so dangerous. They could be killed at any minute and leave behind a wife, a kid, a husband and partner. There was no way I was going to do that to anybody. I was going to stay isolated and in my own little world and if I died in the line of duty, it wasn’t going to affect anyone.

I stopped in my tracks and took a deep breath even though I didn’t need to breathe anymore I was dead whether I breathed or not. My body was inhaling and exhaling out of habit rather than necessity.

I had died in the line of duty and just shown back up to work. I pressed my lips together, a bit nonplussed by the observation Antonio had made.

“Let’s get these interviews done and you can get back to Bianca,” I said, a little annoyed. He arched an eyebrow at me but didn’t respond.

The woman behind the hotel desk had blonde curly hair and thin lips pressed together in a bad mood. I waved my badge, which just made her glare at me with annoyance. “You got a problem with someone at my hotel?” she asked.

Whatever the Crown Hotel had once been in its day, it had lost some of its lavish charm now. It was an old brick building with a façade that made it look rather grand, but inside, everything was faded and tattered. Basically, it needed a really good overhaul.

Just like the lady behind the counter. Even though she was young, she looked a little

bit worn out. I peered at her nametag. “Heather, we’re looking for some people who have been acting suspiciously. People that have been acting a little differently to your typical holiday goers.”

“You mean all those happy couples from the city?” she asked curiously. “The happiest couples come through here, holding hands and kissing faces before they go to their rooms to fuck their brains out all weekend. Then they back to their homes in the cities and their high-end jobs. They leave us to change the sheets.”

Antonio raised both of his eyebrows at her, his eyes wide with surprise. It was fairly standard. I had interviewed hundreds of hotel clerks and shop attendants and there was always a hint of a bitterness. Probably because they had to deal with the public all the time.

“But there’s been no single men checking in recently?” I asked. “Somebody on their own, maybe even a woman on the road?”

“There was one guy,” the woman said. “Fiery red hair and a strong jaw line. He was something else, but I don’t think he was suspicious.”

“What room is he in?” I asked, giving her a warning stare.

“We don’t want any trouble here,” she said.

“The only way you’re going to stay out of trouble is if you don’t give me that man’s room number,” I said.

“Twenty-nine,” she said with a sigh. “I’ll walk you over there.”

Chapter 10

We walked with Heather up to the door and knocked on it a few times, but there was no answer.

“I can’t let you in without a search warrant.”

Antonio let out a low growl.

I glared at him. “Stop it. She’s a kid. She doesn’t realize the amount of time it’ll take me to walk over to the police station and do all the paperwork to get a search warrant.” I looked at her wondering if I need to spell out a threat. “Or you could just let me in the room.”

“You don’t scare me none,” Heather said. “I’m going to open the door, but I want you know it’s not because I’m afraid of you. It’s because I’m a good citizen. If there’s somebody in there doing something wrong in the neighborhood, then I’m going to want to know about it or I’m going to want to help to stop it from happening.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Got it,” I said as she stepped forward and unlocked the door.

We stepped into the room and opened the curtains, switching on the light so we could see what was going on.

“Holy fuck,” Heather said.

The entire inside of the room was almost totally singed. Every surface: the bedspread, the sheets, the pillows. The room had a faint tinge of smoke, as if something had been smoldering in the fireplace all day. Only there was no fireplace.

“He’s done a lot of damage,” Heather said. “I have to report this.”

“Consider it reported,” I said.

“Aren’t you going to take notes or anything?” she asked.

“I don’t think so,” I replied as I watched Antonio move around the room stealthily. He walked into every corner of the small dingy space, sniffing it out and looking around. I could tell he was doing crime scene investigation, only with his nose. “Give us a moment in the room.” I motioned for Heather to go out.

She took one look at me for a moment and then glanced back around the room. “My boss is going to be so pissed when he finds out,” she said.

“Why don’t you go call him,” I said.

“Oh hell no. I think you need to let him know,” she said. “This type of news is much better coming from the police than coming from me. He’ll think it’s my fault.”

I tried to look at her. “Is it?” I asked. She blushed a bright red and I realized there was something going on she hadn’t told me about.

“No, ma’am, I didn’t do this,” she said.

“But you know who did.”

“I checked him into the room,” she said.

Antonio walked up behind her and began sniffing over her head and shoulders in a way that was invasive and clearly unnecessary.

“You had sex with him,” he said.

“What’s it to you?” she asked Antonio. “I don’t know him, and I didn’t see him again after. He’s been in and out of his room, just like every other fucker who comes and stays here. Another good-looking city guy who got his kicks in Cougar Creek for the weekend and visits the hot springs.”

I took out pen and paper. “Can you give me a description?” I asked.

“He’s compact,” she said. “But loaded in all the right areas, bastard.”

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“Something weird. Rar’goth. There was a lot of stuff about him that was cool. Except his body temperature. I don’t know what he was doing in here, but his body temperature was so hot I could feel it, you know, inside me.” She looked at me as if I

would understand, but my eyes were wide with shock.

“OK I think that might not be relevant to the conversation,” I said.

“Yeah, but I had to tell someone,” she said. “When you look around this room, it’s crazy¬, what do you expect.”

“Why would he come and stay at a hotel?” I asked Antonio.

“He’s recently corporeal, so he’s investigating what it means to be corporeal. You know, have sex, stay in a bed, things like that.”

“But he doesn’t seem to have it under control.”

“He was freed by witches’ magic,” Antonio said. “Demons are responsible to a portal in answer to Thrain. They’re not allowed to leave their portal and they’re not allowed to come and live on earth. Somehow, he’s used the witches’ magic to break free of his fealty to Thrain.”

“Okay fine. I’m just going to go with this.” I walked around the room. “So, you’re a demon who’s in a physical body and you’re interested in experiencing everything available to you. You assume he’s eaten, assume he drank. So, he came here, he had sex with our friend Heather, and then what would he do?”

Antonio and I looked at each other at the same time, connecting on the same thought.

“The hot springs,” we both said.

Chapter 11

The hot springs were part of the river making up Cougar Creek. At the lower end of the town the creek splayed out and joined hot springs that bubbled up from underground. The hot springs themselves were an oasis of large flat stones and bubbling warm whirlpools of water. The hot water mixed with the cold water, creating delightful eddies of hot and cold. The entire set up made it ideal for visitors to lie around and do natural mud masks while the waters provided nutrients to their skin.

The tourists made it seem really busy, but compared to Indianapolis, this place was a desert with no one around. On a Wednesday afternoon I didn't expect to see anybody at the Hot Springs, so I wasn't sure what a demon would be doing there.

“We'll have to go back and get the car,” I said to Antonio.

“Did you forget how fast you can move?” Antonio said.

“Did you forget a large white wolf running through downtown in broad daylight is going to get a little bit of attention?” I asked, shaking my head at him and walking toward the police station.

“I've been a wolf a lot longer than you've been a vampire,” he retorted. “I'm pretty sure I know how to hide myself.”

“Look, I’ve had about all of the weirdness I can take for one day and I’m still chasing a demon,” I said. “If you don’t mind, we’re going to walk back to the police station, we’re going to get in the cop car and we’re going to drive out all nice and quiet to the Hot Springs, where we will see if the demon has visited. Based on what he did to the hotel room, we should be able to recognize if he’s been here.”

“Fine,” came Antonio’s terse reply.

“Why is he sticking around?” I asked. “Isn’t being corporeal the thing he wanted?”

“It means he’s corporeal,” Antonio explained, “but he’s burning with flames also, which makes it a bit of a problem.”

“Kind of like being a werewolf,” I said with a smile.

“A little more inconvenient if he spontaneously bursts into flames.” Antonio pointed out.

We got into the cop car and drove out to the Hot Springs. “Why would the spell not work completely on him?” I asked, still trying to understand the supernatural world I’d found myself in. At the same time I was feeling a little bit sick to my stomach, and I could tell it was going to be time to feed again. I had to find a better way to feed than constantly snacking on Antonio.

“Well, the witches were only trying to do one thing,” Antonio said. “They were trying to free Jane, the psychic in the Coven, from the demon that latched onto her. Sometimes when you do that, you sever it so hard you cut them free from everything. So now he’s a loose cannon, out of control without a stabilizing power. His fealty to his Lord is gone, but they didn’t ground his energy into anything except the fire.”

“They did a spell to banish him back to Undirheim.” I said. “It didn’t work. Instead, it

gave him the ability to walk like a human on the earth.”

“There must have been a split-second distraction,” Antonio pondered. “That was the demon’s opportunity, and he broke free. He created a sever. It must be what’s letting the fire come through so strongly and uncontrolled from him.”

It suddenly made perfect sense why he’d be at the hot springs. “He’s trying to put out the fire.”

“No, he probably knows water doesn’t put out demon flames. Maybe there’s a Nereid there he’s trying to talk to. Sometimes the Nereids can help.” Antonio explained.

“What?” I asked.

He peered at me sideways. “Nereids. They’re water nymphs.”

“Is there anything I’ve heard of that isn’t real?” I asked.

“Just Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny,” Antonio grinned. “One thing, if we do meet a water nymph, don’t call them that. The name’s gotten such a bad reputation they refuse to use it and they only go by Nereids.”

“Right. Noted,” I said. “Next time I run into a Nereid I’ll make sure not to offend them.” I shook my head. There was no way I was going to make it in the supernatural world.

“You’re hungry again,” Antonio said.

“I’m fine.” My lips were dry and cracked already. It was obvious.

Antonio was already undoing the bandage on his wrists.

“I don’t like the way it feels,” I said.

He looked at me quietly for a moment, his eyes narrow and his lips pressed together.

“You have to eat.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“I don’t have to have you every time,” I said.

A dark light flashed in his eyes, and he started tying up the bandage on his wrist again.

“That’s right you don’t,” he said, “but until you learn how to kill something, you’re going to be awfully hungry, so you let me know when you change your mind.”

I chewed on my lower lip. I didn’t mind killing something, a rat or a small animal. Without another vampire to show me how to do it, though, it’d be harder. I didn’t know how to latch on to such a small animal and not kill it.

I pulled into the dirt parking lot of the hot springs and stared at the painted plywood sign that announced Cooper Creek Hot Springs were open for the season.

I stepped out of my car and drew my gun as we walked toward the entrance, I only slowed when I noticed Antonio’s gaze and the slight smirk on his face.

“The gun’s not going to do anything to a demon,” he said. “In fact, it’ll do the opposite. His body, even his corporeal body, will absorb it and spit it back out at you. Before you know what’s going on you’ll be dead.”

“I am dead.” I hesitated, staring at him with the cocked gun in my hand, pointed at the sky. There was no reason for Antonio to lie to me.

“Dead dead.” He raised an eyebrow at me. “You’re a vampire. Use your natural weapons of destruction.”

“No time like the present to face your demon,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 12

I had a black belt in karate. It had been a requirement I made for myself. Even before I knew I wanted to be a police officer, I’d started training in martial arts when I was a kid. I’d been tired of being the small one who everybody picked on, so I’d gotten a black belt in mixed martial arts, and nobody messed with me or my friends again.

As I tucked my gun back into its holster, I shook my shoulders out a bit and flexed my muscles. I’d gone after Antonio with a gun. I hadn’t really tested out my vampire skills. I had the sense that was all about to change right now.

There was a feeling in the air I couldn’t quite understand, but it made my senses tingle. It was almost as if there was a sonar energy hitting my face.

“What is that?” I asked.

Antonio grimaced at me. “What’s what?”.

“The vibration, the pulse. The energy thing. It’s pounding in my ears.”

He stopped dead in his tracks and turned his full body to face me. “Do you have the pulse?”

“The pulse?” I asked, having no idea what he was talking about.

“It’s a thing known among supernaturals, but it’s extremely rare. I haven’t met anybody with it. I’ve heard rumors of people saying they had it. What’s it like?” he asked.

“It’s like a sonar is hitting me in the face,” I said. “It’s really not pleasant.”

“You’ve got to get a different take on it,” he said. “What you’re feeling is the energy pulse of a magical creature. Every magical creature has a signature energy, and some people have different ways of seeing them. I heard Trina can see auras and supernatural sparkles in individuals who have powers, but people who can feel it on a sensory level can be used as a weapon to find magic creatures. You’d make a hell of a bounty hunter,” he said. “Probably the best.”

“How do you know so much about Cougar Creek Coven?” I asked.

“I’m a bounty hunter.” He ran a hand over his mouth. “I do my research. Especially when I’m entering new territory.”

I burst out laughing, thinking of the burly tatted guys with the mohawks and the mullets who would walk around the courthouse offering outrageous deals to the poor bastards who were getting locked up for crimes they pretended they hadn’t committed. “You think I’d make a bounty hunter?”

“Yeah, yeah I do,” he said.

“Why can I feel the pulse now and I couldn’t feel it before?” I asked.

“Because you have the intention of finding this guy,” he said. “You could do it for anybody, but you have to send out the sonar and then as you get closer, it comes back.”

“Is that why I thought he was at the hot springs?” I asked

“Probably combination of that and common sense,” Antonio said. “Come on, let’s get our guy.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

We walked down the dirt trail in single file toward the Hot Springs. Antonio shifted into wolf form and lead the way. I followed him. With my senses on high alert I was able to hear tons of sounds. The rustling of every little beetle in the forest seemed to be a cacophony in my ears. It was almost too much. The wind rustling in the leaves and then the incessant pulsing of the magical creature I was focused on.

I didn't care. I felt like a bloodhound going after him. It didn't matter if I was dead. I was a sworn officer of the law and this man had instigated the death of two citizens of this region, whether they were supernatural or not.

The path opened as we approached the edge of the creek spreading out to the pools where the hot springs were. I'd visited the space one time since I moved to Cougar Creek, as a cursory overview of the region and to make sure I understood their number one tourist attraction. I hadn't gone in because it was gross. Who wanted to sit in a bunch of water a bunch of other people sat in? Even though it flowed, the bears upstream were probably peeing in it already.

We stood in the shadows of the trees for a moment, scanning the hot springs. The pulse was coming from upriver. He was clearly in the water, because Antonio couldn't catch his scent anymore, but the pulse didn't stop. It was constantly hitting me in the face. I turned and guided him carefully toward where I knew our prey would be. I took a deep breath, wondering for a moment how I was going to address this. Normally I would draw my gun and say "Halt I'm an officer of the law. You are under arrest" but in this case he wasn't going to care. In fact, he would probably laugh. A better option was to draw him out.

He was a demon. He'd clearly been interested in sex as one of his corporeal

pleasures. I was surprised the girl didn't have burn marks on her. She must have gotten to him before he began disintegrating back into the demon world.

"I'm here to make a deal with you," I said loudly.

A laugh echoed up the creek. Antonio's head whipped around to get a sense of exactly where Rar'goth was. It didn't matter to me. I already had a sense. The sonar was starting to calm down as if satisfied the criminal was within reach. As a cop, I had always been a hunter, always wanted to go out and find my perp and now as a vampire it felt no different. The demon was in corporeal form at the moment, and I was hungry.

I moved quickly and in mere seconds I was standing right in front of the demon. He had the body of a human, but his skin was burning off in light little veins. He was sitting low in the hot spring, staring up at me.

"What do you want from me, vampire?" He grinned up at me. "I am dying."

"Well, I can make it a lot faster for you," I said, immediately diving into the water and getting a grip on his neck, I held him down with as much force as I could manage. He sprang away from me in seconds, slamming an elbow up against my chin. If I was human, it would've drawn blood, but now it only split the skin to the bone.

Rar'goth turned to me. "You're going to have a hard time getting me down, young one. Even with me dying. I'm not interested in any deal that lets me die sooner. I'm only interested in a deal that keeps me here on earth in a living corporeal body."

"I can get you time in a body," I said, not knowing if I could or not. Antonio's face gave away his surprise at my claim, but what the hell? I was in a coven of witches. We had a werewolf and a psychic who was actually a Fae. We had a lot of power.

Surely there had to be something we could do for the demon?

“Why the hell would you want to help me, vamp?” Rar’goth asked.

“I know what kind of punishment you’re going to face,” I said bitterly. “I’ve been punished before by my commanding officer. I know what it’s like.”

At this Antonio did swivel his head to look at me.

Rar’goth let out a big sigh of relief as if he was understood finally for the first time. He took a step toward me. “What do you want from me?” He asked, his voice quiet. Resigned.

“We wanna know who offered you something for attacking the cemetery?”

“There’s no way in hell I can tell you,” Rar’goth said, his eyes opening wide in real fear. “I’d sooner die.”

“Well, you are dying,” I said. “Either you tell us who it was, and we save your ass, or you go back to Hell. Which sounds more appealing to you?”

“How do I know you’re not bullshitting me?” Rar’goth asked. “You human types are the same. Vampire or not, you lie through your teeth.”

“Come up to the estate tomorrow at midnight,” I said. “We’ll arrange it then. I’ll have the whole Coven there to help you.”

With those words I turned and walked away, not wanting him to see the doubt and uncertainty in my face. I had no idea what we were going to do, but I knew we needed another meeting with the demon, and we needed it on more equal terms. We needed to find a way to connect with him, because right now, he was our only lead to

the real person who was fighting to destroy the cemetery.

Chapter 13

“What the hell did you just promise him?” Antonio asked the second we stepped through the entrance gates of the hot springs. He’d transformed back into a man. I was always startled by his bright blue eyes and his white hair. As a wolf he looked the majestic, but as a man... He looked delectable.

“There’s something he wants in corporeal form he can’t get in any other way. I don’t think it’s escaping from Thrain, and I don’t think it’s to experience being a human. There’s a reason why he’s willing to die, and we need to find out what that reason is,” I said.

“Do you understand you can’t actually deliver what you just promised him?” Antonio’s voice resonated with irritation and anger. “How could you even do that. Do you realize you’re inviting a demon onto the estate property with a lie?”

“You don’t know it’s a lie. I don’t know it’s a lie. Hell, I’ve been a vampire for twenty-four hours and you don’t even know the witches, so how do you know it’s a lie? How do you know they can’t give the demon a body? Heck, there’s lots of bodies in the cemetery. Maybe he can have a body from there.”

My voice had gotten a bit short because I was irritated with Antonio. We got in the car and drove back to the police station. In silence.

“Aren’t you getting out?” he asked when we pulled up.

“No, I’ve got stuff I’ve got to do at home,” I said quietly. I didn’t want to tell him the truth, which was that I needed to try to figure all of this out in my head. It was so complicated becoming a supernatural and trying to solve a murder case while trying

to fit into a group of people who were now my Coven. I'd been alone for my entire life. I mean, I didn't even fit into the police station I was stationed at in Indianapolis.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Suit yourself,” Antonio said, stepping out of the car. “Call me if you need some food.” He held up his wrist toward me. I shook my head.

“No thanks.” I said curtly before I stepped on the gas. I drove forward, slamming the passenger car door shut. It didn’t take me long to get to my house. When I’d moved up from Indianapolis, it’d been pretty easy to go from owning a house in the city to owning a one-bedroom old wooden house in Cougar Creek. A community of houses ran up narrow streets on the east bank of Cougar Creek and up along the hillside. From the neighborhood you could look across the small valley and see The Estate and the cemetery on the other hillside.

I walked in my house and took a deep breath. It was an old one-bedroom small Victorian cottage like almost every house in the region. There was a loft with a small deck that I went up to in the darkness. My eyes pierced the darkness across the creek. I could easily see the cemetery. It had a faint glow about it. The light must have been the wards. I wondered if every supernatural could see them. If it was something to do with being a vampire, being a member of the coven, or if it was something to do with this thing Antonio had called the pulse.

I went into my garage where I kept all my sporting-goods, my rowing machine, my elliptical trainer, my weights and where I also kept my whiteboard. I hadn’t really used it. I hadn’t been working on many cases. The last case in Indianapolis had kind of worn me out, but I hadn’t been able to let go of my whiteboard. I had spent so many hours of my life sitting there staring at it, that now it seemed crazy to let it go into a dumpster. So many memories of so many cases were tied up in the stupid white thing.

“Let’s get you out of here,” I said, moving aside some of my workout gear to make a path for the whiteboard to go into my living room. I spent the next few hours on the Internet printing out photographs and newspaper articles and taping them to the whiteboard. I printed out everything I could find out about Cougar Creek; the murders and strange phenomenon happening in southern Oregon. Then I expanded my search, looking for odd occurrences in other places. It wasn’t until sunset I realized I had gone far down the rabbit hole and was looking for supernatural events in the most unlikely of places.

A knock on the door got my attention and had me focused in seconds.

My pulse was going off, so it was a supernatural creature. These old houses didn’t have eye holes to look through, so I just had to open the door and hope for the best.

I sighed with relief when I saw Jane jogging in place in the front yard.

