



Anger (Legendary Shifters #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She was the original, the one and only. When Pandora opened the jar, she had been first hit of the God's Warriors. Her shape wasn't as hideous as some. From the waist up, she could be classed as human, if you ignore the glowing green eyes and slightly greenish tint to her skin. Until you look down and see the snakes tail. She became what is known as the legendary Lamia.

Tragically, she'd been in love once and he turned on her and helped spawn a race that belonged in mythology. Now she guarded her heart and stayed in the shadows. She'd been cursed with the Sin of Anger, and it welled hot, deep in her gut. She struggled not to let it absorb her, but it threatened to overwhelm her on a daily basis. After all, every single person in the world experienced anger!

She crossed his path during a crazed serial killer on a spree. He knew she was hiding something and arrested her. Unamused when she's freed, he's determined to uncover her secrets. He's unsure if she's the killer or another potential victim, because they all look remarkably like her.

The Lamia are being hunted. Every single victim is a descendent of hers. Who is killing them and why? How are they hiding themselves from Mary Worth's portals? Can Lamia track down a serial killer and stop him before he claims another innocent life? Her Sin is Anger, and she commands it with all the pain and cunning of a betrayed woman.

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Irideesa

“S how yourself, my love,” Alainen called.

“No, you don’t understand. I have become a monster, Alainen. That wretched human girl cursed my entire squad. We have done everything possible to contain the evils, but they corrupted our bodies,” Irideesa called back.

“Irideesa, I refuse to believe that. You’re beautiful, even if you look horrendous now,” Alainen argued.

Irideesa sighed. Why would Alainen not believe her? She merely told the truth, but Alainen seemed to wish to disbelieve it. Or maybe Alainen loved her that much he’d be able to look beyond her new body shape. Did Irideesa trust him?

Alainen had cared enough to hunt her down. And there was desperation in his voice.

In the three months since she had been changed, Irideesa had hidden away from everyone, even her own squad. In shock at their horrific change, some, like her, fled to the far corners of the world.

Irideesa’s transformation was even more of a heartache. The man she loved was close by, calling to her. She’d been terrified he’d reject her and not realise she was still the same person inside, even though she carried the Sin of Anger.

“Irideesa, please. Come to me, my love. I refuse to believe you’re the monster they all say. My beautiful lover must be in there,” Alainen called, and his words gave

Irideesa pause.

Why was Alainen so insistent she couldn't be a monster? Irideesa was and knew it, but Alainen's persistence made no sense.

"No, Alainen, go away, please. For our sakes. Let my squad find the Jar and replace these evils, and then I shall come home," Irideesa called.

There was silence.

"Have you fallen out of love with me?" Alainen demanded. His voice sounded closer, and Irideesa looked around. She was near a large river, as yet un-named and surrounded by trees.

Unlike her sister, who'd taken the name Medusa and hid in caves, Irideesa had found them claustrophobic. Instead, she had headed for thick forests with cool coverage and rivers to swim in. Irideesa loved swimming and was naturally drawn to water, and this new form of hers also seemed to enjoy the water.

"I love you, Alainen. But I must attend to certain matters. Hunt Pandora, bring that wretched human to justice, gather the evils. Once I've done that, I will return," Irideesa called.

"There you are," a smug voice stated, and Irideesa jumped and spun around. "You're beautiful, my love." Alainen declared.

Irideesa looked down. Alainen couldn't see her bottom half as she was hidden behind a rock. Tears formed in Irideesa's eyes as she gazed at the warrior she loved the most.

"Alainen, you shouldn't have come. Why did you wish to see me brought so low?" Irideesa asked.

“Gorgeous girl, I told you I’d always walk by your side. Come out now, embrace me,” Alainen demanded. He looked closely at her and seemed startled. “Your eyes, they glow strangely, almost a white, green colour.”

“My face and upper half remain the same. My bottom part is changed,” Irideesa said. Something inside was warning her, but she didn’t know what about.

“Come out now!” Alainen ordered, exasperated.

“You were warned!” Irideesa snapped in return and slid out.

Alainen’s eyes widened as he took in her serpent tail. The scales on it glittered iridescently, and its length was four times the size of her body. The tip of Irideesa’s tail ended at a point unlike Medusa’s, which had a rattle.

But it was her stomach his eyes landed on.

“What is that?” Alainen exclaimed in horror.

Irideesa’s hand covered her bump. “That is the child we created in love. I know not if it too is cursed.”

Alainen’s eyes were huge, and Irideesa saw the disgust in them. “Alainen, leave. Let me finish my hunt.” “No. This shall not be,” Alainen muttered. For a brief moment, hope flared, but it died a quick death as Alainen drew his God Sword and attacked.

Irideesa moved out of the way, yanking her own sword from its harness.

The swords clashed together.

“You are a creature of the dark, a monster full of sin, an abomination of wickedness,”

Alainen shouted as he aimed for her head.

Irideesa pulled back and counter swung. “I am the same person inside!” she yelled.

“Liar!”

“I loved you!” Irideesa cried as she delivered her own blow.

“Another lie! I have joined a squad to hunt all of your kind down. We shall kill each and every one of you vile monstrosities for your crimes against God!”

Irideesa jumped back as an arrow landed near her. Alainen’s full betrayal become apparent as men appeared with bows and arrows notched.

Alainen stepped forward and pressed his attack, which Irideesa parried.

A sneer crossed her face. “I am not the one who betrays love. I’m not the one who is a monster who hunts innocent victims. My squad is hunting Pandora and the Jar, and we shall succeed. And you’ll grovel at my feet for forgiveness. And I tell you now, it’ll not be forthcoming,” Irideesa snarled.

Alainen pressed forward, and she once again defended. But as another arrow landed near her, Irideesa knew she had to escape. She slashed forward and cut Alainen’s handsome face.

“Now your internal ugliness will be visible for the world to see!” Irideesa hissed and dived into the river. She swam deep as possible as arrows rained down in the water, and, using her tail, she was leagues away within minutes.

Surfacing momentarily, tears streamed down Irideesa’s cheeks as she escaped.

The warrior she had loved, who Irideesa thought she had a future with, had sorely betrayed her. She'd never forgive Alainen for this.

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Lanie/Lamia

“Miss Cross, a word, please!” a guy called as she got out of the car. Lanie tilted her head as her chauffeur stepped forward.

“Not too close,” he warned, and Lanie smiled at him.

“Thank you, Ranson. May I help you?” she asked the keen-looking young man.

“I’ve been calling your office for an interview, and I can’t seem to get anywhere. It’s for my end-of-year paper, and some of the other students have got some big names. But I wanted you,” he said.

“What’s your name?” Lanie questioned.

“Simon Clare.” “Simon, did you set your cap at me because I’m the unicorn everyone wants to interview and people rarely do?”

“Yes—no? Which answer gets me a meeting?” Simon replied eagerly.

Lanie laughed, and Ranson looked amused, even though he remained alert.

“We have to give him kudos for his energy,” Lanie commented. “You may have ten minutes of my time. Call my personal assistant in half an hour. However, should you miss this appointment, there won’t be another. My time is valuable, and I don’t like wasting it!”

“Thank you so much, Miss Cross,” the man said and stepped forward.

Ranson got between them. “No personal contact,” he warned.

“I was just going to shake her hand,” Simon replied.

“No personal contact,” Ranson repeated.

“Okay, okay!” Simon exclaimed.

Lanie wasn’t as amused. It was a well-known fact she hated physical contact and never shook hands. As one of the richest women in the world, she could escape any consequences. The actual truth was. Her Sin, Anger, would light a spark in the person she touched and set them off. Not always, but when it wanted to be perverse, it was.

“Shit like that will get your interview rescinded, Mr Clare. Don’t attempt to play me for a fool. I didn’t get where I was today by being one,” Lanie warned.

Simon’s head bobbed up and down.

Lanie searched his eyes and found them free of deception.

Ranson handed him a card, and Lanie continued to make her way into the building she owned. This was her world, and it had created her a fortune. Lanie was known as the queen of beauty. The public believed she was thirty-three years old and a driven businesswoman.

Actually, Lanie was thousands of years old. This was a temporary identity, which would last a few years before Lanie died in a horrible accident. Then, a new persona would emerge. Or maybe she’d age herself over the next fifty or so years. Her whim was fickle, to say the least.

The attendant opened the door as she approached the private entrance, and Lanie marched through with a warm smile. Henry nodded at her as he touched his hat and let her pass.

Heading for her lift, Lanie knew Ranson was on her heels.

She headed up to the top floor and walked straight to her office. On this level were the company's executives. The building was a slender sky scrapper with her businesses based here. Lanie didn't just run one, she ran several.

"Emergencies?" she asked her personal assistant, Laura, as she approached her assistant.

"None to report. Your schedule is on your desk, Miss Cross," Laura said, handing Lanie a coffee.

Lanie smiled in thanks. "Expect a call from a Mr Simon Clare. He may have a ten-minute appointment. Ensure he understands how my interviews are conducted."

"Yes, Miss Cross," Laura replied as Lanie entered her room and sat behind her desk. Ranson took his stand outside the door. Lanie relaxed back into her chair. She was a busy bee. She was renowned for creating and owning the premier makeup line in the world. Lanie's labs, staff, advertising, everything was based here.

Two floors were assigned to her jewellery designs and two more for her clothing line. Simple but smart was Lanie's motto. Three further floors were dedicated to her lingerie designs, and the final two were the charity she'd opened. Lanie ran them all herself and trusted few others. She worked five days a week and took weekends off to spend with her family.

Lanie's phone rang, and she glanced at the screen and saw it was Jase. "Yes, dear?"

Lanie asked, answering it.

“She’s doing it again!” Jase bitched.

“What’s Willow up to now?” Lanie questioned, amused.

“Look at the TV!” Jase complained.

Lanie switched the TV in her office on, and her lips began to twitch in amusement. In her boat, The Swallow’s Nest, Willow sailed around a tanker with a banner streaming from her mast.

‘ Stop leaky tankers! Keep our oceans clean!’

“Oh boy.” Lanie chuckled.

“What do I do with her? She’s pregnant!” Jase squealed as Willow cut dangerously close to the big ship.

To Lanie’s deepening amusement, three dolphins, a blue whale, and a humpback appeared and seemed to urge Willow to keep her distance. The banner at the bottom finally made Lanie chuckle.

‘Willow Monroe, wife of elusive billionaire Jase Monroe, took to the seas today to protest a leaky oil tanker polluting the waves.’

“At least she has her court with her,” Lanie soothed.

“Willow is six months pregnant with triplets! She needs to be on bed rest. Remember, Emmaline did not go full term!” Jase blasted her eardrums. “She can’t even walk now, she waddles!”

“Tell me you didn’t mention that to Willow before she headed out,” Lanie asked, shaking her head. Jase would never learn.

“Of course I did!”

“Knew it. Jase, you literally baited her into doing this. By saying she’s fat and incapable, you challenged her!”

“I did not!” Jase exclaimed.

“The idea you had about recycling is stupid and won’t work,” Lanie said, and Jase drew in an outraged breath.

“It is not! You watch me... oh. I see.”

“By telling you, you couldn’t do something, I ensured you’d try to do it. Exactly what you just did to Willow. No wonder your pregnant wife is out there scaring the crap out of people,” Lanie pointed out.

Jase sighed. “Willow’s going to make me suffer, isn’t she?”

“Yeah. And I’m surprised your scaly ass is not already out there,” Lanie said.

“I was, but Amari decided to bite both her parents, and Emmaline is wailing about her nipples. Vladimir is trying to calm her down, and I got roped into looking after her, and Willow escaped,” Jase complained.

“The trials and error of being a godparent,” Lanie teased.

“Yeah, well, I think Emmaline is working with Willow because Willow skedaddled the moment Amari played up,” Jase grouched.

“Jase, Willow is surrounded by sea life who love her. She’s not alone out there, and Willow’s probably safer there than in the castle! She can also breathe underwater and hide down there for days on end. Stop fretting and worry more about getting your suite ready. Willow has told everyone you’re dragging your feet!” Lanie chided.

“The betrayal of that woman is shocking! There’s no loyalty!” Jase snarled grumpily, but Lanie heard the love in his voice.

“Yup, and tragically for Willow, she puts up with your grumpy ass. Now get to it and sort things out for your lady!” Lanie replied and hung up before Jase could continue. No doubt he’d ring another sibling and be told the same thing.

For a man who’d been so anti human, it was amusing how Willow had him wrapped around her little finger. Poseidon had fallen hard and didn’t care who knew it.

Lanie smiled; she could only imagine how it felt to be loved like that. She’d never experienced it.

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Lanie was finishing up when a knock sounded. She looked up and frowned as she saw Ranson with a stranger. He was dressed the same as Ranson, but he wasn’t one of her guards. Lanie’s back went up.

“Miss Cross. This is Joe McIntyre. He’s replacing Emmet Strong. Mac is my cousin,” Ranson said, and Lanie’s eyes widened a little. She compared the men, noting their identical eyes. A bright, clear green that was sharp and insightful. Ranson was blonde, whereas McIntyre was dark. In fact, McIntyre reminded her of Drew McIntyre.

“Did Strong enjoy his party?” Lanie asked as she reached out to shake McIntyre’s

hand.

She scanned his aura and was relieved to find it clear of anger. Lanie hated touching people but her guards she always scanned.

She always referred to her guards by their surnames. It helped her keep some distance. Human lives were fleeting things, delicate and fragile. It never paid to get involved in them. But McIntyre was certainly handsome and worth a second look.

“Yes, ma’am. Mac is consistent with all procedures and policies. He did fifteen years in the Special Boat Service before retiring with honours,” Ranson explained.

Lanie cocked an eyebrow. The SBS was an elite force within the Royal Navy, and only the best got in.

“And now you’ve come to work for me?” Lanie questioned, surprised.

“Yes, Ma’am. I took a year off, but I’m ready to get back to it.”

Lanie studied him. “The SBS motto is ‘By Strength and Guile’, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“What squadron were you in?” Lanie asked.

McIntyre gazed at her, and Lanie wondered what he was seeing or thinking. “M Squadron.”

Lanie held his gaze. “Black Group?” she inquired, naming the rumoured notorious black ops group that worked within the SBS.

“I can’t confirm or deny that,” McIntyre replied.

Lanie was amused. “I’ll let that be your answer. What rank were you?”

“Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Impressive. Welcome, McIntyre,” Lanie said as she rose to her feet. “It’s time to call it a day, Ranson.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Mac will be driving you today.”

“Whatever you think is best, Ranson,” Lanie responded as they walked out of the office. It was already six o’clock.

Once home, Ranson handed over to the night team, and Lanie instantly headed for her bedroom. No cameras or recording devices were allowed in there. When she entered, she hit a button and a spell by Lilith killed any bugs that might have been placed. Lanie crossed to her full-length mirror and passed through. The air from the valley always tasted and smelt different to her. It was cleaner than clean.

Marie stood waiting as Lanie walked through. “Good day?” Marie asked.

“Yes, I accomplished my goals. And got a new security guard. I’ll have Achere run him, but I think he’s okay. How about you?”

“Found some disgusting individuals for some of you tonight. I’m uneasy, like a change is coming,” Marie said.

Lanie paused. “Another mate?” “I don’t know, but it’s a great upheaval, I sense,” Marie answered.

“Damn. I wonder who this time!” Lanie mused.

“No idea, but I think we better buckle up.”

“Wonderful,” Lanie commented and headed to her quarters. She passed several of her siblings as she did.

“Willow!” Jase bellowed from somewhere in the castle, and Lanie smiled. That man would never be quiet.

“Vladimir!” Emmaline shrieked. “She bit me!”

Lanie slipped into her room, amused. Castle life had never been peaceful. There were too many of them living here. However, with the two humans in their midst, it was now chaos. Try as she might, Lanie couldn’t help but be a little jealous of Vladimir and Jase. Vampire and Poseidon had both found their true mates and were sickeningly happy.

Lanie headed down to the great hall after changing into some loose clothing. Tonight, she’d have to shift to Lamia and sate Anger. Her Sin was shoving at her skin, and Lanie knew better than to ignore it.

The evil she kept inside had a mind of its own, just like all the Sins, but its thought processes were simple. It needed to eat, sleep, and grow. Lanie had long ago learned to control it, and she killed people who acted in pure anger. And not those who had mere temper tantrums. Lanie hunted the dark rage harbourers. Those who destroyed in fury, people who used ire to justify cruel and unforgivable actions.

She wasn’t bothered about someone getting outraged over a football match. No. That did not sate her Sin. Anger fed on those who betrayed innocents in sheer, unmitigated, boiling, unthinking rage.

They might have killed, robbed, stolen, harmed, tortured; it didn't matter as long as her Sin was the driving force behind their actions. Sabotage, theft, and rape, if driven by anger, they came under her remit unless they clashed with another Sin. But Marie always found the correct person to feed each Sin.

It was a task Lanie did not envy Marie for. Looking in the mirrors at the thousands of images of people doing bad stuff. It was a wonder her sister was sane. Marie's Sin was Voyeurism, and it fed like a glutton each night as Marie spied on individuals through her network of mirrors.

"Lanie!" Lorelai called.

"Hey!" Lanie replied and headed towards her. Lorelai hadn't shifted to Medusa yet. She sat with Hans, Noah, and Sela, respectively, The Phantom of the Opera, Rumpelstiltskin, and Sphinx.

"Is anyone hunting tonight?" Lanie asked, sitting next to them. No sooner had she sat than Luke joined them. Surprised looks were swapped between them. The man who held Deception and turned into the fierce Minotaur had mainly kept himself apart until now. Being held, tortured, and experimented on had harmed Luke in many ways, not all just physical. Everyone had an eye on him because they didn't want him going the way of Basilisk.

"Are you okay?" Lanie asked.

"Am I not welcome?" he replied.

Lanie reached out and leant against his arm. She squeezed it tightly and kissed his scarred cheek. Those evil hunters had scared his monster form so badly it had carried over to his human self. For that to happen meant the wounds had to be repeatedly reenacted.

“Of course you are, but you’ve been rather solitary. We’ve worried,” Lanie responded gently.

“I’m aware, and I won’t harm myself. The Hunters may have messed with my mind, but I’m strong enough and seeing Achere. I am trying to regain my place,” Luke explained quietly.

“You’ll always have us. You’re our brother,” Hans said.

“How goes your operas?” Luke asked, and they all laughed.

It amused them that Hans became the Phantom of the Opera, and he wrote musicals and operas. He’d achieved global fame. However, he remained a shy recluse. Or so the humans thought. Hans just didn’t trust any human around him.

“They go well, thank you,” Hans replied dryly.

“I have missed some due to my incar—I need to catch up,” Luke murmured.

Lanie’s heart bled for her brother. Unlike Browen, who kept bursting into flames in her anger, her phoenix at odds with the Sin she carried, Luke had retreated into himself. Lanie was delighted to see him mixing again.

“No doubt, I am sure we can resolve that issue. As for now. Do you need to hunt tonight?” Noah asked.

Lanie eyed him. Noah held Cunning, but his shifter form as Rumpelstiltskin was a vicious little being.

“I do and require company. I admit to being afraid,” Luke said.

“Accompany me, Luke,” Lanie offered, and he nodded.

“Thank you, that would be suitable,” Luke responded somewhat shyly.

“I’ll be there too,” Sela added. “I don’t need to hunt tonight, but I shall guard you, brother.”

“Sela, you ease my worries. Such kindness in you,” Luke replied.

“You’re most welcome. Feed Deception, I am sure Mary can get you culprits nearby. Deception and Anger are so easy to find in humans,” Sela said, shaking her head.

“Yes, indeed they are,” Lanie agreed.

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They stood in front of her mirror later that evening as Mary displayed two images. As guessed, Mary had been able to not only find two evil-doers close together, but they lived in the same house. Lamia joked it was a two-for-one deal. They headed through the mirror, and Sela followed Minotaur, intent on protecting him.

They discovered themselves in a large home and went their separate ways. Lamia tonight felt vicious, but didn’t know why. She wondered if it was because she was reminded of what had been done to Minotaur. Even though he was covered in short, sparse hair, his scars were visible.

Anger rose in her at his appearance, and, for once, Lamia let it reign. By the time it had finished toying with its food and eaten, Lamia felt more balanced.

“Wow, your Sin was messy tonight,” Sphinx murmured, entering the room.

“Yes, it was uneasy and demanded to play. So, it did.”

“Interesting. How does it feel?”

“Like there is a threat to it, which I can’t understand. Anger keeps warning me, it has done since...” Lamia’s voice trailed off.

“Since?” Sphinx prompted.

“I met the new guard in my office. I think Anger is afraid of him,” Lamia mused.

“How weird!” Sphinx replied.

“Yes. That makes me wonder what the hell is wrong with him. It’s impossible that he is holding a Sin, he’s human, so what could frighten a Sin?”

“Your mate!” Sphinx gasped.

“No. There was no link or bond there. But it is certainly strange. Maybe he’s a Hunter, and Anger picked up on it. I shall keep on guard just in case,” Lamia replied.

Now, Sphinx looked worried. “Be careful, Lamia. Hunters won’t hesitate to harm you if they knew who you are.”

“I know. And I always am. Sadly, we’ve learned our lessons too well,” Lamia said. Sadness swamped her as she thought of those they had lost. Innocent lives. The question of why this had happened to them bugged her. It felt like they were targeted, but it didn’t make sense. They hadn’t been the only squadron of God’s Warriors, although they’d been the most favoured. Was that why they’d been sabotaged? Lamia somehow knew they had been.

“Where did your mind go?” Sphinx questioned as they headed downstairs to find Minotaur.

“The past. Which is always unpleasant,” Lamia replied.

“Do you still grieve?” Sphinx asked cautiously.

“No. Grief is something I don’t experience. I was wondering though, why us? Somehow, I know we were targeted. Somebody wanted it to be us that was affected.”

“You believe that someone knew what would happen to us?” Sphinx gasped.

“You’re the riddle master, Sphinx, what do you think?”

“That is something I shall consider, sister,” Sphinx replied.

They entered the room where Minotaur stood as it gazed at the man he killed.
“Deception feasted well tonight.”

“He reeked of it,” Lamia agreed.

“Can we return now?” Minotaur said. “I feel uneasy. Almost like I’m being watched.”

“Then we’ll leave,” Lamia urged, and they headed towards a mirror. One by one, they called Mary and flowed through it.

In the bedroom upstairs, a camera blinked a red light, recording all that had taken place.

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Lanie/Lamia

Getting into the car the next morning, both McIntyre and Ranson greeted Lanie. Ranson was driving, but Lanie sensed some unease from them both.

“Is there a problem?” she asked, concerned.

“We’ve had word there is a worrying package at the office. My security team has isolated it in a fireproof lab and is awaiting my arrival,” Ranson replied.

“Do we need to evacuate?” Lanie questioned, worried.

While, like most of her race, she didn’t rate humanity much, these were her employees, and therefore she was responsible for them.

“No. It is in a secure lab, Miss Cross,” Ranson responded.

“I’ll accompany you,” Lanie stated.

“I have to insist you head to your office, Miss Cross,” McIntyre said.

“And I’ll inform you that I pay your wages, and while I appreciate your diligence, I will see what is going on,” Lanie replied. She wished to understand what the threat was.

“Then you shall have our resignation when we arrive at the office. If you undermine my security procedures, Miss Cross, we are ineffective as guards,” Ranson

announced.

Lanie's eyes narrowed. "That is the fifth time you've offered to resign, Ranson. One day, I will accept it. Fine, I'll go and hide like a coward."

"Being safe is not being cowardly. It is sensible."

"So you say," Lanie snapped and sat back in her seat.

McIntyre and Ranson swapped amused glances, and Lanie glowered at them. Their vulnerability exceeded hers, but she couldn't tell them that. Humanity's stupid roles and rules meant that someone of her status used security. Lanie didn't need it, but if she did not have guard's, eyebrows would be raised. Plus, it would also put a different target on her back.

Hunters might not know her identity, but other threats existed. Due to her wealth, there were kidnapping and death threats and even blackmail attempts. None ever worked out, and she'd sent a fair few to court and prosecuted them. Lanie had around ten years to make a difference before disappearing. And she intended to make the most of it.

The car pulled into its spot, and Lanie waited until McIntyre opened her door. She marched straight to the lift and headed for her office. Once inside, McIntyre remained while Ranson disappeared downstairs.

"I don't need babysitting, McIntyre," Lanie snapped.

"No, Miss Cross, but should that package prove dangerous, you're my priority to get out of here," McIntyre replied.

"What room is it in? Can you bring the cameras up?"

“Certainly,” McIntyre stated and moved to her desk. Moments later, Lanie was watching intently as Ranson looked the package over with a piece of equipment. He nodded his head to someone and checked it with something else before putting it down.

Slowly, Ranson unwrapped the box and opened it. His face registered surprise, and Lanie wondered what was inside. Ranson beckoned another guard over and handed him the parcel, and then looked at the cameras and nodded.

“Ranson says it is all clear,” McIntyre said.

Lanie tapped her thigh impatiently as she waited for Ranson to arrive.

“What was it?” she asked the moment he appeared.

“A snake. It was sliced open lengthwise. It’s been sent to be frozen in case we need it later on. There was a card too,” Ranson explained.

Lanie used every ounce of control to keep her expression neutral. “A snake? Cut open? Is that some sort of message?”

“A snake usually symbolises somebody untrustworthy, deceitful, manipulative, or betrayal. Someone thinks you’ve done something,” Ranson replied.

Lanie barely refrained from rolling her eyes. “I understand what it means, but I’ve no idea why one would have been sent.”

Lanie’s mind was already racing. The poor creature was clearly meant to represent her. Someone believed they’d identified her.

She wanted to go home and head for the castle but couldn’t finish early. She had a

full day ahead of her.

Lanie needed her family around her but couldn't disturb anyone. And plus, there was no way she'd allow anyone to frighten her from what was hers.

"What did the card say?" Lanie asked, suddenly remembering it.

"See you soon, lover, and it was signed A," Ranson replied and Lanie's blood chilled in her veins and not because of the serpent in her.

"Are you sure it said A?" she whispered and wished she'd kept quiet because of the quaver in her voice.

Ranson inquired, "Miss Cross, is there something we should know?"

"Not that I am aware of. I'm rather affected by the fact someone killed a creature to send me a message that means nothing to me. Could this be a disgruntled employee?" Lanie inquired.

"We'll investigate. The fact it's starting at this level is worrying. Usually, it starts with calls or letters, not straight to killing creatures," McIntyre said.

Lanie noted he'd not took his eyes off her face. Somehow, she knew those bright green eyes were seeing something she didn't want him to.

McIntyre studied her for a few more seconds before turning to Ranson. "I'll begin checking the employee files who have been fired in the last five years."

"Yeah, I'll join you in a few," Ranson said and watched McIntyre leave the office.

Lanie held his gaze.

“Miss Cross, I’ve been with you for ten years. Ever since you started up. Are you withholding something?” he asked bluntly.

Lanie could appreciate that. Ranson always spoke his mind. They’d kept a comfortable working relationship but had maintained employer and employee status.

“No, Ranson. You’re fully aware I don’t have relationships or date,” Lanie replied.

“And I’ve always wondered what turned a stunningly beautiful woman off dating. Excuse me, Ma’am, but I think there’s something in your past that scarred you. And I’m wondering right now, does his name begin with A?” Ranson inquired.

I almost snorted. Talk about don’t hold back. But Ranson’s eyes were keen on her, and she knew he was searching for a clue or weakness.

“Ranson. I’ve always liked your honesty and bluntness. But do not overstep. If there was a hidden lover, I’d tell you,” Lanie answered.

“I’ll join McIntyre and see what we can dig up,” Ranson said and left.

Lanie leaned back. Today was going to be a nightmare.

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Lanie stared at Simon Clare after he sauntered into her office. He differed from the worried young man he’d been yesterday. There was almost a cockiness to him. Lanie hadn’t expected to see him, but she’d had a cancellation, and Laura had squeezed him in.

Simon sat down and offered a smarmy grin. “I’m so pleased to see you again, Miss Cross, or can I call you Lanie?”

“Miss Cross is fine, Mr Clare,” Lanie replied.

Simon’s behaviour was almost too familiar, and she didn’t like it.

“I best crack on. We’ve only got ten minutes,” Simon said and began asking questions.

Lanie answered by rote. They were the same ones she was asked repeatedly.

With two minutes to go, Simon sent Lanie a grin. “That will be great for my report, Miss Cross. Can I get a photo?”

“Sure.”

Simon took a quick snap and looked at her.

“People say monsters exist,” he declared.

Lanie frowned. What on earth?

“I beg your pardon?”

“There are rumours that creatures exist. What would you know about them?” Simon questioned. He leaned forward and held her eyes. “I’ve even been informed you are one of them.”

“Are you on drugs?” Lanie asked for the second time, keeping her expression calm.

“What?”

“This interview just went off the rails. I’m confused what we’re discussing,” Lanie

stated.

“Have you heard of a Lamia?”

Lanie hit the button under the desk. Ranson and security would be alerted, as would Laura.

She clucked her tongue. “Isn’t that the woman with a snake tail and snakes in her hair?”

Simon looked annoyed. “No. That’s Medusa. A Lamia is a normal woman on top, but her bottom half is a snake.”

“Sorry, I see no difference. I’m not up to scratch on mythology. Are you asking me to join a game? I’m afraid I do not play games. I’m a little busy,” Lanie said calmly.

“What about the name Irideesa?”

Lanie barely stopped herself from stiffening. “That sounds Greek or Arab. It’s not a something I’m familiar with. Is it a person or a company?”

“Don’t take me for a fool. I know you are the monster called Irideesa, who is a Lamia,” Simon snapped. “We’re done. I’m far too busy to deal with the rants of a delusional man. Your time is up anyway,” Lanie stated.

“Alainen sends his regards,” Simon said smugly.

“Who? Mr Clare, I don’t know what you think I am—”

“You’re a god-damned monster who shifts into a snake!” Simon spat, his face contorting. “Alainen has found you, and we’re going to kill you!”

Her door banged open as Simon was raging, and Ranson strode in with McIntyre on his heels. Building security was also behind them.

Ranson dragged Simon from where he was leaning over the desk, threatening Lanie, and shoved him against the wall. In the meantime, McIntyre came and stood by Lanie, offering protection and reassurance.

Lanie watched as Simon was frisked and then, with his arm up his back, escorted from her office. He kept shouting threats at her, and Ranson shook his head.

“Call the cops. He’s a lunatic,” Ranson ordered, and the building guards nodded.

“Don’t hurt him. Mr Clare is obviously mentally unstable. Perhaps we ought to speak to his professor and see about getting him some professional help,” Lanie said with mock concern.

McIntyre’s lips twitched, and Lanie guessed he’d realised that she was being false. Lanie met his eyes and witnessed amusement in them.

“Don’t you agree?” she asked softly.

“Indeed, Ma’am. He certainly needs some help,” McIntyre agreed.

“She’s a monster! She turns into a half-human, half-snake creature! Listen to me, Lanie Cross is not what you all think!” Simon screeched.

“Get him out of here!” Ranson bellowed.

“I’m going home. This day had been bloody awful,” Lanie announced, standing up.

“Security will call the police on him, as he does seem mentally unstable. I’ll bring the

car up to the door if you don't mind waiting a few moments," Ranson said.

Lanie nodded and sat down as Ranson left the room, and Lanie gazed at McIntyre.

"Why do you all wear black combats and tees that show your biceps?" Lanie asked and then looked embarrassed.

This man seemed to throw her off balance, and she'd no idea why.

"It's uniform," McIntyre replied with amusement.

"Um."

"It doesn't show blood stains," McIntyre continued, and Lanie's eyes grew wide.

"That was a joke."

"Security humour?"

"Yes, we have our own brand of humour," McIntyre admitted.

Lanie's gaze narrowed. "You treat me different to Ranson."

McIntyre looked surprised. "I do?"

"Ranson is deferential and respectful, but he also treats me normally. With you, there's something else. I can't put my finger on it." "Life's little mysteries and all that," McIntyre stated, and Lanie sat up straight.

"Right there. Ranson would never say that to me."

"Maybe because, although you are some rich billionaire type of person, you're still a

woman. And I was in the SBS, after serving with them, not much scares me,” McIntyre replied.

Sharp green eyes studied her as she gazed back. McIntyre tilted his head as his phone pinged.

“Ranson’s right outside the door, Miss Cross. Stay behind me until I’ve checked that it’s all clear. I think we’ve had enough of lunatics today,” he said.

To Lanie’s amusement, he strode to the door and opened it before waving her out. She grabbed her purse and briefcase and followed. Lanie couldn’t help but note his firm butt as she walked behind him.

McIntyre was what someone would call the entire package. Tall, broad-shouldered, leading to a trim waist. A firm ass, long legs with thick muscle thighs. In his black tee and combats, with his green eyes and long black hair tied back, he could be a book cover model. He certainly did look like the wrestler Drew McIntyre, and it was even funnier to her that they had the same name.

Now she needed to go home and binge-watch some wrestling. Amused at her thoughts, Lanie rolled her eyes and stepped into the lift.

“Do you think he sent the package?” she asked.

“Possibly. I mean, what was that crap about you being a snake woman? The man is clearly delusional. But that makes him dangerous and hard to predict.” “He’s going to come at me again, isn’t he?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so, Miss Cross. His kind of crazy needs help. Mr Clare was literally frothing at the mouth. Hopefully, the police will put him in a psychiatric hold, but it’s not definite. We need to swap our routines daily for a few weeks,” McIntyre replied.

“How tedious.” Lanie sighed.

They never kept to the same route, anyway. And it was never planned. Ranson has several routes from her house to work and back again and never informed anyone which he was taking. He just followed a whim each morning and evening. McIntyre was indicating further adjustments were necessary.

“Possibly, but your safety is paramount,” McIntyre stated. The elevator doors opened, and she saw her car parked directly outside. McIntyre held up a hand and checked before letting her out.

She climbed into the car, and, to her surprise, McIntyre jumped in beside her. There was another member of Ranson’s team in the passenger seat up front.

“We’re increasing security for a few days, Miss Cross, and from tomorrow, we’ll have an extra car behind us,” Ranson said.

Lanie’s mouth opened and shut. Ranson’s expertise made arguing pointless.

“That’s fine,” she replied.

“The police have taken Mr Clare to the station, but he’s ranting about you still being a snake woman, and they have to believe him. It does appear they’ll take him to the psychiatric ward,” Ranson continued.

“Good. I hope he gets help. Although his imagination was rather vivid,” Lanie said.

McIntyre sent her a sharp look, but he nodded. Lanie wondered what that was all about, but her phone rang. Looking down, she saw it was Dale.

“Hey,” she mumbled.

“Hey, Lanie. I’m visiting for a few nights and wondered if I could stay at yours,” he asked.

“Of course. Are you here now?”

“Not yet, but I’ll be arriving shortly,” Dale said.

“Just text when you’re near, and I’ll buzz you in,” she responded. Dale made a noise and cut the line.

Lanie snickered. “Bye, rude dude! Ranson, a friend will be staying with me. His name is Dale Cunning, I believe you’ve met before.”

“Yes. I’m aware of Mr Cunning. I shall inform the teams,” Ranson replied.

Silence fell for the rest of the journey home. There wasn’t much else to say. Lanie’s mind turned to Dale. He must be here for a couple of jobs. Like most of them, Dale travelled all over the world for his Sin. But if he was requesting to stay at Lanie’s, there was a big job on. Dale’s Sin was Covetousness. Dale used his unique ability to enter homes and steal back items which had been stolen, such as artwork, etc and return them to their original owners.

As Dale was also the Invisible Man, he was uniquely suited to this task. He’d waltz in and didn’t care if there were security features or not. Grab the item and head out was Dale’s motto. His actions left many people scratching their heads in bewilderment. But some families had had their treasures returned and that meant everything.

Lanie exited the car and headed inside to her house. It was a huge mansion expected of her status, but she rarely used all of it. She did hold office parties here for events such as Christmas and a summer ball. Heading towards her bedroom because that was the mirror Dale would come through, Lanie showered before lying on her bed.

While security monitored the rest of the house, cameras were not allowed in her room. There was one outside on her balcony and one on her bedroom door, and they even covered her window. But not in here. Lanie hit her special button and curled up. Hugging a pillow to her, she finally let her emotions out.

Alainen. She wished she could say it was a name she'd not heard for thousands of years. But that would be a lie. After her escape from him when he'd first tried to kill her, Alainen had made it his mission to hunt her down. Sadly, Alainen was as long-lived as her being a God's Warrior, and Lanie had often wondered if he led the Hunters.

Tears streaked from her eyes as she recalled his hate and how he had levelled it at her all this time. Alainen was a true fanatic and hateful. The scar she had given him fuelled his envy, and over the many years, he had constantly hunted her and their child out. Their child was safe, having been born with the ability to shift, unlike Lanie, who'd been locked into Lamia's form.

That one thing saved their daughter and kept her hidden from Alainen because Lanie had no doubt he'd kill her. Once she'd reached adulthood, Lanie had bidden her to go into the world and make her own way. She had warned Callidora to stay away from Alainen, and Callidora had obeyed. Of course, Callidora had been exposed to Alainen's level of hatred as they fled him multiple times.

The safest they'd ever been was in America. It had been a little-known continent, and so vast Lanie had spent three thousand years there safely before Alainen tracked her down. There, he'd nearly succeeded in taking her head. Lanie had only once attempted to find love, and she'd believed Alainen's empty promises.

Lanie couldn't determine whether Alainen's behaviour was typical or a reflection of her absorbing Anger. But one thing that didn't make sense was his level of hatred. Alainen's hatred was beyond anything anyone had seen or experienced. Why? It had

been shocking when she'd first been confronted with it, and it had grown steadily worse. Alainen was out of control.

A car pulled up outside, and she sensed Dale as he let himself in.

' In my bedroom, ' Lanie mind spoke to Dale, and he headed towards her.

"What happened? I can feel your distress from miles away," Dale announced as he entered her room and kicked the door shut.

Dale strode over to the bed and gathered Lanie up in his arms. Lanie tucked her head under his chin and curled into him.

"Alainen sent one of his little minions after me today. He confronted me in the office," Lanie responded.

"That doesn't mean he knows for sure you're you," Dale replied. "Your shifter is totally different from you. He's probably taking a punt in the dark."

Despite his words, Lanie felt the worry coming from him.

"I might need to kill him now," she replied.

"Then you do so. We aren't going to lose you, and you are not running alone now. What you and Alainen did was wrong. God's Warriors weren't allowed to mate. But you did, and you fell in love. Callidora sprung from that, and she's beautiful. But why Alainen is so focused on you confounds all of us. There's more to his hatred than we understand," Dale said as he rocked her.

"I want to go home."

“Then come on,” Dale replied, calling for Mary as he stood and, still carrying her, passed through the mirror.

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McIntyre

His teeth ground together as the confident man parked and entered the house. McIntyre swapped cameras and followed Dale Cummings as he marched through Lanie's home like he owned it. When Dale entered the bedroom, McIntyre nearly threw his mug at the screen.

"Take over for me," he said to the guard accompanying him. Roy nodded and moved his chair to watch the mansion.

McIntyre walked out and headed for the small yard staff used. He tilted his head back, dragged in a deep breath, and blew it out.

Why Dale Cummings had affected him so badly was anyone's guess. Hell, McIntyre had only known Lanie less than a week. She wasn't anyone to him.

Except she was. And he couldn't deny that. Ranson would bust his ass if he knew what McIntyre was thinking. He had to get his emotions under control. Whether she realised it or not, Lanie Cross needed his help.

Lanie/Lamia

After spending the night at the castle and returning to tell Ranson she was staying at home for the weekend, Lanie relaxed as she watched her family.

Emmaline was complaining about Vladimir and Amari and how spoiled she was, not just by her father but by all the shifters.

Jase held Amari in his arms as he whispered things in his goddaughter's ear while he kept a sharp eye on Willow.

Other Legendary Shifters were dotted about, Lanie noted as she turned to see who was present, but her eyes noticed Willow's bump. It rippled alarmingly, and Willow winced.

Lanie moved closer as Willow placed a hand on her stomach, and her face took on a faraway look.

"Are you okay?"

"I've got back pain," Willow muttered. Jase's sensitive hearing caught her words, and Amari was handed back to her mother.

"Baby?" Jase asked, approaching, his long legs eating up the short distance between them.

"I'm fine... ow!" Willow cried.

Heads snapped towards her.

"Get Maeve, Lily, and Andie!" Jase yelled, scooping Willow up.

"Lanie!" Willow wailed.

"What?" Lanie stated.

"Don't leave me with him!"

"Er, Willow..." Lanie began.

Willow's head twisted, and she sent Lanie a glare that should kill. "He's your brother!"

"Okay, I'm coming," Lanie muttered as she chased after them. Willow had looked completely capable of killing someone in that moment.

Jase headed to his quarters and told Lanie where to get the special sheets they'd bought for birthing. It would keep the bedding and mattress clean. He quickly laid Willow down on them as her water broke.

"Did I just pee myself?" Willow demanded, horrified.

"No baby, your waters went," Jase said calmly.

"This is too soon. I am twelve weeks early. I'm only seven months!" Willow cried.

"Amari was born at this time. Perhaps we have a shorter gestation," Lanie soothed, brushing Willow's hair out of her eyes.

"Where's that goddamn witch?" Jase snarled.

"Which one?" Maeve answered as she entered. "Stop being a waste of space and fetch a blanket to cover Willow while I examine her. Lily is coming, but Andie can't."

"What is wrong with her?" Jase demanded.

"She is unable to come," Maeve stated, and the stare she sent Jase dared him to argue.

Lanie was distracted by Willow grabbing her hand and screaming as she crushed the bones in Lanie's fingers. Lanie yelped herself.

“Oh boy, that’s quick,” Maeve muttered.

“Maeve?” Jase asked in panic.

“Like Emmaline, the labour is progressing quickly. It appears our pregnancies are shorter, and delivery is much quicker,” Maeve said as she moved into the bathroom and scrubbed her arms and hands.

“This is a problem?” Jase demanded as he wiped Willow’s brow.

“No. Just curious. Lanie, do you remember yours?” Maeve questioned gently.

“Yes, Callidora was seven months, too. And my labour was less than an hour. Harpy delivered Callidora. Could it be our blood and race?” Lanie asked, even as Willow squealed and squeezed again. Lanie cried out with her, too.

“Maybe. Relationships and children were forbidden to us. You were the first, Lanie, to experience love and birth a child. We’ve no knowledge how a pregnancy would affect us,” Lily said, entering. She was pushing a baby unit, with Sela and Jess following her.

Jase’s eyes grew wide, and Lanie saw panic flash across his face.

“Calm down,” Lanie murmured to him, and his gaze crossed to hers. “You’ll be a great dad.”

“Do you think so?”

“No. I know it. Get behind Willow and support her back,” Lanie ordered, and Jase climbed on the bed and took Willow’s weight.

Willow bore down as Maeve peered between her legs. “I’m examining you, don’t push until I okay it.”

“I need to now!” Willow growled at Maeve.

“Not yet!” Maeve replied and ducked under the blanket covering Willow’s lower half.

Willow’s stomach rippled alarmingly, and Lanie swallowed hard. Her memories of labour had never faded, but watching someone else go through it was alarming.

“Andie is on standby for an emergency, but we’re not to call her unless life-threatening,” Sela muttered.

Lanie wondered what was bothering Andie. She seemed to be losing weight and had started to isolate herself. She was clearly suffering from something but wouldn’t talk to anyone.

“You’re fully dilated. On your next push, bear down,” Maeve ordered as Lily headed into the bathroom.

Seconds later, a heart-rending scream erupted from Willow as she grunted and pushed hard.

“I’ve got the head!” Maeve announced. Willow gasped, and, moments later, pushed.

“A boy!” Maeve called triumphantly. She handed him to Lily, who immediately began checking him over.

“Maeve, I need to push again,” Willow cried.

“When you’re ready,” Maeve replied calmly.

Five minutes later, a second boy was born, and he was passed to Lily.

Further minutes ticked by, and Maeve started to look a little worried. Willow’s contractions seemed to have stopped. Jase murmured in Willow’s ear, telling her how much he loved her.

After fifteen minutes, Willow cried out, and a baby girl was welcomed.

Lanie had tears in her eyes as Jase looked swamped with love and awe.

“We need Andie,” Lily said softly.

Lanie’s head shot up with Jase, but Willow didn’t hear.

“What is it?” Jase snapped.

“Boy two is struggling, as is the girl. I don’t know why,” Lily replied and shifted into Lilith. As Lilith, her power was stronger. Maeve changed into Baba Yaga, and they began to work on the babies.

“They’re having difficulty breathing,” Sela said, and finally, Willow realised something was wrong.

Lanie watched as her brain worked furiously.

“Their father is a water god. Get them in water!” Lanie ordered.

Lilith and Baba Yaga snatched them as Lanie headed into the bathroom and started running a lukewarm bath.

“He’s shifted!” Lilith cried, holding the boy.

“Quickly,” Lanie said, and Lilith put him in the tub. Immediately, he began to breathe.

“Oh hell!” Lanie exclaimed. In front of her disbelieving eyes was a tiny merman.

“What!” Jase bellowed as Andie walked slowly in. She headed for the bathroom just as Baba Yaga placed the little girl in the water. She changed into a merbaby before everyone’s eyes.

“Someone better get this baby!” Sela shrieked, alarmed.

Lanie rushed out and saw the eldest boy had also shifted. Straight into an uber merman with tentacles and everything.

“Crap!” she cried and grabbed him and placed him in the bath.

“Well, this is interesting,” Andie said, her eyes glowing as she checked them over.

“Someone tell us what’s going on!” Jase bellowed with fear in his voice.

“The babies can shift. At the moment, we have two in merform and one uber merman,” Lanie announced as Baba Yaga hurried back to check on Willow.

“We have what?” Willow demanded in disbelief.

“They can shift into all three forms. However, they seem to prefer their water side,” Lanie explained.

Baba Yaga chuckled. “You’re going to have to revise your living arrangements.”

“They are fine now. They needed to touch water. I’m not required, so excuse me,” Andie said as she stumbled out.

“Andie, shift into Pandora,” Lilith ordered.

Andie shook her head. “Call someone to help me back to my quarters, please.”

Vladimir arrived and, seeing the commotion, picked Andie up and disappeared with her.

Lanie returned to the bathroom and watched the babies frolic about. The second boy, on realising his brother had a different shape, scrunched up his face, and Lanie thought he was going to poop himself. Instead, he managed to change into his brother’s form. A wave of happiness hit Lanie, and she realised it had come from him.

The little girl had been happily flapping about, but now her brothers had something she didn’t. Moments later, she, too, had shifted and was slapping her tentacles around.