“I was up for a run,” she said, taking a deep breath and wiping the sweat off her forehead. “I thought I’d stop by and say hello and see how you’re doing. It can be a bit much, huh?”

“A bit?” I asked. “Have you ever had to suck blood?”

“No,” she said. “But if you need something to eat, you can feed on me.”

“No!” I stepped back and motioned her in the house. “I’d rather go hungry. I can’t feed on you and I can’t continue to feed on Antonio. I can’t. No. I just can’t.”

“But you have to,” she came inside. “You can’t not eat and now you’re a vampire you can’t not drink blood. It’s your thing.” Jane shrugged and gave me a sideways smile.

“It’s like you’re telling me eating moldy monkey brains is my thing now.”

“Does it really taste that disgusting?” she asked.

“No,” I said, grabbing a glass out of the kitchen cupboard and filling it with tap water for her. “In fact, it’s really kind of good, but that’s not the point. The point is I must get it, but who I have to get it from or what...I haven’t got it all figured out yet. It’s like I’m still trying to figure out who murdered these kids and how do we stop them from murdering again.”

“Look, we appreciate the need to find the demon,” Jane smiled, and took the glass of water. “We’re also concerned about you and your ability to transition into becoming a supernatural. It’s not easy and you’re taking it in your stride. You just became a vampire. Now you’re already showing up for work and trying to solve a supernatural case using human tendencies or human methods.” She motioned towards the white board. It was now covered in articles and string and tape and photographs.

“I found him,” I said.

She looked at me, her gaze wide and dumbfounded.

“You found the demon?” she asked, looking over the whiteboard.

“Yes,” I said. “I did what the sheriff told me to do, which was strangely the right thing to do in this case. It isn’t always, but this time it worked.”

“What happened?” she asked. “You don’t look dead or anything. Well, now actually you do look dead because you’re already dead, but he didn’t burn you out of existence which I think he’s probably pretty capable of doing.”

“He’s dying,” I said.

“Oh, really. So ’s a good thing, right? I mean, I feel bad for him and all, but he did

kill two people, so he kind of deserves to go back to Undirheim. He'll be made to answer to Thrain."

"I have a slightly different take on it," I said. "He has something we need."

"How can he have something we need?" Jane asked.

"He didn't come up with the whole idea of attacking the coven all on his own in the cemetery. He's just a demon looking for a deal. You guys have said it yourself. He's the only link we have to the person or being behind this, so if we let him die without him telling us who it is, then we're not any better off than we were before."

"What are you saying?" Jane asked. "I'm capable of reading someone's mind, but out of respect I'd rather just ask you the question and let you answer it."

"I think we need play his game," I said.

"What do you mean, play his game?" Jane put her hands on her hips and cocked her head toward me. "He wants to stay alive. We can't help a demon stay alive."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“I don’t know if it is even possible or not.”

“Hilda will know,” Jane insisted. “Seriously. This guy is a demon who has gone AWOL from Undirheim. They’re going to be looking for him and what they do to him is out of our jurisdiction. We can’t be seen protecting him.” Jane spoke as if she was speaking to a child.

“I don’t wanna protect him. I want to give him a chance at life,” I insisted.

“How do you plan to do that?” Jane asked.

“I have no idea, but I’m going to ask the Coven if we can help him live in exchange for information.”

“Are you sure this is what you wanna do?” Jane asked softly.

“What do you mean? I don’t think there’s any other way about it.”

“There are always multiple ways to get to the same result,” Jane said. “I mean, we have options. Maybe giving a demon life isn’t the best option.”

I frowned at Jane. I wanted her to agree with me. I tried to be cool about it, but the reality was I thought it was the best shot we had at getting the next lead.

This was the exactly the kind of situation that got me in trouble back in Indianapolis. Now wasn’t the time. I needed to learn from my mistakes.

“Let’s take it to the coven and see what they have to say.”

I stood up so we could head out the door.

Chapter 14

“You promised a demon what?” Trina’s bony arms crossed in on her chest as she frowned at me.

“We don’t have to deliver him exactly what I said, but we have to do something,” I pointed out. All the witches had come plus Jane, Bianca and Mae. I had done thorough research on the people of The Estate when we started the investigation on the murders. Toern was a new face to the crowd, but from the way he sat protectively next to Jane, his dark eyes brooding, I could see he had bonded with the group. Branson and Matheus stood like sentries at the door. We sat in the red room discussing what everyone thought would be the best choice of action under the circumstances. “Cops do it all the time. It’s called bartering.”

“Well, maybe that’s one of the problems,” Trina said.

“Look, maybe we can’t deliver, but I think she has a point,” Mae said. “We need to find out who’s behind this if we’re really going to secure the protection and safety of the cemetery. If we keep fighting the creatures who come against us, they’re going to keep sending them. Ultimately, we’ll break.”

“Especially if they get to us before we have all the members of the blood pact together,” Bianca said. “We have to fulfill the rest of the stones.”

I pointed out. “Look, we don’t know when the bad guys are coming, but the one thing we can be sure of is they are coming. The demon is our only lead, we need to take it.”

“Right, but she said to the demon we can provide him with life,” Bianca said. “Does that mean one of us is giving up a body so the demon can have it? Because if that’s the case, I’m out.” She whispered the last words.

“Maybe we don’t have to bring him back to life,” Jane said. “Maybe we can do some work. If you bring him here, maybe I can connect with him, and we can figure out exactly what it is he knows.”

“Are you saying you wanna mind meld with a demon?” Bianca asked. “That didn’t go too well last time. How do you know he won’t jump inside you again?”

“If it’s our best chance of finding out who sent him here to mess with the cemetery, then yeah, I’m going to do it,” Jane nodded.

A low snarl went up from Toern. “I don’t like the idea,” he said in a deep voice.

“It’s going to be fine,” Jane said. “It won’t take me a minute. I’ll just reach my aura out, connect it with his, do a psychic mind meld, and boom, get the details and get out before anyone even knows what happened. Then we can let him return to Thrain.”

“Do you guys think we should go through it before we even meet with him?”

“No, don’t do that,” Hilda said. “Demons are naturally suspicious at the best of times.”

“If Rar’goth does come here, trusting you and believes you’re able to deliver on your word, he’s still going to be cautious. He’s going to send out signals and try to determine if there’s any demon activity over here that wasn’t set up by him. So probably the worst thing you can do is call Thrain.”

“We’re really going to do this?” Bianca asked the room in general.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

Mae looked around at the rest of the coven. “I say yes,” she said.

“Well, if you say yes, I say yes. I’m in,” Bianca nodded, holding up her hands.

Drake gave a mischievous grin. “Front row seats to a demon dying? You can count me in.”

“And me as well,” Anita said.

One by one everybody in the room agreed, even the guys, Branson, Matheus and Toern. Hilda shrugged. “I’ve seen some crazy things in my day. This might be the craziest thing I’m ever going to experience, so considering I won’t live forever, let’s do this and see what happens.”

“You guys are insane,” Antonio interrupted the general assent of the entire room. “Am I the only one of the lot of you with any common sense? You’re talking about taking on a demon. You’re lying to him and then you think all this is going to turn out fine? We already have one person who shouldn’t leave The Estate because she’s got a price on her head.”

“I went out today,” Bianca said.

“Against what the rest of us thought we had agreed on,” Antonio retorted.

“He’s got a point,” Mae agreed. “We need to find out who put the price on you, because it’s another thing we can’t have hanging over our heads.”

“One problem at a time,” I said. “We don’t even have a lead.”

“I’m going to go to the Waldorf and ask around,” Matheus said. “As long as there are people watching Bianca and she’s safe.”

Bianca smiled warmly at her boyfriend. “I’ll be fine, hun. I don’t think any of us should go anywhere alone right now. It’s not safe with demons running around.”

Branson leaned against the wall, folding his arms across his chest. “I’m staying on The Estate.”

“I’m watching Bianca’s back,” Antonio said.

Matheus frowned at him. “Don’t watch it too closely.”

“I’m just here as a brother wolf,” Antonio held up his hands. “You guys look like you could use some help anyhow.”

“I’ll go with you, Matheus,” Toern said.

“That leaves the coven plus two,” Mae nodded grimly. “The greater our numbers the better.”

“I don’t plan on being gone long,” Matheus said. “Just long enough to get some information.”

“Well, the demon’s going to be here by noon tomorrow.” Bianca kissed Matheus as he and Toern left the room. “We better start working on some binding spells if we’re planning on getting some information out of him.”

Chapter 15

“You’re hungry,” Bianca said to me. We were sitting in the red room with the fire going as the rain poured down outside.

Feeling miserable I had slunk away to one corner of the couch, my arms folded on my midriff and my legs bent up beneath me. “I’m fine.”

“You might be dead, but you still need to eat,” Jane said. “Where is Antonio?”

“Don’t,” I said. The word came out a little harsher than I intended, but the thought of his blood racing through his body was tantalizing, tempting, and something I couldn’t do anymore. I needed to find a different way to feed, not sucking off this guy’s wrists. I needed to be able to take care of myself. I turned to Bianca. “Teach me how to hunt,” I asked.

“You make it sound like I know how to hunt,” she said. “Remember, I’ve only been a werewolf for a couple of weeks.”

“Yeah, but at least you have some instincts in there. Who’s got instinct to be a vampire? It’s not even remotely human or even an animal, which is what you are.”

“I thank you very much.” Bianca threw me a sideways grin.

“That’s not what I meant,” I said.

“It’s alright, I get it,” Bianca said. “You’re hungry.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Have you actually killed any animals with your teeth?” I asked.

“What happens in wolf form stays in wolf form.” Bianca smiled and shook her head.

“But we do need to teach you how to hunt if you don’t want to eat off Antonio and you won’t eat off any of us.”

“I most certainly won’t. I’m not going to eat off any humans and I can’t eat off you. I’m not going to eat off anyone in the Coven and I’m certainly not going to eat a random stranger.” The thought of sucking some random person’s blood was disgusting to me.

“Great so you’re going to be a vegetarian vampire.”

“Last time I checked, a chipmunk wasn’t vegetarian,”

“You’re going to eat a chipmunk?”

“I need blood,” I said.

“Ew,” Bianca made a face.

I shook my head. “At least I don’t shed.”

“Touché.” Bianca smiled good-naturedly. I looked over and smiled at her. It felt good to have camaraderie. I’d been in the forces, and I’d had camaraderie to a certain extent, but there came a point where I was the career police officer. Everybody would go home to their families and have gatherings on the weekends and be with their

spouses and their kids. Then there was me, kind of an extra attaché to all of those events. Never quite fitting in.

But here I was with this mismatched group of women, who were all single with most of the kids moved out and having their first meaningful relationships. It made me feel warm and comfortable inside knowing there was a place in the world that made sense. Now we had to find a way to protect it.

“I don’t think you’re going to be able to eat a chipmunk,” Bianca said. “That’s one drop of blood for you. You need to eat a lot more, I guess. I mean, I’m not vampire, but a Chipmunk’s going to be an appetizer for you. We need to think about something more sustainable.”

“Is there a hospital around here? Maybe she can get blood from the blood bank.” Jane suggested.

“That sounds so disgusting to me.” I cringed. “I don’t want random human blood.”

Bianca stood up. “Well, if you don’t want human blood and you can’t eat a chipmunk, we’re going to need to find you something bigger and better to sustain you.”

“It’s raining,” I said.

“Doesn’t change the fact you’re hungry,” Bianca said. “Here’s what we’re going to do. You move really fast as a vampire, even as a new vampire. I’m going to go out there and somehow, I’m going to sniff out an animal for you to feed on. Then you go and do what you did to Antonio.”

“Can you have it not be a bear?” I asked.

“Yeah, I don’t think a bear is in our future,” Bianca grinned. “I’m not going after any predators. There’s deer and elk out here, you will be fine.”

It was amazing to step outside in the rainy night and feel its crisp droplets on my skin. I could see in the dark without any problem whatsoever. It was a marvel; as if I had on night vision goggles. “Why can I see in the dark?”

Bianca shrugged. “Must be a vampire thing,”

“Do you know how much it sucks not knowing what to do as a vampire?” I said. “I mean, the vamp who turned me was a creepy old motherfucker, but at least he could’ve taught me something about being one

“I was turned into a werewolf by a witch,” Bianca said. “I get it.”

“Antonio is the first wolf I’ve ever met and based on the way he is-” I pressed my lips together. Antonio was protective of Bianca. He was protective of me too, but not quite the same way.

“He definitely has a thing for you,” I said, feeling a knot in my stomach I didn’t like.

Bianca whipped her head around and looked at me, laughing. “Are you kidding me? He’s here to do a job for me. Fulfill some sort of honor code he has in his head. He’s smitten over you, my dear. I thought you would’ve seen it by now.”

“He came here to protect you. It’s all he ever talks about,” I said.

“Yeah, but it’s not a romance thing. It’s some sort of a weird pack thing he’s got going. I don’t exactly get it, but he’s taking some sort of protective stance. He doesn’t like the idea werewolves were told to stay out of Southern Oregon. He thinks we should be able to go where we want. I could be a three-legged, five eyed wolf and he

would still want to protect me. It's instinctual. I don't get it, but I bet if there were other wolves here, they would want to protect us as well."

"If you say so," I said.

Bianca grinned. "You're jealous," she said. "You've got a crush on the boy werewolf."

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“I don’t have a crush on a werewolf. Last time I checked vampires and werewolves are supposed to hate each other.” I pointed out.

Bianca grabbed me in a thick hug “I don’t hate you.”

“It’s different. We are bound by a blood pact with the pendant,” I said.

Bianca raised her nose in the air, sniffing at the wind.

“Do you smell prey?” I asked, salivating for blood.

“Come on.” She grinned mischievously at me. “Try to keep up.”

In seconds she had transformed into a giant red wolf. She let out a series of small yips and then went racing through the forest. I stayed on her heels following her over the hill and down the other side.

In minutes we came to a large flat pasture with a river running through the middle of it. A large herd of elk slept standing in the dark field. We stood on the edge of the pasture, watching them, knowing they were sniffing the air and could tell we were in their vicinity.

We were the predators.

The creatures were magnificent even in the dark and rainy night. Their massive necks looking almost like a lion’s mane.

“I’m going in,” I said. “If you plan on killing one of these things, please don’t ever let me see that.”

I looked across at Bianca and raised my chin.

But already I could feel the hunger in my veins calling to me as I was enveloped in the pulsing heavysset heartbeats of the elk standing in the rain.

I loved my new ability to move faster than I had ever dreamed possible. I remembered as a child I’d discovered how fast a cheetah could run and I had always been jealous. I was pretty sure I could easily overtake a cheetah now.

The elk sniffed the air. It looked like they were going to make a run for it, but I was faster. In seconds I was near one of them and had it on its side. I knew the venom in my fangs would soothe the animal and allow me to feed on it. I went for the lower part of its neck, near the front of its chest. Sinking my teeth into it, I felt the skin pierce, and blood began to flow. The copper ecstasy fueled me. I lost myself in the pumping blood as it flowed into my mouth and nourished my dead body.

Chapter 16

“What the hell are you doing,” I was ripped off the side of the elk and thrown to the ground.

I bared my teeth, bursting to my feet. ‘the elk blood dripped warm from my mouth, down my neck and across my chest. Antonio was glaring at me as I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

“You almost killed it,” he said.

I choked, looking at the large elk panting on its side in the field. “Shit,” I muttered.

“Is it going to be okay?”

“Yeah, now you’ve stopped feeding on it. It still has enough blood. It’ll be fine,” Antonio said.

“I was about to stop her.” Bianca came up next to us.

Antonio whirled on her. “You shouldn’t be out of the estate.”

“You’re not my keeper,” Bianca said. “I needed to come out and go for a run. I thought you of all people would understand.”

“I understand a lot more things than you give me credit for,” Antonio said. “In this case, you have no idea what’s going on. The minute you leave the estate, people can get a signature on you. The minute you left, which at this stage, I think was about an hour ago, headhunter alarms everywhere started going off.”

“What the fuck?” I asked, turning to look at Bianca. “Did you know this was going to happen?”

“No, of course I didn’t know.” She looked at Antonio. “How did you know this was going to happen?” She slowly backed up. I felt the razor-sharp points of my teeth, ready to sink them into his throat if I suspected he was.

He practically rolled his eyes. “Do you really think I would be out here trying to protect your ass if I was trying to collect the bounty. You guys are so naïve. I could’ve taken you in without even thinking about it.”

“Nice way to rub it in,” I said with a smirk.

“Regardless, we’ve got to get you back to the estate.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” I said. “If a werewolf in southern Oregon is enough to set off the alarms, how do you get to move around freely?”

“It depends on the signature you give out,” he explained. “I have ways of changing my signature.”

“Ways you’re not going to share with me?” Bianca asked.

“Ways that wouldn’t work for you,” Antonio said. “Now let’s get back to The Estate.”

There was something quite remarkable about running through the forest with the wolves at my side. I wasn’t sure who was protecting who, but I was exhilarated and free, until suddenly a blinding light flashed in the forest in front of us, throwing us all off our feet.

I sailed through the air and smashed into the ground. The wet earth pressed up against my skin into my face and my nose. It smelled like a grave.

“What the fuck?” I mumbled, looking around for my companions. They were still in their wolf form, but they were lying on their sides, not moving.

I stood up, getting my bearings. The world was still tilting and whirling and there was a loud throbbing in my ears. The pulse. I had the pulse. I needed to find out where the enemy was.

I scanned my periphery vision, sending energy by focusing on danger. Something

pulsed back at me, moving at the back of my head. I spun around. Standing there were three of the biggest, burliest men I'd ever seen in my life. But they weren't just men. Their legs were like goat's and they each had horns of varying sizes on top of their heads; their chests were naked in the rain. The largest one in the center of the other two had his crossbow pointed directly at the space between my eyes.

“Make one move and this arrow will get you. It's silver and basted in garlic and holy water, the very end of it being a wooden tip. We've got a little something for everyone here. I suggest nobody move a muscle. We're going to extract both wolves. We thought we were coming for one, but it looks like today is our lucky day, gentlemen.”

I snarled as they took a step toward me and the wolves.

They weren't going to take Bianca. Not today. I sprang into action, leaping into the air directly over the satyr in front of me. I captured his head with my feet and gave it a swift side twist, snapping his neck. He fell to the ground before I even landed on the other side facing the largest satyr. In seconds I grabbed him in a headlock and forced him to release his arrow aimlessly. Then I flipped the satyr onto his back and sank my teeth into his neck, drinking from him while he screamed.

The poison in my veins soon overtook him. I glanced over to see the other satyr shaking in shock, his back against a tree. I dropped the satyr I was drinking from and made short work of tying the last satyr up.

“Maybe you can get a nymph to set you free at some point in the near future,” I said as I went to check the wolves. “This is Cougar Creek Coven territory. I suggest you leave as soon as you figure your way out of that knot.”

Chapter 17

Antonio was still seething when we got back to The Estate. I didn't have time to deal with his emotions, because we had a few other things on our plate, Demons were coming to call. The entire coven had gathered ready to do some magic and put this demon down once and for all.

"Are you sure you've got everything you need?" I asked Mae.

"I'm not the one who got us into the situation," Mae said. "But yeah, we've got a handle. We're going to do what we can."

"Remember. Last time you guys did something, it didn't work out too well and Rar'goth went from residing in Jane to walking free on the Earth," I pointed out. "This time we've got to be super vigilant."

"How did you guys survive so long in this place without knowing so much?" asked Antonio. "Demons are capable of doing things we don't even realize they can do."

"Don't blame us," Trina interjected. "We've been living in a quiet neighborhood in the middle of nowhere until Mae showed up. And with Mae came all these other people out of the woodwork as if they all belong to her."

"They belong to The Estate," Mae said. "Everyone in the Cougar Creek Coven made a promise to The Estate, not me. I even think to a certain extent the men were drawn here for a similar reason." She looked over at Branson and smiled warmly.

I knew she was also referring to Matheus and Toern, even though they weren't there. I'd seen those three men protecting the women of the coven as if they were sentries in the same stance Antonio was taking. Maybe people were being called to the coven. From everything I understood, Cougar Creek had gotten a lot more crowded over the last month or so.

It made sense.

Authorities had been called in when the kids had been killed. The state provided Sheriff Ted with not just a deputy, but a person who would inherit his job when he retired. They asked for somebody to volunteer. I had seen the opportunity and there wasn't much left for me in Indianapolis even though I'd lived my entire adult life there. Now it just seemed like twenty years of having a job. I mean, a job I cared about, but that was all the roots I had there.

"The demon's going to be here any minute," I said.

"We're going to take them straight into the altar room. That's the best place to bind him."