“Do they seem advanced to you?” Sela questioned.

“Yeah. In this form, they’re not totally helpless. Swimming is natural to them,” Lanie noted.

“Was Callidora the same?” Jess asked.

“Yes. She was advanced at shifting and using her tail.”

“Holy crap. I could have a baby Loch Ness. How the hell would I manage a baby that size?” Jess gasped.

Lanie broke into gales of laughter. “Think of Salah with an infant Scylla.”

The women blanched.

“Or the woman who gives birth to a baby Yeti, Minotaur, or Big Foot,” Lanie said.

“Fu...” Sela shook her head.

“Let’s hope they all come out baby human-sized, or some woman’s lady bits will never be the same!” Jess cried.

They all began laughing as the babies watched them from the bath.

“Can we see them?” Willow asked weakly as Jase carried her in. Jase stared at the water in utter awe as all three babies turned as one and faced them.

“Did you see that?” Jess muttered.

“Could they have telepathy?” Lanie suggested.

Jase moved to the other side, and they followed suit. “Wow.”

“This is a family moment,” Sela murmured.

Lanie and Jess walked out of Jase’s quarters, where their siblings all congregated.

“Are they okay?” Dale asked.

“They are all fine. We’ll let Jase tell you their sexes, and what a surprise they are!” Lanie replied. Everybody frowned, but Jase appeared before them.

“We’ve two boys and a girl. We can’t bring them to you, but you can come visit a few at a time,” Jase announced. He looked tired but so proud.

Lanie loved this for him. Jase deserved this.

Lanie tiredly walked to her quarters. She had to rise early in the morning to return to her home, but this weekend had been something she needed.

McIntyre

Lanie and that Dale guy had spent all weekend in the bedroom. He had not seen them come out once, and he wondered how they’d eaten. Several times he’d checked the feeds were live because there had been no movement from them. Yet, this morning, they left her room and resumed their daily routines.

McIntyre felt a surge of jealousy. Had they been doing the obvious? Or had Lanie somehow fiddled with the cameras to loop back and hide their actions? Because two days locked in a bedroom with no food or drink wasn’t possible. Something was off, and McIntyre was determined to discover what. He couldn’t do his job if he didn’t have all the information.

He hadn’t been in the SBS for nothing. McIntyre had skills Lanie was completely unaware of!

Lanie/Lamia

She climbed into the car, wondering what was wrong with McIntyre. He seemed sullen this morning. Ranson and the second guard up front, Fisher, were fine. Shoving aside McIntyre’s grumpiness, Lanie pulled up her schedule and made a face. She had a meeting with Jonah Preston, a clothing designer whose designs she’d rejected. Lanie prided herself on having functional, attractive, and feminine clothing.

She covered day dresses, to female suits, to evening gowns, to casual wear.

What Lanie disliked was wacky idiots who were determined to make a statement. Impractical clothing had no place in her business. Why Jonah had designed such a line, she had no idea. He should have known she'd never approve it. It was beyond ludicrous, with sharp angles and over the top pointed shoulders—and other ridiculous additions.

Lanie sighed and caught McIntyre's attention.

"Ma'am?"

"Just a meeting I'd rather avoid. I can't deal with drama, and this man's going to give me it," Lanie replied.

"Preston?" Ranson called over his shoulder in amusement.

"Yes. I have an eleven o'clock with him. It is a ten-minute meet, but it will run over. He's very talented but so dramatic," Lanie said.

"And you just nixed his latest designs," Ranson replied.

"I did. Lord knows what he was thinking. I'd never use anything like that in my lines."

"Some people like to push the boat out," McIntyre added.

"He pushed the damn boat out and then sank it like the Titanic!" Lanie exclaimed.

"That bad?" Ransom asked, sounding amused, although his face remained impassive.

“Terrible. I don’t know what he was thinking,” Lanie replied.

“He probably wasn’t,” Fisher chipped in.

“Nope. And now I have got to deal with his flamboyant ass.” Lanie shook her head and resigned herself to drama!

???

“Miss Cross, you’re not a designer! You’ve no idea what sells!” Jonah cried, flapping his hands about.

Lanie watched him with narrowed eyes. “I’ve no idea?”

“No. Clearly not. Fashion is not meant for the pedestrian,” Jonah snapped.

“Considering I run a multimillion-pound clothing company and designer line, I would suggest that I do know what I’m talking about, Jonah. My sales keep growing because the designs I release are what people want.”

“You could be a billionaire! If you listen to me.” Jonah flapped his hands again.

Lanie pulled a design. It was a dress shaped like a triangle with shoulders bigger than any potential body, and the dress made from stiffened material.

“How would that function in this office? Or at a garden party? Or even at a ball?” Lanie demanded.

“That’s not meant for an office,” Jonah exclaimed. “Nor a garden party. That dress ensures the wearer is seen . It’s for a red-carpet event.”

“We create elegant, functional, and beautiful clothing. This piece is none of that. Nor is this one, or any of them,” Lanie said, showing Jonah his designs.

“You’ve no imagination!” Jonah spat.

“I am known as one of the most elegantly dressed women in the world. I wear the designs my company put out. If I won’t wear any of this, I wouldn’t expect my buyers too, either. If you wish to design like this, there’s no place in my business for it. Last year, you put an excellent line together. The summer dresses were outstanding. I’ve no idea why you’ve gone this route,” Lanie said with a sigh. She was starting to get a headache.

“They were boring. Anyone could have designed them,” Jonah hissed, folding his arms across his chest.

Lanie withheld a groan. They were going in circles and not getting anywhere, and it had been fifteen minutes already.

“Ultimately, Jonah, the decision is mine. The answer is no. I will not allow these ridiculous lines to be sold in my company. I value your opinion, and you have created some wonderful pieces in the past. But the answer is no. I won’t be featuring those designs,” Lanie said firmly.

Jonah leapt to his feet. “You’re making a mistake!” he shouted.

“It’s mine to make,” Lanie agreed.

“You’ve no talent, no vision. I’ll quit,” Jonah seethed.

“The door is there, and HR is on the floor below. Please hand your resignation in there,” Lanie replied.

“You’ll regret this, you talentless philistine! You deserve to die for your lack of fashion sense!” Jonah yelled.

“And you’re done!” Lanie stated as she pressed her security button.

McIntyre entered immediately. Jonah looked at him and puffed up, which made Lanie giggle. Not even on Jonah’s best day could he match McIntyre.

“Please escort Mr Preston to HR. He wishes to hand in his notice. Inform them Mr Preston can leave now, and we will pay any holiday money outstanding. Hell, I’ll be generous and pay him for the full month. But get him off my property. One of his colleagues can empty his desk, and we will send your items on Jonah. Goodbye and good luck.”

“I don’t need luck! I’ve more talent in my little finger than you have in your entire body,” Jonah hissed.

He flounced past McIntyre, who shot Lanie an amused look before following Jonah out. Lanie shook her head. McIntyre couldn’t exactly lose Jonah, as Jonah was wearing a bright yellow suit.

The rest of the day passed swiftly for Lanie as Jonah had put her behind, so she worked hard to catch up. She skipped lunch to get her schedule back on track, and when she finished, she was starving.

“Ranson, can we stop at La Chef on the way home?” Lanie asked.

“Certainly, Miss Cross,” Ranson replied. Lanie dialled and ordered through as they headed to the car. McIntyre took his place beside her in the SUV, and Lanie glanced at him. He still appeared sullen, but it had eased. Until he heard her place her food order. Then his chin clenched.

She had ordered for herself and Dale. Did McIntyre not like him? Or was it concern she'd not eaten? Unusually for her, Lanie was confused. While she'd been around men her entire life, Lanie would never claim to understand them.

McIntyre was proving to be a conundrum, and she was not sure if she liked it. Lanie wanted her life simple. A love affair wasn't part of the picture.

Lanie reined her thoughts in. Where the hell had that come from? A love affair? Never.

McIntyre might be gorgeous, and he certainly was worth a second look, but Lanie wasn't driven by her hormones. She'd broken the rules once and had paid the price. It had been too high of one for Lanie to ever risk love again.

The Jar's Protectors were forbidden from forming relationships. Their sole focus should have been on the Jar of Fate. And deep-down, Lanie blamed herself for Pandora's actions. If she'd been more alert, not preoccupied by Alainen, might she have sensed Pandora?

Even worse, in her darkest moments, Lanie had wondered if what happened to her and her squad had been punishment for her and Alainen's illicit affair. Although nobody had mentioned it to her, she wondered if her siblings shared the same thoughts.

Callidora had been the best thing to come out of that mess, but Lanie hadn't ever risked herself again. Some of her siblings had love affairs, but not her. Lanie's bad behaviour had resulted in a harsh penalty indeed.

Her heart was fragile, and she'd never trust anyone with it.

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Lanie/Lamia

She glanced out of the window at the castle as she held Balius, the eldest of the triplets. He was in human shape and a beautiful child. Looking at Balius was like seeing Jase back in his Or'lan DiMitra, God Warrior form. Lanie noted each triplet resembled his former figure of Or'lan. Amari also looked like Vladmir's previous Mir'ald Ula form.

She was unsure what this meant. Although all three children had Willow's eyes and cute button nose. The rest of them were Or'lan. Duris, the second child, was identical to his brother, and the little girl Raisa was a beautiful, feminine version of her father.

Lanie assumed that implied, under all their monstrous forms, something existed of their previous forms. Everyone was talking about it, but nobody had any explanations. Lanie stared at Andie as she walked through the gardens. Andie was maybe the only one who had answers to their questions, but she was locked up tight.

Balius snorted and wriggled, and she looked down at two bright eyes. Balius blinked and pouted before yawning.

"Beautiful boy," Lanie cooed.

Jase approached her, carrying Raisa and Duris. Duris was asleep in a sling, but Raisa, lying in her father's arms, was wide awake.

"Hi, Dad," Lanie teased.

“Hey. I see you kidnapped my son,” Jase teased.

“He’s gorgeous,” Lanie replied.

Jase’s face softened. “They all are. Can you believe we have triplets? Hell, forget that. Could you believe we’ve had children?”

“I guess it’s always been possible,” Lanie answered. “I had Callidora.”

“But nobody had a child since.”

“No. What made me so special?” Lanie wondered.

Jase looked at her and swallowed.

“What is it?” she asked with concern.

“Let’s put them in their cots and take a walk,” Jase said.

Lanie followed him into his living area, where Willow lay on a couch. Maeve and Jess were with her, so they laid the children down in their Moses baskets and headed out.

“What are you thinking, Jase?”

“I haven’t discussed this with the rest of the board. But it has been bothering me ever since Willow announced her pregnancy. I’m unsure how to say this…” Jase said.

“Just say it. It’s often the best way,” Lanie ordered.

Jase took in a deep breath and grabbed Lanie’s hand. Fear ran up Lanie’s spine as she

gazed at her brother. Whatever this was, was serious.

“Have you ever wondered why Alainen’s reaction to you is so extreme?”

“Yes. His hate is off the charts,” Lanie replied.

“Did you come up with an explanation?”

“No. But his envy continues to grow. It’s never-ending.”

“Remember that. Bear with me. I’m going to be brutally honest. Vladimir’s and my pasts include several affairs. But we never got anyone with child. Then Vladimir met Emmaline, and within a couple of months, she was pregnant. The same happened with me,” Jase said carefully.

“I don’t see where you’re going,” Lanie admitted, but she felt strange inside.

“What if we couldn’t impregnate women because they weren’t our soul mates? And we can only conceive with them?” Jase asked.

Lanie froze. Slowly, the implications sunk in, and she gazed at Jase in horror. Her legs began to shake, and she groped around for something to cling to.

“That means Alainen was mine?” Lanie exclaimed and collapsed to the ground. “No! That can’t be.”

“It’s a plausible explanation, and I didn’t want to tell you,” Jase said, crouching by her and gathering Lanie up tight.

“Alainen was my soul mate?” Lanie groaned as tears began trickling down her face.

“Possibly. It would explain Callidora and why none of us have ever had a child other than you,” Jase commented gently.

“Oh God,” Lanie gasped.

“Sweetheart, breathe,” Jase urged.

“The flip side of love is hate,” Lanie cried.

“That’s true.”

“Alainen turned against me even though he was my soul mate? Shouldn’t we have a bond?” Lanie demanded, wiping her tears away.

“It may have been present, but if he broke it, then it wouldn’t exist anymore. We can’t know for sure, and I’ve not spoken to anyone about this, but I am convinced I’m correct. If the next person to find their mate gets them pregnant or becomes pregnant, then we’ve got a working hypothesis.”

“I need to go,” Lanie gasped and hurried away from Jase.

“Lanie!” Jase called, concerned.

“No, later, please,” Lanie cried.

Lanie fled for her mirror, which Mary opened without a word. Lanie appreciated that as she fell into her bedroom and scrambled for her bed. Curling up on it and dragging the sheets over her, Lanie burst into heartbroken sobs.

If Alainen had been her soul mate, then there was no hope remaining. Pandora’s Sin of Hope had cursed her, too. Lanie cried herself hoarse, and it took hours before she

fell to sleep. All she kept thinking was Alainen had been her soul mate, and he'd turned on her.

McIntyre

Jeez, Lanie looked awful. Oh, she had done her makeup and was dressed immaculately, but McIntyre could tell the subtle signs that she'd had a rough night. Her eyes were slightly red and sore.

He saw Ranson send her a sharp look, but neither of them said anything.

"I'll be heading into the office today but working from home for the rest of the week. Next week, I plan to hit my retreat. Please reschedule accordingly," Lanie announced as she got in the car.

McIntyre slid in beside her, and her signs of distress were even more visible up close.

"Yes, Miss Cross," Ranson confirmed from the front seat. "Is there anything else?"

"No. I'll contact the guard who goes with me," Lanie replied and gazed out of the window.

What guard that accompanies her? Mac thought. Did Lanie go somewhere that they didn't? McIntyre decided to grab Ranson as soon as Lanie was ensconced in her office.

"What retreat and guard?" he asked.

"Miss Cross has a hideaway nobody knows about. She heads there several times a year when she needs to reboot herself. A bodyguard accompanies her that is not one of ours. Miss Cross has done this since we came on board. She uses the same man

each time. He's not known to us, but he does bring her back safe and sound," Ranson replied.

"And we know nothing of him?" McIntyre asked.

"No. And we don't ask. Miss Cross gets angry. All we need to understand is the person she employs is as dedicated as us," Ranson responded.

McIntyre nodded but guessed that wasn't the end of the matter. Lanie had secrets from him, and that wasn't to be allowed. Not if he was to do his job.

Lanie/Lamia

She began opening her mail and paused when she came across a hand-printed envelope. With a frown, she opened it and pulled a piece of paper out. On it, in cut words from a newspaper, was a threat.

"Your time is coming. Death will be a blessing for you by the time I've finished'," Lanie said out loud. "Well, that's short and sweet. Laura, please ask Ranson to come to my office," Lanie asked, pressing her intercom.

"Yes, Miss Cross."

A few minutes later, Ranson appeared. "Miss Cross?"

"A threat. One to add to the pile," Lanie announced, pointing at it on her desk. Lanie rolled her eyes as Ranson approached.

He went to pick it up, and his gaze narrowed.

"What is it?" Lanie questioned.

“Did you see the watermark?” Ranson asked.

“No?”

“It’s an A,” Ranson said, and Lanie stiffened.

“An A?”

“Yes. The style of the letter A on the dead snake is identical. What is going on, Miss Cross? Because Mr Clare mentioned a name, Alainen, it is an old Greek name. Ancient, not a well-known name today. Yet I can’t find a mention of an Alainen anywhere. You know something, and by holding back, you’re risking your safety.”

“Ranson, I’m not lying, I have no clue what is happening,” Lanie lied through her teeth.

“Then we’ve an issue. Alainen, whoever this is, has a serious problem with you. He sent the snake, Mr Clare, and now a death threat. We also discovered Mr Clare was released from the hospital by a Mr Alain. Alain to Alainen isn’t a far jump.”

“No. And you can’t find trace of an Alainen anywhere?”

“No, Miss Cross. It’s not a name I’ve come across. We’ve still got searches running, but whoever this is, they’re using either a false name or he’s buried his identity deep,” Ranson replied.

“What do we do?” Lanie asked.

“Tighten security and notify the police are the first steps. We must resolve this and quickly. But we have insufficient information,” Ranson said.

“Basically, we need this Alainen to up his game so we can catch him. Surely, it would make more sense than to leave me a little more exposed,” Lanie suggested.

As expected, Ranson bristled. “That’s not a good idea and won’t be happening. Your retreat can go ahead, Miss Cross, but you may have to take extra guards.”

“I’ll contact the company,” Lanie mused. Naturally, her brothers would come for appearances’ sake. Lanie only intended to go to the castle for a week, anyway.

“That is not enough, I’m afraid. I am going to insist at least one of your personal team accompany you this time. That or cancel the trip. As the head of your security, I cannot authorise someone else to take charge of securing your safety,” Ranson stated.

“The other company has kept me perfectly safe,” Lanie argued.

“And you’ve not had a stalker after you before,” Ranson disagreed.

Lanie longed to tell him she’d been stalked for thousands of years but held her tongue. Ranson would never understand.

“I’ll consider my options, but remember, you work for me,” she said.

“And I would be remiss if I didn’t point out I can’t do my job without the full information. You can not expect me to be your bodyguard but not allow me to act as such.”

“Some things in my life I wish to keep private and personal. I informed you of this ten years ago when you became my security team. If this is a problem, then you and I need to sit down and discuss it,” Lanie replied. Her gut tensed. She didn’t want to lose Ranson, but she had no idea how to explain the castle.

“Miss Cross, I’ll schedule an appointment, and I will bring a list of acceptable replacements,” Ranson said.

Somehow, she’d expected Ranson to back down. Instead, he’d stood his ground. There was sadness in his eyes, but they were unwavering.

“Please do,” Lanie whispered, and Ranson nodded. He deftly picked up the letter with tweezers and placed it inside a plastic bag.

“We may get fingerprints, but it’s highly unlikely,” he said and left.

Lanie felt like everything was falling out of control. First Alainen had raised his head and was making threats. He could not possibly be sure Lanie was Lamia, but he was locked on her. Mr Clare had called her out; Alainen might be her soul mate, and now she was potentially losing her security team. The last seven days had been a total nightmare.

Lanie tried to return to work but couldn’t. She sighed, picked up her phone, and dialled Rhett.

“Lanie?”

“Are we secure?”

“Naturally. What’s wrong?” he asked with concern.

Lanie explained her problem and sat back as Rhett digested it.

“There’s a simple solution, Lanie,” Rhett said, and Lanie’s shoulders relaxed.

“What?”

“Do you pay attention? A year ago, I bought a security company out. Give Ranson my company’s name, and I’ll come and meet him. Or better yet, send me when you are meeting him, and I will be there,” Rhett offered.

“Thank you!” Lanie trilled over the moon with Rhett’s response.

“You’re welcome. Now, what’s going on?” Rhett demanded.

“What do you mean?”

“Dale said Alainen has raised his ugly head,” Rhett answered.

“Yes. Did Jase tell you his thoughts?” Lanie asked.

“Huh?”

“Well, Jase thinks Alainen is my soul mate,” Lanie began, and then explained Jase’s theory.

“Shit, he could be right,” Rhett replied a few minutes later.

“It’s a frightening thought,” Lanie agreed.

“If you need any of us—”

“Then I’ll call. I promise. As soon as I’ve got a time and date for Ranson’s meeting, I’ll let you know,” Lanie said and offered her goodbyes.

Alainen was her problem. Not her siblings. She knew he was responsible for killing four of their kind. Roc, Bugbear, Fenrir, and Chupacabra. Alainen was a murderer, plain and simple. It had been harder for him to hunt them down since they could now

shift into humans, but it clearly hadn't stopped him looking.

As Lanie contemplated her next step, the fire alarm startled her.

Grabbing her purse and rising to her feet, she was halfway across the room when her door opened. "Confirmed fire in a third-floor office. Everyone is evacuating. We're taking the stairs," McIntyre stated as he rushed in. He grabbed her arm and began pulling her along with him. Lanie shrugged him off.

"Don't touch me," she warned. "Is anyone injured?"

"No idea, but we've got to get you out of here. The elevators have been opened and locked," McIntyre said. He looked down at her high heels.

Lanie kicked them off, picked them up, and followed McIntyre to the secluded stairs in her office.

"Are my staff evacuating?" Lanie asked as they burst through the doors and began heading down.

"Yes. The fire is contained for now, and security is there, trying to stop it from spreading. Everyone is leaving the building, Miss Cross," McIntyre stated.

"The disabled people?"

"The disabled elevator is the only working, and security has manned it to get them out. They have a list and are going floor to floor where they work," McIntyre replied.

They'd descended four flights, yet many levels remained. A door opened above them, and Ranson called out.

“Keep heading down. I’ll catch you up,” he shouted at them.

“On it,” McIntyre replied as he kept hold of Lanie’s hand

and moved quickly down the stairs.

“Is anyone hurt?” Lanie demanded.

“No. Not yet. Please keep moving, Miss Cross,” Ranson answered.

“I smell smoke,” Lanie announced a few minutes later. They’d gone down half her building now, and she was becoming winded.

“The fire is near,” Ranson confirmed, sounding closer.

“We need to keep going even if we’re walking,” McIntyre said.

“Okay,” Lanie agreed. Below, she could see smoke and wondered if the staircase was blocked. As they headed downwards, the fumes thickened.

McIntyre stopped and ripped the edge of his tee off. “Cover your mouth with this,” he ordered, handing her the scrap. Lanie nodded and coughed.

Ranson landed beside them.

“The fire is two floors below, but the smoke is getting thicker. We need to move at speed. Miss Cross, if you can’t keep up, we’ll carry you,” he announced and gave her a little push .

Lanie was out of breath, and her feet hurt from being barefoot. It would take more than a fire to kill her, but it could cause her great pain.

With Ranson at her back and McIntyre in front pulling her, they continued. The fumes were a lot thicker now, and Lanie looked frightened. She pulled back and McIntyre turned and slung her over his shoulder and carried on jogging down the stairs. He was coughing and choking, but somehow, he managed to keep going.

McIntyre had slowed down when suddenly the air lightened, and Lanie heaved a sigh of relief. They were through the worst. But her legs felt like jelly, and she wasn't certain her head was clear.

Hell, Lanie wasn't even sure that she could stand until McIntyre placed her on her feet.

"Three more floors, Miss Cross. You can do it," he encouraged. There was soot on his face, and without meaning to, she reached up and wiped it off.

McIntyre's gaze held hers, and something passed between them. "You can do this," he murmured, and Lanie nodded.

They began moving again and finally burst into the underground car park.

"Keep Miss Cross here," Ranson ordered as he raced away from them. McIntyre pushed her behind him, and Lanie sagged against the wall. She planned to have those stairs removed and a blasted slide put in.

Ranson pulled up in the car, and McIntyre moved out with her and shoved her in the back. As soon as he was in, Ranson was moving. Lanie sat and sought to control her breathing. She hated that Ranson and McIntyre barely seemed out of breath.

"What aren't you telling me?" Lanie demanded, noting how tense they were.

"We're hearing from the chief of security at the tower block. It was arson, Miss

Cross. They have footage of Simon Clare gaining access to the eighth floor and setting the fire,” Ranson explained.

Lanie said a few words that weren’t particularly ladylike. McIntyre raised an eyebrow, but Ranson remained impassive.