There was a tapping on the door that barely got our attention. Bianca and I exchanged a look. We'd been expecting a little more of an entrance from a demon. I opened the front door to find the demon standing there. His skin was charred black with thin magma cracks all over it.

He wasn't even ferocious. He stumbled forward, leaving trails of embers after him. Anita swept up with a magic hand.

"He's dying," I heard her whisper to her brother Drake.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Demons don’t die,” Antonio said. “They go back to Undirheim. They exist there in corporeal bodies, but they can only come here for a short period of time. Permission must be granted by Thrain or else it doesn’t work so well.”

“You said she’d give me a body,” Rar’goth groaned as he followed me to the altar room.

“We brought what you want,” Mae said, motioning to Antonio. “Will he do?”

Antonio looked surprised. “What the fuck?”

“He needs a host,” Mae said. “You seem the most likely candidate. Will you do it?”

Antonio was too fierce to back up in the face of a challenge, but he crossed his arms and took a wide stance as he glared at Mae. “You’re asking me this now?” Antonio said. “Are you crazy?”

“Don’t you want to host a demon?” Rar’goth asked, but he didn’t even wait another second. It was as if he was a man dying of thirst in the desert and Antonio was an oasis. In seconds the body the demon had been possessing disappeared and fell into ash on the ground. A light shot into Antonio. His body lit up in a burst of golden glow.

“Holy fuck,” he said. His hands clutched and then his whole body relaxed as his eyes opened. There was something different about them now. They weren’t ice blue; they were ice blue with shots of gold in them.

“Antonio?” I asked quietly.

Antonio nodded his head.

“Rar’ goth, is in you?” Mae asked.

“Yes,” A deep and gravelly voice came from Antonio.

“You have the body,” Mae said. “Now give us the information we’ve been asking for.”

Jane stepped forward, her ethereal body glowing so brightly we could all see it. She reached her hands forward shooting rays of light out of each hand. She plunged them into Antonio’s chest. Reaching forward with her light energy, she clasped onto the demon where he was deep inside of Antonio.

“Who sent you?” It wasn’t a question; it was a demand. Under normal circumstances I didn’t think Rar’ goth would have answered, but Jane’s grip on his psyche was strong and punishing. A hideous screech came from Antonio and was mirrored by Jane.

I leapt forward, grabbing Jane, and pulling her arms back from Antonio, separating the two before they could fuse any more.

Jane collapsed in my arms, her head lolling to the side. Bianca came running over. “Jane!” She cried. I lay Jane on the floor, turning to Antonio with my hackles on end and ready to attack any second. The demon was still inside him. I glared at him.

“It’s me,” Antonio said.

“Where is the demon?” I asked. “Where is Rar’ goth?”

“Is he gone?” Mae asked.

“I don’t know.” I watched Antonio carefully.

“I can’t feel it,” Antonio said. “Every inch of me feels like me.” His words made my mind tug in the direction of every inch of him, but I shook the thought from my head. He was here under some weird protection thing for Bianca. I needed to stay away.

“Maybe the demon disintegrated?” Mae offered.

“Doesn’t work quite like that,” Branson explained. “There’s no earthly power that can make a demon disintegrate. They can only return to Undirheim or become corporeal. There’s nothing in between. If they aren’t in a human body, they need a host.

We all looked around the room suspiciously at each other. And then slowly all eyes turned to Jane. Her eyes opened wide, a bright turquoise light shining out from inside them.

“It’s a renegade dark Fae,” she intoned before closing her eyes and passing out.

Chapter 18

We moved Jane onto one of the couches in the red room, which seemed to be from what I had heard the recovery center for the Coven. Apparently, the monster that had killed the two young kids had also gotten in a fight with Bianca. She’d been comatose for a couple of days, so this was nothing to worry about.

“Right?” I asked Mae. “This is nothing to worry about? We shouldn’t call the doctor or maybe the medics?”

“She’s in a psychic induced coma with a demon possibly attached to her.” Hilda pointed out. “I’m not sure there is much the medical profession can do for her.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“The only thing we found out is that there’s a dark Fae behind all of this, some renegade. It seems a high price to pay for one little piece of information,” Bianca grumbled.

“Well, we just have to figure out the puzzle pieces,” I said. “I’m working on a board at my house. Maybe I can bring it here,” I said. “You’ve got a van, right?”

“We can do it better,” Anita said. “I mean, after all, we are witches.” She waved her hands in the air and the whiteboard appeared inside the red room.

My eyes widened “I don’t think I’m going to get used to that,” I said.

“You will eventually,” Trina said.

I shrugged. “We’ll see. You were brought up in this world. And the rest of you were born to it. Your blood called you here, but the only reason I’m here is because I’m too nosy, I guess, and got turned into a vampire.”

“You were doing your job and you got caught by a vampire.” Bianca nodded.

“I never imagined there would be this type of world here,” I said. “So much of what we pretend isn’t real is actually true and right below the surface.”

It was quiet in the room, the fire crackling, the lights dim. I looked around at the women and men gathered around me. Each one of them had supernatural skills. Trina, Hilda, Mae, and the kids all being witches.

“How do humans get magical powers?” I asked.

“It’s in their bloodline,” Antonio said. “Millennia ago, a branch of Fae broke off from the main line of pure-bred Fae. They wanted to interact with humans and cross their DNA. It turned out the human DNA was stronger. Even though the Fae were surprised at this, they realized for true longevity of species, they would need to continue to breed with the humans. Eventually it became a race in and of itself, not quite human and definitely not Fae. They have the power to manipulate the material world around them.”

“And do you have a demigod also?” I asked.

“No,” Mae said. “We serve the demigods, but we are not related to them at all.”

I wasn’t sure I would ever understand their politics. “Why do you serve the demigods if you’re related to the Fae?”

“The Fae tried to exterminate the witches back in the day. There was a battle between the Fae and the witches. The witches lost, but instead of becoming subject to the Fae, they asked for help from the demigods to stay free of the Fae. They would’ve made worse masters so they became members of the demigod corporation.”

“You have a completely different history than any I know,” I said. “What about your police, your judicial system. How does all that work?”

“There’s a high court with the demigod corporation. They’re served by the Nereids and the other elementals who work in the legal system. The witches are the protectors, but the demigods have the final say. The elementals act as their agents in the prisons in the courts. I don’t think you’d be too shocked by the judicial system of the Legendi; it’s much the same. We have supernaturals interspersed inside human court rooms to divert the criminals who are supernaturals gone wrong.”

“So, I’m going to stay working at the sheriff’s and it’s going to be okay with the Demigod Corporation?” I asked.

“Yes,” Hilda said. “Bianca still works there.”

“Is there any vampire association I’m supposed to be reporting to?” I asked.

Hilda and Trina exchanged a look.

“The vampires mostly live in dark Fae country over in Eastern Europe. A few vampires live outside that area because, well, vampires are hunted.” Trina explained.

“Are you kidding me?” Bianca asked. “I already have a price on my head. Now she’s got one too?”

Trina shrugged. “Certain vampires can get releases by the DGC in order to operate within the parameters of the DGC as long as they’re working solely for the DGC and have no affiliation whatsoever with the vampires of Eastern Europe. In this case she should be fine because under the protection of The Estate. She can get this type of dispensation.”

“Or I get killed?” I asked.

Hilda shrugged. “Pretty much.”

“Well, you guys have a really convincing argument for joining forces with you,” I said sarcastically.

“You don’t have a lot of choices,” Trina shrugged. “It’s either you stay with us or get killed.”

“I think you know whose side I’m going to fight on,” I said. “It’s just hard to find the perp when all I have to go on is that he’s a dark Fae.” I motioned towards Jane. “She might have more information.”

“It’s not going to work so well with her.” Hilda shook her head. “If the demon is inside her, then she’s going to need all of her strength to deal with him and she might’ve already lost too much when she connected with his aura.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

I pulled out my laptop and set it down on a cushion on my lap. “Right, so how do we find this renegade dark Fae? If he’s the one causing the problems we need to find out as much information as we can about him before he shows up.”

“Well, if he’s a leader, he’s got to be about a hundred years old,” Trina said. “The Fae don’t respect anyone who is less than eighty.”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked. “How long do they live?”

“About three or four hundred years. It depends.”

“That’s one-hundred-year gap in life expectancy.” I pointed out.

“Well, some have more dangerous lives than others. There were a lot of wars, which sort of shifted things, but now things are settled down. The Light Fae live in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.”

“And the Dark Fae live in Europe and eastern Europe?” I asked.

“That’s the way the world got divided at the end of the war.” Hilda explained.

“How do you usually find information on the Fae?” I directed my question to Drake. I figured the kid in the corner with the VR headset and the magic powers was going to have the most insight into how to hack the witches’ dark Internet.

“I’m so glad you asked,” he said, the corner of his mouth lifting in a sly smile.

Chapter 19

Hours later, after an intense lesson in the Fae and demigod wars, complete with a map drawn out for me showing me showing where all manners of creatures I'd never imagined lived, we hadn't come any closer to finding out about some dark renegade movement. On the plus side, I now knew about Frost Giants, Atlantis, and the DGC capital in NYC. Only Drake, Hilda, Jane, and I remained in the red room. Hilda was pottering about with the plants and Jane was still resting

"How do the Fae communicate?" I asked.

"The Fae are otherworldly," Drake said. "They're like the monsters."

"How do you mean?"

"They come from a land on the other side of the rift. The rift separates Earth from everywhere. So, this is our home plane, but the Fae and monsters come from lands on the other side of the rift. Monsters still live in their homeland mostly, but Fae have migrated here." Drake chewed on a carrot as he explained the workings of the Earth plane.

"Is that why the demigods were trying to get rid of them?" I asked

"Exactly the demigods are from Earth. The Fae were an invasion.

"OK," I said. "It doesn't answer the question. How do the Fae communicate?"

"Psychically," Drake said.

"Oh," I said, my eyebrows lifting high, eyes opening wide. "Well, that's interesting. They're like her?" I pointed to Jane who was still lying on the couch gently breathing

but unresponsive otherwise.

“She’s an air Fae, which makes her Light Fae. Because her element is air, she is able to communicate a lot better and more quickly than most people. She’s able to pick up different psychic energies.” Drake doodled on a piece of paper as he spoke.

“But how do they get a message out? If I were going to take over part of the Fae world, how would I do it?”

Drake stopped chewing on his carrot, put down his pen and looked up at me. “Very carefully. The Fae live in family pods, so you would get as many of the leaders of those families to follow you as you could.”

“And how would I get a message out to them? That they should follow me?” I asked. I had spent my career getting into the minds of perpetrators, or perps as we called them, but getting into the mind of a different species was a little bit out of my skill set or at least out of my experience level.

“You would have to do great and daring deeds that Fae would start talking about,” Hilda shared. “You would also have to use the crystals.”

“The what?” Drake asked.

“Oh, crystals are used for communication in general.”

“What the Hell’s wrong with cell phones?” I asked. “They seem to work for most other people.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Yeah, we use cell phones and things too obviously. You’ve seen me with mine, but if you want to get into the old school, you asked how the dark Fae communicate. They use dark crystals.”

“Do you know how any of this works?” Bianca asked.

“Well, you have to get hold of a dark crystal.” Antonio shrugged as if it was an obvious response.

“You’re not being helpful here,” Jane said.

“I’m giving you every single answer to the questions you’re asking me.” Antonio responded.

“Can you get us a dark crystal?” I asked.

“There’s only one place I know where they’re sold. And it’s not here in Cougar Creek. Cottonwood Arizona.”

“Can’t you order them online?” I asked.

Hilda looked over at me like I was a little crazy.

“Well, you’ve got a corporation, right?” I pointed out. “Why can’t they set things up to sell on Amazon or Etsy or eBay?”

“You can either go and get the crystal or you can have them brought to you,” Drake

said. “That’s how it works.” He looked over at Mae. “I take it you’re footing the bill?”

“The Estate will,” Mae said.

Hilda nodded. “We can’t leave the cemetery. We’ll need delivery.”

“I’ve got some connections,” Drake said. “It’s not going to be cheap though.”

A low murmuring rose out of Jane’s lips and we all turned to watch her deliver a low series of grunts and sounds that didn’t make sense in any language we knew.

“What is it?” I asked.

Hilda leaned in close so she could hear what Jane was saying.

“Demon tongue.” She stood up shaking her head. “Damn. The demon’s still in there.”

“Do any of us know what she’s saying?” I asked.

“If the demon’s in her and she’s speaking a demon tongue, it’s not her who’s doing the talking. They’re doing something to her.” Hilda shook her head, worry etched in her face. “He’s got complete control of her body.”

“Except we’ve got the binding spell on her,” I said. “Right? That’s what’s holding her down?”

“Yeah, but he’s trying to free himself.” Drake moved around her body watching as it moved and jerked in awkward ways.

“Will the bindings be able to hold her?” I asked.

“Long enough,” Hilda said.

“Long enough for what?” I asked.

Hilda made a clicking sound with her tongue. “Long enough for us to figure out how to get the demon out of her.”

A crippling pain shot through my stomach making me double over.

Blood. I needed blood.

I looked up, feeling the hunger in my gaze as I looked at everyone in the room.

I was the murderer. I was the perp. I was the predator.

“Got to eat,” I said.

“Can you make it down to the elk?” Bianca asked.

“She’s not going down to the elk,” Antonio entered the room as if he had a sixth sense around when I would need to feed. He unwrapped the bandage on his wrist. “Come here.”

He was so commanding that I moved automatically in his direction. He turned and led me out to the back terrace and into the backyard.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this.” I joked, already hearing the beat of his heart and feeling the pulse of his veins in mine, already wanting to bite into his wrist, to taste his blood, to feed on him. It was a growing addiction. I wasn’t even listening to his response as his pulse throbbed in my ears. My mouth clasped against his wrist and I felt the warm rush of his blood to my mouth and into my body.

Chapter 20

His low moan broke through the rush of his blood in my ears. I glanced up at him. His eyes were closed, his head back as if he were enthralled. He was enjoying it as much as I was. At least it appeared that way. I ran my tongue along the holes I had made in his wrist, smiling at the blood and letting it trickle down my throat. I was tasting every part of him and feeling his pulse inside me.

I stood up, bringing his wrist with me. He looked down, his bright blue eyes glazed over. His white hair fell over his forehead as he leaned down and grabbed me and

pulling my face to his. Our lips crashed together, his tongue probing into my mouth, searching and seeking out everything inside me as I had been draining him. He grabbed my lower lip and his teeth gnawed on it as if he was dining on me tonight.

I wanted him, even though I knew I was way too old for him, and werewolves and vampires didn't mix. I wasn't really relationship material. I'd never had one. It had been so long since I'd even had sex there were probably cobwebs growing down there. The last time I'd had sex I'd been in my 30s. It had been a one-night stand with a colleague after a drunken Christmas party. No wonder I'd never done it again.

But this wasn't that.

This was...everything.

I let his tongue explore my mouth. I met him with fervent desire, panting against his mouth as I felt his heart race against my chest. His hand slid up, cupping my breast. He groaned as his mouth slid around to my ear.

"Not the ear," I said, pulling back from him suddenly. My ears were sensitive. It made me crazy. With these heightened vampire feelings, I was having, there was no way I was going to be able to stop myself. No. I needed to stop this whole thing right now.

"Thanks for the food," I said bluntly and turned around to go back in the house. He reached out and grabbed my wrist, snapping me back toward him, kissing me again hard, this time holding me to him.

"Don't walk away from me," he said, holding me tightly as he bruised my lips with his. I was breathless, wanting more, but knowing this wasn't the right guy; this wasn't the right time. There never would be for me a right time. Especially not now.

“I’ve got to get back in,” I said. “Sorry about the kiss. I got carried away.”

He frowned at me, his eyebrows creasing together. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll be out here for a bit.” He turned away from me, but not before I saw the swollen part of his pants where his cock was obviously extremely hard.

If I had a heart, it would’ve been racing. But as it was, there was a tingling of desire in every cell of my body that was leaning toward Antonio.

A loud scream erupted from the house which had me running up the back stairs before I could quite work out what I was doing with Antonio.

The scream was coming from the red room and I knew instinctively it was Jane. When I ran into the room, she was sweating and crying. Her body was rising in the air.

Footsteps on the back stairs and across the house heralded Antonio running in.

“Oh my God what’s wrong with her?” I asked.

“There’s a demon in there,” Antonio growled.

“I know. What is it doing?”

“Trying to get out, I guess,” Bianca said. She looked at me warily. “Can you hold it?”

“The Coven can. Now that we’re together we’re stronger than a single demon,” Mae pointed out.

I didn’t have the vision Trina did. I couldn’t see auras, but I could sense evil and there was evil emitting from Jane’s body. I hadn’t felt it before, but now it was

pulsing at me.

“We have what we want to know. We need to get rid of the demon.” I turned to Mae.

“How do you call Thrain the demon overlord?”

“I have no idea.” Mae looked around the room questioningly. Anita and Drake shrugged and Trina looked lost. Matheus and Toern were gone. Branson was out on the rounds of the cemetery.

“Call the harpies,” Hilda said.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“The harpies?” I looked at her curiously.

She nodded and waved me into action. “Remember those two kids who were killed? They were harpies, but they have a whole clan of people who live out here.”

“Harpies are dark Fae. They don’t really mesh in New Attica, but the demigods gave them a nicer home than they’d be given from the Fae of any type. They stay away from most of the rest of us and do their jobs, but they understand as the watchers they’ll be able to contact anyone necessary to protect the cemetery. I think under the circumstances we can call them. We’ve got them under control. It won’t bring too much attention to us. They’ll go and get Thrain and bring him here.

“What was the one harpy’s name? The father of the kid?” Bianca asked.

“Toth,” I said. “I’ve got his number for when we did the inquest.”

It seemed a bit strange, but I held onto these moments when I could do my normal job. It was something I understood how to do. I could pick up a phone and call someone who had a lead. I could talk to them about the lead and I could look for the truth of a situation. I knew how to do that.

I glanced at Antonio as I walked out the door.

I didn’t know how to think about him.

I didn’t know how to think about him at all.

Chapter 21

I stood on the front porch of The Estate talking to Toth, letting him know that we'd found out who had been responsible for the death of his son and his son's girlfriend. It was the weirdest news to deliver. I was always grateful that I could help somebody gain some closure, but in doing so, it ripped open the wound again, which in this case wasn't very old. The kids had only been dead a short time. The parents were probably still getting used to the idea of spending the rest of their life without their children.

It must've been what my parents had gone through, only for them, it was my sister. My older sister, who had lived to be about ten and then had gotten ill and died. The doctors should've had more clarity on exactly what had killed her, but they didn't know. My parents had grieved for years and years and then, ten years later, they had decided the solution was to have another child. That's when I was born. Twenty years after their first joy and ten years after their greatest grief. They cherished me, but it was through no fault of their own I could tell they weren't truly raising me; they were raising my sister again. And then after I turned ten, they didn't quite know what to do with me. I didn't quite fit into their idea of what their daughter was supposed to look like or be like.

I'd joined the military to get away. After four years in the army, I'd returned home and joined the police force. I was disciplined and regimented, and much different from my colleagues who flirted on the edge of the law even though they were the ones upholding it.

"We want to come in and see it," Toth said.

"The it you're talking about is one of the Coven members, who's hosting the demon inside of her right now." I said. "She's not exactly taking visitors at the moment, but we need Thrain. If he comes, you can come with him, but we need him to take charge of the demon and get it out of her."

The call was cut short, not by any part of my own, but by a loud shout that rang out from the back of the house.

“She’s gone!” Drake yelled.

I turned around and dashed up to the house. The red room was empty.

“Who was watching her?”

“I went into the game to tell them I couldn’t play tonight.” Drake looked beside himself with worry.

“Never mind,” I said. “She can’t have gotten far. Were any of the doors open?”

We all fanned out and began looking in all directions for her. Mae went upstairs to the bedrooms to see if she’d stayed in the house. Somehow the demon must’ve wheedled its way through the binding spell we had on it. It was possibly getting help from the other side.

“She’s not in the house,” Bianca announced as I cleared the kitchen and the library. Mae cleared upstairs and Bianca cleared the other rooms downstairs.

“She’s headed down to the cemetery,” Anita called from the backyard. We all ran out to the back terrace and looked. It was easy to see where she was. She was glowing. Not with demon fire, but with a pale turquoise light that was uniquely her own.

“What if she’s melded so far with the demon, we can’t separate them?” Bianca asked.

“We can’t think like that,” Mae said. “She’s a member of our Coven. She’s part of the Pentacle of Time and the blood bond of our ancestors. We have to get her and we have to make sure the demon gets out of her. There’s no other option. We can’t let

her leave us. Without her, we are not a Coven.”