“Rhett Stone, who runs the other security company, is coming to meet you,” Lanie said, feeling like she needed to offer Ranson something.

“He owns it?” Ranson asked.

“Yes. He’s intensely private but has agreed to a meeting. Rhett’s also a close friend,” Lanie added.

“And the reason you could not tell me this?” Ranson demanded.

“Because Rhett deals with high-value clients. And discretion is paramount. He provides security for Jase Monroe, for example,” Lanie explained.

“Seems strange you couldn’t tell me he worked for you. I’d have thought it would be the other way around,” Ranson replied.

Lanie nearly growled at him. Typical Ranson. Too clever for his own good. She thought quickly. “Because he doesn’t want every Tom, Dick, and Harry pestering him for security. Rhett’s particular who he works for. He could have A-list actors hassling him, for example. Rhett wouldn’t work for them. Or those idiot social media influencers,” Lanie stated.

“Can understand that. I’ve turned several of those down,” Ranson replied.

Her car passed through the gates to her home, and they closed behind her.

“We need security in there with you until we understand what is happening. I know you value your privacy but please, today, obey orders,” Ranson asked.

“Not a problem,” Lanie agreed, throwing him a bone.

“Fisher came here directly and has swept the mansion. The house is secure, and security is patrolling the grounds. Miss Cross, I’m going to return to the office and see what they have discovered. McIntyre will stay here with you,” Ranson said, and Lanie nodded.

She got out of the car with McIntyre on her heels and headed inside. Lanie winced at her bare feet, and McIntyre nodded.

“Can I see?” he asked, and Lanie lifted her feet. McIntyre cringed.

“They’ve been cut, and there’s some bruising. I’ll doctor them, and then you can let me cook you a meal,” he stated.

“Oh yeah?” Lanie challenged.

“Don’t argue, woman!” McIntyre replied, and Lanie was gobsmacked. Only her siblings dared talk to her like that. McIntyre grinned as if he knew what she was thinking before he swept her off her feet and carried her into the kitchen.

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Lanie/lamia

“D on’t I get a say in things?” she demanded.

“Nope.”

“You’re bossy!” Lanie exclaimed, and McIntyre laughed.

“You like it. Now be a good girl and shush,” he said, placing her on a stool and lifting her feet onto another one.

“I’ll have you fired!”

“No, you won’t.”

“Why not?” Lanie retorted.

“Because you like me, Lanie.”

“That’s Miss Cross or Ma’am to you!” Lanie spluttered, and McIntyre laughed again. And damn him, he grew even more handsome when he did.

“In public, sure. In private, it’s Lanie. Unless you’re in my bed, then I’ll happily call you Ma’am,” McIntyre said.

Lanie’s mouth dropped open as McIntyre pulled out the first aid box and opened it.

“You can’t talk to me like that!” she finally spat out. Lanie hated to admit it, but she liked it when he did. Somehow, she knew McIntyre would do all sorts of dirty things to her body if she allowed him.

But she’d not slept with anyone since Alainen, and she had a code of certainly not dating an employee.

“Just did, and you enjoyed it,” McIntyre said, putting the box on the breakfast bar.

Lanie opened her mouth to argue once again, and McIntyre swooped. He cupped her face and held her eyes.

Panicked, she began to pull away, but McIntyre kept her close, and his lips met hers. Lanie stiffened, unsure what to do, as McIntyre slowly kissed her. Her lips popped open as he nibbled her bottom lip and sucked it into his mouth. His tongue swept into her mouth, and Lanie tentatively touched hers to his.

McIntyre drew back, his gaze speculative. “You’ve not been kissed much?”

“No.”

“Let me show you,” he said with possessiveness flaring in his eyes. McIntyre plundered her mouth again, and Lanie clung to his broad shoulders. His hand cupped the back of her head as he tilted it and angled her just right.

Lanie was lost in the sensations he brought up in her and felt lightheaded as he began to end the kiss. He pulled his tongue in and nibbled her lip once more before finishing it properly.

“Wow.”

“Indeed,” McIntyre replied smugly. “Tell me you didn’t enjoy that!”

“I did,” Lanie replied honestly. “But you work for me...”

“Enough. One day at a time. But know this, when we’re alone, I’m going to kiss you and keep kissing you,” McIntyre said, and it sounded like a promise.

“Okay,” she whispered shyly, and McIntyre pecked her lips in a long kiss before breaking off to check her cuts.

Lanie knew she had a blush to her cheeks, and she was slightly panting. McIntyre began cleaning her feet. Lanie didn’t understand how she had cut them as they’d been running indoors, but she’d managed to.

“Oh, my God!” Lanie cried as she caught her reflection in a window.

“What?” McIntyre demanded.

“How could you kiss me when I look like that!?”

“You’re beautiful.”

“My hair looks like a bird’s nest. I have soot on my face and forehead, and I stink of smoke,” Lanie exclaimed as she sniffed herself.

“And you are still gorgeous. Once I’ve cleaned these, I’ll carry you to your room for you to shower. Try not to stand on them too much and please wait there until I collect you. I need to wash, too,” McIntyre said.

Lanie nodded in agreement. Despite not having been in the fire, the smoke in the stairwell had seeped into their clothing and pores. McIntyre washed her wounds to

get any dirt out before she headed upstairs.

Lanie showered, wincing as she stood on her feet. She dried and dressed quickly and began making her way down towards the kitchen. As she closed in on the stairs, there were soft footprints behind her, and strong arms picked her up.

“Stop yanking me about and carrying me!” Lanie hissed, unsure how to act.

“You want me doing it. Shut up,” McIntyre retorted.

Lanie wrapped her arms around his neck as he carried her down the steps and into the kitchen. She tried not to sniff him but couldn’t help it. He smelt wonderful.

“Is that Africa?” she asked.

“Yeah. I know, it’s a cliché, but I like the smell,” McIntyre said.

“Me too. It is one of my favourites.”

“Then I will be sure to wear it around you all the time,” McIntyre offered, and Lanie blushed. He stuck his head in the fridge and came out with a couple of steaks and some salad items.

“Ranson is going to be tied up for hours. I’ll be eating here unless you have a problem?” McIntyre said.

“No, but get a steak out for Ranson and Dale. Dale must be out at the moment, but he’ll be back soon,” Lanie replied and was surprised at McIntyre’s scowl.

“Are you jealous?” she teased.

“I don’t do games, Lanie. I am interested in you, but I won’t allow anyone to play me off against another man. You either want him or me. You can’t have both,” McIntyre said as he grabbed two more steaks.

“Is that what you think I do?” Lanie asked, aghast.

“Honestly? No. But I’m confused. Dale’s living here, but you’ve barely been kissed. Does he not like kissing?” McIntyre inquired.

“Ew! That’s my brother!” Lanie exclaimed and clapped a hand over her mouth. She hadn’t meant to say that.

“What?” McIntyre demanded, spinning to face her.

“You can’t tell anyone!” Lanie babbled.

“I won’t, but your brother?”

“It’s a secret. Our mum had an affair, and Dale’s my older brother,” Lanie said without thinking.

“So, your father is the man she had an affair with?” McIntyre asked.

“Yes. But she told her husband I was his,” Lanie continued.

“Husband? You didn’t call him dad?”

“Let’s change the subject, please. And Ranson can’t know,” Lanie insisted.

“That’s my cousin and my boss,” McIntyre stated.

“And my private life. What importance are my parents to him?”

“They could be behind this current threat,” McIntyre said.

“Doubtful, they’re dead,” Lanie replied, scrabbling.

‘Dale!’ she shrieked in her mind at him.

‘Yes?’

‘If my security team asks, we are siblings whose mother had an affair with another man, and I was the result.’

‘What the hell?’

‘Don’t ask!’

‘Okay.’ Dale sounded amused.

“Lanie?” McIntyre said, interrupting her thoughts.

“Sorry?” she replied, looking at him.

“I asked if you like salad and jacket potatoes with your steak?”

“Yeah, that’s perfect. You cook?” Lanie asked, somewhat surprised.

“Yup. If I wanted to eat nice things, then I learned to cook them,” McIntyre answered.

“Do you prefer Joe or McIntyre?” Lanie inquired.

“I prefer Mac, actually. Those close to me call me Mac.”

“Not Joe?”

“Nope. Joe was my dad, and he was an asshole. Mac suits me a lot better,” McIntyre explained. Or Mac, as Lanie decided to call him.

“What do I call you?” she asked, checking.

“Mac, or lover in time,” he said confidently, and Lanie choked.

“Too pushy,” she warned. “And I’m your boss.”

“Yup, but I ain’t screaming sexual harassment,” Mac replied with a wink.

“You are incorrigible!” “At risk of repeating myself, you like it.” Mac finished what he was doing with the steaks and turned to her. “You are in control, rigidly so. You do not let yourself relax, and you’re always on guard. Ranson has told me you’re incredibly private, kind, and will help anyone out who works for you. But you don’t tolerate fools and are uptight. Lanie, you don’t party, drink, smoke, do drugs, or let your hair down. Ranson says you are one of the most controlled people he’s ever met.”

“Oh,” Lanie said, feeling a little hurt.

“I get all that, but I also sense a great passion and a big heartbreak. Somebody, somewhere in your past, betrayed you so badly it soured you from love and living. You hide from life because you’re unsure how to live it. I think you want to dance on tables and drink yourself silly but can’t because someone might once again hurt you. I’m not physic, Lanie. And I don’t claim to see the future.

“But I like you and want to get to know you. The first step is having dinner with you here right now. The second will be me bringing you lunch and sharing it with you. One small step at a time until you realise I am rock steady and you can take a risk on me,” Mac said, and Lanie’s eyes went wide.

“Whatever you’re looking for, it’s impossible!” Lanie exclaimed.

“You are so confident about that,” Mac challenged.

“I’ve good reason to be,” Lanie retorted bitterly. If Alainen had been her soulmate, there’d not be another one for her. So, getting involved with a human whose short life span would be over in the blink of an eye wasn’t happening.

“And yet there’s always the possibility you might be wrong,” Mac retorted and turned back to his meal prep.

“I’m afraid that’s unlikely,” Lanie murmured as bitterness grew inside. She wanted what she couldn’t have. Someone to love her and worship her and vice versa. Lanie wanted what Vladimir and Jase had found. And Jase had been a dick about it and fought it, but love won out in the end. Lanie wasn’t even fighting love. She desperately desired it, but if Alainen had been her soulmate, if Jase was right, then her chance at happiness was gone.

Her mobile rang, and she glanced down and lit up in delight.

“Hello, sweetness!” Lanie exclaimed as she took her phone and headed to the patio. She felt Mac glance at her, but he didn’t say a word.

“Hey, Mum, how’s things?” Callidora asked.

“Everything is fine,” Lanie replied.

“The news is wrong, then?” Callidora demanded. “There wasn’t a fire at your headquarters?”

“Reporters are scavengers. Lowest of the low,” Lanie complained, and Callidora laughed.

“What’s happening?”

“A certain person has raised his ugly head again,” Lanie stated. There was no point lying to her. If there was danger, then Lanie needed Callidora to be on guard, too. She glanced over her shoulder and checked the patio door was shut. Lanie did not want Mac hearing this conversation.

Callidora let loose a string of cuss words, and Lanie grinned. Callidora didn’t believe in holding back and, therefore, didn’t. Alainen had missed out on a beautiful daughter, and that was his loss. His hate and bitterness had stolen Callidora from him.

“Do you need to hide?” Callidora asked.

“No, sweet girl. He can’t know for certain who I am, and I think he is looking for a reaction,” Lanie soothed.

“In other words, you’re reacting like a scared human,” Callidora said shrewdly.

“Exactly. Let him chase ghosts. He is beyond paranoid now.” “He’s so full of hate, I dread to think what he would do if he got hold of you,” Callidora worried.

“Stop. He won’t. My security is being tightened and I’m taking a few days off to spend at the holiday villa I visit,” Lanie said.

“That’s good, Mum. But if Alainen becomes too much, burn your identity and flee,”

Callidora argued.

“I will do, sweetness, don’t worry. This isn’t my first time around the block,” Lanie reassured her daughter.

“Love you. I’ll come to the villa too, and we’ll spend some time together,” Callidora said.

“That sounds amazing!” Lanie exclaimed.

They said goodbye, and Lanie entered the kitchen in a much better mood.

“A friend?” Mac asked.

“Yes. We’re planning to meet up,” Lanie answered with a smile.

Mac blinked as if her smile stunned him before returning his own blinding grin. “Food won’t be long. As I’m cooking, you can serve drinks,” Mac teased and checked on the food.

Lanie shook her head. Who’d have thought she’d have this hunk of a man cooking for her and bossing her about? Certainly not her.

McIntyre

As he served up their dinner, Dale and Ranson both arrived within minutes of each other. Mac watched carefully at Lanie’s reaction to Dale and realised they did have a sibling relationship. Dale teased Lanie unmercifully, and Lanie snapped at every taunt until she turned it back on him.

Lanie was much more relaxed than he’d ever seen her.

She tensed up a little when Ranson arrived and questioned him mercilessly, but she also listened carefully and took on board what he said.

Mac was concerned that Lanie might be keeping more secrets from them. But then again, he was keeping a huge secret from her. How she'd react to that he was not sure, and it did worry him. Mac wasn't pleased to hear that arson had been confirmed, as was the sighting of Simon Clare.

Simon Clare was proving to be more than a stalker. Ranson confirmed he'd dealt with the police, and they were aware of what was happening.

Mac knew the danger was amping up. He had to keep Lanie alive. Something told him it was imperative she survive. And weirdly, he thought his own happiness also depended on that.

Lanie/Lamia

She'd gone to the office this morning to assess the damage with the insurance investigator and thanked her lucky stars it was an admin floor that had been affected. The labs and design studios were locked down and therefore unattainable to anyone who didn't have a code. Once done with him, Lanie asked Ranson to take her to the hospital, where some staff had been hospitalised through smoke inhalation.

Nobody had been hurt, but even so, some had inhaled a great deal of smoke, and twelve of her employees had been kept in.

After visiting them, Lanie went for a walk in a park. She needed to clear her head, and Ranson and Mac followed her.

She rounded the duck pond and came face to face with Simon Clare.

“Bitch!” he seethed as Mac stepped up and shoved her behind him. Lanie glimpsed a gun and clutched Mac’s tee.

“Back away, pal,” Mac threatened.

“You don’t know what type of monster she is. She must be stopped. She carries a disease in her that infects the world,” Simon yelled.

“Mac,” Lanie murmured. Ranson had moved to one side, looking for an opening to take Simon down. Lanie’s heart was in her throat.

Simon’s eyes were clear and full of fear and hate. He wasn’t mad; Alainen had got to him and was using him.

Lanie guessed exactly what Alainen was doing. Should she be killed by Simon and turned out to be an innocent, Alainen could deny having anything to do with her death.

“Dude, you’re either high or insane. Which is it?” Mac retorted.

“Don’t agitate him,” Lanie muttered.

“Lanie, stay back,” Mac whispered.

“He’s got a gun,” she exclaimed.

“And Ranson and I are trained to deal with them.”

A scream came from somewhere close by as a woman became aware of Simon waving his weapon. Other people started screaming or yelling and ran off. Others watched and whipped their phones out to record this. Lanie shook her head. That

showed everything wrong with today's generation. No decency left.

“She is a monster!” Simon screamed, flecks of spittle at the corner of his mouth.

“Miss Cross is human. Jesus, man, what are you on to believe in monsters? Aren't you a little old?” Mac taunted to retain Simon's attention on him.

“She's a Lamia. A half-snake woman. And she carries the Sin of Anger. It escaped from Pandora's Jar,” Simon yelled.

If there'd been any doubt left, it fled then. Most humans recalled the Jar as being a box. Simon was definitely working for the Hunters.

“Put the gun down. You do not want to harm an innocent lady,” Mac soothed.

“No, I don't, but she's not innocent. If I have to shoot you to save the world, I will!” Simon ranted.

Ranson moved so fast Lanie thought he was a blur. He leapt forward and reached for the gun. He and Simon wrestled for it, and there was a gunshot. Lanie stiffened as Simon looked horrified.

Ranson's legs slowly gave way, and he collapsed to the ground.

“No!” Mac called, but he kept her behind him. “That's my cousin, and you just signed your death warrant,” Mac hissed.

Police sirens wailed in the distance as those who'd been filming now ran away.

Simon seemed panicked. “He deserved it for protecting a monster.”

“Where’s your evidence she’s one? You caught her shapeshifting? Seen her Sin? You crazy fuck!” Mac spat, and Simon looked a little unsure.

“I was told she is!”

“By the voices in your head?” Mac fumed as he began edging towards Ranson. He kept Lanie behind him. Lanie knew she’d survive a bullet, but Mac wouldn’t let her past him.

“No. A man I respect told me!”

“Where’s his proof? You saw pictures? Images?” Mac yelled.

“Yes! I have.”

“Of Miss Cross shapeshifting. You’ve seen pictures of that?” Mac spat. “Stay with me, Lanie.”

“Well, no. Not of her shifting, but I’ve seen the Lamia,” Simon replied.

“So, you are telling me. I could show you a picture of a werewolf, and you would believe me, and then I could point you at someone, and you’d off them? No evidence of that person being a werewolf or shit. You’re a sheep and a prick,” Mac continued.

“Alainen wouldn’t lie!”

“No? What’s the betting he wants her, and Miss Cross rejected him?”

“She seduced him,” Simon cried.

“When?”

“Thousands of years ago!”

“Do you have any idea how batshit crazy you sound? Now you’re saying Miss Cross is not only a shapeshifting monster but thousands of years old?”

Police began running through the park towards them.

Lanie stumbled and appeared from behind Mac’s back. She wasn’t ready to let Mac die. Simon’s gun spat, and he crowed as he shot her in the shoulder. Mac yelled and grabbed her as her legs shook and she fell.

Red blood poured down her shirt, and Simon looked confused.

“She is meant to have green blood!”

“That looks red to me!” Mac snapped.

“See to Ranson. It’s a shoulder wound,” Lanie said as she allowed tears to streak down her face.

“But she can’t bleed red. Only humans bleed red!” Simon carried on.

“Which means she’s human, and your friend got it wrong!” Mac yelled. “You’ve been persecuting an innocent woman!”

Simon looked at the gun in his hands and threw it on the ground before running away. Several police officers were close and gave chase as a couple stopped by them.

“Call an ambulance!” Mac cried, and an officer nodded and got on his radio.

Mac swapped glances with Lanie as he kept pressure up on Ranson’s wound. They

were losing him.

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Lanie/Lamia

Ranson was critical. His heartbeat was fading, and his chances were slim. The sirens wailed as she curled into a corner and let the paramedics work on him. Mac was following in a car behind as there'd not been enough room for his huge bulk. She'd demanded he call Fisher as Mac was clearly torn who to go with. Hopefully Fisher would be at the hospital as they arrived, and Mac could see to his cousin.

They slammed to a stop outside the ER and Ranson was rushed past her.

Another paramedic came with a wheelchair and helped her inside. Right now, with all the attention, Lanie was prepared to worship at Lilith, Maeve, and Pandora's feet for their spell, making them fully human. Her Lamia's green blood would be hard to explain.

Mac appeared, and Lanie waved. "Did you get Fisher?" she asked.

"He should be here within minutes."

"Then go to Ranson. He needs you more," Lanie urged.

"My job is to protect you," Mac argued.

"And how can you when your mind is distracted? Go to him, that's an order!" Lanie stated firmly.

Mac clearly argued with himself a little but nodded and headed out of her bay to find

Ranson. A nurse bustled in to take her stats.

Lanie had maybe five minutes alone and then Fisher arrived.

“Fisher, find me someone in command, please,” Lanie said.

She lay back against the pillows as Fisher nodded.

‘I’ve been shot, and it will no doubt be on the news. I’m okay, just a mere shoulder wound. Nobody come. Alainen is close!’ Lanie informed her siblings. Her siblings bombarded her for a few moments until a wail silenced them all.

‘Mum!’ Callidora cried.

‘I am fine. Honest. Head to the castle, sweet girl. I shall arrive there shortly,’ Lanie reassured her.

‘We need to hunt him down. Enough is enough! ’ Callidora hissed in everyone’s mind.

‘I thought I had the Sin of Bloodlust,’ Vladimir teased Callidora.

‘Alainen needs putting down like the rabid animal he is,’ Callidora exclaimed.

‘I don’t disagree, but now is not the time. I shall come to the castle soon. But this is about to become a media circus,’ Lanie said.

Noone disagreed. Lanie’s human persona was huge, and no doubt her shooting would already be hitting the news.

‘Just, everyone, keep calm. And nobody rush here. That would give Alainen another

target,' Lanie continued, and reluctant agreements came back at her.

Her curtain moved in her bay, and a man in a suit entered with Fisher behind him.

'I need to go, the doctors are here,' Lanie's mind spoke one last time and shut them all out.

"I am Sidney Cate, the manager here. Can I help you?" he asked.

"My name is Lanie Cross, and your hospital might find the media camped outside—"

"They have already arrived. We have security at the entrances, but we are slightly overwhelmed," Mr Cate replied.

"Fisher, call for support," Lanie offered.

"That would be most helpful," Mr Cate agreed.

"My guard. Mr Ranson, I want him to have the best. Money is no problem. Ensure he receives the very best care possible," Lanie said.

"And for yourself?" Mr Cate asked.

"I'll wait. Ensure Ranson is the priority. Should I find otherwise..." Lanie let the threat hang in the air.

Mr Cate held her gaze. "Mr Ranson shall receive the best we provide," he assured her.

Lanie nodded, leaned back, and closed her eyes. Ranson's life was in his hands and Gods... If Ranson had the will to survive, that would go a long way. For Mac's sake,

Lanie hoped he had the fight in him.

???

Five hours later, Lanie had been plastered all over the media and tv stations along with the camera footage from those who'd filmed it. Simon had been called insane, amongst other definitions of crazy. The hospital had released a statement Laura had devised alongside the HR department.

Lanie had received surgery to remove the bullet, and although she could have pushed it out herself, she had to remain humanlike.

Mac had returned twice to check on her and Fisher before heading back to a private waiting area. All Lanie knew was Ranson was barely alive and critical and was being operated on.

Lanie was relaxing in her room with two security guards from her own team on the door when Mac entered. He looked tired and pale, and resignation and grief hung on him.

Lanie felt her stomach clench. "Ranson?" she whispered.

Mac ran a hand over his face. "He is alive but critical. He has a ten per cent chance of making it. The hospital can't believe he's held on this long, but they've said he could go at any time."

"I'm so terribly sorry." Lanie gasped. And she was. She'd liked Ranson, and he didn't deserve this.

"It's not your fault," Mac replied.

Lanie disagreed; it was. But she could fix it. “I’d like to see him,” Lanie asked.

“Aren’t you recovering from surgery?” Mac demanded.

“Mac, please don’t argue,” Lanie replied.

“I’ll get a nurse and a wheelchair.”

Mac returned with a doctor and a nurse, who both agreed that as long as Lanie stayed in the wheelchair, she could visit Ranson. There were guards on his door, too, Lanie noted as they approached.

“Reporters tried to get in to see him,” Mac said.

“Leeches,” Lanie hissed, and a ghost of a smile crossed Mac’s lips. They entered Ranson’s room.

“Please pull the blinds. This is personal, and I don’t want people watching,” Lanie asked as Mac wheeled her to the bed.