Mae’s words gave me a warm feeling in the pit of my stomach. There was something about her strength and surety. We were bonded, we were a family, we were a group of people who were meant to be together. I loved that about us. It was one of the reasons why I had always loved the military and that I had always searched for a type of brotherhood in the force. I had found it when I was first there, but as people had started getting married, my friendship groups had dwindled. Then, when I found out that my closest friends were working on the wrong side of the law, I much severed all in the Indianapolis Police Force.

“God dammit!” Antonio swore. I turned around to glimpse him shifting into a wolf. He raced behind the hind legs of Bianca, who had already shifted and was heading toward the blue glowing light moving toward the cemetery.

I knew I could move as fast, if not faster than them, but Jane seem to have powers of her own at the moment. Or the demon inside her did.

I raced through the undergrowth and the pathway leading down to the cemetery. The ground was a blur under my feet as I overtook the wolves and homed in on Jane. The pulse was coming in strong and electric, but there was something else. Jane was at the side gate when I closed in on her.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Jane, are you in there?” I asked.

She looked at me with the demonic grin on her face.

“Depends on who’s asking.” She chuckled at me with a deep throaty chortle.

“Let me talk to Jane,” I said. “I want to make sure she’s alright. Because if she isn’t, I will kill the body and leave you without one.”

Jane’s eyes lit up with flames of irritation as she glared. “This is my body now.” The demon insisted.

“In that case, I’ll kill you,” I said, drawing my gun and cocking it against the demon.

Chapter 22

Jane flew at me in a screaming rage, flames coming not only from her eyes, but from her hands as well.

I didn’t dare risk taking a shot at Jane. No matter what the demon said, I was sure she was in there. We had to find a way to get the demon out.

The demon plowed into me, lighting the back of my clothes on fire. He left me rolling around in the dust as he ran off in Jane’s body. The wolves chased after him, howling as they skirted around the edge of the cemetery. I lay there for a moment, feeling my skin burning where the fire had sizzled it off. It hurt like a motherfucker.

It was one of the risks of being a cop. Sometimes you got hurt.

I pulled myself up on my haunches and took survey of how I felt. My clothes were fairly tattered, but they covered me still. I needed to catch up with the wolves and Jane. They weren't going to be able to subdue her on their own. If Thrain, the demon overlord got here and we didn't have his renegade demon, we'd all be in trouble.

When I caught up to them, Antonio had collared her at the edge of the cliff overlooking the town. She stood towards us with her back to the sheer drop. Antonio growled, looking ready to spring, even though I had a pretty good suspicion he wouldn't. Going over the cliff would kill Jane as well as Antonio.

"You've got nowhere to go," I said.

"There's always some place to go," Rar'goth said. "I don't necessarily need this body."

"We need that body," I said. "It's our friend."

"Leave me alone and I'll let her live," Rar'goth said.

I knew at this stage we were stalling for time. The witches pulled up by the cemetery. I could already feel their energy in the air. They piled out and ran through the gate towards us.

"Chammas. Tilian. Huguenot." They chanted, murmuring the words through the air, whispering them on the breeze. The demon looked over; his gaze suddenly confused.

"How could they know that chant? How do they know those words?" Rar'goth asked.

"Let me take a wild guess. They talked to Thrain." I suggested.

“No!” The demon yelled, looking back over Jane’s shoulder at the steep drop and then back towards Antonio.

He was trapped and he knew it. I had a pretty good idea he was going to make one last play for it. As I moved to the side of the clearing, away from Antonio, I saw the demon make a rush. Jane bolted past Antonio toward me. I clasped my arms around her, using my superhuman vampire strength to clinch her wrists to her side. Leaning forward, I muttered sorry as I sank my teeth into her neck, taking enough blood out of her to give her, what I knew would be the euphoric feeling from the poison in my veins. It would also weaken the body enough that the demon would not be able to escape.

I drank carefully, focusing on keeping a steady rhythm and counting so I would not take too much from her. I looked up slowly, wiping the blood from my mouth before I had to make eye contact with any of my Coven.

I held Jane’s body tightly as the witches ran up to us. Their chants created sparkling threads of light that bound her arms and kept her hands and wrists together.

“Sorry, Jane,” I said quietly, imagining what she say if she could see the way we were having to treat her body right now.

“She’ll be all right,” Hilda said. “The harpies are on their way. Thrain is coming, too.”

The witches continued to chant in a steady rhythm, making sure every moment was filled with the melody of their magic spell.

Suddenly a loud crash of thunder and bolt of lightning scared the bejeezus out of me as it erupted from below my feet. Out of the middle of nowhere, a massive stone portal appeared. Steps led up to a large circle of stone.

“What the fuck?” I murmured. “I guess this is a portal of the demon king.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Apparently,” Hilda said. “I’ve never seen it before, myself.”

At the center of the portal, when the light and smoke had died down, there stood one of the largest men I’d ever seen in my entire life. Body armor covered him all except his naked chest and back. His long hair was pulled back in multiple braids that laid down his back. He stepped through the portal and bellowed out to those of us gathered around. “Where is my demon?”

“He’s in our friend,” I said, pointing at Jane.

The demon king lips curled as he looked toward me. Clearly, he didn’t have much of a fondness for vampires, but I didn’t care. It wasn’t my fault I was a vampire. At this stage, well, it was what it was. As long as it didn’t stop me from doing my job, I wasn’t going to be too worried about it.

Thrain came over as several more demons stepped through the portal behind him. I gave a low whistle. I’d always thought that demons were supposed to be evil and ugly, and well, demonic, but these guys were far from that. One had a wolf tattoo on his chest and another had a Rune symbol. They stood, waiting for Thrain to investigate Jane. He prowled around her as if he might eat her for lunch, but at the end of his rounds he grunted. “I want my demon back.”

“Good, because we want our friend back. Can you make that happen?” I asked.

“The only way she will survive possession is if she’s strong.” Thrain brushed his chin with his hand as he stared at Jane.

“You hear that, Jane?” I said. “You’ve got to be strong for this one.” I reached out and clasped her hand as I held her body. I looked up at the demon lord.

“Make it happen, number one,” I said.

“Number one?” he asked

“Never mind. Just please can you do it without hurting her.”

Thrain raised his staff in the air bringing lightning down into the center of the stone at the very top. He brought his staff down hard, harnessing the lightning and sending it right into the ground where it split. Thousands of little bolts splayed out like a huge firework, before sucking in on themselves and firing into Jane’s body

She screamed in what sounded like excruciating pain.

“Are you sure it’s working?” I screamed over the sound of the electricity.

“No,” Thrain said. But if anything is going to work, this is it.”

More lightning bolts flooded into Jane. Finally in a burst of light, the demon’s body separated from Jane’s, but this time instead of walking off into the forest as it had done last time, its body disintegrated into a pile of ash. A gold flame went up and blew through the air, landing at the feet of the demon lord, Thrain.

“Thank you for reporting him,” he said, stepping through his portal. “You’d be amazed how many times people don’t want to report it. It’s so much easier if people would let us know what they’re seeing out there.”

The portal vanished leaving nothing but singed and blackened grass where it had been standing.

“Where is Bianca?” Antonio’s question startled me.

Chapter 23

Each of us quickly scanned the area. Bianca was nowhere to be seen. “Did she go into the portal?” Mae asked.

“I didn’t see her when I first got here,” I said, “and I was the first one here after Antonio.”

Jane was weak. I knew we needed to get her back up to the estate. “Let’s get Jane to the car.”

“I’m going to go look for Bianca,” Antonio said.

“I’ll go with you” I said as I put Jane in Mae and Trina’s arms.

Mae looked a bit frazzled. “I can’t be everywhere.”

“Just focus on getting Jane better,” I said. “We’ll go and find Bianca. She’s got to have left a trail behind and Antonio is going to be able to follow it better than anyone we know.”

“Anyone besides Bianca,” Mae said ruefully.

“Do you think a bounty hunter got her?” I asked.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“It would have to be something. She wouldn’t run off without telling us. She knows we’d be worried about her.”

Antonio shifted into his wolf form. I knew it was the easiest way for him to follow her scent and cover the most ground quickly.

I could keep up with him, so I stepped up next to his side and motioned for him to carry on. I could hear and feel the sensation of his heart beating loudly, throbbing against his chest, and I couldn’t help but think about the moments my lips had been wrapped round his wrist. He had given such vital life-giving blood to me. A bit of euphoria in return seemed an easy exchange.

I followed him down a trail that went along the edge of the cliff. If someone had brought her along here, she must have gone willingly, or they had bound her up. Maybe they had gotten her to chase them.

I sighed. Jane was out of commission and now Bianca was missing. That was half of the blood pact out of commission. It seemed like the Coven was falling apart before it really got together.

We moved swiftly along the trail until it came to a sudden end at a road. Antonio shifted back into his human form and stared up and down the road.

“This is where the trail ends. They put her in a vehicle at this point.”

“Holy fuck,” I said, irritated beyond belief I hadn’t been paying close enough attention to Bianca. She was someone who always seemed to be able to look after

herself no matter what. She was in wolf form and she had Antonio looking after her, but we had all gotten distracted by the demon and now she was gone. I chewed on my lower lip.

Our coven was slipping.

If we were supposed to be here saving people, we weren't doing a very good job of it. We had lost Bianca and almost lost Jane. We couldn't even figure out who was attacking us. I was supposed to be an officer of the law providing protection, but I couldn't even provide my Coven with protection. The bounty hunters had driven in right under our noses and taken away one of our own.

"Where would they take her?" I ground the question out to Antonio.

"Only one place, but we need a truck," he said.

"Come on. I know where to get one," I said racing down the hill toward the cop shop, not even bothering to see if Antonio was behind me or not.

It didn't matter if Sheriff Ted was there or not, we were going to borrow a truck and go after Bianca, even if I had to report her as a missing person.

The keys to all the police cars were on a hook inside the police station. It didn't take me but a moment to slip in there and grab the keys off the hook. Sheriff Ted was taking a nap in his office. I didn't think it was necessary to tell them she been kidnapped, at least not yet. I would file the reports when I came back that evening if we couldn't find her. For now, we had to get as close to her as possible.

"Okay, where are we going?" I asked as Antonio got in the truck.

"We want to head east out of town, and then take the third exit on the left once we get

to the fifteen-mile marker,” he said.

I raised my eyebrow as I glanced at him sideways. “Random.”

“This truck has four-wheel-drive, right?” Antonio asked.

I nodded. “I assume that’s why you said we needed a truck. Is there a road at all where we’re going?”

“A dirt fire road. It’ll take us up to the camp.”

“We’re going to a campground?” I was pretty sure I hadn’t signed up for a camping trip with a werewolf.

“No, a prisoner of war camp,” Antonio said.

I stopped still, gazing at him in surprise. “What are you talking about? We’re in the middle of Oregon.”

“During World War II they put prisoner of war camps out here and used them to house enemy soldiers,” Antonio explained.

“Are you kidding me?” I asked. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Then later after the soldiers were moved, Japanese Americans were rehoused here to hypothetically protect them from other citizens.”

I found the whole history surprising. “I’ve never heard that story at all,” I said. “I always thought prisoner of war camps were something overseas that we didn’t have here. I guess I don’t think about there being war on American soil.”

“It’s because you don’t recognize it,” Antonio said. “But there’s war on American soil every day.”

“As evidenced by the fact I’ve become a vampire and discovered an entire supernatural world. I think the fact I can even recognize this should give me some credit here,” I said.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

We turned onto the dirt road and bumped along into the hills.

I tried to imagine what it must've been for a prisoner of war or a Japanese American citizen to be taken on these back roads. We were surrounded by what looked like an endless forest.

"If this was a prisoner of war camp for humans," I asked, "How do we know about it?"

"There are only about one million supernaturals on the planet. Compared to the eight billion humans, we are a small number. We are strategic, though. We know we're outnumbered, and we try to stay focused to make sure we hide in plain sight. We also make sure we've got plenty of places to hide should the need arise. Prisoner of war camps and abandoned train stations are prime safety locations for us."

"You're telling me if there was a zombie apocalypse, the demigod corporation would set up shop out here in the middle of nowhere. That's crazy," I said. "These are the guys from Manhattan, right?"

"Good Lord, no," Antonio chuckled. "They've got bunkers in Virginia they would use, especially for the demigod president. These kinds of places are for people like me. You know, the bounty hunters and the renegades and the shifters who don't really fit into the demigod world. The demigods can't function without a group of people working for them." He pointed up the road to the left. "Up there you want to turn off of the main road."

I slowed down and looked at the road he was telling me to take. It wasn't much more

than a dirt path, a double wide dirt road that led into the shadows of the forest.

Chapter 24

“Do you have any idea who were up against?” I asked as we drove through the trees.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if there are multiple people,” Antonio said. “We’ve got to get in there quick and get her out.”

“How are we ever going to stop this?” It suddenly felt so hopeless. “We can try to get her out of this situation, but it’s not going to stop the next lot of bounty hunters from going after her, simply because she’s a werewolf.”

“Until we figure out who is responsible for the bounty, we will be stuck in this situation.” Antonio agreed. “The other option is that she leaves Southern Oregon.”

“That’s not going to happen.” I immediately dismissed the idea. “She’s part of the coven and has to stay here.”

“Exactly,” Antonio agreed.

“The person who created the hit clearly wants the coven broken up so they can take over the cemetery. It must be the renegade dark Fae Jane mentioned.”

“Not necessarily,” Antonio disagreed. “Fae politics are often complex. They have many layered reasons for their often-confusing actions. Their webs are centuries old and easy to get caught in.

“Sounds like a charming race,” I muttered.

“They like their games,” Antonio shrugged. “In this case the bounty has existed for so

long, they must have a very good reason for creating it.”

“Did you say there’s a very good reason for putting out a death threat on my friend?” I asked indignantly.

“No.” He narrowed his gaze at me. “What I’m saying is the guy who placed the bounty is committed. He’s unlikely to cancel it. You’ve got to think like a criminal. Not like a cop.”

“I’ve spent my career trying to think like a criminal. Don’t start giving me lectures.” I replied belligerently.

Antonio grated on my nerves, but in a way that drew me to him. I couldn’t explain it. He was harsh, curt, and arrogant, but he was attractive as all hell and he had a magnetism that charged me. Even though he was fierce and wild, or maybe because of that, I was drawn to him. I couldn’t let my attraction for him get in the way of any type of business we had to take care of. I had to stay focused. My friend was in danger.

“My apologies,” Antonio said. “I wasn’t trying to offend you. It’s just you seem always so clear and straight and right. It’s not how most criminals live. In this case, whoever has the hit is going to want to make an example of her.”

“She could be killed on the spot?” My gut clenched at the thought of it. How could I be in a group with these women and I couldn’t even protect them? We’d been trying to protect Jane and instead we lost Bianca. No man left behind, but I was in danger of losing two.

“Do you need to feed?” Antonio’s voice was gruff as he asked me.

“What? No!” My reaction was too swift, too sharp.

He glanced at me sideways and I hated the way the corner of his mouth lifted in a slight smile as if he knew how much I craved his blood. The taste of Jane had been nourishing and good and sweet, but it was nothing like the fire and synergy I found with Antonio's blood.

"Really," I said softly. "Thank you, but I'm fine."

He looked a little bit surprised, but he didn't say anything. My irritation with him hadn't been making the partnership to find Bianca any easier, so maybe I would try killing him with kindness. We needed to be on the same page, especially if we were about to take on a bounty hunter or perhaps multiples of them.

"Pull over here. We'll go the rest of the way on foot," he said.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“How far away are we?” I asked.

“We’re still about five miles out, but this is a back road. I don’t want to take any chances that they will hear the truck. I would like to get the element of surprise.” Antonio explained.

“Are bounty hunters normally a particular species?” I asked.

“Satyrs or shifters,” he said. “But sometimes you find the odd elemental.”

“Ok. No vamps or Fae?” I asked.

“Not typically.”

“Lead the way,” I balled my fists thinking about the battle to come. The best option would be for us to sneak in and whisk her out of there, but I was pretty sure that option wasn’t going to be particularly easy.

We raced through the forest in single file with Antonio in the lead, taking me through the trees on a winding deer path. We went through some of the most beautiful untouched countryside I’d ever seen.

When we got to the top of a mountain, he stopped. “Look down there.” He pointed to a thin streak of a valley nestled in between two mountain peaks. “That’s where they might have taken her.”

“That was a prisoner of war camp during World War II?” I asked in astonishment.

There were a couple of rows of low-lying barracks, a larger building that must have been the officers' quarters, and a landing strip for large army planes to land with their prisoners.

"Yeah, certainly secure," Antonio said.

With the speed of a vampire and a shifter, it only took us a few minutes to cross the last couple of miles. Shortly we were in the trees, hiding in the underbrush and looking out toward the wooden barracks for any sign of movement.

It didn't take long before somebody came out of one of one of the buildings and went to a nearby truck. He was a tall, broad man sporting a crew cut and a tank top; his bulging muscles glistening in the afternoon sun.

"Shifter?" I ask.

Antonio nodded. "Bear."

"Bears aren't pack animals," I said, watching as the massive man leaned against the truck and started surveying the countryside.

"No, but he's not alone. There's got to be more inside."

"We've got to take him out with a bit of stealth so we can surprise the ones on the inside," I said.

Antonio looked over at me appreciatively. "Exactly. Now the question is, who's going to be stealthier: the werewolf or vampire."

"I'm way ahead of you." I gave him a slight grin before I went into action.

Chapter 25

I moved with speed to the far side of the camp, making no sound in the underbrush. I created a wide loop that took me behind the bear. I knew I'd have to lay low and come in hot. I was able to see Antonio on the other side moving toward the warehouse, probably trying to gauge the situation on the inside. Without any level of understanding, we weren't going to find out what was behind the door until we opened it.

I waited until the bear had perused my region of the forest and as he turned his back, I rushed at him, slipping over the truck and coming down on his back. My teeth sank into his neck and I injected my poison into his veins as I quickly took a large draught of his blood.

He tasted good, wild, and beefy. But I wasn't here to eat. I was here to weaken him and to get him compliant.

As I felt his body weaken and become more supple in my hands, I moved. "Who's inside?"

"Too many for you alone," the bear said, his eyes half glazed with the poison I'd injected into his veins.

"We'll see about that. Are they all shifters?" I asked. He shook his head. I could see he was starting to lose consciousness. I'd made a mistake on how much blood I should drink.

"Shit," I muttered, slapping him across the face a couple of times. "Come on. Don't pass out." I moved his face back-and-forth, but it was too much. The big guy was a lightweight who couldn't handle giving blood.

I looked over to Antonio, shrugging with an apologetic grimace. He shook his head and waved me off, motioning me toward the door on the side of the building. He must have one like it on his side, so at least we would enter at the same time. He held up five fingers, letting me know it was a five count before we entered. This was a risky move, but at least we would be coming at them from two sides. Hopefully the bunker was wide open. If it was sectioned off, one of us could be walking into a death trap. Or, both of us.

Five. I counted it down quickly in my head. I'd rather be the first one in the room and get their attention on my side, but it seemed Antonio had the same idea. He didn't even wait for the count of five. I heard him burst into his side of the barracks while I was still counting on four.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Shit,” I muttered, kicking in the door with all my might and watching it fly across the room.

Being a vampire wasn’t a bad thing.

There were five people in the room, two women and three men. When I first entered, they were facing Antonio, but one woman and one man turned and came at me as the other three rounded on Antonio.

I was going to have to make short work of them so I could help Antonio fight his three.

“Where is Bianca?” I asked.

“Werewolves shouldn’t be in this land,” the woman said. I looked at her and hissed.

Vampire.

We had the same weapons and there was no way my newbie vampire powers were going to work against her. She wasn’t going to be like the bear outside.

“Werewolves can decide where the hell they want to be and where they don’t want to be,” I said. “Last time I checked, this wasn’t a DGC ruling. This was some asshole who took a hit out on my friend.”

“Yeah, that asshole has a lot of money,” the tall lanky guy said.

“What are you doing with this crowd?” I asked, recognizing a harpy when I saw one now. He had the signature necklace and the pointed features of all the rest of his type.

“Just looking for a payday like everybody else,” the harpy said.

“I’ll give you a payday,” I said, feinting toward the vampire, who moved toward me. I slipped away from her and went full on against the harpy, kicking his feet out from under him.

He hit the ground with a sound that was a lot heavier than I would’ve imagined for both a harpy and a skinny guy. I kicked him hard in the head. I felt a little bad doing it, but I needed to get one man down. His head swiveled to the side, hitting the ground hard again as I turned to face the vampire.

She grinned at me. “Do you think you’ve got what it takes to take me on?” she asked.

I braced myself, standing steady and waiting for her attack. This was going to have to be a swift and fierce battle. I was going to have to get the upper hand early on.