“Yeah. I’ll wait outside and give you a few minutes to say your goodbyes,” Mac muttered and left the room. In the dim light, Lanie studied Ranson.

“Somehow, bud, you got under my skin,” Lanie said and leaned forward and grasped his hand.

Their Sins killed. They took life and feasted on the Sin residing in a human body. Anger needed to feed on Anger to keep strong.

But what nobody discussed was... on rare occasions, their Sin would heal. If the host could bend it to their will.

Lanie already felt Anger bucking against her idea, and she silently started wrestling it for control. She struggled and bit her lip, making it bleed, but she was determined.

Five minutes later, her hands glowed a soft blue, and she placed them on Ranson. Anger gave one last attempt at breaking from her will and then began to heal Ranson.

Lanie fed the energy slowly into him. She didn't want him to suddenly jump up and dance around. She sought the worst injuries that would lead to his death and healed them to the point they'd finish healing on their own. By her reckoning, Ranson now had a fifty-fifty chance of surviving.

Lanie left little healing bombs inside his body and timed them to go off over the next forty-eight hours. Should Ranson start to fade again, those bursts would stop his decline. And if he stayed stable, then they would just leak over time and speed his healing up.

Lanie looked up tiredly, and she blew the hair from her face.

Mac stood inside the door, watching her. His eyes were focused on her hands, which still glowed blue. Lanie put them out and held his gaze.

"I'll take you to your room, Miss Cross. Thank you for caring for Ranson," he said.

That was it? Lanie wondered, aghast that he'd seen her. No questions, no explanation demands. Mac would wheel her back to bed?

Shockingly, Mac did that. He called a nurse to help get Lanie comfortable and kissed her forehead before walking out.

Lanie stared at the door and pondered what the hell just happened. Had Mac missed her glowing blue hands?

McIntyre

That had been a shock. He'd no idea Lanie's kind could heal. But he was intensely grateful to her. Somehow, Mac knew his cousin would survive now. When he arrived back, he was unsurprised to see doctors and a nurse inside with Ranson.

"Is everything okay?" Mac asked.

"Your cousin is doing better than we expected, Mr McIntyre. His vitals are not only stable, but they have increased. I won't lie. I didn't expect Mr Ranson to live this long. He's not out of danger yet, but I'd give him a fifty-fifty chance now," a doctor said.

"That is great news. I have been told it's okay if I stay with him?"

"Yes, that's not an issue. I believe a nurse is bringing you a cot to put up. They're not very comfortable, but it is all we can do," the doctor continued.

"A cot is fine. I've slept on far worse. I'm ex-navy," Mac explained.

"Thank you for your service," the doctor said and shook his hand.

"Thank you for my cousin," Mac replied and settled down in an armchair next to Ranson's bed.

His mind wandered to Lanie as everyone left. For all his knowledge of Lanie's kind, healing had not been something he had come across. None of the verbal legends handed down had mentioned healing. Saving someone, yes, not healing. Why Lanie had exposed herself, he did not know. It had seemed an out-of-character thing for her.

Lanie didn't show a different side to herself at all. He'd been surprised when she bled

red as he knew she bled green usually. It's why he had been so panicked to keep her behind him. And then he realised. The entire world had seen her shot and hurt. It would put any Hunters off chasing her.

And even better, with Simon screaming she should be bleeding green, not only had it made him look crazy, but it would cast doubts on her being what she was. Her blood had definitely been red.

Mac wondered what she would do next. Would Lanie confront him about what he'd witnessed, or would she act ignorant? Lanie was a conundrum—and one he wanted to figure out. And in time, he would. Mac was damn sure of that.

Lanie/Lamia

She was released the following day, and Fisher accompanied her home. On the way out, she'd stopped and seen Ranson and was relieved to see her healing had worked. Mac had held her gaze and was silent during her visit.

Lanie was more confused than ever. Didn't he want to know what she had done? Weren't there questions burning deep in him? However, she needed to get to the castle.

After healing Ranson, Anger was hungry and clawed at her for a meal.

As soon as she was in her bedroom at home, she entered the mirror portal and discovered Mary on the other side.

"Let us heal you," Mary demanded.

"Nice to see you too, sister. And no. For once, this must be done the human way," Lanie replied.

“I do not like it,” Mary growled.

“You don’t have to. But I need to wound and scar for now. When it is time to disappear, then we can heal the scar. People will expect to see it if I wear an off-the-shoulder dress. This is one time being human works against us.” Lanie shifted into Lamia. “That’s better. Like this, I do not feel the pain,” Lamia stated and smiled.

“You know, it is no wonder Medusa hates you,” Mary said, and Lamia grinned.

“Not my fault she’s all ugly and hissy,” Lamia responded. “Anger needs a big meal today. I forced it to heal, and he’s ravenous.” “Lamia! You healed?”

“My guard, Ranson. I’ve no idea why I did, but I had to. It was inexplicable,” Lamia replied.

Her tail swished.

“Go and reassure everyone you are fine. I’ll find Anger its food,” Mary replied.

Lamia noted how her gaze had already turned to the mirror portals as she began searching. Touching her sister on her shoulder to say thanks, Lamia slithered through the castle.

“Bitch!” Lorelai shouted from somewhere, and Lamia hissed her laughter. While similar, they were very different. Medusa had snakes in her hair, and Lamia had none. Both retained human-like faces, but Medusa’s thinner and gaunter, while Lamia remained beautiful.

Their tails were different, too. Lamia’s was covered in iridescent scales, while Medusa’s was browner, more like a snakes.

“Jealous cow!” Lamia called back, and Lorelai laughed.

“I can turn a man to stone, something you can’t, sister,” Lorelai said as she rounded a corner.

“Hateful woman,” Lamia replied as they embraced.

“How is Lanie’s shoulder wound?” Lorelai asked.

“Painful, hence my shift.”

“The media is in a frenzy over your shooting. You’re not exactly keeping a low profile,” Lorelai stated.

“Believe me, that wasn’t my choice. I’m mortified by it. However, it might make some Hunters reconsider Lanie as Lamia,” Lamia replied.

“Do you think the Hunters are clocking onto our shifted forms?” Lorelai questioned.

“Yes. Social media is everywhere now. There are facial recognition programmes and other things that can track our identity down,” Lamia mused.

“What do we do?” Lorelai asked.

“That’s for the board to resolve. Either we must change looks every fifty/sixty years, or we withdraw from society altogether,” Lamia stated.

“The original spell laid Lilith, Maeve, and Pandora out for weeks. Asking them to cast it every half a century is unfair,” Lorelai considered.

“Maybe they enact it once a century and we spend half a century living in society and

the other half isolated. I don't have an answer, Lorelai, but is it getting more dangerous for us," Lamia replied.

"Or we become the hunters and wipe them out. Instead of tackling them on our own, we take them out in force," Luke suggested, passing by.

"Luke has a point," Killian added as he approached. "I'll be hunting with you later," he said to Lamia.

She looked surprised. Phantom rarely hunted with anyone, and now Killian was saying he'd go with her. Lamia's eyes narrowed.

"I can hunt fine on my own," she snapped.

"I don't doubt it. But tonight, Phantom will be going with you. Do not bother arguing," Killian retorted, dropping a kiss on her head and chasing after Luke.

"I hate our brothers sometimes," Lamia complained, and Lorelai laughed.

"Especially those on the board," she agreed.

That night, Anger sated itself into a stupefied coma. Lamia knew she'd not have to hunt for at least a week. Callidora was coming soon, and Lamia had no intention of giving up her time with her daughter.

After shifting back to Lanie, she walked through the mirror to her home and froze on the spot.

McIntyre

Lanie's bedroom was off-limits. It was the one rule they'd never broken. Yet he sat

on her bed, knowing she'd entered here but now wasn't here. Somehow, Lanie was leaving the house without their knowledge. He had been sitting here six hours, ever since he'd arrived at one a.m. He reckoned Lanie would return pretty soon because of the cover she kept.

Mac was surprised when the mirror rippled and Lanie stepped through it. Her eyes met his, and her mouth dropped.

"I'm going to have to kill you now," Lanie said with sorrow in her voice.

"Because I know you are a Legendary Shifter, that your Lamia, or because you use mirrors to travel?" Mac asked, and Lanie's jaw dropped open in shock.

"Oh, let's add, I know you carry the Sin of Anger, and I also have the previously unknown knowledge that you can heal."

"Who are you?" Lanie hissed as she shifted.

Mac stared at her, his eyes wide. "You're stunning," he murmured. "Far more beautiful than I ever believed."

"McIntyre, answer me," Lamia demanded.

"I'm a member of a family you once knew as Galanis. Mine and Ranson's mothers were daughters of the Galanis family," McIntyre explained.

"From Ancient Greece?" Lamia asked, puzzled.

"Yes. My family saved you and your daughter several times throughout the millennia. For four thousand years, my family has watched over you and Callidora, providing aid when needed. We've stepped up and helped other Legendary Shifters," Mac said

calmly.

“You’re a Saviour family!” Lamia exclaimed.

“Is that what you call us?”

“Yes. The Galanis family supported me several times.”

“Ranson and I are all that’s left of them. Hunters took out the rest of our line years ago. Including our mothers. Our fathers hid us and brought us up to fight. They, too, were remnants of a Saviour family.”

“What do you mean?” Lamia asked, puzzled.

“Hunters have turned their attention to the families that helped your kind in the past. They’ve been wiping them out. A hundred years ago, my family had several hundred members. Now there is only Ranson, and I left. My father’s family was decimated by Hunters, as was Ranson’s father’s family. If the Hunters can’t find you, they’re coming after us,” Mac explained.

“Shit. We’d no idea.”

“You weren’t meant to have,” Mac said. “Our priority is protecting you. Not vice versa.”

“But you’re dying. How many more have the Hunters killed?” Lamia demanded.

“Thousands of us have fallen. There is a mere handful left,” Mac admitted.

“The board needs to be told. We need to tell them what is happening,” Lamia insisted.

“The Saviour families, as you call them, have banded together. We have hidden from the real world and are being protected while we continue our missions,” Mac said.

“How?” Lamia demanded.

“Magic,” Mac answered. He held her gaze.

“Humans do not have magic,” Lamia hissed.

“No, we don’t.”

“Who do you have?” Lamia retorted suspiciously.

“Tisiphone.”

“One of the Erinyes?”

“There’s only one Tisiphone,” Mac replied.

“Is she captive?” Lamia asked.

“The hell she is!” Max exclaimed.

“I want to see her.”

“I’ll have to contact my people. Tisi saved us, they won’t allow someone to waltz in, even if it’s another shifter,” Mac said.

“Why not? She is shifter to me!” Lamia shrieked, and Mac shook his head sadly.

“You honestly don’t know.”

“What?”

“A shifter betrayed you all and is working with the Hunters.”

Lamia reared back at Mac’s bombshell.

“Liar!” she hissed, snatched him to her, and fled through the portal.

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Lamia/Lanie

She was already calling everyone together, even as she passed through the portal. Mary met her on the other side as she yanked Mac with her.

Mac gaped at Mary Worth before shoving Lamia behind him as Big Foot barrelled towards him.

“He has information!” Lamia cried, and Big Foot skidded to a halt. He didn’t stop in time and crashed into Mac and took them both down. Lamia shrieked as her tail was crushed and whipped it out of the way as she yanked Mac from under Big Foot.

“I can take him,” Mac called, gaining his balance and crouching. “Come on, you Wookie wannabe!”

“Stop it!” Lamia cried and grabbed Mac.

“I swore to protect you, woman, and that’s what I’m going to do,” Mac hissed as Big Foot got to his feet.

Yeti grabbed Mac from behind, and Mac swung around and pulled off a move a wrestler would love. Yeti went down as Mary and Lamia watched and sighed.

“You did come through screaming to get everybody together and about danger!” Mary chided Lamia.

“I didn’t expect this,” Lamia snapped and whipped her tail up to send Jase flying. He

shifted into his Uber Merform as he did.

“Holy shit!” Mac exclaimed and grabbed a tentacle.

‘Stop,’ Mary blasted throughout the castle. ‘Proceed to the Great Hall. Lamia has brought someone, and everyone needs to stop attacking him.’

‘Him? Lamia has a man?’ Sela demanded.

‘Is it her soulmate?’ Liadun asked .

‘Is he cute?’ Lorelai inquired.

‘Busybodies! Everybody to the hall,’ Mary ordered. “Poseidon, shift back now and behave yourself. Yeti, you, and Big Foot do the same. And Lamia, collect your thoughts. You’re broadcasting rather loudly, and it’s distracting!” Mary scolded.

“Sorry,” Lamia apologised.

“Calm yourself because you’ll cause chaos at this rate. Human, I apologise, but for our sake, I must blind you to your surroundings,” Mary said and touched Mac’s brow.

Lamia sensed his instant panic as his eyes searched sightlessly in front of him.

“What did you do?” Mac demanded.

“Mac, it’s a security measure until we get to the Great Hall. Then Mary will lift the spell. Here, hold on to me, I won’t allow you to fall,” Lamia said, feeling guilty.

She should have let Mac explain before yanking him here. Lamia had overreacted and knew it.

“I trust you,” Mac replied.

Lamia felt a warmth in her stomach at those simple words. Mac, trusting her, even after seeing her as Lamia, meant a lot.

He placed his hand on her shoulder and allowed her to lead him down the maze of corridors to the Great Hall.

There, sitting on the dais, was the board, all changed into their monster form. Baba Yaga, Banshee, Dullahan, Lilith, Phantom, Poseidon, and Vampire all watched as Mary Worth took her place.

As Lamia looked around, she saw everyone else was in monster self.

Perversely, Lamia shifted into Lanie. She didn't want Mac to be isolated. Emmaline, Willow, and the children were nowhere to be seen. That was expected.

“I'll unblind you now,” Mary spoke from the dais.

Mac nodded but kept hold of Lanie's shoulder.

As his eyes adjusted, Mac smiled at Lanie. “I guessed you had shifted. It was subtle, but I noticed.”

“I didn't want you to feel isolated,” Lanie replied.

“If you two have finished. Someone better explain why we have a human in the castle,” Poseidon snapped, glaring at Lanie.

“Because Mac is a Saviour,” Lanie answered.

“Are we to bring all Saviour’s here?” Dullahan asked.

“No. I brought Mac because he knew what I was,” Lanie said.

Phantom and Vampire rose to their feet. “Kill him now!” Vampire demanded. Several of the shifters moved, but Lanie shifted, and Lamia hissed in their faces.

“You’ll not touch him!”

“Lamia, step down immediately!” Vampire ordered.

Lamia hissed at him, and he looked a little shocked.

“Everyone calm down. I sense nothing negative from Mac, is it?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Mac answered, turning to face Lilith.

“Why did you come with Lamia, Mac?” Lilith asked.

“Well, in truth, I wasn’t given a lot of choice. Lamia pulled me through the mirror before I knew what was happening,” Mac replied.

“Why would she do that?” Baba Yaga demanded.

“Because I offered her distressing news.” “For God’s sake, can we cut to the meat of this matter? What did you tell Lamia that was so upsetting?” Poseidon snapped.

“Your temper grows worse,” Mary Worth groaned at him.

“I told Lamia I knew where Tisiphone is,” Mac said, and silence fell.

“Is this a cruel joke?” Wendigo demanded, rising to his full height.

“Not at all. Tisiphone is alive,” Mac insisted. “Perhaps I may start from the beginning?”

“By all means. It’s been a long time since I had a bedtime story,” Poseidon sniped.

Mac ignored him. “Around five hundred years ago, Hunters found it harder to find you. There weren’t as many of you, and the world had become a much bigger place. Instead, they turned their attention to the families who had aided you. They began wiping out what you call Saviour families, those who’d helped you in the past and would do so again in the future. We had several population bursts and so the Saviour families had grown immense.”

“Yes,” Mary said when Mac paused.

“The Hunters focused on finding and killing us all, even down to a newborn babe. My two-day-old sister was a victim of theirs. They didn’t care how old you were, if you had Saviour blood, you had to die. Several families in our community realised what was happening and banded together. In doing so, they saved the life of Tisiphone. She was captive and dying, and the Saviours raided a den of Hunters.

“They freed Tisiphone but were too late to save Alecto and Megaera. The older of the Erinyes are both dead. The Saviours spirited Tisiphone away and looked after her. In return, they informed Tisiphone of what was happening. And she created the Refuge for us. She sought out Saviour families that still existed and brought them to Refuge, and we grew up there.

“In time, further Legends joined us. I am not free to share their names, only Tisiphone. Nor can I inform you where Refuge is. I will die before that knowledge leaves my lips. My family was one of the last out in the world. We knew little of our

heritage and, therefore, didn't see the need to hide. My mother and her sister's cousins were the last of their line. They'd been smuggled out and adopted. But Hunters still found and slaughtered them.

"Mine and Ranson's fathers were also from a Saviour family, which had been decimated. But unlike our mothers, our dads knew what they were. They accepted Refuge and took Ranson and I there to grow in safety. We learned to fight from them. Since then, we have tried to aid those we've discovered. And we've saved two further Legends. We thought Lamia was alone. We didn't know about this. Tisiphone knew you'd all disappeared but assumed you were dead," Mac exclaimed.

Silence reigned.

"Who are the other three Legends?" Vampire demanded.

"I'll not betray them," Mac stated.

Vampire flew across the room and bent Mac backwards, his teeth at his neck. "I shall tear your throat out, boy. Who are they?"

"I shall not betray them!" Mac repeated.

"Let him go!" Lamia shrieked and her tail wrapped around Vampire and yanked him away. Lamia wound herself on Mac.

"Lamia?" Poseidon exclaimed gently, noting her eyes flashing.

"Mac is under my protection," she hissed. "Ask him why he won't betray them!"

"Mac, please tell us," Banshee asked.

“Because a shifter deceived the Erinyes. And he double-crossed others,” Mac replied.

“That’s a lie!” Poseidon roared, leaping over the table and heading for Mac. The tip of Lamia’s tail knocked him back.

“Ask Mac who!”

“Who,” Dullahan gritted out.

“Tezcatlipoca,” Mac answered.

Gasps echoed around the room, and Baba Yaga banged for silence.

“Do you have proof?” she demanded.

“Tisi told us, and I’ve no reason to disbelieve her,” Mac retorted. “Tisi doesn’t lie!”

“You call her Tisi?” Banshee questioned, amused.

“It is what she told us to call her,” Mac said defensively.

“We need to speak to her,” Vampire stated.

“I will pass your request on,” Mac responded.

“I beg your pardon?” Phantom stated.

“Dude, it’s my job to protect you. If that means keeping your location secret from the rest of you, that’s what I’ll do,” Mac replied.

“You dare deny us?” Wendigo demanded.

“Yes,” Mac answered.

“Lock him up. Let Tisi come for her own,” Wendigo sneered.

“If it is Tisiphone,” Rumpelstiltskin mumbled

“I can assure you it is,” Mac said.

“And your word means nothing,” Phantom added. “We don’t know anything about you. And, in fact, you won’t be returning home anytime soon.”

“You think to make me a prisoner?” Mac asked, sounding amused.

“Let’s say you’re a guest in confined quarters,” Vampire stated.

“Yeah, that doesn’t work for me. Lamia, shift back, honey,” Mac said, patting her tail.

Lamia looked down at where he touched and blinked. “You touched me?”

“Babe, you ain’t the scariest thing I’ve seen,” Mac replied as Lanie shifted. “Hold on tight.”

“What?” Lanie asked, puzzled.

Mac wrapped his arms tightly around her.

“Let her go!” Poseidon bellowed, lunging over the table.

Mac grinned at him. A portal opened, and a serpentine head appeared and swept them up.

“Lanie!” Poseidon roared.

“Hydra!” Banshee shrieked.

“Let them go!” Vampire ordered.

Hydra ducked back into the portal, and it snapped shut.

“We won’t blind you because you’d never identify where we are,” Mac said to Lanie as she looked around, bemused. “Hello! Thanks for the rescue.”

“You take too many chances, Mac,” Hydra hissed.

“I can’t believe it’s you. We thought you were gone!” Lanie exclaimed.

Hydra’s seven heads peered at Lanie. “Am not dead.”

“No. Clearly not. Where are we?” Lanie asked.

“Refuge,” Hydra replied.

In the sky, a shadow flew towards them, gradually turning into a female shape with wings. The figure landed, and Lanie’s eyes widened. Standing in front of her with bat wings outstretched with claws on the tips and snakes hissing in her hair stood Tisiphone, the last living fury. Blood-red eyes stared at Lanie.

“It is you!” Lanie exclaimed. She rushed forward to hug Tisiphone and then Hydra.

“Welcome, sister,” Tisiphone said.

“I am sorry about Alecto and Megaera,” Lanie replied.

“We three were born together. It was a harsh loss. I survive, though, thanks to the Saviours. Now they survive and thrive thanks to me,” Tisiphone responded.

“You need to come home,” Lanie urged, and Tisiphone shook her head.

“We are,” she said and motioned Lanie forward.

Lanie stepped towards the edge of the platform they stood upon. “Wow!” she exclaimed. “What is this?”

“Refuge,” Hydra explained.

Below, Lanie swept an amazing sight. An old Greek citadel, fully functioning and preserved, bustled with everyday life. Lanie saw hundreds, if not thousands, of people hurrying about. The designs of the buildings reminded Lanie of Ancient Greece, a time Hydra and the Erinyes had loved.

“It’s like looking at Ancient Greece,” Lanie spoke her thoughts.

“Indeed. Our home is designed on an era we enjoyed,” Hydra agreed.

Homes were dotted onto plateaus and hills. They rose above a central plateau that seemed to have the governing buildings on. Lanie saw large practice areas where men and women trained in various forms of fighting. There was a huge temple, an arena, shops, two markets, and many other buildings. Lanie noticed farms far and wide and turned to Tisiphone.

“This is like a whole country. How does this exist?” she asked, stunned.

“It exists because we need it to,” Tisiphone answered.

“Are we on Earth?” Lanie questioned, feeling dumbstruck.

“Sure as hell hope so,” Mac replied with a laugh.

“This is where you grew up?” Lanie inquired.

“Yup. My father was abusive after my mother died. But he trained me well until he went too far one day. Justice was served, and I was brought up with Ranson. Once, Dad had been a good guy, but Mum’s death soured him. I was lucky, though, to survive. My sister didn’t,” Mac said, and sadness touched his eyes.

“I am sorry to hear that,” she murmured.

“Come. Ranson is in the healing hall, and he will be fine thanks to you, Lamia,” Tisiphone stated.

“When in their human-shifted forms, they go by their human names. Lamia’s is Lanie,” Mac announced, and Tisi inclined her head.

“We developed different practices,” she admitted.

“Indeed, we did. But we can learn one another’s etiquettes,” Lanie replied.

“Come, Lanie, it has been a busy day. We shall go to the food hall, and then Mac can visit Ranson. Although only an hour or so has passed for you,” Hydra ordered.

“Yes, hard to believe I’ve only been awake three hours, and so much has happened. Damn,” Lanie said, amused.

Mac smiled as Lanie’s head appeared to be on a swivel as they made their way off the platform.

“Stand here and wait a second and watch,” Mac asked, and Lanie did as she was told.

To her surprise, the steps moved like escalators, and Lanie grinned. That was great, as she hadn’t fancied the steep climb down. Once they reached the bottom, Mac held a hand out again.

“Watch the road,” he exclaimed, and Lanie’s eyes went wide. The roads moved like a treadmill, and you stepped on, and it moved for you. “We don’t use vehicles here. The roads move for us, and you step on and off as you wish. But if you want to walk or run, that is what the pavements are for.”