She flew off the ground, talons out and teeth bared. Her nails sank into my shoulders, drawing blood. I screamed and kneed her in the stomach. I whipped my arms up, breaking her lock on my shoulders, as she ripped flesh off me. I gnashed my teeth at her, going with the only weapon I had at my disposal. I caught her arm and twisted it to the side, gripping her tightly. She screamed in pain, but I didn’t release it, holding steady as I brought my teeth down to her jugular and bit into her. She would only have blood if she had fed recently, but regardless, it was fueling her. I took a drink.

Oh my god. I spat it out.

Vampire blood tasted like shit. It was drinking somebody else’s backwash.

She laughed. “Can’t drink from vampire.”

“And vampires can’t take stakes,” Antonio said, coming down hard in the middle of her chest with a wooden stake. She screamed as her body shriveled up and turned into dust, disappearing right between my hands.

I sat up, looking at the four other bounty hunters who were tied up around the room. There was one person missing.

“Where the hell is Bianca?” I asked.

Chapter 26

“She’s got to be around here somewhere,” Antonio said. “I can smell her.”

I scanned the barracks. It was dark and dusty on the inside, with rays of light sliding in through the cracks between the wooden beams. My eyes didn’t need time to adjust. I was a vampire.

“There.” I pointed toward a trapdoor in the floor.

“What the fuck?” Antonio raced over, reaching down at a handle, but there were chains and locks all over it.

“She’s got to be in there,” I said.

Antonio reached down, gripped the chain from both sides, and used all of his strength against the metal. The metal lost as the links went flying thanks to his brute strength.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Shit, that was pretty impressive,” I muttered as I raced forward to pull the lid of the bunker open.

“No doubt this was a safe place in case for some reason the enemy ended up flying bombers over here,” Antonio said.

“Bianca!” I called down through the opening. My voice echoed against the cement-sided bunker.

I stood up on my haunches seeing nothing in the darkness below.

“Chloe, don’t,” Antonio said, but it was too late. I had already pushed off the edge of the floor and was shooting down into the darkness of the bunker. My feet hit cement as I crouched down and made a quick scan around.

“Bianca,” I shouted rushing to the limp pile in the corner. “Bianca,” I cried, pulling her forward and up into my arms. I felt for her pulse.

“She’s got a pulse, but it’s weak,” I called up to Antonio.

“They must’ve drugged her,” Antonio said. “Otherwise, her Lycan genes would heal themselves and she would be fine.”

“It’ll take time for the drugs to wear off.”

“Here’s a ladder,” Antonio said, sliding it down. “Can you lift her?”

Could I ever? I probably could've thrown her up through the opening if I trusted my aim at getting her through the narrow hole. Being a vampire was like what I imagined being on steroids was like, because I felt as though I could take on the whole freaking world in one second. I picked her up and threw her over my shoulder. It wasn't the most elegant way to get Bianca out of the bunker, but it was efficient. Her red curls bobbed against my back as I headed for the ladder. I balanced her with one arm and used the other one to pull myself up as I climbed up and deposited her on the edge.

"Did you find anything out from the others?" I asked Antonio.

"You've got a good right hook," Antonio chuckled. "The harpy is out cold. The second vampire is coming to, though. Maybe we can get some feedback from her."

We made our way over to the vampire whose arms were tied with string dipped in holy water which apparently was something Antonio carried with him in his little tool kit. I had to remind myself to stay away from him and his toolkit.

The vampire looked up, her red eyes shooting daggers as she curled her lips at me. "Pretty impressive move," she said.

"I could teach it to you, but we need to find out some information."

"I don't need to learn anything from you," the vampire said. Antonio moved up behind her and held a wooden dagger to her heart.

"In one second, I'll kill you. How does that sound for a deal," Antonio said. "I love killing vampires. Vampires annoy the fuck out of me because you guys are always sucking people's blood and killing the wrong people."

He sounded hostile and angry, as if he had a personal vendetta against vampires. I glared at him. What the fuck did all that mean? And why was he letting me feed on

him if he was such a hater of the vamp?

“What do you want to know?” the vampire asked.

I wanted to grip her by the throat and choke the answer out of her. “Who’s keeping werewolves out of Southern Oregon?”

“How the hell should I know,” the vampire said. “All I know is they put out a huge hit. So big, in fact, the six of us were willing to share the bounty. We knew there’d be others, but we didn’t think two people could take us down.”

“Do they know you have her?” I asked.

“Yeah, they’ll be here soon.” She grimaced as Antonio pushed the wooden blade against her chest.

I looked at Antonio. “Let her go.”

“Why would I let her go?” he asked. “She’s going to cause a nuisance.”

“Take the wooden dagger from her chest. I’m going to make a deal with her.”

“I am not making a deal with you, not for one second,” she said.

“Your job here is to shut up and to think smart. You want to live right?” I leaned in inches from her. “Then I suggest you listen closely. I’m going to put you down in the bunker, and you’re going to be quiet. We’re going to put you in Bianca’s clothes so you smell like her. You’re not going to look like her, but it’s dark enough down there. It’ll take them a little while to figure it out.”

“I’m not your bait.” she snarled.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“So, you’re going to live, but you’re not going to tell them anything about us. You’re going to say you were attacked and they got away. That’s it. You don’t know anything else. Do you understand?” I insisted.

“I’ll tell them whatever the fuck I want.” The vamp hissed.

“Then you die now.” Antonio pressed the wooden dagger so it pricked her skin.

“Get in the bunker and you live.” I stood up and stepped back, giving her room to make her decision.

Antonio got all up in the vampire’s face. “If you talk, we will hunt you down and kill you.”

She glared at me, knowing I had figured her out and knowing there was not a damn thing she could do about it.

She walked to the bunker and within seconds disappeared to its dark interior. I took off Bianca’s coat and threw it down to her. We were going to move quickly. Bianca wouldn’t need a coat in the amount of time it would take us to get to the truck.

I slung her over my shoulder and we moved outside.

“I’m going to take her back to the truck. You’ve got to stay here and see who lands and see what happens. Please don’t get caught.” I suddenly felt a pain in my chest at the thought of Antonio being captured by the bounty hunters.

“You can’t just go off alone,” Antonio growled.

“We have to split up,” I insisted. “I have to get Bianca to safety and we need to find out who’s responsible for the price on a werewolf’s head. It’s the same problem we’re facing with the cemetery. We need to cut off the head of the serpent or we’re going to be fighting it over and over and over again. Something I’m way past doing. So, you stay here and figure out who’s running the show.”

Antonio’s gaze shifted back and forth as he weighed my words before finally giving me a single nod. He shifted into wolf form and disappeared into the undergrowth.

Chapter 27

Getting Bianca back to The Estate was a lot less eventful than I thought it would be. I ran over the mountains with her on my shoulder and got to the truck, laying her down on the seat. When I pulled into The Estate, Branson and Mae ran out to greet us. Branson hoisted Bianca up, carrying her into the house in a little more dignified approach than I’d been managing.

“We should send for Matheus,” Mae said as we followed Branson

“I’ll let Matheus know she’s been hurt,” Branson said. “But the reality is we need him to find out some more information.”

He carried her into the red room and laid her on a sofa opposite the sofa Jane was on. I turned and looked at Mae for a moment and shook my head. “We’re dropping like flies around here,” I said. Hilda was in the kitchen with Trina.

“Where are the kids?” I asked, concern edging its way through my body.

“Down at the bakery,” Trina said.

Mae, Branson, and I moved to the red room.

“They’ll come back around. They’ve had a healthy dose of magic.” Mae nodded.

“We need to spend some time and look at the case,” I said, “because at the moment we’re losing the battle for our members and the cemetery.”

“Have you given any thought to finding our fifth member?” Branson asked as if they’d been having a conversation earlier.

“I don’t know how we find people,” Mae said. “What am I supposed to do? Put it in the personal columns or up on Facebook or something? Bianca and Jane and Chloe, they came to the pendant. I believe the pentacle called them and I think it will also call the fifth person to us much faster than I could ever find them on my own.”

“Finding the fifth person isn’t going to be the whole deal, right?” I pointed out. “There’s six stones on the Pendant of Time. We need the five people to be in a circle around Mae like the stones are on the pendant.”

Jane stirred on the couch. She rolled over and slowly sat up.

“Jane,” I said as Mae and I both rushed over to her.

“Are you okay?” Mae asked, scanning Jane’s body with her hands.

“Yeah, I am actually,” she said. “Where is Toern?”

“He’s out gathering information still,” I said. “We still don’t know who’s responsible for the assault on the cemetery or for the price on Bianca’s head.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“You know I was thinking about if it’s the Dark Fae,” Mae said.

“It’s not,” Antonio said as he ran into the room from the kitchen. He must have come in through the back door of the house. He wasn’t even out of breath, though he must have run all the way back.

I marveled at his muscles and the warm feeling I always got whenever he was in the room.

“They flew a stealth jet. They were illegally in DGC country, on the rim, probably from Asia if they were coming in at the edge of New Attica, it would be the easiest in and out.”

“Asia in general,” I said. “That’s kind of a lot of ground to cover.”

“It couldn’t be Asia. It would have to be a pocket of Asia because Asia in general is light Fae territory. I don’t know why they would be putting hits out on shifters, especially on DGC land. It doesn’t make sense,” Jane said quietly.

“Well, until we start finding answers to some of our questions, a lot of this isn’t going to make sense and we’re still going to be reacting to every fire they put on us.” Mae groaned.

“Is there any way we can find out where that chopper was going?” I asked.

Antonio chuckled lightly. “Not unless you know all the wrong people. I’ll ask Matheus and Toern.”

There was a knocking on the door. We all exchanged a look.

“Are you expecting anyone?” I asked Mae.

“No,” she said.

“It might be the delivery I ordered,” Antonio said.

“You ordered a delivery to my house?” Mae said. “To The Estate?”

“It’s the crystals Drake ordered,” he sighed. “Besides, it’s a courier.”

I went with Antonio to the front door. I didn’t have a good feeling about this. We were down one Coven member still and the last thing we needed was another problem at the door. I was completely disarmed when the door opened and we were greeted by a short curvaceous middle-aged Asian woman with round cheeks and a big smile.

“I brought the crystals,” she said without introduction.

“Where’s Frank?” Antonio asked.

“Oh, he couldn’t make it. He told me to bring them here,” she said. “My name’s Kartika.”

Antonio stared at the hand she was holding out I looked at him. He was being his rude crabby self. I elbowed him and he reached out to take her hand.

I stretched past him, reach out my hand, and shook hers. “I’m Chloe,” I said. “Thanks for bringing the crystals.”

“May I come in?” she asked. “I really have to go to the bathroom. I had to fly to Portland from Phoenix, then drive here. I’ve needed to go forever. I hope these crystals bring you what you want.”

I exchanged looks with Antonio. I could see he didn’t want her coming in. She was a middle-aged woman that had to go pee. What was I supposed to do? I had to go pee every thirty minutes nowadays.

“Come on in,” I said, holding the door back and letting her. Antonio glared at me, shaking his head but I glared right back and shut the door behind her, welcoming her into The Estate.

Chapter 28

It turned out Kartika didn’t need to just go to the bathroom. Apparently, she needed to eat as well and then she needed to rest. She stayed almost the entire afternoon while I had a deep conversation with Trina about the different types of crystals and their properties.

Jane was still feeling okay, but I knew she was weak. We all gathered around the kitchen table and prepared food. There were sausages and Pierogies and salads and dumplings and a wide mixture of food for everybody’s taste. Trina even made dim sum for Kartika.

Kartika looked at the food and then to Trina. “I’m American, you know. I mean, I’m Asian obviously but I’m American. My parents aren’t Chinese, either. I don’t eat dim sum.”

“Sorry.” Trina seemed genuinely remorseful. “I thought I had gotten that right. I shouldn’t have assumed. Where are you from?”

“My family is from Indonesia,” Kartika said. “We eat similar to what you think of as Thai food, but you don’t have to go to any trouble. I’m happy with everything you’ve put on the table. It’s amazing.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

Having Kartika around, the conversation had shifted from being one about how we were going to stop the attacks on the cemetery and protect Bianca from the headhunters to a general conversation about the properties of stones and the gentle nuances of metaphysics. It was a much safer conversation and frankly, I was relieved. It had been a long time that we had been running and fighting. It felt nice to hang out around the table and have a human connection talking about random things. It was nice to have a break from saving the universe.

“Are you staying at the Crown Hotel?” I asked.

“How did you guess?” Kartika asked.

“It’s the only hotel in town, so if you weren’t staying there, then you have a long drive to the next town over.” Mae moved around the table collecting empty plates.

“I was going to stay a week out here on vacation.”

“You’re on vacation in southern Oregon?” Mae looked over at Hilda and Trina.

“It’s a beautiful place,” Hilda said. “Why wouldn’t people want to come and here?”

“It’s a lot different from Cottonwood,” Kartika gave us a dimpled smile. “Where I come from it’s all rocks and mountains and no trees.”

“How do you know Frank?” Antonio asked.

“He’s a really good friend of mine. We play poker on Friday night after work.”

“What kind of work is there out in Cottonwood?” I asked.

“I work for myself,” Kartika said. “I’m a journalist. My husband and I went exploring and one day found Cottonwood and we there and raised our kids. I’ve been there ever since. Even after he divorced me and left. You know what? I say good riddance.”

“You’re not bitter?” Mae asked.

“No, why do I have to be bitter?” Kartika said. “He gave me my children. I love my children and he’s a dumb ass.”

I glanced at Mae. There was a strange vibration in the room. I didn’t know if she could sense it. It was a gentle vibration going through the room. I glanced at Jane and she nodded toward me, feeling it also.

We could all sense it. I looked over my shoulder. Bianca stood at the door to the kitchen.

“Well, hello there,” I said quietly, the energy palpable in the air.

“Thanks for saving me,” she said gruffly before coming in and sitting down on the bench next to me. She leaned her head on my shoulder. I sat there stiffly, uncomfortable at the proximity but then realized this was probably what normal people with friends did. I patted her on the arm, still feeling awkward but knowing it was a good thing to do.

“Something’s going on,” she said.

“There’s a lot going on,” Trina commented.

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Bianca clarified. “There’s something here that’s really

good and I'm trying to put my finger on it.

I looked at Mae, but she gave me a slight shake of her head.

“Chloe, why don't you follow Kartika down to her hotel?” Mae asked. I stood up, understanding I was being told to do something and not minding. I liked orders. At least when they came from someone I trusted, and I trusted Mae completely. I trusted her with my life. As I walked by her and glanced down at her chest, I saw the pendant. Even from there I could see it was glowing. She quickly pulled her hand over it and turned away.

It didn't take me long to follow Kartika to the Crown Hotel. At first it felt a little bit awkward dropping her at a place where I knew a demon had destroyed one of the rooms, but the demon was dead. He was back with the demon king, and with a bit of luck things would slowly go back to normal. At least I knew the murderer was taken care of, even if the guy who called the hit wasn't.

I made a cursory glance of the hotel. It looked quiet and safe.

“I'm going to be here a week,” Kartika said. “I'll connect with you guys later. I want to find out how you use the crystals and you know, maybe you can show me around if you have time. I wouldn't want to impose.”

She had a bubbly vivacious personality, which was the exact opposite of me. Where I was upright and stiff, she was fluid and smooth. Where I was heavy-handed and hard, she was tingling and light. I liked her immediately, but I wasn't sure she was ready to have a whole shit show of the paranormal world dumped on top of her. Hell, the reality was I wasn't sure I was either. I was trying to make the best of it as we went along.

Chapter 29

She had no idea she'd been drawn here by the pendant to be in a coven with us.

For whatever reason, Mae didn't want to tell her yet.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

I could kind of understand it. It was shocking news. We already had enough problems on our hands trying to keep Bianca and Jane safe and to find out who was behind everything. From what I understood, the demigods weren't supposed to find out about all these problems. We were trying to hide it from the very people who could probably solve a number of these issues. Though, I had heard the types of wards and protections the demigods set up meant cougar Creek would basically end up being a prison.

It was nice to get into my house and have a little bit of normalcy. I knew I was hungry, but I figured if I laid down and rested then I would eventually feed. I didn't want to go all the way out to the elk, but I knew there were some deer in the field down by the hot springs. That was close. Maybe I would go out for a midnight snack.

One thing I knew was I had to get out of my uniform. I felt I'd been wearing it forever, and though I was going to continue to serve in the police force, I didn't necessarily have to be wearing my uniform twenty-four-seven. I slipped out of the khaki outfit and into the shower, feeling refreshed by the hot water pouring over my body. Even as a vampire I appreciated the feel of hot water on my skin. I didn't have the aches and pains I'd been experiencing before I was turned, though. I guess it was good to be dead. I couldn't say I always felt energized and ready to seize the day, but I definitely knew the little aches and pains that had been niggling at me were gone. For that I was grateful.

It didn't take me long after the shower to put on a pair of black jeans and a black long-sleeved shirt. I felt a bit ninja-like, but I knew I had to stay dark. Even at the speed I moved, there would be a point where I sucked the blood from an animal. No one needed to see that. I hesitated for a moment at my front door, wondering if I

should consider going over to the estate first to check on them or not. I reminded myself that Antonio was there watching Bianca, who needed it for sure.

They didn't need me.

The night was cold and dark as I moved out into the streets. I decided to stay on the road, but I moved so quickly nobody would be able to see me. I ran past the hot springs entrance and into the fields next to them where the farmers kept animals. It wasn't quite the hunt I had enjoyed with Bianca, but it would get me the food I needed. I found a healthy horse and drank from it, feeling the blood seeping into my body, pumping into my veins and beating in my heart. I had energy again and my vision was returning so everything was bright and beautiful.

As I was finishing getting my food, searing pain ripped through my brain, pulling at me and yanking me away from the horse I was drinking from. It pushed me flat on the ground. I looked up and to where a shadow creature was floating in the air above me, its face a skull covered with a limp black shroud. I had no idea what the fuck it was, but the way it was draining energy from me wasn't good.

Chapter 30

It was the weirdest sensation of having my body pressed against the ground as if I was falling into it while at the same time my soul was being sucked out of me. The very essence of what made me exactly who I was and gave me power was being absorbed into this creature that floated above me.

"Stop!" I screamed at the creature, even though I knew it wouldn't listen. My voice sounded like a drifting whisper. I had to do something and there was no way I could fight this thing with hand or gun or anything. There was no way I was going to beat him under any circumstances. All I could do was lay there and hope upon hope it didn't kill me.

at it sucked the life force out of me, it filled my head with every nasty memory I'd ever had. Every moment when I'd been shunned by colleagues in Indianapolis and every moment when I found myself feeling less than, or not good enough. I was left lying there with the distinct sense I was useless and had no purpose.

A ferocious snarl ripped through the air as a white flash came sailing above me, I could make out the white fur of Antonio as he leapt onto the shadow creature, breaking its focus and making it tumble to the ground and disappear into the shadows of the night.

I lay there on the ground, feeling the world turn around me and the stars overhead spinning. I slowly waited for it to stop, trying to get a sense for every part of my body and trying to figure out if I had enough energy to actually get off the ground.

Any energy I had gained by feeding on the animal was gone. I needed to feed again.

As the thought entered my head, Antonio pressed his wrist up against my lips letting his blood stream into my mouth. I dragged heavily on his veins, seeking the refuge of the euphoria the blood brought. The visions the shadow creature had put in my mind slipped away. Instead, I was caught up in the beating of Antonio's heart. I looked up at him, my gaze finding his. His eyes, usually sparkling with intelligence and grumpiness, were now glazed over as he looked out at me.

"You're absolutely fucking stunning," he said.

"That's the poison talking," I said. "It's making you think I'm glamorous."

"Liar," he said. "I thought it from the first moment I saw you."

I raised my mouth from his wrist, blood dripping from my lips. "Now you're the liar."

He reached his hand forward and pushed a strand of hair out of my face and tucked it behind my ear. “You’re absolutely gorgeous,” he said. “You’re the epitome of a beautiful woman.”

“Vampire,” I said. “Don’t forget. I’m a vampire and you hate vampires because you’re a werewolf.” I whispered the last word, but it was too late; he was already upon me, his mouth thundering against mine as he tilted his head to get closer to me.

“We shouldn’t,” I whispered. His mouth plundered mine in response. His hands raked across my breasts and grabbed my ass. There was no softly going in with this creature. He was going to take me here in the field with the animals watching.

I pulled my lips away from his. “Are you insane?”

“I want you.” His voice rasped. “I need you now. Naked.”

There was something about the way his words stroked me that made my juices flow and my womanhood swell. He shifted slightly, just so his fingernails turned into talons. With a sweeping motion he ripped off my clothes.