“This is amazing,” Lanie exclaimed. As the road moved them towards the city centre, Lanie noted each street had a name, and every so often, there was a street map denoting where they were.

“It’s something,” Mac said proudly.

Lanie noted how much he was loving seeing her reaction to his home. Even though he’d grown up here, Mac obviously thought it was stunningly beautiful.

“No wonder the castle did not impress you,” Lanie stated with a laugh.

“I probably would have been if I’d seen it,” Mac teased, and Lanie blushed.

“Yeah, that too,” Lanie agreed. “What’s the plan, Hydra?” Lanie asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you bring me here?” Lanie questioned.

“We didn’t. We were after Mac. Mac is a leader here, Lanie, a high-ranking leader.

His importance can't be underestimated," Tisiphone said.

"So, you never served in the SBS?" Lanie sought, slightly confused.

"Yes. I did. But time moves differently here. I'm actually older than I look," Mac admitted.

"How old are you?" Lanie asked with her eyes narrowed.

"Two hundred and thirty-three."

"Get the hell out!" Lanie exclaimed.

"Sorry, but it's true. If we returned you right now, only a mere few seconds would have passed," Tisiphone explained.

"Wow."

"We needed time to grow this," Hydra added.

"What is this?" Lanie inquired again as they stepped off the road, and Hydra shifted into her human form.

"This is Refuge. And also, where we're building an army," a male voice said from behind them.

Lanie turned around and gaped.

"Does nobody stay dead?" Lanie asked, embracing the leg of the huge creature in front of her.

“No,” Griffin answered.

“Not in my case,” Chimera added.

“Damn!” Lanie exclaimed. “All four of you were thought dead.”

“Refuge blocks our thoughts and presence from the outside world. Try to mind speak to your people. You won’t be able to,” Chimera replied.

Lanie reached out and found a perturbing lack of noise. There was silence in her head.

“How did you know Mac was at the castle?” Lanie demanded.

“Because he is tracked. As soon as Mac teleported from one place to another in a blink of an eye, we locked on to him. Mac is valuable to us and much loved. Him being a prisoner was not on the cards,” Griffin responded. He lifted a heavy paw and cuffed Mac on the back of his head.

Mac grinned.

“The Board wasn’t sure of Mac’s intentions. Alainen has raised his ugly self again,” Lanie stated.

“You have our sympathy, sister, but your Board does not control us,” Chimera replied. “And we weren’t prepared to allow Mac to become a prisoner.”

“Welcome, sister,” another voice said, and Lanie’s eyes grew wide as she took in the three-headed dog heading towards her.

“Cerberus!” she exclaimed and hugged the creature.

“Indeed, it is I,” he responded.

“Are there any others?” Lanie asked.

“No, this is all of us. We do have a loose lock on Gargoyle, and we believe he is with another shifter. But we are having a hard time pinning them down,” Hydra added.

“Nobody has heard from him for centuries,” Lanie replied.

“No, we think he’s locked his form down. But we’re getting random thoughts every so often,” Hydra admitted.

“How? If mind speak does not work here,” Lanie asked.

“It doesn’t work for you, sister, it works for us. We can hear the thoughts of the others, but they can’t hear us. Ask Tisiphone, it’s her magic,” Chimera replied.

Tisiphone smiled. “You’ve always had an inquisitive mind, Lanie. Come, you can’t have eaten yet, and it is lunch time here.”

“Do you trade with the outside world?” Lanie asked as they entered the building. A smile broke across Lanie’s face as she recognised the buffet-style setup.

“Yes. However, we grow most fruit and vegetables ourselves, and we also farm our own meat. We are quite self-sufficient. We have perfect weather for what we need to grow,” Hydra replied.

Lanie waited as the other three shifted to human forms and headed for the long buffet-style table. Plates of food were put out for people to help themselves and then you’d sit on cushions in gatherings and eat.

“This is amazing,” Lanie said as she picked up cheese and meats with some fruits.

“We worked hard to create this. It began five hundred years ago in your time, but for us here, it’s been much longer,” Griffin replied.

Lanie felt a little awkward. They were in human shape, but she didn’t know their human names.

“How many people live here?” Lanie asked.

“Four hundred thousand. And out of those, three hundred thousand are warrior-ready,” Chimera answered.

Lanie choked on a bit of apple.

“What?” she exclaimed.

“Lanie, this is an army. We are preparing to take the Hunters on and wipe them out,” Mac said with a serious look on his face.

Lanie stared at him mutely.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:46 am

Lanie/Lamia

Did I hear him right? They were preparing to take on the Hunters? Mac offered a small smile.

“I’ve shocked you. However, that’s why we’re all gathered here. So, the children can be raised without fear of being slaughtered. Women will have families and be safe, and men aren’t frightened of coming home to a massacred family. Five hundred years have passed since Refuge was created. Our numbers have grown from the ragged four hundred that started it to the city you see today,” Mac said.

“We understand what the Hunters don’t. If you’re killed, the Sins run rampant without a host. They would destroy the world in a matter of a few paltry years. Somehow, the Hunters are blinded to this possibility. Why or how is not our issue. What is, is stopping them. Some might call you monsters, but we do not. Those who live here understand all too well what will happen,” Mac continued.

“We have been tracking them for years. Our intelligence knows where their bases, homes, and families are. While we don’t condone the massacre of a family, we’re aware that, with Hunters, we need to wipe them out, even down to the children. So many times, we’ve raided a nest over our lifespans and left kids alive, and they always, always come back at us with more hatred,” Chimera stated.

“Not this time. They will be put down, just like they did to the Saviours,” Mac explained.

“You’re talking about killing women and children,” Lanie replied, shaking her head.

“Let me show you the Hall of Memory,” Mac said, and Lanie got to her feet as he stood.

Her siblings remained where they were.

“I can imagine how hard this is for you to understand. However, when you see the Hall, you shall realise that we didn’t reach this decision lightly,” Hydra added.

“Keep an open mind, sister,” Tisiphone added.

Lanie nodded, and Mac grabbed her hand and led her through several streets. At the heart of the city stood what Lanie had assumed was a temple. In Ancient Greece, it would have rivalled the temple of Zeus. Mac stopped at the golden doors of the white marble building and removed his boots.

“Please remove your shoes. We have slippers in there we can use,” he said.

Lanie slipped her shoes off and entered behind him.

The first room was an ante chamber, and Mac handed her some slippers. He washed his hands and face in a bowl of water and bade Lanie to do the same. Then he pushed through a second set of gold and wooden doors and led Lanie inside.

Lanie gasped as her eyes took in the multitude of statues standing on plinths around them. There were too many to view at once, and Mac took her hand.

He guided her to the first. “Ogre, he was the first to fall.”

Lanie looked at the date with tears in her eyes. Ogre had been caught four months after their transformations and had been tortured for a year while Hunters figured out how to kill him. He’d been the first of them captured and murdered. The statue’s

likeness was unbelievable; she could blink and believe he was there in front of her. It was so realistic. On his plinth was a plaque.

It read his God's Protector name, Tor'und Melina, and the age he was when changed. The plaque continued with the Sin he'd held, the monster he had become, and the date of his death. It also stated who had killed him.

"Note this killer is in gold writing," Mac said, and Lanie nodded. "Press that button."

Lanie did and gasped as the statue shifted, and Tor'und Melina stared out at her. His handsome visage was etched into her mind like all her siblings, but seeing this... it choked her.

"Every child from the moment we can walk is brought here to learn their names and stories," Mac explained. He pressed another button and Tor'und faded, and Ogre reappeared. He began speaking, telling of his capture and murder.

"Children shouldn't be exposed to this," Lanie stated.

"Saviour kids should. They should understand the sacrifices made by God's Beloved. That is what your squadron was known as. They should learn about Pandora's betrayal and what led to this. Come, Lanie, let's check the others," Mac said.

Lanie wasn't sure she was ready for this as her gaze landed on the next plinth, Behemoth. He was followed by Troll, Frost Giant, Moth Man, and Typhoon; they were all here. Then Lanie noted the difference in the name of the killer. Some were in silver, others in gold.

"What does it mean?" Lanie asked.

"Those in silver, touch their name," Mac encouraged.

Lanie did so with distaste and gasped. They were Hunter children who'd been left alive after the adults had been murdered.

"There's so many," she murmured.

"Over half of those killed were done so by offspring that Legends left alive. The temple has several levels. I shall take you to a Saviour one," Mac said.

Lanie followed him down a couple of flights of stairs and into a corridor. They entered the first door and discovered a marble and gold room. "There are many like this, each room dedicated to a family. Come, Lanie. I'll explain," Mac ordered, walking to the far wall. "This was the person who began the first Saviour family. And these are his children and descendants. If their name is in blue, they died a natural death. If their name is in gold, they helped a Legend. Red means Hunters murdered them."

Lanie looked around and hissed. Too many names were lit up in red. Loads were in gold with a red edging. Lanie touched one. An image appeared of a person and a Legend. A voice told how the person had aided a Legend and then had been killed for doing so. Lanie shook her head in disbelief. Lots of deaths.

The family tree covered the far wall and then branched out onto the adjacent walls, where it abruptly stopped. All names were in red.

"There's nobody left?" Lanie whispered. Hundreds of names were written on the walls, and over half were in red or gold and red.

"No. And there are too many rooms like this," Mac said, bitterness in his voice. He waved Lanie out and showed her the next five rooms. Each family ended as abruptly. At the seventh room, he stopped and hesitated but opened the door.

Lanie studied the names, and her eyes widened as she gaped at him. “This is yours and Ranson’s family tree!”

“Yes. We are the only two left out of hundreds. This is our maternal line. You can see highlighted where they joined with our fathers. This is repeated in my paternal line room.”

“I am so sorry,” Lanie gasped, staring at the red names. There was far more red here than any other colour.

“My family was a militant line. We seem to risk our neck more,” Mac said. “That’s why Tisi values Ranson and I so much. Our family did not just help Legends, we helped Saviours. We are leaders. The Hunters would love to get their dirty, murdering hands on us.”

“None of my family knows about any of this,” Lanie replied.

“I didn’t expect you to. There are still Saviour families out there we’re hunting down. Emmaline and Willow were two of them. But the majority are now here. Those outside Refuge are single families, orphans, or families who’ve lost their past. We seek them out and, inform them of their history, and give them a choice. If they choose to join us, they are welcome. If they refuse, we secure them a new life so Hunters don’t kill them,” Mac explained further.

“I have no words. This is so much to take in,” Lanie said.

“I shall leave you if you wish. You can wander the Hall of Memories and recall your fallen brothers and sisters. Know this, though: there is a statue for every single one of you, even those who are alive. At Refuge, we know how many remain living,” Mac stated.

“You do?” Lanie gasped, spinning on him.

“Yes. You have Lilith, we have Tisiphone. The Erinyes were as powerful as Lilith. And when Alecto and Megaera died, their magic went into Tisiphone. I would wager she is the most powerful being on this planet,” Mac elaborated.

“Please stay, I don’t wish to be alone,” Lanie asked.

“As you wish,” Mac said and allowed Lanie to lead him where she wanted. She headed back upstairs and took her time studying each and every statue on this level. There was seventy-five. The next two levels also held Legends, and then they descended into the Saviour rooms.

McIntyre.

To his surprise, Lanie lingered as long in the Saviour rooms as she did in the three Legend Halls. Lanie genuinely wanted to pay her respects to each family and would take a candle from a box outside each room and light it in remembrance.

Lanie knelt in every room and repeated The Lord’s Prayer for the families, too. Hours ticked past, but Lanie refused to stop until she’d visited them all.

“We owe them so much. We should be bowing at Emmaline and Willow’s feet,” she muttered.

“Vampire and Poseidon’s soul mates. Yeah, we’re aware of them. That took us all by surprise,” Mac said. His eyes twinkled. “As did the children!”

“You know?”

“Yes. Lanie, we watched over you, of course, we knew. Each of you has been

protected by a family for many years now. Once we organised and began to grow, we started sending people out to keep an eye on those left. At one point, we were about to bring you all in, but then Lilith, Baba Yaga, and Pandora pulled off that miraculous spell,” Mac explained. “Tisiphone decided to leave you alone.”

“If she’d reached out, we probably would have accepted her help!” Lanie said.

“A tip. Don’t piss her off. Tisi’s temper is legendary and for all the wrong reasons,” Mac replied with a smirk.

“Why do I think you’ve been on the end of that?” Lanie laughed as they headed towards the top floor.

“Several times. Tisi took Ranson and I under her wing, metaphorically speaking. And we were healthy, mischievous boys. Ranson’s father passed in an accident shortly after my dad died, so Tisi took it upon herself to bring us up. We didn’t make it easy on her,” Mac admitted, and Lanie chuckled.

“I can imagine. Although let me tell you. Tisiphone caused her own share of mischief.”

Mac laughed in response to her reply. He liked the fact Lanie was opening up and dropping her shield. He’d guessed she was in awe of his home, and that was understandable. Nobody expected to be dropped in the centre of an Ancient Greek city. Then again, he had not been ready to find himself in Dracula’s castle either.

They’d not known how the Legends from Dracula’s castle had been moving about. Now they understood it was Bloody Mary, or Mary Worth’s, whichever name she preferred, mirror network.

“I need to tell the others about this,” Lanie said.

“Yeah, you do. But know this. Refuge won’t be risked. The army is ready, and we’ll continue to train daily. If your people don’t approve of our plans, we couldn’t care less. We’re still going to go after the Hunters,” Mac stated.

“I can see that,” Lanie responded.

“Good. We need to get you back. Lanie, remember, time moves differently here.”

Mac flinched as Lanie screeched. “What!”

“Lanie, let’s get you fed, I’ll explain and then send you home,” Mac replied with a laugh.

“They’ll be frantic,” Lanie cried.

“Tisi would have sent them a message after we ate. Come. I’ll take you for dinner,” Mac said.

“Will I see you again?” Lanie demanded.

“I’m your personal guard,” Mac said, closing on her and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re stuck with me.” His whisper made her shiver, and she gazed up at him wide-eyed.

“Somehow, I’m perversely happy about that,” Lanie muttered, and Mac smiled. Lanie’s returning smile warmed him deep inside.

Lanie/Lamia

Mac led Lanie to the Food Hall, where they sat and ate.

Lanie's mind was whirling. None of the Legends back at the castle had any idea about this. It was astounding and beyond belief. Somehow, Lanie didn't think they were in the same dimension as the castle. The Erinyes had been rumoured to be able to plane jump, and Lanie guessed this was a pocket dimension within their world. But she couldn't be sure.

There was a babble of conversation around them, and many were sending curious looks their way.

Lanie felt self-conscious, and even more so when people came and greeted Mac with deference. She had treated Mac and Ranson like common security guards, yet it was clear they held high rank here. Lanie was amused, and also a little peeved, when several beautiful women spoke to Mac. It was obvious they were interested in the handsome man by her side, but Mac treated them all with a detached friendliness.

"Would we be able to see Ranson before we leave?" Lanie asked.

Mac's lips twitched.

"Speak of the devil and he's sure to appear," Mac replied and nodded in a direction.

Making their way slowly to them was Ranson. He sat in a wheelchair and was being pushed by a nurse. He was pale and tired-looking but was alive.

Mac grinned as Ranson kept getting swarmed by women, all offering to help him out.

"God, Almighty!" Ranson exclaimed as he finally made it to them. "Next time, it can be your ass that gets shot."

"Not fond of the attention, cousin?" Mac teased.

Ranson scowled, and Lanie laughed. “Miss Cross.”

“I think you should call me Lanie, don’t you?” Lanie asked.

Ranson made a moue with his lips. “Probably. How are you, Ma’am?”

“Shellshocked is a good word to use,” Lanie said.

“I can imagine. And how do you feel about us continuing as bodyguards?” Ranson questioned.

“Selfish. You are obviously leaders in this community, and yet you’re playing security guard to me. I feel you both could be using your time better,” Lanie answered honestly.

Ranson held her gaze. “We know who Alainen is. The question is, do you?”

“What do you mean?” Lanie sought puzzled.

“The Hunters are led by a secret group of leaders. Some think they are families who’ve been in on it from the beginning. But... that is not true. The Hunters have a... let’s say, boss. We don’t know his identity. But under him are those who run the Hunters. The Five, as they are called. Alainen is one of the Five. He is second to one person only. If Alainen says jump off a cliff, they obey instantly,” Ranson explained gently.

“No, that can’t be. Alainen became bitter when he discovered what happened to me,” Lanie denied.

“That is a false narrative you’ve believed for thousands of years. Alainen met that day to kill you. Whatever he said to you was lies.”

“God’s Protectors can’t lie!” Lanie exclaimed.

“Says who?” Griffin challenged, joining them.

“Were you aware that Alainen had been questioned by his commander about his relationship with you, and he’d denied it? Several months later, he was interviewed again and blamed you for seducing him. A case was being built against you by Alainen and his squad commander,” Griffin said gently.

Lanie reared back in her chair. “That can’t be true! Alainen shouldn’t have been able to lie! What do you mean, build a case?”

“They were going to argue you were defective and had seduced him. They planned to argue for termination and for you to be stripped of your God’s Protector powers. Alainen was going to ask for you to be forcefully turned human and banished,” Tisiphone answered.

“No!” Lanie exclaimed, shoving her chair backwards and rising to her feet. “He said he loved me!”

“Alainen was twisted. He lied to everyone. Whoever was behind our great betrayal had got to Alainen a long time beforehand,” Hydra informed her.

“What are you talking about?”

“Pandora did not do what she did by choice. She was forced into it. Whoever it was has something over Pandora that stops her spilling the truth. Pandora is also protecting someone. There is more to the story than Pandora being curious. Who the hell gave her such a powerful spell that we did not even sense her? Pandora didn’t have powers at the time!” Chimera explained.

“This is all too much. Please, I want to go home and think. I need...” Lanie broke off and looked guiltily at them.

“You need those who’ve been with you solidly for the last two centuries. We understand, Lanie. Go with our blessing. When you return to your human life, Mac and Ranson will be waiting. Should you wish to converse with us, call Mac. He can mind speak us,” Tisiphone replied.

“Thank you.”

“Lanie, come. I’ll open a portal for you,” Mac offered, holding out his hand.

Lanie nodded and took it. Then she turned back and hugged those at the table.

“You’re all in my heart,” she murmured and then left before she broke down.

Mac was quiet as he steered her through the city to the platform. Once they arrived, he drew her close and cupped her face.

“This has been a day of shocks for you. Know this. Ranson and I are loyal to you. We will always protect you. When you need me, call. I shall hear,” Mac said and kissed her gently.

Then he opened a portal and ushered Lanie through. The last thing she saw was his crooked smile and him sending a wink.

???

Lanie lay in her bed at the castle. Beside her were Sela and Liadun, who were offering silent comfort. She had been gone nearly two weeks during her short visit to Refuge. She’d explained in great detail everything she’d seen and heard, and the

castle's inhabitants were in shock. All except Andie, who listened and then took herself off.

"Andie didn't confirm or deny what Chimera said," Lanie muttered.

"No. I've thought for many centuries now that there was more to Pandora's story than we knew. She was human, although beloved by God. Yet she is one of the most powerful beings alive today. How could a human have become so formidable?" Liadun questioned.

"That is a good question. One that's probably crossed everyone's mind, and we dismissed it!" Sela agreed.

"Alainen, do you think they're right about him?" Lanie asked.

"Oh honey," Sela replied, squeezing her. "Mir'ald had been planning to speak to you. We'd heard the rumours."

"Damn. I thought I was so in love with him, and now I discover he'd planned on betraying me all that time," Lanie said and closed her eyes on the threatening tears.

"Alainen was born wrong, and we know he made the first moves. He was also much older than you and knew better. But Alainen's group was not the Beloved of God, and there was jealousy," Liadun soothed.

Lanie frowned. "How could there have been jealousy? The Sin's hadn't been released."

Sela and Liadun blinked. "The Sins are human. Not God's Protectors. But Lanie is right. Negative emotions shouldn't have existed. What is going on?" Sela murmured.

“How have we never considered that before?” Lanie asked, sitting up.

“It doesn’t make sense. How the hell could human emotions affect us, and how could they have affected us before they were freed?” Liadun demanded. She, too, sat up.

“Alainen was showing all the signs of being infected. Jealousy, lies, hate, spite, possessiveness, yet the Sins hadn’t been released,” Sela mused.

“Or had they?” Lanie asked.

“There is a big chunk missing from this puzzle,” Liadun agreed.

“And Andie has the answers. Do we push her?” Sela inquired.

“No. Andie will retreat into herself. Maybe even flee. I believe we are close to something. A breakthrough or confrontation. The truth is near, I can sense it,” Liadun murmured, her eyes unfocused.

“Then we sit tight and wait. The truth will always come out,” Sela said.

“It’s just a matter of time,” Lanie stated.

“Indeed it is.” Liadun nodded.

Lanie/Lamia

Lanie wasn't surprised when she entered her house a few days later to find Ranson and Mac waiting for her. Ranson looked a lot better, and Mac appeared relaxed, but he was on edge.

"We explained your absence as being necessary due to the attack," Ranson said by way of opening.

"Hello to you too," Lanie replied and smirked as Ranson blushed slightly.

"Good morning, Lanie," he responded.

"I did message Laura, and she rescheduled everything. But thank you for taking your time to look out for me."

"Fisher is driving today, and Mac will be in the back with you," Ranson said.

"Is Fisher...?" Lanie let the sentence fade as Ranson shook his head.

"Just Mac and me, please remember that," Ranson replied softly.

"Okay, let's go because I'm pretty sure my day is chock-a-block with meetings." Lanie sighed.

She wasn't wrong. Laura had even only scheduled a fifteen-minute lunch break. Lanie could kick herself, but she had not realised how much time she'd lost in

Refuge. She would be more careful in the future.

Lanie replied to emails and phone calls and worked up till eight at night. She was yawning when she left the office. Security around her was heavy. Simon Clare had evaded capture, and his face had been splashed everywhere. But he'd gone to ground. Lanie barely ate her dinner before she was asleep. She was still catching up with the shocks she'd recently received.

The following week went much the same way. She caught the worried looks Ranson and Mac were sending her over her long hours, but she had to put in the extra time.

Finally, on Friday, Lanie hit her intercom and called for Mac and Ranson.

"What's up?" Mac asked, entering.

"I've finished for the day. Everything is caught up," Lanie answered.

"About time. You were putting in some stupid hours," Ranson replied as he appeared in the doorway. "I'll call Fisher for the car."

"How about I cook for you?" Mac suggested.

"How about we order in?" Lanie counteroffered.

"We can do that," Mac replied happily.

"Why do I feel like a third wheel?" Ranson complained as they headed towards the lift.

Lanie felt guilty. "I'm sorry. Would you like to join us?"

“No, I do not crash dates,” Ranson teased.

“It’s not a date!” Lanie exclaimed.

“Thanks, bro!” Mac said at the same time.

Lanie looked at Mac, aghast, and shook her head. “You can’t say that!” “I don’t want my cousin around when I am on a date with you,” Mac replied.

“It’s not a date.”

“Lanie, it’s a date. There’ll be food, movies, and kissing. Lots of it. Ranson does not need to be seeing that!”

Lanie blushed, and Mac grinned as Ranson groaned. “Jesus.”

“Let’s go home before Ranson gets all squirrely and embarrassed,” Mac teased. Lanie slid in the back of the car and sent them both stern looks.