“What the hell am I going to wear home?” I asked as my T-shirt fell in shreds to the ground.

“Nothing,” he said.

I didn’t care, because he had me down on the ground, my ass was in damp grass and my legs spread wide. He went down on me, a hungry wolf seeking out dinner. I gasped at his ferocity, his eagerness. His tongue made lapping circles over my clit. I moaned, arching my back and moving my hips forward so my womanhood pressed into his mouth, feeling his teeth bite against me.

“Oh my God.” I breathed the words out as my body shuddered in a small pre-orgasm. Moisture flooded my thighs, but I knew it was teasing. He was leading me on, taking me to where I couldn’t stand it anymore. My nails dug into the dirt, feeling at the earth, vibrant and alive beneath my fingers as I slid it through my fisted hands and screamed out into the night, thrusting into his hungry mouth.

“Get your ass in the air,” he growled. “Now. I want to see it.”

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

I wanted to take direction from him. I wanted to be told what to do. I had no problem following orders when they were from somebody I trusted, and while I might not trust him in the long-term, tonight I trusted he had everything to fulfill my every need.

He pulled back on his knees and flipped me over. My knees pressed into the mud as I stuck my ass in the air, eager for his throbbing cock. I didn't even want to see it. I wanted to feel it. Without another thought he put one careful hand on my shoulder to hold me steady, then he thrust his hips forward. With no more warning, his cock buried into me like a shooting rocket deep inside me.

I gasped as his magnificent manhood stretched me and touched me in places I'd never experienced before. I rocked back against him, feeling more than his glorious cock. I felt his hands pulling me up, grabbing my breasts and holding me tight as he thrust into me.

A thought struck me then, when all that could be heard were my panting and moans.

He was the one.

HE was the one I'd been waiting for all these years. Every single year of my life I had stayed single and it was all waiting for him. It was always Antonio.

I pressed my hips back into him as we rocked together, our bodies moving in the moonlight, sweating despite the cold air and the breeze chilling our skin. I was a vampire and he was a werewolf. It didn't matter, we could handle the weather. No cool Southern Oregon night was going to be enough to dampen the passion we had

for each other. My soft groans and his low growls were the only sounds that filled the pasture. Our bodies moved together in rhythmic force as his hands grabbed my waist and pulled me back against him.

“You are so fucking glorious,” Antonio said with a slight light spank on my butt.

If being alive as a vampire was remarkable, fucking as a vampire was mind blowing. Every inch of his body against mine, inside and out, was like a million electric pulses setting me on fire and driving my desire in a way I had not experienced before.

He bit at my neck.

I clawed at his thighs, reaching between his legs and squeezing his balls as he fucked me, fast and furious. He brought me to the brink of oblivion until finally, in pulsating waves, we orgasmed together, our screams echoing into the dark night.

Chapter 31

I was so delirious from the blood and the romp I didn't even remember how I got home. I remembered we'd run side-by-side quickly and I'd been home. Antonio took very good care of me. The rough dominating man who had fucked me was gone. Now he filled the bathtub for me and gently washed my arms and shoulders as I rested in the candlelight.

“Why are you such an asshole?” I asked him, raising an eyebrow.

He chuckled. “Maybe it's you who's the asshole.”

“I'm an officer of the law,” I said. “Either that makes me definitely an asshole or it makes me definitely not an asshole. It really depends on your perspective, not reality.”

“Whatever,” Antonio grumbled.

“What was that thing?” I asked, shuddering as I remembered the shadowy figure had sucked up my energy.

“A wraith.” He said the word gruffly. “It could’ve killed you.”

“How did you know where I was?” I asked.

He didn’t answer first, but as I looked at him, realization suddenly dawned on me.

“You were out there, already. You were watching me feed.”

“I was there to protect you and clearly you needed it.” It was hard to argue with him about that. Still, the fact he had been following me irritated me. Though, with everything I’ve been going on lately, it wasn’t really surprising.

He stayed the night at my house and the fast, rough love making we’d had in the pasture was replaced with a slow body massage as he brought me more and more climaxes through the night.

Finally, exhausted, he fell asleep. I was tired as well. It wasn’t true the vampires didn’t get tired; we did. I felt drained by the wraith and the lovemaking. There was a beautiful throbbing in my body, layering over the chill leftover from what the wraith had done to me.

In the morning we went straight to The Estate without even having breakfast. I knew there’d be plenty of food for us if we were hungry. Well, if Antonio was hungry and undoubtedly, he was. At this stage I realized I could empty my fridge unless I wanted to keep food for humans and wolves that happened by. I was resigned to being a vampire and no longer needing food.

Just blood.

I knocked at the front door and Mae opened it wide. “You don’t have to knock,” Mae said with a sigh. “I realize people come and go as they want to. It’s fine.”

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to come and go from your house,” I said with a smile. “My mother taught me manners, but I appreciate what you said.”

“We’ve got wraiths,” Antonio said.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

Bianca looked over at me and they both looked at Hilda.

“What does that mean?” Bianca asked.

“You saw a wraith?” Hilda asked, the color draining from her face. She motioned everyone inside. We made our way into the kitchen, settling around the table by the small kitchen fire.

“That’s not good,” Branson said. “I guess there’s no doubt about the fact whoever’s after the cemetery is a dark fairy, because only the dark Fae would have the audacity to summon wraiths.”

“There weren’t many wraiths. It was one.”

Hilda’s face was still as white as her hair. “When one shows up, there’s a flock of them somewhere nearby. It usually means they are coming to suck the soul out of some people. In this case, by the fact they attacked you, Chloe, I can only imagine they’re here for the Coven.”

Mae’s face was drawn and tired. “If they can destroy the Coven before we fulfill the Pentacle of Time, then we will have lost the battle. We will have lost it all.”

“What about Kartika?” Bianca asked.

Mae shook her head. “Everyone’s lives are at risk. If we bring her into this, it’s one more life we’ll put at risk.”

“But we need the six coven members,” I said.

“Yes, we need the six coven members.” Mae nodded in agreement, “we don’t need them until we have all six. We know who she is. I saw the pentacle last night. It was glowing with her stone. Kartika’s the fifth member of the Coven, but I don’t want to tell her until we have the sixth one.”

“What if they only come in order?” I asked. “What if we’ve got to recognize and accept the fifth one before the sixth one shows up?”

“Well, how are we supposed to find out?” Bianca asked.

I looked at Hilda and then to Branson, but neither one of them seem to have an answer.

“The crystals,” Antonio said. “We’ll find some answers in the crystals. I don’t know if it’ll be the answers you want or the answers you need, but we’ll find something there. I’m sure of it.”

We moved into the red room where a table had been set up next to the potions table. The boxes of crystals were there. Nobody had even opened since I’d left earlier, but I supposed everybody here was quite exhausted. Bianca and Jane were both still recovering from their run ins with supernatural forces. I’d been busy being attacked by a wraith and Mae, the normal, calm, steady center of our coven had stood there waiting for us to come together.

I stepped forward and opened one of the three boxes myself, pulling an athame, a small handheld blade, off the potions table. Inside there was a collection of pale pink crystals. Rose quartz. In the second box there was a collection of amethyst crystals and the third one held smoky quartz crystals. I stared down at the crystals as we began to take them out of the boxes. There were clusters and pillars. We placed them

all out on the table, but it was obvious by the expressions on everyone's faces that no one knew how to make them work.

"Any of us know how to operate these things?" I asked, primarily looking at Hilda.

"No, it's a Fae trick," she said. "The communication through the crystals. It's an elemental thing. We have Jane."

"We've got shifters and witches galore, but the only Fae we have is air Fae, so Jane's an elemental, but she would not be able to use the crystals without training." Branson explained.

"We don't have a spell, we don't have a diagram, we don't have anything?" I asked in frustration.

"We've got the crystals," Antonio shrugged. "There's got to be something in that. We can figure out what to do with them."

"Great. I'll start," I said, thinking I was the least qualified one in the room to do it but we had to start moving them around.

I tried moving the crystals into a number of different configurations and each time, I had the witches come by and do any spell they could think of to try to make m work. Everything we tried failed. By the end of the day, we had come up with absolutely nothing. It was frustrating. We had spent the whole day discovering a hundred ways to fail at making crystals communicate. It was almost a relief when somebody knocked at the door.

Chapter 32

Branson and Antonio had gone out to do a round of the cemetery. Anita and Drake

were running the restaurant. Hilda and Trina hadn't shown up yet. It was just Jane, Mae, Bianca and myself. The four members of the blood pact. It was warm and cozy by the fire.

I moved next to Mae as she answered the door, my tensions on high alert. Kartika stood outside with a big smile on her face.

Mae stepped back into the house and invited her in, directing her toward the kitchen.

Once Kartika was settled in at the table by the kitchen fire, she made a weird look at Carl, the zombie dog, and then up at Mae.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Your dog doesn’t look so good,” she said. “Have you thought of you know...” She touched her mouth and clicked her tongue and ran a finger around her neck as if she was decapitated herself.

I burst out laughing unintentionally. It was kind of hard to kill a dog was already dead, but I wasn’t about to say that.

“Oh, Carl’s a permanent fixture around here,” Mae said. “He’s not going anywhere.” Mae gazed silently at Kartika for a long moment and I could see her fingers twitch. I glanced over to see if Mae was performing any magic on Kartika, but Kartika was looking her usual bubbly happy self.

Mae held her hands up to the tonics, teas and brews she had sitting out on the counter. Aa she moved her hands over them, she suddenly stopped on a particular brew, smiled, and prepared individual cups of tea made of those leaves.

I looked over Bianca and we both raised our eyebrows. It hadn’t gotten past me. Jane had told me how Bianca had been forced to turn into a werewolf by Trina because she hadn’t developed her ability to shift yet. Trina’s potion had made that possible. Was Mae doing the same thing to Kartika?

As if she knew what I was thinking, Bianca looked at me and gave me a shake of her head. I guessed she and Mae had discussed it and it wasn’t something they were going to do again.

I knew the magic world had different laws than the human world and I was starting to get used to them, but I liked the laws of the human world. I liked the rules and

regulations and following them and upholding them. I still wasn't sure which side of the fence I was on in terms of the magic world, but with a bit of luck, I was going to be able to straddle them both without forcing someone to shift against their will.

Mae put the cup of tea on the table, looking at Kartika and smiling. "This is a tonic. It'll make you feel better," she said.

"What do you mean, feel better?" It was the first time I'd ever seen a frown cross her face.

"Your smile doesn't reach your eyes," Mae said. "There's something wrong with your heart."

To my shock and surprise, Kartika burst into tears. They fell down her face and created rivers on her cheeks.

We all looked at Jane, who was famous for calming people down. She had actually used her powers to calm me down a couple of times and in fact had turned me away so I wasn't nosing around in their business.

"I just found out I was adopted," she said.

We all raised our eyebrows.

"How is it you only found out when you're in your, what, forties?" Mae asked softly.

"Forty-two," Kartika said. "I know, right? What's even worse is that my parents didn't tell me. I found out because I had to get my birth certificate and somehow it slipped out that it was my second birth certificate. Both my parents are dead so I can't even confront them about it."

Jane reached out her hand and touched Kartika's fingertips with her own. It was a small connection, but it created energy between the two of them. We could immediately see the effects on Kartika. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

"Frank knew I was upset and struggling with it, because you know, what do I tell my children? Now I don't know who I am, so they won't know who they are. I've spent my whole life thinking I was one thing and then I'm not," she said her eyes wide as she leaned forward whispering the words.

"So anyhow, that's why I'm here. It is why Frank sent me." She inhaled a ragged breath. "He wanted me to get a break from Cottonwood and I don't even know why I'm telling you all this."

"Oh, it's okay," Jane said. "You'd be amazed what we've all discovered about each other. We're a group of new friends. And it's really nice to have you here." Her voice was calm, light.

I felt the urge to tell Kartika about the world she was going to find herself slipping into. I didn't know what her adopted meant to us, but we hadn't known until the day before that she was a member of our Coven. I knew there was no way we were going to tell her right now, especially not with the wraiths attack the night before.

I suddenly sat up straight. She probably shouldn't even be at The Estate. The truth suddenly struck me; she would be targeted based on association with us. I stood up and walked over to Kartika. "We're going to get that in a to go cup for you."

The others looked at me as if I was crazy to be throwing her out now that we had found her.

I was pretty sure we were being watched and if we were, it meant someone would know that Kartika was coming here. If we were attached to her, then she would

become a target. We had enough problems as it was. “Yeah, yeah she’s got to go.”

Looking confused and hurt, she stood up, drying her eyes. “It was TMI, right?”

“No, there’s nothing wrong with you. You’re perfect and wonderful,” I said. “They’re doing some work on the house, so we all have to leave.” I turned and looked at everybody and gave them the eye.

Everybody in the room stood up, nodding. “Yes, of course we all have to get up.” We moved toward the front door. As we passed the door to the red room, Kartika stopped and turned toward it, her eyes suddenly shining.

“We were gathering and looking at the crystals you brought,” Mae said, walking further into the red room.

At this phase the gray, pink and purple stones were configured into something looking like a demented butterfly. I’d never seen anything like it before in my life.

Kartika took a deep breath in. She looked around as if taking stock of every single item in the room. Then she turned to me with a light laugh. “This room is amazing,” she said. “You could do anything in here.” She looked over at the table with the potions on it. I bit my lower lip, but nobody said a word.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Right now, we’re focused on the crystals.” Mae directed her attention to the crystals.

Kartika studied the crystals. “Okay, one second.” She began twisting the crystals around bit by bit.

She looked down, frowning.

“One of them is missing from the formation,” she said. “I’ll go and look in my things. Maybe it fell out of the box or something. I don’t know. I do know there was a small hematite crystal that sat in the center of the configuration when Frank had it set up.”

I glanced around at the rest of the Coven and nodded. “I’ll go down to the hotel and get it with you.”

With a bit of luck we’d identified the missing link to our Fae communication tool.

Chapter 33

Kartika had the rental car she’d driven up to The Estate with, so I followed her in the cop car. I’d gotten dressed that morning to go to work. Antonio thought I was crazy for wanting to go to work in the evening, but the reality was being attacked by a perpetrator, whether they were supernatural or not, wasn’t a good excuse to not go to work when you were a police officer. In fact, it was even more of a reason to go to work because there were bad guys out there and they were creating havoc.

My plan was to get the crystal, deliver it to The Estate, and then go back and check in with Sheriff Ted. At least one of us needed to show up to work to keep him off the

premises of The Estate and I knew it wasn't safe for Bianca to go into work. After last night, maybe it wasn't that safe for me, either.

Kartika's tears hadn't bothered me earlier. I'd understood them. If I found out I was adopted at this age, it would be a pretty scary thing and I would have a lot of questions for my parents. We hoped to keep her safe by not having her association with The Estate known.

I stood by silently in Kartika's hotel room as she began to dig around in her boxes. "Those boxes were in another box. I'll find it here in a second. I'm still here for another couple of days. I'll go down to the hot springs and then to the seaside. Hopefully I'll see you guys around."

"Sure," I said, trying to be nice and noncommittal at the same time. I was going to keep an eye on Kartika while she was here, that was for sure, but the sooner she got out of town, the safer it was going to be for her as far as I could see it. Until we found the sixth member of the coven, the last thing we needed right now was one more liability.

"I found it!" Kartika said, turning to me and handing me a small, long box. "It's what Frank gave me to give you. He said these would activate the other crystals."

"And you're sure there's no more," I said, standing there, wanting to make sure I wouldn't have to come down here in a few hours to find something else.

The box was taped and sealed shut. I didn't really want to open it, so I had to trust her.

"It's everything, I'm sure. I'm sorry I didn't deliver them all the same time. It was my mistake."

I felt a wave of compassion for her. I totally knew how she felt being all alone. She sounded like I felt when I lived in Indianapolis. I wanted to bring her into the coven and then share with her sort of the goodness of our found family, but it wasn't safe yet. Maybe it would never be safe. It was one of the risks of being in the supernatural world. It seemed we were always one step away from death and destruction. Then again, I had died and it didn't seem too bad so far.

"Thanks for your help," I said, gripping the box tighter and heading back up to The Estate.

By the time I got back to The Estate, everybody had regrouped in the red room and were looking at the crystals again, trying out different formations. They settled on moving it back the way Kartika had left it. I handed Mae the box.

"Here's the last of the boxes."

Mae turned to Antonio, but he ignored her kissing me on the cheek instead.

There was no way to introduce the idea of me and Antonio being together any other way. I ignored the looks and raised eyebrows of the rest of the coven. Mae handed the box of crystals to Antonio.

"This is kind of your show," she said. "It was Hilda's idea to use the dark crystals."

"Let's get the box open," Antonio said.

He used one shifted talon to rip open the tape in the box and open it up to a small row of perfectly square hematite crystals. There was a single row of about ten of them inside the rectangular box. He lifted them one at a time, interspersing them into the pattern of the crystals that were already on the table.

There was one hematite crystal that was larger than the others. “This is the keystone,” Antonio said, setting it down in the middle of the crystal formation. “Now we need some elemental magic.”

“I don’t even know what to do,” Jane said.

“You need to feel it,” Antonio said. “In your soul. Reach out to all your people, all of the Fae, the ancient ones. They have a psychic connection between all of them and it’s gotten weaker over the years. They use crystals to help keep it focused, so if you can reach into that magic of connection, then the crystals will enhance your ability to connect with them.”

“So, you’re basically saying she’s the transmitter?” I asked.

“I’m saying she’s the receiver, and the crystals are the enhancer. They’ll make it possible for the rest of us to see what’s going on.” Antonio said.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“This only works with Fae?” Jane asked.

“Yeah, these are Fae crystals because we’re trying to find out what’s going on in the Fae world. They keep it all pretty hush-hush, especially over here, even amongst themselves if they have different politics playing out.” Antonio explained.

Jane sat down on the red couch in front of the crystal formation, her hands placed delicately on her knees. She closed her eyes. Her black curly hair was slicked back and pulled up off her face. Her almond-shaped eyes were closed and her dark skin almost glowed as she centered her energy.

We all stayed quiet. I held my breath as she slowly inhaled and exhaled, going deeper and deeper. I could feel her sinking into some sort of foreign aura I didn’t quite understand.

She gave a nod and reached her hands out toward the crystals, muttering a spell under her breath to enhance the connection. Jane nodded and repeated the same spell. Mae said it also and slowly the two of them created an energy field, like a television screen floating above the crystals.

I looked at Antonio, my eyes wide. “What the hell is that?” I whispered under my breath.

A large room appeared on the screen. It was full of many beautiful people, some with pointed ears, some without. Some had long hair, some had short pixie hair, and blue skin, some green skin, some brown skinned

“These are scenes from the Fae world,” Antonio said.

“How do we know what we’re seeing?” I asked.

“We have to discern it,” Antonio said. “But you can direct it. Jane, think about the question you want the answer to.”

“Who’s responsible for the attacks on the cemetery?” Jane said without hesitation. We all stared expectantly at the screen, waiting to find out what would appear.

Chapter 34

I watched the screen, trying to discern what the people were doing and where they were going. There was a flow of people heading toward a single destination in the distance.

It was very, very dark.

Jane’s body spasmed breaking her out of her trance. The screen went blank and then fractured. Tiny energy crystals fell back down to the crystals that projected them.

I rushed to Jane’s side. “Jane, are you OK?” Jane opened her eyes and looked at me, her eyes full of the darkness I had seen on the screen. “You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine, there’s something out there,” she said, her voice trembling. “There’s something out there that’s powerful and malevolent. It’s coming for the cemetery. I don’t even know if it’s safe for me to tap into that energy and look at it, but we need to go in and find out.”

“Not if it’s a danger to your health,” Mae said. “I won’t risk any more of our people on the idea we need some more intel. You’ve come out of a demon induced coma. No

way are we going to use this thing.” She nodded toward the crystals.

I bit my lower lip and agreed. I knew she was right. We had to protect the individuals who were working on keeping the cemetery safe. Everyone was needed.

I thought about Kartika. She could probably work the crystals. She said she was adopted, which meant whatever bloodline she was from, they had given her away. Probably meant she wasn’t a shifter. They seem to be pretty loyal and focused. Definitely wasn’t a vampire, so that left demigod, Fae, or witch.

Whichever one she was, I was sure it was going to be helpful to the coven.

The radio on my belt went off. “Deputy Chloe.” Sheriff Ted’s voice came out over the walkie-talkie.

“This is Deputy Chloe,” I said into the walkie-talkie.

“I need you down at the office right away,” he said.

“On my way.”

“What is it?” Mae asked.

“He didn’t tell me. He just said I needed to get down there,” I said.

“Well, we can’t come with you since it’s your job, but you’re going to be okay.”

I looked over at Mae. “Of everybody in this organization, I think I probably have the most likelihood of being fine,” I said, but as I got in the car and went down the hill to find out what Sheriff Ted wanted, I had a feeling of responsibility weighing on my shoulders. With two men down and Mae the leader of the Coven, I needed to support

her as best I could. Hopefully what I needed to do for Sheriff Ted today, allied with what Mae wanted to do with the coven.

Sheriff Ted was in the car and ready to go when I got to the police station. I didn't even bother going inside.

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Where are we going?” I got into the police car next to him as he gunned the engine.

“There’s a problem at Crown Hotel. We’ve got to check it out. It’s a woman, so I thought it was best if I had you come along.”

A few moments later we were at the Crown Hotel and Heather, the blonde curly haired girl behind the counter, was showing us around.

“I’ve worked here for two years,” she said. “Never needed the police and now I’ve seen you guys twice in two days.”

“Just take us to the room,” I said.

“It’s all I was doing,” she said.

By the time we got to the room, I had a feeling of dread as we got closer and closer. “Which room number is it?” I asked.

“Thirty-eight.” Heather smacked her gum as she answered.

Kartika’s room.

I quickly texted to Mae and the rest of the coven there was a problem with Kartika.

It wasn’t till we got to the room that I knew exactly what had happened. Kartika was lying on the bed, her head thrown back, hair flowing. she had an expression of absolute horror and terror on her face.

You need to get down here right away, I texted Mae. There was no way I was going to be able to bring Kartika out of this on my own. I didn't even have the tools to figure it out. I needed a witch.

"Have you ever seen anything like it?" Sheriff Ted asked me.

"I was going to call the medics," Heather said. "But then I thought I'd call you guys first. Do you think there's been some foul play here?"

"I've never seen anyone in a position like this," Sheriff Ted said, scratching the scraggly beard on his chin.

"I've got some friends coming over," I said.

"Don't tell me you're mixed up in all this kind of weird stuff," Sheriff Ted said.

"Not really, sir," I said. "I've made friends since I moved to Cougar Creek and some of them might know something about this. It looks like she might have eaten something that was bad for her."

"We need to call the medics." Sheriff Ted turned toward Heather. "Call 911 and get the medics from the next town over to come to Cougar Creek."

Mae showed up moments later with Trina and Hilda in tow. The three witches ushered Sheriff Ted out and shut the door. They took one look at Kartika.

"Wraiths," Hilda said.

"How do you get someone out of a wraith trance?" I asked.

"Very, very carefully," Trina said. Kartika's skin was glowing a pale white and

glistening from sweat. Her eyes underneath her closed eyelids flickered right and left rapidly, as if she was watching something.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked.

“Wraiths can go in and infect your brain,” Hilda said. “They keep re-running the images of your past misdeeds or anything you feel bad about. They keep running it over and over again in your head. For example, we know she’s emotional about her discovered adoption. so, she might be reliving the moment of finding out again and again. The shocking horror of it or the self-loathing, the lack of love, the feeling discarded, all of that.”

“Oh my God.” My heart went out to her. I knew all those feelings all too well. I had experienced them in Indianapolis and I was only now realizing how toxic that environment had been for me.

“Poor Kartika,” Hilda said.

“How do we disrupt the cycle?” Mae asked. “Will my lightning, do it?”

“No, that would probably kill her,” Hilda said.

“Let’s not do one then,” I said.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“Noted,” Mae agreed.

Jane looked at Kartika pensively. “I can do a mind meld.”

We all looked at Jane as though she was crazy.

“You want to have that experience?” Trina said. “It won’t help her. It’ll give you the same experience she’s living at the moment.”

“We have to change what she is thinking about,” Hilda explained. “We have to override it.”

“How do we do that?” Mae asked.

“With a very powerful magical spell we all have to put everything into.” I’d never seen Hilda look so serious about anything.

Chapter 35

Mae, Bianca, Jane, Hilda, and Trina turned up to help with the spell. They had even shut the bakery down to bring Anita and Drake over. Jane did a quick compulsion spell on Sheriff Ted so he gave us access to Kartika and even stood guard at the door.

“We have to build a better feeling for her to counterbalance what the wraith did,” Hilda explained. “A wraith works by controlling your thoughts, so we need to make a golden light. A bubble of happy thoughts to bring out all the best moments of Kartika’s life. That’s the only way it’s going to override what she’s going through.”

“How do we do that?” I asked.

“I want each one of you to think of the best experiences you ever had in your life.”

Instantly the night with Antonio came to mind. I felt the tingling in my body of those good sensations. My skin heated up and a vibration of light surrounded me.

“Once you feel energy of goodness, dig deeper,” Hilda said. “Find other memories that are sparked by the feel-good sensation. It doesn’t have to be the same type of memory. Then we’re going to feed those feelings into a light bubble.” She raised her chin to Trina, who nodded. A moment later, glowing above the bed, was a huge bubble of golden light.

“We have to fill it up with good memories and good moments.”

“We’ve got this,” Bianca said.

I stood there silently for a moment, waiting for my thoughts to simmer down. Antonio was there in the forefront, but right behind him were years and years of unhappy memories of trudging to work. Those years had felt like living in quicksand. I’d been trying to fight the good fight, of going to work every day trying to find camaraderie with my colleagues before going home alone at night. As I went farther back, I found memories from my childhood of joy and light and color. I remembered sunlight dappling on my arms as I ran through the sprinkler and the warm breeze of a summer’s day as I lay on the grass with nothing to do but enjoy the warmth of the sun on my skin. The simple things like finding a four-leaf clover one afternoon at the church picnic. All of these thoughts and feelings filled me with joy.

As I felt the energy well up inside of me, I opened my eyes and focused on the ball of golden light that hovered above Kartika.

There was a movement inside of me and as the energy built-up, it started funneling into the light bubble. I could see it and as I looked around the circle, I saw all the good thoughts and energies of the rest of the coven filling up the golden bubble with a glowing light.

The brightness and the feeling of goodness and safety and security was so full and rich in the room. I soaked it in myself, even though I knew it was meant for Kartika. There was still plenty left over for her.

Hilda started a low chant in the corner we all began to reprise.

“Malancha mala tutor Patis“

Soon we were all chanting and as we intoned, the glowing ball grew brighter and brighter, as if our good thoughts and energies were getting supercharged. I felt so powerful, as if nothing in the world could stop me and everything was perfectly in its right place and its right moment.

“Let it drop,” Hilda said as the energy in the room built. We did as she said and let go. The ball splashed down on Kartika making her body sizzle with golden light. It shone out of her and through her.

“Keep chanting,” Hilda insisted, her voice straining against the whorls of energy that moved through the room.

The chanting reached a climax. The light flashed brightly, and then it slowly dimmed down. Kartika’s skin tone was back to being golden. Her eyes fluttered open.

“Thank you,” she said before she closed her eyes again.

The door opened and the medics came in. We parted the way, letting them get close

to Kartika. They took her blood pressure and all of her vital signs.

“We’re going to take her into the clinic,” they said. “We need to do some blood tests and take a look. It seems she suffered some form of a stroke or something.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

I looked at Mae and Hilda, wondering what they were going to say. But they nodded. It seemed she definitely had to go to the hospital.

“I’ll go with her,” I said.

“Good idea,” Sheriff Ted said, poking his head in the room. “We’ll want to ask her some questions when she wakes up.

“Well, maybe we should give her some time to rest first,” I said with a smile.

Mae pulled me aside as they loaded Kartika into the ambulance.

“You can’t stay with her,” Mae said.

My heart tightened, but I knew she was right. I felt connected to Kartika because we had such similar experiences with rejection. I thought, we would automatically be friends. It didn’t matter we hadn’t known each other over those twenty years of adulthood we had already experienced.

“We have to let her go,” Mae said.

“I know,” I moaned. “We’re all in danger enough and well, she’s not really strong.”

“I think your Wraiths will show up eventually,” Mae said. “For now, we really need to make sure she’s protected and out of here.”

“If the wraiths already know she’s connected to us and they’re willing to do this,

won't they do the same if she's not here?"

"I don't think so," Mae said. "I think they're right on top of her because she's right next to the cemetery and they're trying to keep her from us. Let's let them think they've won and we sent her packing. The rest of us need to go back to The Estate."

"We're not even going to say goodbye?" I asked.

"It's not goodbye," Mae said. "Let's make it as low-key as possible for her own good."

Chapter 36

When we arrived back at the estate, the red room was all aglow with tons of lights.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"We don't know," Anita and Drake said. They'd gone back early and had been sitting in the room monitoring the crystals, which apparently had flung up a screen and was showing them images right, left, and center as if it were a tv screen whose remote was stuck and flipping channels.

"Are you sure it's even safe to watch?" I asked, looking at the scenes of dark and fiery creatures milling around.

"I don't know what you mean," Anita said. "It turned on all by itself."

"Maybe it's already connected to Jane in some way, so it has abilities," Drake suggested.

"It kind of worries me a little bit," I said.

“You mean, you think maybe they can see us?” Anita asked.

“It’s always a possibility,” I said.

It was one of my firm beliefs that things had to be looked at from different perspectives to find a solution.

It was one of the reasons why I’d taken to being a vampire so easily. The only way to solve the crime was to think like a killer. I might not have been a vampire my whole life, but I’d felt like a hunter my whole life. Now I had to think like a vampire and my gut feeling was that vampires didn’t trust anyone.

Not even their own.

But I was different. I was a vampire and a blood coven member.

“Shut it off,” Branson said.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“We didn’t turn it on,” Anita said.

Jane walked over and waved her hand over the crystals, which immediately shut off.

“Dismantle it,” Branson said.

Mae came in the room. “What’s wrong?”

“Chloe brought up a really good point about the crystals giving others access to us,” Branson put his arm around Mae and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Mae said. “It is what it is. It’s not like they don’t know The Estate exists. We have a certainty about one thing. The troubles in the cemetery are coming from the dark Fae. That’s one thing we can all agree on.”

The clumping up the stairs announced the arrival of Matheus. He walked in the room with Toern, who took Jane into his arms, giving her a resounding kiss.

They both looked like they’d been through a couple of fights, but they were wholehearted and welcome home. Bianca grabbed Matheus and for a moment I thought she might jump him right there; she was so excited to see him.

“I think you’ve got a room upstairs,” Mae said, shaking her head.

“It’s Morel,” Matheus said.

“What do you mean?” Bianca asked.

“The name of the dark Fae stirring a rebellion against the light Fae is called Morel. He’s gaining a lot of power. We had to go to the edge of the Fae territory, Hawaii, to find out, but the minute we touched it, it was obvious. There is a Civil War amassing between the dark and light Fae and this guy Morel is taking the lead.”

“Why does he want to take on the light Fae?” I asked.

“I don’t know, because he’s dark?” Mae said.

“I don’t think it’s quite that simple,” Bianca said. “I think there are ones who tend more toward darkness and ones that tend more toward light, but well, whatever they are, they want our cemetery. We’re going to need to keep a twenty-four-seven watch and figure out a way to combat the wraiths. We can’t afford to risk more people. We need to find the sixth Coven member.”

“We’re going to need to survive,” I said. “We’ll take turns on the watch.”

“Sounds good,” Mae agreed. “Jane and Bianca, maybe you can start researching the wraiths and figure out ways we can combat them, because if the Fae are done with the demons and sending wraiths now, we’re in trouble.”

“What can they do in the cemetery with a wraith?” I asked as zombie dog Carl came up and rubbed against my leg. I reached down and gave him a pat on the head.

“They can wake the nightmares of all the people who are dead in the cemetery,” Hilda said. “Once they raise their nightmares and fears it would be the reverse of the spell we did on Kartika. They’ll collect them all and send them out against the people of Cougar Creek to infect their brains.”

“Holy shit,” I said. “The cemetery’s warded, right?”

“Well, that’s the other problem,” Hilda said. “The cemetery’s never undergone a psychic attack, so if the wraiths were testing out what was going on here, then they’re preparing for a larger attack on the cemetery itself. We’ve already shown we don’t have much resistance to them. Not with the way they took down Chloe.”

“So, we don’t have wards against them,” Trina stated.

“Exactly. I’ll be working on finding wards with Hilda and Trina. Chloe you and the guys will have to do the rounds. Anita and Drake, I don’t want you doing rounds. It’s too dangerous.”

“That’s not fair,” Anita said. “We’re full-grown adults. We’re both twenty-one.”

“But you’re kids,” Mae said.

“Are you being for real?” Anita asked.

“No, I’m pointing out we don’t want you doing rounds of the cemetery patrolling. It’s dangerous out there and the wraiths could really fuck you up for the rest of your life.” Mae explained clearly to them both.

“Well, that’s one way to put it,” Hilda smiled.

“Listen, Mae,” Trina said. “A long time ago I learned my children have a mind of their own and I let them do things. You’re allowed to create rules for the coven to separate us by age, but it’s probably not the best idea. I say we let everybody rotate into the places that suit them best. Anita is a really great researcher, but Drake is a fighter. I’d put him out there against the wraiths any day.”

“Probably right,” I agreed. The twenty-one-year-old, while still a kid in my eyes, was a strapping young man who was able to fend for himself.

Page 52

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“All right, we have a plan,” Mae said. “We’re going to research wards, we’re going to research wraiths, and we’re going to check out perimeters. Let’s get to it.”

Chapter 37

The estate was quiet. Everyone was doing their assigned tasks, pouring over the Internet, pouring over books and with Mae’s permission, Drake fired up the crystals again and was trying to work with Jane to fine tune them and try to get them to focus on specific things.

The problem remained. How could we combat a wraith’s attack? We literally had no idea.

As the night wore on, we grew tired, but we knew we still had to be vigilant. The men had been gone a little longer than normal on the rounds of the cemetery.

I looked up from one of the grimoires I’d been studying. Mae had hers, which included the long heritage of The Estate, but The Estate had never had to deal with wraiths. They were a whole new thing and judging by the experience of this coven, they were going to be a little more than we could handle.

“I’ve gone through everything,” I said, turning to the group in the red room and pointing to the notes I’d made on the whiteboard. They all gathered around. I had a pretty careful drawing of a wraith with my little dry erase pen and I’d put a big red line through it. “How do we get rid of the wraith?”

“Well, the simple answer is you can’t,” Antonio explained. “They are sworn to their

liege lord and will do everything there liege lord says until their liege lord dies. Problem number two is wraiths can't actually be killed. This means once they are assigned, it's forever."

"There wasn't a great deal about those two facts," I picked up the thread. "So, I looked in the history books a little bit. Around the time of the Great War when the demigods and the Fae split the world, nobody wanted the wraiths because as much as they swear fealty to you, they only do one thing. Suck the life force out of everybody else. Now you would think because they had such great power people would've actually stopped them from going rogue or going wherever they wanted, but apparently in the days when the accords were written and the DGC was set up, the wraiths were overlooked and they ended up falling under dark Fae control. I think that might give you some information, Jane, to focus on with the crystals."

"We're not using the crystals," Branson said.

"There has to be a way we can use the crystals and not be found out by the dark Fae." I argued.

"There's no way when we're using a light Fae to access the crystals. We are looking for a dark Fae. The minute a light Fae shows up, the dark Fae we reach out to will pay attention."

"Well, we don't have a dark Fae on hand, so we're going to have to make do," I said. "Honestly I think we want to see the wraiths connecting with the Fae."

"That's only connecting the dots backwards," Mae said. "I know it's valuable and important and we want to cut off the head of the serpent, but I'm expecting an attack at any time on the cemetery."

She wasn't wrong and I knew it. My vampire hearing was pretty intense and I could

already hear the light keening of the wraiths as they gathered over the cemetery. We all slowly moved toward the back windows of the estate and looked down the hill at the cemetery, where the black shrouded figures were gathering above.

“Are Matheus and Branson and Toern and Antonio safe out there?” I asked.

“Fortunately, yes,” Hilda said. “See what the wraiths are focusing on. They’re not focusing on living creatures. They’re focusing on the skeletons.”

“How can we possibly stop them?” I asked.

Jane responded. “We can’t. They will raise the dreams and the nightmares of the deceased.”

I stared blankly at the black shrouded figures fluttering in the moonlight above the cemetery. They weren’t doing anything yet, but I knew what they would soon be doing. They’d done it to me and they had done it to Kartika, and we still did not have a single way to combat them. We knew their history; we knew their patterns. “There has to be a solution,” I muttered.

“We thought the same thing,” Hilda said.

“Is it dark magic?” I asked, completely aware of the fact we couldn’t do dark magic and keep the coven bond alive.

Hilda shook her head, taking my question seriously. “No, we won’t be able to do that. We have the wards and they trap things inside them. It held a monster in there for a hundred and fifty years. What if we tried something totally different?”

“It’s genius,” Mae said, nodding in agreement.

“I think you might’ve come to a conclusion we don’t know about,” I said, trying to discern it.

Mae looked at me, her green eyes flashing. “We’re going to take all the wards of the cemetery down and let them in.”

“That’s slightly insane,” Bianca said. “We’ve been busting our ass to keep the wards up.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” I said. “It somewhat makes strategic sense, but we’d have to be quick.”

“Not following,” Bianca said.

“You’re going to have to trust us on the plan,” Mae said. “It will have to be a tight operation, but I think we can pull it off.”

Chapter 38

The first test we had to do was go into the cemetery and remove all the wards. I didn't know where many of them were, so I went around with Anita and helped her gather them. We got a red stone, a crystal wand, an ancient scroll, a dagger and a few other magical totems. Without Bianca on her platform in the Celtic corner, the cemetery was already greatly diminished in its ability to be protected.

After we had gone and physically removed the objects, we went into the altar room back at The Estate. This was where the main magic was going to happen, but it was going to have to happen twofold. The wraiths' screaming got louder. They rose up and down in agitation as they sensed the opportunity to get inside the cemetery. They were being conjured through the thin veil that stood between the cemetery and them. They were drawn to the remnants of nightmares, sadness, and misery that rose from all of the dead who lay in the cemetery graves.

The darkness sank over us. I glanced over at Jane. I could only imagine what she must be sensing from all the negativity that was dropping down from these soul sucking creatures. Every bit of goodness was taken out of the air around them. Every happy memory created by the corpses in the cemetery was gone. Instead, their misery was called forth, conjured up and floating in a filthy dirty massive black substance above the cemetery. It moved in a mass of undulating smoke and fear.

We had to reverse all of the spells and open the gates completely, but we had to make sure we could shut the gate the minute the wraiths descended into the cemetery. Once they were in the cemetery, they would try to animate the corpses, spreading the worst nightmares around the dead. At least if we could get the wraiths inside the cemetery,

then slam the wards shut with magic, they would be contained. We could bind them through the magic of the cemetery and they wouldn't be able to leave and neither would their creations. Then we could have a little more time to figure out what to do with the wraiths.

It was an incredibly risky and daring move to make, but I admired Mae for choosing it. Other than capturing them, we really had no other choice. We formed our circle inside the altar room, ready to begin the chant that would create the magic to open the seal over the cemetery. Undoubtedly this was why we weren't calling the DGC. The last thing in the world they would approve of was us opening the protective shield around Cougar Creek cemetery.

However, that was exactly what we were doing.

Mae began the chant. "Frellum medilintis hurghava. Frellum medilintis hurghava."

My gaze was drawn to the two spots in the room that were still left empty. One of them should've been Kartika and maybe we needed her for this, but it was too much right now to try to explain to her what was going on. In her emotional state it didn't seem the kindest thing to do. Instead, we would use every coven member we had and all of our powers combined in order to fight against the wraiths and bind them to the cemetery. One thing we knew was they weren't expecting it and that it would also separate them from their liege lords, the dark Fae. Whoever was controlling them would actually lose control of their wraiths in time. I smiled to myself a bit. It was rather a master stroke of genius.

The chant began to drop the shield. We had a lookout standing in the kitchen, zombie dog Carl and Drake. As much as we needed Drake's magic, we also needed the practical set of eyes looking out to see what was happening in the cemetery while we created the magic in the altar room.

“They’re freaking out,” Drake said. “Bashing at the barrier and trying to get in.”

We continued to chant.

As we grew louder, I could feel our energy moving and becoming a palpable substance. Red magic came out of the top of my head and green magic out of the top of Bianca’s, turquoise magic out of the top of Jane’s head and a mix of purple and green out of Mae’s.. Together they formed a binding circle above us.

“The circle represents the shield over the cemetery,” Hilda said. “We now need to reverse the spell and open it.”

I was a little surprised, but I followed suit when I found out reversing the spell was literally saying the spell backwards. It took me a moment to catch on and catch up, but I mastered it, and in seconds the shield over the cemetery was dropping.

“They’re hungry locusts,” Drake cried from the kitchen. “They’re going in!”