Yet, in her stomach, there were butterflies. Which made no sense. Because if Alainen had been her soul mate, then why was Mac getting to her? Because the damn man was. Mac was making her feel things she’d not experienced since Alainen’s betrayal. And that made Lanie very unsure of herself.

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“Get out now,” Ranson ordered, bursting into Lanie’s office two days later.

“What?” Lanie exclaimed, looking up in surprise.

“The biohazard sensors just went off in the sorting office. The entire building is

evacuating. Lanie, go!” Ranson commanded.

“Where’s Mac?”

“Checking the car out. Move your ass, now. Because even you are vulnerable to toxins!”

Lanie got to her feet and groaned. Not those damn stairs again. Instead, he headed for a cupboard and pulled out two face masks. He placed one on her and shoved her towards her private elevator.

“Do my staff have these?” Lanie demanded, worried.

“Yes. It was part of the recent security overhaul. After the attacks with bio-toxins, face masks were put in the bottom draw of every desk,” Ranson explained, and her shoulders relaxed.

Lanie didn’t want to be responsible for anyone’s death.

“This is Alainen,” she said, and Ranson nodded.

“For sure. Which is why Mac and Fisher left to fetch the car. We think he’s looking to isolate you,” Ranson said.

“How does he know who I am?” Lanie wondered as the elevator doors opened and they stepped inside.

“Good question. He must have something, but I can’t think what. Nothing about Lamia has got past me. Although there’s been nothing to link you to her,” Ranson responded.

“Are you going to betray me? Are you working with him?” Lanie asked, fear seizing her gut.

“No. Not us. And I doubt anyone has betrayed you. Alainen has found you in the past, hasn’t he?” Ranson mused.

“Because I couldn’t shift,” Lanie replied.

“True. But has he found you since you could?” Ranson questioned.

“No.”

Lanie’s phone rung, and she ignored it. The doors opened into the garage, and she was surprised to see Mac and Fisher there.

“Car is compromised. We’re heading outside to be with the crowd,” Mac announced.

“I won’t expose everyone to a toxin,” Lanie said, pulling back.

“How high is the risk this madman would do that?” Mac demanded with a glance at Lanie.

“High,” she replied tersely.

Her phone rang again, and Lanie growled. “Hello?” she said, answering.

“Hello, Lamia,” Alainen drawled.

“Sorry, you’ve the wrong number,” Lanie stated and hung up. The blood drained from her face, and her hands shook.

“Lanie?” Mac asked.

“Alainen. He has my phone number,” Lanie whispered.

Ranson shot a glance at Fisher. “We’re getting Miss Cross to a public location. She’ll be safer there. Keep your mask on, and go ahead and check the route is clear.”

“Will do, boss,” Fisher said as Lanie’s mobile rang again.

Mac cupped her face. “Play it cool and unconcerned.”

“Okay.” Lanie answered the call a second time. “Hello?”

“Don’t you dare hang up on me!” Alainen snapped.

“Who is this?” Lanie demanded.

“Do not play dumb!” Alainen snarled.

“Look, I’ve no idea who the hell you are or what you want. Either identify yourself or stop wasting my time!” Lanie retorted in return. “You have five seconds.”

“Lamia...”

“At least get my name right... wait. Lamia? That’s what that crazy idiot called me when he tried to kill me! Are you working with him? Do you know where he is?” Lanie babbled.

“Shut up!” Alainen roared.

“Yeah, you’re done. This call will be logged with the police along with your number,

asshole,” Lanie retorted and hung up.

“He’s watching, or he has got someone near,” Mac murmured. “Keep acting like a human who is being harassed by a man she doesn’t know.”

“The exit is clear!” Fisher shouted, and they began moving out. Lanie kept up a meaningless complaint, looking irate and waving her hands about. To anyone watching, she looked like a businesswoman whose day had been rudely interrupted.

Lanie pointed to the police, who were arriving alongside the fire brigade and ambulance service.

They headed in that direction, and Lanie started speaking to the officer in charge. Ranson was giving a report, and the police began setting up a cordon. Sirens wailed, and Lanie watched as the cops isolated her staff to check for potential contamination.

Lanie watched wide-eyed as governmental departments and counter-terrorism units arrived.

The media was also out in force. A government worker herded them all over to a tent that had been set up and began issuing orders.

“It was anthrax, and the packing was unstable. There has been a possible leak, and there’s the potential for contamination. Everyone needs to be decontaminated and checked over,” Mac said, glancing at Lanie.

“I’m going to give the police Alainen,” Ranson murmured.

Lanie’s brows drew together. “Is that wise?” “It’s what a human businessman would do. They’d also give a statement about their employees’ safety. Lanie, you need to react normally,” Mac muttered.

“Okay. Set things up. Do I have to talk to the press?” Lanie hated the media.

“Yes. Let’s get you decontaminated and checked, and then we’ll deal with everything,” Ranson said.

Several hours later, after speaking to the police and telling them everything, starting with Simon Clare and ending with the two phone calls, Lanie sighed inwardly. She was now sitting at a desk after law enforcement called a media interview due to the frenzy being caused.

The police had informed Lanie what to talk about and what to keep back, and Lanie had answered a barrage of questions.

“And no blackmail call has been received?” a reporter asked for the third time.

“No. I’ve no idea what this Alainen’s problem is. But somebody out there knows who he is. I beg of you, please contact the police. This poor man is unstable and fixated. He is dangerous. The police have advised no one to approach, and after today, I strongly agree with that,” Lanie replied.

“Are you offering a reward?” someone asked.

“For someone doing the right thing and saving lives? No. Is human decency so dead that nobody would do the right thing without a monetary reward?” Lanie challenged.

“Well, it may encourage the people who know him to come forward,” a slimy reporter said.

“You might have lost faith in humanity, I haven’t. I believe if someone knows who he is, they will contact the police because they have decency in their heart,” Lanie snapped.

Inwardly, she smirked. Nobody would come forward. Alainen would be protected, but it put the pressure on the Hunters for now.

“Miss Cross, do you think this person is obsessed with you? Could be a former lover?” someone asked.

“My private life remains exactly that. But no, I don’t know an Alainen. I have no comment for you on my dating activities,” Lanie replied.

A flurry of questions was yelled at her, and Lanie swapped glances with the police officers next to her.

“That’s enough, as you’re all aware, this has been a long day for Miss Cross,” an officer said, and Lanie got to her feet.

Reporters shouted further questions, but Lanie ignored them. She’d given them enough, and now Alainen and the Hunters would feel the pressure. Ranson took her back as Mac walked by her side, keeping between her and the reporters. Fisher led the way.

Luckily, although the parcel had been completely unstable, the anthrax hadn’t leaked. Lanie intended to send an email to every member of staff and pay them a bonus this month. They’d had two major incidents already. The fire and this. Lanie could only imagine how furious Alainen was. She’d not done as he probably expected and some of the Hunters had to be doubting him right now.

“Fisher has brought the car around,” Mac murmured, and Lanie nodded. The entire affair was shocking to her. Hunters never really bothered with leaving witnesses and didn’t care if the odd innocent was slaughtered while they achieved their goal. But to threaten such a huge number of people was on a scale she’d never seen.

Alainen was clearly becoming unhinged. And that was highly concerning. Her phone rang, and Lanie looked down. Mac had blocked the number Alainen had called from on police advice, and her shoulders relaxed when she saw it was Callidora.

“Hey, sweet girl,” Lanie said, answering the phone.

“I’m at the castle. Are you okay?” Callidora demanded.

“Perfectly fine, I’ll pop along as soon as I get home,” Lanie assured her.

“Please do, I need to see you,” Callidora begged.

“Give me an hour, honey.”

“Okay, Mum, bye,” Callidora replied.

Lanie began to say something to Mac, but he shook his head. “Not here.”

Lanie begrudgingly nodded and slid into the back of the car. Ranson jumped in the driver’s side and Fisher took the front passenger seat. Mac, as was becoming his place, got in next to her.

“Let’s go,” Mac ordered as soon as he’d shut the door.

Ranson started the engine, and they pulled away.

She was still being filmed by the media, and that drove her insane. Lanie liked her privacy. Not just because of being a Legendary Shifter but because she was private. She did not see the need, like many, to post herself all over social media. Lanie couldn’t understand that thinking.

Putting yourself out there meant you were at high risk. Was it really worth it? Lanie didn't think so, but clearly, some did. She thought they were all insane.

Still, those desperate for attention would get it one way or another. But with attention came negative connotations, and that was something Lanie already dealt with. No, let people wonder about her, and she'd fade into obscurity.

McIntyre

He was on edge. The attempt by Alainen today had been a fool's game. What the hell had the man been thinking? Actually, Mac doubted Alainen was thinking. More like Alainen was attempting everything to get Lanie to break her cover. Instead, it was backfiring on him. Doubts had to be rising whether she was a Legendary Shifter or not. Anything to deflect Alainen from her would be helpful, but Mac had realised something Lanie hadn't.

Alainen had a sole focus. And it had always been Lamia. Every shifter the Hunters captured, Alainen tortured them for information on Lamia. Alainen's single-mindedness was what controlled his actions. He was determined to find and kill Lamia. And in the past, he had killed innocent women. Lanie wasn't privy to that knowledge. Now Alainen was fixated on Lanie; he would not stop till she was dead, or he was.

Many Saviours had fallen to Alainen. As had several of the shifters. Alainen was one of the top Hunters. Alainen wouldn't back off. And Mac truly believed the man was uncontrollable.

He was a rabid dog that needed putting down, but he wouldn't die despite multiple attempts over the years.

Mac shook his head.

Whatever Lanie's plans had been to disappear, they just got moved up.

Lanie/Lamia

Mac was uncharacteristically quiet. Oh, he said and did the right things, but there was something weighing on his mind. Several times, she had seen him with an unfocused look in his eyes, and she'd guessed he was mind-speaking someone at Refuge.

In the last few days, Mac had become more serious, more alert, and certainly more focused. Between him and Ranson, she felt on edge. Something was bothering them both, but they refused to say what.

It was made worse because Lanie had been feeling closer to Mac. His sudden withdrawal confused her and caused her self-doubts to rise. Had he been playing games? Was this a ploy to get her to join Refuge? No, that did not make sense. What could Lanie bring to Refuge that they didn't already have?

Lanie paced through her large house and discovered Mac outside talking to Ranson. Both men looked heated, and Ranson was making sharp movements with his hands.

Mac shook his head violently, and Lanie opened the doors.

"...you have to tell her!" Ranson declared.

"Tell me what?" Lanie asked as at the same time Mac shouted no.

Mac faced her, looking guilty, and Lanie wondered what the hell was going on.

"Tell her, Mac, or I will," Ranson ordered and, with a nod at Lanie, entered the house.

Lanie turned to Mac. "Talk to me."

"Jesus. I did not want to do this. Here, come sit down," Mac said, reaching out and taking her hand. Lanie almost pulled away, but she let Mac guide her to a chair.

Was he about to break up with her? Tell her this was a mistake? That now Alainen was after her, Mac didn't want her?

"Lanie. I don't know how to say this, so I'll be blunt," Mac announced.

Lanie tensed. Here it comes.

"I'm sure you planned a disappearance or death sometime in the future. But you need to bring the timeline forward. Make a will, leaving your companies to whoever, and fake your death. Alainen is beyond dangerous," Mac informed her.

Lanie's shoulders sagged. This was about her false death? A bark of laughter escaped her as relief swept over her.

"That's funny?" Mac asked, confused.

"No. I was expecting you to break up with me or say you didn't want to be with me because of him," Lanie replied honestly.

A warm smile crossed Mac's face. "We are starting out, and we're at the beginning of something special, Lanie. Alainen couldn't force me away if he tried. It's not your fault the man is an ass. Nor that he is fixated on you. I'm more concerned with your safety and security."

"Alainen is nothing if not persistent," Lanie drawled.

“Lanie, what you don’t know is Alainen has attacked other human women, thinking they were you. We know for certain he doesn’t know you can shift, but he thinks you are using a spell or glamour to hide yourself. He has taken women, tortured, and killed them, believing them to be you. Now he has focused on you, he won’t look elsewhere until you’re dead.” “What?” Lanie exclaimed as shock hit her hard. “He’s murdered innocent women?”

“Lanie, Alainen is the world’s most prolific serial killer. The Hunters can’t control him. His murders are in the thousands,” Mac explained gently.

“That can’t be true!” Lanie gasped.

“It is. And he won’t stop coming for you. Even if you were proved a human, he wouldn’t care. Ranson and I need you to fake your death sooner rather than later,” Mac replied.

“And then I withdraw from the world for good?” Lanie asked.

Mac grasped her other hand. “For now, yes. Until our army marches and takes the Hunters out.” “Can we not kill him?” Lanie inquired.

“Sure, and that would solve a multitude of issues. But Lanie, we don’t know where he is,” Mac answered.

“Naturally. He hides like the coward he is,” Lanie bit out.

“Yup. If we could find him soon, we’ll end the threat to you. If not, you’ll have to die, honey.”

“Well, that sucks because I planned another ten to twenty years in this persona,” Lanie complained.

Mac laughed. “And all that work building your companies.”

“Oh, they’re easy to deal with. They go to my alleged daughter. Which would be me!” Lanie said. “But that wasn’t planned for twenty years. There was going to be a fake pregnancy and everything.”

“Sorry to ruin your fun.”

“Not you who should be sorry, Mac. But it’s time to hunt the Hunter. Alainen needs to pay for all those innocent deaths,” Lanie hissed as Anger swamped her body.

She looked over her gardens. It was time to face her past and the man who’d hurt and betrayed her so cruelly. Alainen had to die.

Lanie/Lamia

Mac was actively checking his contacts to track Alainen down. They'd narrowed him to being in England, but the question was where?

Lanie had emailed Laura, stating she'd be working from home, which should protect the people who worked for her. Laura had been told to set up video conferencing for Lanie's meetings.

The next issue was Ranson and Mac wanted Lanie out of the house and somewhere safe. Ranson wanted Lanie to go to Refuge, but because of the time difference, that wouldn't work. They could go to the castle, but Mac and Ranson weren't welcome. They were all on edge and twitchy.

"Something has to give," Lanie said three days after her decision to stay at home.

"We've been searching for Alainen for years. We won't find him overnight," Mac replied.

"So, let's set a trap with me as bait," she suggested.

"Hell no!" Mac exclaimed, and Lanie flinched back a little.

"Something has to give, and nothing is happening," Lanie argued.

"Things are, I get you're fired up, but you can't risk everyone's safety because you've a bee in your bonnet," Mac retorted.

“That’s what you think this is about?” Lanie demanded.

“I don’t know because you are not exactly explaining your thought process!”

“Wow!” Lanie snapped.

“Lanie. Everything is being investigated. Every little lead we have is being tracked. Simon Clare’s life is being turned upside down. Simon had to meet Alainen somewhere, if we can find that, then we could narrow Alainen’s position down. Right now, two hundred people from Refuge are working their asses off in real time. They’ve left Refuge.

“They are putting themselves in danger to locate Alainen. Do you understand the risk they are taking? They’re doing that because this is the closest we’ve ever got to one of the Five. Simon Clare has given Alainen a weak spot. Even if Alainen kills the little prick, he remains a link. Because Simon isn’t clever. He’s a kid out of uni who doesn’t know how to hide his past. And it’s doubtful that Alainen would have bothered to teach him. Simon is another throwaway human for him,” Mac said.

Lanie listened carefully and took in his words.

“But if I come out and show myself, we’d get him quicker,” she insisted.

“Yeah, and how many would die bringing Alainen to justice? Who would you sacrifice, Lanie? Me, Ranson? A man who just had a baby, a woman with a family depending on her? They face a war as it is. Whose life will you gamble to catch Alainen?”

“That’s harsh,” Lanie replied.

“That is the facts. Which lives are less valuable to you?”

“I get it!” Lanie exclaimed as she rose to her feet and paced back and forth.

“No, you don’t. Do you want to know how many families I’ve told that their loved one won’t come home? Thirty-seven death announcements I’ve had to make. I do not throw life away needlessly, nor do I take unsupported risks. If Anger gets free and there’s no Shifter close by, what then? There are repercussions to you being bait. And damn it, I care about you, in fact, I’m falling in love with you. So, yeah, I don’t want you in danger,” Mac spat.

Lanie’s jaw dropped open. Her mouth worked for a few seconds as she tried to get her words out. “You’re in love with me?”

“Near enough. You are everything I want and didn’t know it. Apart from right now, because you’re being an idiot,” Mac snapped.

“Well, thank you!” Lanie shouted.

“You’re welcome!” Mac snarled, grabbing her and hauling her close.

Mac pulled her head back and kissed her hard. Lanie gasped into his mouth as her body responded to his anger, and she was aroused for the first time in forever. Mac backed Lanie against a wall and lifted her up. Lanie instantly wrapped her legs around him as she kissed him with all the pent-up frustration she had.

For days now, being in close proximity had been driving her mad. And Mac’s little touches or sneaky kisses were making her just as crazy.

She wanted Mac, and something deep inside her called out to him. And Lanie was going to give in. She was going to fuck the brains out of Mac and enjoy it.

Lanie hissed as Mac broke off the kiss and sucked hard on her throat. That made her

wetter. Lanie clung to his shoulders as Mac's cock pressed into her core, and she mewled as she moved her hips against it. Mac kept Lanie pinned to the wall as he cupped her neck and kissed her again.

"I want you," Lanie gasped when the kiss ended.

"I'm going to bury myself deep in you. You'll never doubt you're mine," Mac promised, his eyes blazing at her. He ripped her blouse open and ducked his head to suck on her exposed flesh. Lanie cried out as his teeth dragged across one lace-covered nipple and then the other.

Making love to Alainen had been a gentle affair. Mac was fury, passion, desire, and a little pain, too. His hand snaked through her hair and yanked her head to the side as his teeth bit the vein in the side of her throat gently. He pulled it between his teeth and sucked. Lanie moaned softly as arousal swept over her.

Mac turned and carried her to the couch, where he laid her down. He tore the rest of the clothes from her and stripped naked.

Lanie's mouth watered. Mac was tanned skin over rock-hard muscles. His cock was thick and heavy and certainly bigger than average.

"Will that fit in me?" Lanie gasped.

"Oh yeah, baby," Mac said, stroking himself.

Lanie knocked his hand away and replaced it with her own. Mac allowed her to touch him as Lanie discovered the pre-cum on the tip of his dick and smeared it around.

Mac's eyes were blazing, and he shoved her back and knelt. He spread her legs and exposed her pussy to him.

“Fuck, that’s the prettiest I’ve ever seen,” Mac declared and bent his head.

His teeth nibbled at her thighs, and his tongue trailed lazy circles on them. All the while, he inched closer to her core.

Lanie squirmed and tried pulling him to where her body throbbed for attention, but Mac refused to allow her to take control. His fingers shoved inside her with a suddenness that took her by surprise, and Lanie screamed as his tongue grazed her clit. Her hips thrust towards him, and Mac banded an arm underneath her, lifting her hips.

His mouth made love to her, driving her wild. Alainen had never done this, and Lanie had no idea how good this could feel. Her hand reached down and grabbed Mac’s cock, and she stroked him.

“I’m going to take you hard,” Mac growled out as he pulled away from her. Lanie mewed at the loss of contact.

Mac picked her up and placed her on her knees. “Hold on to the back of the sofa,” he ordered.

Lanie did as Mac shifted her hips. With a groan, Mac slammed into her, and Lanie cried out.

He smacked her ass hard and rubbed it before repeating his actions.

“Ah, God,” he moaned as he pulled out and thrust back inside.

Lanie screamed as Mac shoved deeper, and her walls tightened around him.

“You’re so tight.”

“Mac!” Lanie shrieked as her butt burned. Mac slapped her cheeks again and soothed it before gripping her hips tightly. He held her in place as he let his control slip and began pounding into her. Lanie’s breaths came in short pants as she gave herself over to Mac’s ministrations.

She sensed something building inside her and thought it was an orgasm. She’d rarely experienced one before. Therefore, it was a shock to them both when Lanie shifted.

Lamia screamed out in triumph and shoved against Mac’s cock, and then Lanie reappeared. Mac pulled out and twisted Lanie around. He knelt between her legs, acting on instinct, and pushed back in.

He set a pace that had them both sweating, and once again, Lamia appeared. She reared up and sunk her teeth into Mac, and he returned the favour.

Lamia faded, and Lanie cried her orgasm just as Mac climaxed, too. He pumped his seed into her as Lanie stared at him, shocked and sated. Lanie watched as he stiffened as the last of his cum left him and then sagged back onto his heels.

“Did we just mate?” Mac asked with a lazy grin, his cock still inside her.

Lanie nodded dumbly.

“I can feel something between us,” Mac said.

“The mating bond.”

“It feels strong,” Mac mused as he considered the strange sensation.

“Why are you not shocked!?” Lanie cried.

“Oh, I was a little when Lamia appeared, but I guessed what was happening,” Mac replied.

“And you carried on?” Lanie demanded.

Mac pulled out of Lanie and dragged her up onto her knees against his chest. “You belong to me. Mine, you hear me. I own you, you own me. I do not give a shit what happens, but you and I are one. Lanie, I’m falling in love with you, and I don’t care who knows it. I’ll bite you all over so people see my mark on you and realise you are mine!”

Mac spun Lanie around and bent her over the sofa. “I love this view of you,” he said as he pushed back inside her. Lanie groaned as he filled her again.

“Mac,” she moaned.

“If I have to fuck you into oblivion until you accept facts, I will do,” Mac promised and rammed into her hard.

Lanie screamed as her pussy clamped down on his dick.

“Feel what you do to me.”

Lanie felt Mac open to her, and she was lost in the wonder of his emotions and his cock. It didn’t take Mac long to make her orgasm again, and he followed soon after.

They both collapsed on the sofa, and Lanie blinked sleepily at him. Mac picked up his tee and cleaned between her legs.

“I love you,” Lanie whispered.

“I know, baby,” Mac replied and tucked her in against his body. Mac was smug to Lanie, and it amused her. He was all ‘beat his chest and crow to the world, alpha male’ at the moment.

Her eyes closed, and Lanie drifted off to sleep.

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Mac’s body jolted hers.

Lanie shot up as Mac gave a cry of pain and tossed on the mattress. They’d moved their love making to the bedroom, and Lanie had lost count of the orgasms he’d given her. She was beyond sated and was incredibly tired. Her body ached in places she didn’t know she had.

Mac cried out again, and Lanie looked over and saw him contorted in pain.

She leapt out of bed and shifted. Then Lamia scooped Mac up and slithered over to the portal.

“Mary Worth, Mary Worth, Mary Worth!” Lamia cried in panic.

The mirror shimmered, and Lamia rushed through.

“What is it?” Mary demanded as Mac arched his back in Lamia’s arms and screamed.

“Help me! We mated, but something’s wrong,” Lamia shrieked.

Mac hollered again.

“Your quarters, now! I’m calling Andie, Lily, and Maeve,” Mary ordered.

Lamia took off at speed even as Mac's screams echoed around the castle. She burst into her quarters as Lilith appeared out of thin air.

"Lay him down," Lilith demanded as Lamia rushed to the bed. She laid him on it and his back arched so much he rested on his heels and shoulders.

"Help him!" Lamia cried.

"Talk to me. I need to know what happened," Lilith said as Maeve arrived. Maeve shifted into Baba Yaga and began examining Mac.

Lamia explained that they'd bitten each other and had sensed the mating bond.