“Are they all in?” Anita asked.

“Not yet, not yet. Keep going. Keep opening it,” Drake called out.

The chanting was straining on the bones, but I could feel the pumping of the energy through my muscles so I kept going with it.

Suddenly there was a great cry from Drake in the other room. “Close it! Close it! They’re in.” We had to close it super swiftly, so we said the chant double speed, working to get it out completely so we could make sure we trapped them all in before they realized what was happening.

“They’re totally focused on the corpses. And oh Goddess...” Drake’s voice drained

away.

“Is everything OK, Drake?” Anita cried.

“Close it up, close it up, close it up,” he said frantically. “Some of them are noticing.”

We said the spell harder and faster. I could see Hilda was getting tired, but the cover was closing over the cemetery until finally it was closed.

“Did we get them?” I needed to know the perpetrators were caught.

“Yeah.” Drake sounded as exhausted as I felt. “You’ve got to see this. You have definitely got to come in here and see this.”

Chapter 39

Drained, we walked together past the red room and filed into the kitchen where the terrace stretched out with wide windows that gave us a perfect viewpoint of Cougar Creek Cemetery. I stared at what was going on and I wanted to retch. The wraiths had pinned down the corpses. The cemetery that should’ve only had skeletons, buried now was full of physical corpses. They were blood and bone with brains hanging out. They were like zombie dogs, only they were human. The demon fires had cooked the skeletons and turned them into corpses and the wraiths were feeding on them. They were like hungry locusts feeding on the dead bodies, sucking up whatever nightmares and dreams that had haunted the lives of the corpses when they’d still been moving around the earth.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

They were hungry scavengers feeding on the devastation of life.

I felt woozy, something I didn't really feel typically, but this was something I'd never seen. When one of them looked up, even at this distance I could see the skeletal face and the fangs and the pointy teeth as it flicked its eyes over me and back to its prey.

"What the fuck are we going to do with that?" I asked. "And what are other people going to say about this?"

"It'll look a fog bank or something," Hilda said. "They won't be able to see the wraiths and they'll only see the zombies when they step out of the fog."

"We can't let that happen," I said.

"I think I can solve part of the problem," Bianca said. "How close can we get to the cemetery?"

"As close as you want as long as the wards hold. The minute we start trying to do anything to get rid of them, they're going to start fighting us and trying to do things to get out of where they're trapped. Right now, they're distracted."

"Then we should act swiftly," I said. "I have an idea. We have the crypt inside there, right."

The others nodded.

"It's got demon symbols on it, right? Can we take those demon symbols and create an

entry to the demon world? Through the crypt?" I asked. "Is that what you did before, Jane?"

"I don't think the demons are going to like that too much." Mae frowned.

"Thrain owes us," I said.

Hilda laughed. "I'd love to see you say that to his face."

I looked over at her. "No problem. We need help and unless we get help and get these out of here, we're going to have the apocalypse in demigod country. I don't think that's really going to help the demons either. Any corpses are going to have to be taken into Undirheim. It makes more work for them. It'll make more sense if they help us. And who knows, maybe they'll enjoy it."

I grabbed the phone. "Any objections?"

"No," Mae said. "We need help."

I called Toth and asked him if he could get Thrain again and bring him to The Estate. We had a problem and we needed Undirheim, or as I was used to calling it, Hell.

"Yeah, looks you have a problem," Toth said. "We'll see you soon."

Thrain arrived with Toth and two hulking demon guards, but without the whole demon portal from Hell thing. Antonio stayed close to my side, which I appreciated. He didn't hold my hand, but by his presence I could feel he had my back.

I wasn't afraid of the demon king. Kings were known for telling people what to do, but they were also known for granting favors and we needed a big fucking favor.

“You’ve got a mess on your hands,” Thrain stated the obvious.

“I most certainly do,” I said. “But it’s not me, it’s you.”

“How do you figure?” He stood with the coven and Toth, looking at the wraiths that fed on the zombies in the cemetery.

“Well, we all have a problem, because if the demigods know this is going on, we’re all going to get locked up.” I explained.

“So, get the demigods in here and fix it.” Thrain shrugged.

“Not in my plan for today,” I said.

“Not my problem,” Thrain retorted.

“I think you owe me a bit of a favor since your demon tried to kill people and break open this portal himself,” I spoke as respectfully as I could while still trying to be taken seriously. “We know it’s not your fault, we know who’s behind it or we think we know who’s behind it, but we’ve got to get rid of all of their attackers first.”

“What’s your idea?” Thrain looked curious.

“We want to turn the crypt into a portal and send the wraiths through to Undirheim.” I sucked in my cheeks hoping this was going to fly.

Page 55

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“The wraiths?” Thrain let out of deep sigh. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. What am I going to do with a bunch of wraiths?”

I looked at him sideways with a slight grin. “Piss off the dark Fae.”

“And why would I want to do that?” he asked, but I could hear in his tone of voice I had piqued his interest.

“Don’t you want an army of wraiths under your command?” I asked.

“But to do that, somebody has to go in to that seething mess and put the demon symbols in blood on the doorway.” Thrain rubbed his chin.

“I’ll do it,” I said. “We just need your permission.”

“You’re not doing it,” Antonio said.

“I’m the only other dark creature here,” I pointed out.

“Thrain can write the symbols or one of his minions,” Antonio motioned towards Thrain’s hulking demon guards.

They both growled in unison.

“It has to be a fresh offering,” I said, “and you don’t have a choice in the matter. It’s my decision to make, not yours.”

“But they can affect me.”

“I’m the fastest of everybody here,” I said. “I go in there, I do the symbols, I take a zombie dog, and we take care of business.”

“The dog’s not going to work as a sacrifice,” Thrain said. “We expect real blood. If you’re not going to use real blood, I might as well just open the portal myself, which defeats the goal of the wraiths being offered to me.”

“I can get some of the butchered animals from the farm where I live,” Matheus offered.

“That’ll do.” Thrain shrugged

I looked over at Antonio who was glowering from the side of the room. I could tell he wasn’t happy about the decision we’d made, but I was the only obvious choice. Now we had to carry it out without a hitch and we’d be set.

“Can you fly?” I asked Thrain.

“I didn’t get these wings for looks.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“Then I suggest you drop me from the top.”

A low growl went up from Antonio. “This is getting worse by the minute. I don’t like it.”

“Isn’t your prime directive to watch Bianca?” I asked.

“Well, maybe somewhere along the way my prime directive got changed,” he said. “Maybe I’m a little more concerned about you at the moment.”

A slight tittering hush fell across the room as everybody looked at Antonio.

I went up to him and kissed him. “I know you’re worried. I’m going to be okay. I promise.” I just hoped I wasn’t lying.

Chapter 40

There was something about being carried by a demon I didn’t like. It might’ve been the way he unceremoniously lifted me by my armpits with my feet dangling. It wasn’t exactly flying first class. Antonio had been upset before I had left, but with the entire coven backing my decision to be the one to go into the cemetery, he really didn’t have a say in what I was going to do. I took it into consideration because I wasn’t a complete asshole, but it was pretty obvious I was the one who was supposed to go into the cemetery.

The plan was perfect. Thrain was going to drop me. I would land, go to the crypt, and trace the blood symbols using the sacrificial blood Matheus had grabbed for me. There was no way I was prepared to kill an animal for a blood sacrifice, but he had known which ones the rancher had already marked for butchering. So, he’d done the butchering a bit early and gotten me the blood, which I was craving. It had been a long day without food.

First, though, I had to deliver Thrain’s sacrifice; an animal killed in his name. Thrain looked a bit disgruntled about the fact we’d gotten away with using a zombie dog for the last sacrifice. In fact, he pointed out pretty clearly that was why it had gone wrong and the demon had gotten loose rather than being forced to go to the entry of the fire.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“You don’t want to make the same mistake again,” he had said with no uncertain terms.

I couldn’t say I blamed him. They’d had enough problems chasing a single demon down. There was no way in hell I was going to chase all these wraiths down. I didn’t even have a way to combat them.

As he took off, he didn’t fly with me straight toward the cemetery, which completely surprised me. Instead, he rose high into the sky until we could barely see The Estate anymore. I was ready to scream at him, but I was so terrified I couldn’t say a word. I knew I should be exhilarated by the height, but that was not what happened. I was terrified.

“So, you realize you can shift, right?” Thrain asked.

I looked up and back over my shoulder. “I’m a vampire,” I said. “Not a shifter.”

Thrain laughed. “All vampires are shifters. They just don’t want to be called that. They think it makes them sound like animals. But you are. You can turn into a bat.”

“Seriously, a bat? That is so not sexy.”

“The vampire bat is where all your powers come from,” he shrugged. It’s a venom that’s been passed since the beginning of time.

“Why are you telling me all this now?” I asked, closing my eyes and trying not to look at the distance between me and the ground. The only thing holding me over the

ground were the two hands of this damn demon who was starting to sound like he'd gone way off script.

"I'm going to drop you into the cemetery," he said. "But if I go down there the wraiths will see me and they'll know exactly what's up. At the moment they're feeding on the undead. They won't notice a small bat if it lands like a little turd plop in the corner of the cemetery."

"What do you say?" I hissed at him, baring my fangs.

"I'm going to drop you from here and you're going to shift into a bat on your way down." Thrain made it sound like I did this every day.

"Why didn't you tell me when I was on the ground?" I asked in earnest. "I could have done a practice run!"

"It doesn't work like that," Thrain explained. "You have to be thrown out of the nest to learn to shift."

"No!" I cried, but it was too late, because he had already dropped me! I fell through the air screaming. How the fuck was I supposed to turn into a bat of all things? I was going to die. The ground raced up toward me. All I could imagine was my head splattering into the ground down below and the wraiths coming over and filling my corpse with their horrible ideas.

"Bat bat bat bat bat," I repeated the word in my head, having no idea how to shift. Suddenly it came to me. The pulse! The pulse and the sonar. Those were powers of the bat.

I quickly tuned into the pulse and I focused it down toward the cemetery where all of the enemies were. The pulse came back and hit me so hard it slammed into my body

as I descended toward the earth. My body began to shrink and suddenly my shoulder blades extended into wings and I turned into this tiny little black bat with leathery wings.

Holy fuck.

I beat my wings really hard, bouncing around in the sky like a drunken sailor.

A hulking mass hovered next to me and I glanced over to see Thrain. He was smiling at me. “There you go, little bat. That’ll get you into the cemetery safer.”

I glared at him with my little blind bat eyes, but when I pushed the sonar out to him, he didn’t come back as an enemy. Thrain was a friend. He had done this on purpose and it had been the right choice. Never mind that I lost ten years of my life. I was a vampire now, so I was going to live quite a bit longer anyhow.

I looked down toward the cemetery where the wraiths were feeding on the bodies. As a coven member I’d be able to slip in, but I had to go straight down this way.

Entering through the ward was like moving through molasses. Not a single wraith noticed me as I landed in front of Toern’s crypt.

I shifted back into human form and crouched low with the pouch of blood in a crossbody bag across my shoulder that stayed with me thanks to the magic of shifting. I slid up to the demon wall and began tracing the blood outlines of the demon symbols, which I’d been studying since the beginning of the case. I knew the witches were up at The Estate, watching, chanting and giving me strength. We were working as a team. Even though right now it looked like I was working solo, they were all behind me.

Unfortunately, so were all the wraiths, and they were starting to notice me. Two of

them had stopped their assaults on the corpses they were hovering over. The screaming became more intense. The shrill shriek of the wraiths was overbearing, but I stayed focused on the symbols. It didn't matter if I was attacked by a wraith. If I could get the demon symbols done, they would all start going to Undirheim and whatever happened to me, I trusted the coven would be able to put me back together again.

At least I hoped so.

A loud shriek went up from the wraiths closest to me as they looked up.

"Be careful!" I heard Jane's voice loud and clear in my head. She must be extremely worried if she was violating her own idea of not communicating with people through their psyche. She was good like that. If I had her powers, I'd be busting into people's brains all the time to mess with them.

I sent her back a message letting her know I was taking care of business, but I could feel the pressure of the wraiths. They were closing in on me.

The nearest wraith attached itself to me and started to pull up my psyche.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

“You are good enough,” Jane said loudly in my head, knowing the wraith would start to fill my head with all of those less than feelings I’d been plagued with my whole life. The feeling I was an imposter, like I wasn’t going to be able to finish the task even though time and time again I had proved I could finish the task. Imposter syndrome was buried under the surface of my conscious mind. My subconscious thoughts were easily instilled in me from a young age and were so far buried, it wasn’t until the wraiths came along, I even realized those thoughts were there.

I could feel them now inside my head convincing me I was worthless. The coven was battling to prop me up. I stayed focused on putting the blood on the demon symbols, even though the pain of the wraiths was becoming intense in my brain.

“You won’t conquer me,” I said, gritting my teeth and fighting the urge to scream and fall. They’d done it to me once before and this time I was connected to the coven through Jane who was going to keep me safe. I reached back out to Jane, mentally gripping onto her hand with one of mine while I thought to finish the blood symbols with the other.

As I finally got the last blood symbol drawn a great swooshing sound came up and a fire surged from the center of the crypt.

“Fuck, it worked,” I said, feeling the pull of the demon gate and knowing I had to get out of there before I got caught up in the worst of the wraiths being sucked into Undirheim.

I turned and ran as fast as I could, grabbing onto a tombstone to try and stop myself from being sucked into the demon portal.

Wraiths flew by me, out of control and shrieking as they were sucked into the fiery pit.

It only took a minute before the entire cemetery was cleared out of the ragged frightening creatures.

Suddenly I was covered in shadows as my fingers on the tomb slipped. I was going to fly into the portal with the rest of the dark creatures.

My fingers slid off the tombstone, but I didn't move an inch. A man's hands gripped my shoulders tight.

I looked up and Antonio was there, one hand holding firmly onto a tombstone and the other one wrapped tightly around me as if he was never going to let me go.

Chapter 41

Antonio held me as the last wraith was flowing into the demon fire. Thrain closed the portal himself.

The coven immediately jumped into action. They moved around the cemetery putting the wards back into place and putting the spells back and repairing all the damage had been done by the infestation of the wraiths.

There was one problem though. All the corporal bodies of the dead were moaning in their graves. The wraiths and brought them back to life.

"How do we kill dead people?" I asked. "On second thought, since I'm dead, maybe I don't want to know the answer to that. Don't tell me we're going to go to the cemetery and put a stake in everybody's heart."

“Oh, hell no,” Bianca said. “I think we’ve got a better solution for this one. It’s not going to make them dead, but it’ll at least get them back to their graves. This is where I come in.”

She shifted into her wolf form and began to howl. As I watched, the dead bodies began to settle back into their graves and pretend as if nothing had happened.

We were all able to head back to The Estate and finally have a moment of respite.

“That’s a powerful skill you have there,” I smiled at Bianca.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t always work out. Thankfully, it’s working now, but it’s not the final solution. It’s just part of the solution.” Bianca explained.

While we were talking on the terrace, Trina laid out a spread in the backyard.

“Well, we faced the wraiths, but you know they’re going to throw something else at us,” Mae said.

The coven all gathered around. I looked from Mae to Bianca to Jane. These were the three women I had a blood pact with. Kartika was the fifth. All we needed to do was find the sixth and I had a feeling the cemetery would be impenetrable. That was probably why the dark Fae really didn’t want us all together. They had seen a weakness and tried to act on it, but the power of the Pentacle of Time and the blood bond that made it was too great.

The only thing worried me at this stage was the fact that we couldn’t actually go out and look for the last remaining member of the coven. We had no idea what species they were, what gender they were, where they lived, or how we were going to find them, but we had to hope like hell we would find them before the next big challenge from the dark Fae.

Antonio came up behind me and put his arms around me.

“Feeling sweet?” I asked curiously.

“Maybe,” he said, giving me a kiss on the cheek. “Certainly not coming out for warmth. How do you vampires live so cold?” He asked with a chuckle.

“You love it and you know it,” I said. “I cool you down because you, my dear, are way too hot.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:31 pm

He groaned and rolled his eyes. “Seriously.”

“I know that was pretty bad,” I chuckled.

I smiled at him warmly. I had no idea where this relationship was going, but I was going to enjoy it every step of the way. I didn’t even know how to have a relationship, that’s how single I’d been my whole life. This was going to be a new adventure, for sure.

I looked around the backyard, where Jane, Mae, and Bianca were huddled together, chatting. My blood bond sisters. Hilda and Trina and all the guys. Everybody was there and what I realized was this was exactly what I’d been looking for my whole life, the warmth and support of true community and a true team member. I had a family around me no matter what challenges we were going to face in the future. I was sure there were going to be more struggles, but we were going to face it together. Of that I was certain.

* * *

Continue the adventures of Cougar Creek Coven inbook 5: **MIDLIFE FAERIE UNEXPECTED**

Or read on for a sneak peek!

CHAPTER ONE - KARTIKA

The storm clouds were gathering across the valley as the storm prepared to move

towards me across the desert. I loved the massive desert lightning storms. I watched it now in the distance. It was one of the reasons why I originally moved to Cottonwood with my husband, to enjoy these thunderstorms. I had a feeling that the crystals would work better with the lightning storm present.

Now that my husband had divorced me and left Cottonwood. I found my only friend was Frank, who'd been around since my sons started soccer. He coached them on the local team. He was really into crystals.

It had never occurred to me that I should take the crystals seriously, but after my trip to Cougar Creek on an errand for Frank, I was completely charmed and enchanted with them. I'd come home and immediately asked Frank if he had more. My newfound interest made him happy.

His wife had died years before he moved to Cottonwood and after my divorce, we had taken to spending time together as friends. It was pretty cool. He was the nicest guy I had ever met. He was also one of the hottest guys I'd ever met, which made it a little difficult to be around sometimes, but I'd gotten used to it. Hot guys weren't into me. Especially hot younger guys.

At forty-four, I certainly didn't consider myself over the hill, but I wasn't looking to date my children's former soccer coach. Yeah, that wasn't going to happen. That was one of the things about small towns that I discovered when we had moved here. Everybody knew everybody and they all had relationships. Around here, there weren't that many options, so if I did pick one option, a world of other options would completely close up to me. And by world of other options, I meant like three.

That's why after Eric and I divorced, I knew I had to remain single for the rest of my life. There was nothing wrong with being single and it would make life less confusing for my kids. They didn't mind that their father and I were divorced. There'd been a lot of arguments when they were growing up and I could just imagine they were tired of it as much as Eric and I had been.

Now it was smooth sailing from here on out. All my own decisions, all my own choices, and it didn't matter that I just found out at forty-four that I was adopted. That didn't matter one bit. I ground my teeth together a little bit at the back at the thought of it.

I had to get these crystals right. The storm was coming in and I wanted to see what I could get them to do. I'd seen some crazy stuff in Cougar Creek. They'd laid out the amethyst in the rose quartz and the smoky quartz crystals in a variety of patterns. It was like they knew exactly what to do, the same as Frank.

I carefully finished putting the final touches on my form. I knew it was a little different than the way that they had done it at Cougar Creek and I could sense it, but I trusted my instincts. My guess was that the crystals attuned to the geography of the location they were in and because of that energy shift, the formations would have to be slightly different in order to channel at all.

I chuckled to myself. Life was funny. I looked out the window. The storm was about five minutes away. I quickly set up the crystals, dusted them off with my breath and then with my hands for good measure, because I'd seen Jane doing that up at Cougar Creek. It seemed like a bit of hoodoo gurus mumbo-jumbo, but I was going to give it a shot anyhow.

I sat quietly, waiting for the storm to come. When the lightning crashed down upon the house so loud it made me jolt, even though I'd been waiting eagerly in anticipation of it, it caught me by surprise. Electricity flowed through every space charging the crystals. I could feel it as they began to glow pink and lavender creating dark shadows. Above the crystals a screen formed. I took a deep breath and suddenly rethought my decision to sit on the couch right in front of the crystals. I slipped onto the edge of the couch as if it was going to do something to save me.

On the screen there was a single face, a dark-skinned man with slanted eyes and pointed ears. He was staring straight out as if he could see me.

“I am Morel,” he said. “Of the Tuath Du’an clan. The originals.”

I suddenly realized this was probably a PSA that was on a loop, but damn he was convincing. I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

He continued speaking. “There has long been unfairness between the dark and light Fae. It must end.” Morel had the wise look of a warrior and I felt compelled to follow him.

As my feelings of compulsion grew, he suddenly walked toward the camera as if he was going to step straight through the screen and into my living room. That was when I moved. I got off the couch and backed up.

He peered in at me.

“Join the resistance,” he said, raising an eyebrow and making it sound much more like a command than anything else.

Suddenly the screen went black as lightning crashed around my house.

I screamed.

* * *