"There is a bond. It is golden," Pandora stated from the doorway as she entered.

"But?" Lamia demanded with a hiss.

"There is another one, and it's strong, too. Mac and Lamia's is a beautiful thing made of love, it moves freely between the two of them. The second is black and twisted, it is evil, and nothing flows from Lamia into it. But it goes to her. It's hate, greed, jealousy, possession, and everything negative about a relationship," Pandora continued to explain.

"What?" Lamia gasped.

"This bond was forced on you. You didn't accept this freely, nor were you aware of it. It attached itself at it's master's bidding," Pandora said.

"Alainen! But he was my soul mate. That's why I was able to get pregnant," Lamia exclaimed.

Pandora shook her head. “No. You might have been Alainen’s, but he wasn’t yours. The fact he convinced you he loved you must have strengthened his bond enough that he impregnated you. But looking at that ugliness, you were never his mate.”

Mac screamed, and Lamia looked panicked. “What is hurting Mac?”

“Alainen’s bond. It is attacking yours. Mac’s body is trying to shift, but Alainen’s bond is stopping him. It wants to destroy your bond with Mac because then it’s in control again. As it is, your mating with Mac is a threat to it. Because a soul can only have one, and if Mac’s takes root, it shall wither and die,” Pandora explained.

“How do you know this?” Lilith demanded.

“Because I can see it. Lilith, look closer at the metaphysical plane,” Pandora suggested.

Lilith’s eyes narrowed, and she turned to Mac and looked for what Pandora had claimed.

“Oh, hell! I see it, and the two bonds are attacking each other,” Lilith exclaimed.

“What does that mean?” Lamia cried.

“One will win, and the other lose. Who the winner is depends on how strong Mac is. If he loses, I believe he will die. Should Alainen lose, I think he’ll be severely diminished if he doesn’t pass,” Pandora answered.

“Why does Mac die but not Alainen?” Lamia hissed beside herself with worry.

“Because for now, without shifting, Mac remains human,” Baba Yaga added, pouring blue healing energy into Mac.

“How interesting, the black bond shied from the healing power,” Lilith announced.

“And look, the real bond glowed a little brighter. Lamia, we can’t bring Mac out of this, nor can we force the shift. But we could heal Mac, and as long as he fights, there’s a chance he’ll succeed,” Baba Yaga elaborated.

“Do what you need to. I can’t lose Mac,” Lamia said and curled up on her bed with him. She gently wrapped Mac in her coils and drew him closer. As if he sensed her, Mac settled a little, but his body dripped with sweat.

Minutes turned into hours, and each ticked by so slowly Lamia wondered if they’d been transported to Refuge. Lamia poured her love and devotion into the bond to strengthen it and aid Mac.

The fight inside Mac raged back and forth, with the three women healing him when he was at his weakest, and Mac held on. Her siblings came and went, all offering words of support. Jase sat in the corner, not leaving her, even though he couldn’t help. Lamia had told him to return to his family, but Jase had replied she needed him more than them.

The battle hit the twelve-hour mark when there was a commotion, and a winged figure entered the room.

“Move aside,” Tisiphone ordered. Baba Yaga and Lilith stared at their sister.

They’d not seen her for centuries, and Jase bolted up straight. Pandora merely nodded and obeyed Tisiphone’s order.

“Welcome, sister,” Pandora responded and left.

“Be well, little sister,” Tisiphone replied and glanced at Lilith and Baba Yaga. “I said

move out of the way.”

They both moved as Tisiphone sat on the bed. “Oh, Mac,” she said with a heartfelt sigh.

“Can you help him?” Lamia asked with hope.

“Yes. But you should have called for me earlier. Mac is weak and needs an infusion of strength,” Tisiphone explained with a pissed-off tone.

“How could I call you?” Lamia flared up. “You don’t mind speak!”

“But Ranson could have called me!” Tisiphone retorted.

Lamia opened her mouth to argue and snapped it shut. Tisiphone was right. Ranson could’ve contacted those in Refuge.

“I’m going to open a portal. Stay away from it. Should you touch it, it will cause a great deal of pain,” Tisiphone said. Her eyes unfocused and refocused and a portal burst into being. “I need Chimera.” Chimera came through the portal as a human male. He headed for the bed as the portal shut, and he lay next to Mac.

“Not the first time we’ve done this, boy,” Chimera chided, placing a hand on Mac’s head and heart. He closed his eyes and went still.

“Hear me, Joe McIntyre, I am your lord and commander. You shall obey me. Mac, you will accept the gift of strength given to you and shift into Lamia. Fight the corruption attached to your soul mate and use our strength to win the day,” Tisiphone murmured.

Lamia watched as Tisiphone’s own eyes closed. A soft glow arose around Mac as

Lilith, Baba Yaga, and Jase watched. Lamia noted figures crowding her doorway but paid them little heed. Once again, minutes ticked by, which slowly turned into hours. But Lamia realised how Mac lay quieter, more serene, and knew that Chimera and Tisiphone were helping him.

“How long has it been?” Lamia asked tiredly.

“A full twenty-four hours now,” he replied. “Twelve since they arrived.”

“And still they fight,” she muttered, worried.

“Lamia, that forced bond has been attached to you for thousands of years. Mac’s has existed only a few hours. Alainen’s slave bond has buried itself deep inside you. But Mac has the righteous on his side,” Lilith said from where she sat.

There was a noise from Chimera, and Lamia looked up. Her bed broke as he shifted and rolled off the mattress. Settling himself on the floor, Chimera placed one paw on Mac’s head and the other on his chest. Chimera’s eyes shut as he once again gave Mac his strength.

“That’s not a good sign, is it?” Lamia whispered.

“No, honey, it’s not,” Lilith answered.

Lamia ducked her head and closed her eyes. Joining those fighting to save her mate, Lamia poured her own strength and love into Mac. She’d kill herself to save him, and that was final.

Vladimir/Vampire

“How are they?” he murmured to Manfred, who watched with worried eyes.

“There is no change. They all remain in battle,” Manfred replied.

“Mary says Mummy needs to feed,” Vladimir said.

“Yes. Elder Abuse is rising and is hungry. I shall leave these in your hands, brother,” Manfred agreed and walked off.

Vladimir exchanged glances with Jase. “Have you slept?”

“I’ve dozed. Lamia needs me,” he responded.

“Jase, go spend some time with Willow and the triplets. I will keep watch for a few hours. Should something change, I’ll call,” Vladimir said.

Jase sent him a grateful look and rose to his feet. “Thank you.”

It was a testament to how tired Jase was when he left the room without an argument.

Vladimir settled in. He’d not leave until Lamia opened her eyes. Lamia had suffered enough, and Vladimir experienced rage at the thought of what Alainen had done to her. The man was a true narcissist.

Alainen had a lot to answer for. His punishment would come, and Alainen would pay for every harm he had caused. Vladimir would ensure that. Irideesa had been an innocent, and there was no doubt in Vladimir’s mind that Alainen had seduced and abused Irideesa.

As his former self of Mir’ald, Vladimir had become aware of the rumours around Alainen and Irideesa. He’d been planning to speak to her after their shift, but events had overtaken them.

After that, it didn't seem worth bothering about. They had more important things to consider, such as survival. But a reckoning was coming, and it had that backstabbing bastard's name on it.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:46 am

McIntyre

He was lost in a world of pain. Some rat bastard was burning his nerve endings with a naked flame, and he was trapped at their whim. His body screamed to shift, but something was stopping him. Well, Mac assumed it wanted to change; having never done so before, he was more than confused.

A wave of darkness swept over him, sending him tumbling and spinning out of control. Mac had no idea where he was or what was happening.

He sensed something coming from his body and looked down to see a golden rope. Mac's brow creased. That was incredibly important. Mac touched the bond, and his eyes widened as a wave of love and strength hit him. Mac recognised that aura.

Lamia! Lanie! They'd mated, and this was their mate bond.

So, what attacked him? Mac's sight adjusted, and he saw an inky black bond in the darkness. He touched his mate bond, and the area brightened, and Mac flinched at the evil he sensed around him.

"She's mine," a distorted voice hissed.

"Think again," Mac replied.

"Weak fool," came the sneering reply.

"Who are you? What are you?" Mac demanded.

“Your death.”

Mac was blasted, and his golden rope dimmed a little. Before his disbelieving eyes, he watched as blackness tried to dim his rope’s light.

Mac fought back, somehow instinctively knowing what to do. This darkness needed to take a hike. Lamia was his soul mate.

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Mac was tired, so tired. It had been hours, and the darkness seemed to be holding steady while he grew tired. He longed to lie down and sleep but knew the evilness would overwhelm him the moment he did. Mac had no intention of giving up, but he wasn’t sure how much longer he could fight.

Worse, he didn’t know what he fought. Was this the manifestation of Anger or something else?

Mac rubbed his brows and readied himself for another bout when soothing blue energy floated over him. Mac blinked as his wounds healed and the bond in his hands strengthened.

“No!” the voice screamed in dismay, but Mac grinned. Someone had just cured him. He wasn’t alone. Lamia had got help!

“Come on, beastie. Let’s dance!” Mac growled as the voice howled in the darkness.

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More hours had passed. Mac was sure of it. The fight went back and forth, neither side winning, and Mac wondered if this would ever end. He sensed something poking

around near him and reached out and slapped it.

“Foolish child,” Chimera moaned.

Mac closed his eyes as Chimera’s strength flowed over and into him. Moments later, Tisi joined him, and Mac stood strong, bolstered by love.

Mac stepped forward, and for the first time, he felt fear in the darkness surrounding him. Gritting his teeth, Mac took the battle to the blackness further, boosted when Lamia merged her power with his.

Vladimir/Vampire

Another day passed, and worry swept through the castle. Lamia, Tisiphone, and Chimera had been under two and a half days now. Sixty hours in total. Vladimir and Jase swapped glances. How could Mac still be battling on and not have succumbed? He was only human. Lilith and Baba Yaga had taken watches over them, sending them healing power every few hours.

Vladimir noted that Andie didn’t seem too worried, and until she did, he wouldn’t stress too much.

Achere was watching over her, and he was calm too. The again Achere was always composed. Even when he shifted into Quasimodo, he remained serene. Vladimir sat next to Rhett, who had his eyes firmly fixed on the tableau on the bed. Chimera stayed in his monster form, as did Lamia and Tisiphone. Tisiphone’s wings were tucked in tightly against her back, but they were visible. All of them now seemed pale, but Lilith, Baba Yaga, and Pandora had all agreed they were fighting and strong.

Vladimir watched as his siblings and his sister’s mate fought a battle he could only watch. The urge to protect them all was immense, and yet, for all his strength and

cunning, Vladimir remained as helpless as a lamb. It was a horrible feeling.

There was a loud snap, and Vladimir looked towards the bed in panic. His eyes widened before he smiled.

Mac

There! He saw the weakness the blackness momentarily showed and jumped at it. The evil was as tired as he was, but Mac had no intention of backing down. His mate bond and future with Lanie/Lamia were on the line. Mac grinned and attacked. The evilness surged back and finally faded as Mac's golden light lit the area.

Mac studied the black fading cord in front of him. What the hell was it? It flowed in the same direction his did, which meant it was attached to Lamia. Could this be another mate bond, one she'd had with Alainen?

The darkness flinched away from Mac as he approached and stared hard. Somehow, this was perverse. It had been forced on Lamia. Mac understood that this shouldn't exist.

He reached out and grabbed it with both hands and it struggled weakly in his grasp. Mac shuddered as the negativity it held hit him with a final, nearly overpowering blast. But Mac battled back with love. Hate, despair, possessiveness, twisted desire. It all fled under Mac's defence. Mac pulled his knee up and brought the evilness down hard. The dark bond shattered on impact with a loud snap, and there was a pained scream that echoed around him.

Someone was in agony, but Mac knew it wasn't Lamia. She was fine, and as Mac watched their bond strengthen, the bright light almost overwhelming him.

Mac relaxed back and blinked. His body felt different, and Mac shut his eyes and

allowed a miracle to happen.

“Damn, he’s pretty,” Tisiphone said with a croak. Mac opened his eyes, knowing that he’d shifted. Lamia lay next to him with her eyes closed as Mac checked himself. Torso, the same muscled form it always had been. From the waist down, he was a snake. His scales glowed with the same iridescence that Lamia’s did.

“Cool,” Mac muttered and gently slipped out of Lamia’s embrace. He nearly pitched headfirst as he was un-used to his tail, and Vladimir caught him.

“Tisi, are you okay?” Mac asked as she collapsed on the floor. Lilith sat next to her and poured a blue healing light over her.

“Tired. But you look pretty,” she said again.

“Not masculine and handsome?” Mac questioned as he moved towards Chimera, jittery. Moving wasn’t as easy as Mac might have imagined.

“Yeah, you’re all that,” Vladimir replied as he helped Mac across the room. Chimera had laid down in a corner and was refusing to move. Baba Yaya sat with him and offered him healing power.

“Chimmy?” Mac asked.

Vladimir reared back in horror. “Chimmy?” he cried, aghast.

Mac reached out with a hand and touched Chimera, who lazily opened one eye. “I’m fine, child. Just need sleep. Deal with your mate,” Chimera replied.

“Thank you,” Mac whispered.

Chimera smiled, a rather horrific sight, but it didn't phase Mac. "I'll always be here for you, son," Chimera murmured and closed his eyes.

"Son?" Vladimir asked, wanting to know more.

"Chimera adopted me after my father died. He and Tisi were constants in my life. And Chimmy took in Ranson after my uncle passed. Chimmy is what all the kids call him," Mac replied as he checked his 'parents' over.

Happy they were being looked after, Mac turned to Lamia. He knew she was okay because he could feel it in the bond. And what a glorious thing that was. The bond between them was strong and glowed brightly. Mac suddenly shifted again and was surprised as he glanced down at a strange form.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed.

"There it is. It appears Mac and all three of the mates have three forms. Emmaline and Willow have a shared monster form with their mate, but they also have a different human form," Vladimir said with a grin.

"We think the Magic in the spell works differently with you. Because your human form is known and hunters could find you easily, the magic gives you a different one. That means you can go out in public with your mate and not be hunted down. Nor would you give away your mate's identity, either," Lilith explained.

"I prefer the snake," Mac said, looking at the image in Lanie's mirror. He looked like a young Jenson Ackles.

"You be grateful for what you've been gifted," Vladimir snapped.

Mac turned and raised an eyebrow. "I don't really care what you think, only my mate

matters.”

Mac moved away and climbed onto the broken bed next to Lamia. He gathered her up in his arms and drew her near, dropping a kiss on her forehead.

“You need to wake up, babe, you got to see my cool new tail!” he urged softly.

Lamia smiled in her sleep and nestled into him. Mac cupped her head and was thankful he had won whatever fight he’d fought.

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Mac stared at Lamia in horror. They were both in their monster form and lounging down by the lake with some of the other water shifters.

“You’re telling me that Alainen basically forced himself on you?” Mac demanded, his temper rising.

“No. I accepted his sexual advances. But the bond that attacked you was imposed on me without permission,” Lamia replied calmly. She seemed unsure how to handle this information. It had been startling at the time, but the importance of it had been lost due to Mac’s battle. Now, they were confronting it, and she appeared more than puzzled. Mac saw that and tried to be patient.

“Baby, it’s still a huge violation of you. Alainen forced something on you that you didn’t want.” Mac turned to Lilith. “Can one person have a soul mate, but they aren’t their soul mate’s soul mate? Damn, that’s convoluted.”

“Mac, we only have three soul mates to compare. We have no knowledge of them before Emmaline came along, and it’s been a real learning curve. We’re unsure of what this all means. And the big question we’ve unanswered is, why now?” Lilith

responded.

“Because the Saviours are ready to make a move,” he replied, and Lilith frowned. Mac’s brain worked furiously.

“You said Vampire and Poseidon are stronger because of their mates. Lamia, do you feel the same?” Mac asked, beginning to work it out.

“Yes, I do, actually,” Lamia answered after a few moments’ consideration. “And I feel unbalanced, like the power hasn’t settled yet.”

“The Saviours are ready for war. We’re gathering intel from across the globe on where Hunter settlements are. We have an army at our back and five Shifters. Now we’ve contacted you and located your village. And this is a village, let’s not argue. Things are moving towards one point,” Mac said.

“A battle,” Loch Ness breathed.

“Yes. Three mates found within a year? We’re heading for something, and I’d agree it is possibly a war. One between Hunters and Saviours. And children being born. And by the way, love... I think I might have knocked you up too,” Mac announced with a shrug.

Lamia reared back and blinked.

“Oh my!” Lilith muttered, her eyes checking Lamia. “It’s... um... oh boy.”

“What!” Lamia screeched.

“Snakes lay clutches,” Lilith murmured.

“What? I’ve a nest of eggs inside me?” Lamia cried, horrified.

“No. But I am picking up five heartbeats,” Lilith announced.

Mac’s jaw dropped open before his chest puffed out. “Five babies? Go, me!”

“Four kids, one of the heartbeats is Lamia’s,” Lilith said.

“Four!” Lamia screeched. “Jase can’t cope with triplets, and I am having quads?”

“We’ll be fine,” Mac said blasé.

“Jase’s children shifted to Merpeople and uber Merforms on birth. Tentacles and everything!” Lamia cried.

“Oh, ours won’t have them... um, Lilith, our kids won’t have them?” Mac asked.

“No. You’re not a merman. But they will quite likely change into Lamias. After all, Callidora does,” Lilith continued.

Loch Ness snickered at the look on Lamia’s face. Scylla winced and shook her head.

“No babies for me!” she declared.

“Yes, wait till your mate knocks you up!” Lamia hissed.

“Not happening,” Scylla said far too confidently.

“Yeah, who’s opening a book on that?” Mac asked.

“Don’t speak. Shut up. You’re in my bad books. How could you get me pregnant?”

Lamia wailed.

“You need me to explain how?” Mac shot back with a wink. “Or should I show you?”

“Shut up!” Lamia cried and began laughing.

Lanie/Lamia

She was going to be a mother again. Holy hell. After all these thousands of years, she was pregnant. What would Callidora say? Lanie was about to find out as her daughter appeared in Mary Worth’s tower.

“Mum!” she cried and flung her arms around Lanie.

“Hello, baby,” Lanie replied as she held Callidora tightly.

“I’m glad to be home. Is everything okay?” Callidora asked, staring intently into Lanie’s face. “You seem different.”

“A lot has happened since we last talked,” Lanie delayed.

“We spoke a few days ago,” Callidora responded.

“I’ve a mate,” Lanie said, linking arms and walking Callidora away from the portal room.

Mary sent Lanie a thumbs up, and Lanie smiled weakly.

“Yeah, my asshole father,” Callidora retorted.

“Not quite, sweetheart. See, some stuff happened...” Lanie led Callidora to the

gardens as she explained. Callidora listened intently, and when they sat by the fountain, she stared at Lanie in shock.

“Let’s get this right. Alainen forced a bond on you. You were his soul mate, but he wasn’t yours. Yours is some hot security guard who is a Saviour. He also knows everything about us because he was brought up by five formerly thought dead shifters. This Mac is a leader in a Saviour army that the five shifters have been building. And Chimera and Tisiphone think of him and his cousin as a son.

“Then you mated, and he can shift into a different human form and a Lamia. Oh, and he had to fight a battle against Alainen’s bond and won. Then, in addition, this Mac has knocked you up, Mum? And with quads? So, I don’t get one sibling but four at once?”

“It sounds like a lot, I know,” Lanie said.

“You can also call me Dad,” Mac replied, and their heads shot up. Mac leaned against an arch, his legs crossed at the ankles, and looked incredibly sexy.

“Holy shit, you picked a winner!” Callidora exclaimed.

“Yup,” Lanie agreed, her lady parts standing up and paying attention.

“I’m Joe McIntyre. You can call me Mac. The Dad thing was a lame joke,” Mac stated, walking forward and holding out a hand.

Callidora took it and smiled weakly. “Seems you and Mum have been up to a lot of stuff.”

“Just a bit. It’s good to meet you. You’re famous where I come from,” Mac said.

“I am?” Callidora asked, surprised.

“Yeah. The only child of a Legend? Very famous. There’s been tournaments fought over who got to watch over you,” Mac replied as he sat down.

“What do you mean?” Callidora demanded.

“Our plan is simple. If we discover a Legend, then we send a team to watch over them. If a Hunter gets close, we take them out if possible. We have not always succeeded,” Mac explained, his eyes taking on a faraway look, “But we’ve done our best.”

“And you’ve watched over me?” Callidora asked.

“Only for the last five hundred years of our time,” Ranson said.

“Your time?”

“Refuge moves at a slower rate than out here. It gave us time to rebuild our numbers and create the army we now have. It also lets us train our people properly so they could survive and protect those we swore to,” Mac replied.

Callidora sent Lanie a dry look. “Seems you missed some stuff out. Tell me about Refuge, Mac.”

Mac grinned.

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“I like him a lot. Mac lights up when he speaks of Refuge and the shifters there. There’s a lot of love inside him for them,” Callidora said as Mac walked off.

“Yes. Mac thinks of them as family. Tisiphone called him a leader. And they need him there,” Lanie replied.

“What does that mean, Mum?” Callidora asked with some worry.

“It means that I can’t keep Mac away from Refuge, but I don’t want to leave here either,” Lanie admitted.

“You love him?”

“Yeah.”

“Then take your chance at happiness. Hell, Refuge sounds intriguing enough. I might pay it a visit if I’m allowed to,” Callidora said.

“You mean that?” Lanie asked hopefully.

“Yeah. Wherever you, Mac, and my siblings are, I want to be, too. Life just got a whole lot more interesting,” Callidora replied with a grin.

“Didn’t it just,” Lanie agreed as she pulled Callidora closer. Her baby girl was amazing, and how she’d taken all these surprises proved that. Despite Alainen being Callidora’s father, there was nothing of the man in her. And Lanie couldn’t be prouder.

Mac

He watched as Lanie and Callidora hugged one another. The sight softened his heart.

“You are going to take them from us, aren’t you?” a guy said, and Mac turned to face Jase.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re important. More than I gave you credit for. You’ve not told Lanie how important,” Jase started.

“She knows I am a leader,” Mac replied.

“Does she know you’re actually the leader?” Jase asked.

“I’m one of several,” Mac refuted.

“I spoke to Chimera. He warned me before leaving that not a hair on your head is to be harmed. My brother made that very clear,” Jase said.

“The truth is that after the Legends, I am in control. I’m a general, and I’ll march into battle. Lanie, as my mate, will be revered twice over. Lanie’s opinion will hold weight in Refuge, and people will seek her out for advice. That is who I am. I take Refuge’s security very seriously, and I rule beside the Legends.”

“Makes you a king,” Jase said, and Mac snorted.

“No. Makes me a man with a load of responsibility and several hundred thousand lives on my shoulders. It makes me tired and shitty at times, but fills me with pride when I see a kid conquer a move that has bothered him. Or a baby is born. I’m proud when a line that was nearly wiped out flourishes once again. That’s what being in charge means,” Mac replied.

“Chimera told me you were a good man. I needed to check. Lanie was fooled before, and it almost destroyed her,” Jase said, rubbing his brow.

“And Alainen will pay for that error. And for the bond he forced on her. That is

beyond a violation,” Mac growled.

“No argument there,” Jase agreed.

“Alainen has a reckoning, and it’ll hurt. And I’ll ensure he stays down this time!”

“Do that, and give her peace,” Jase replied, and Mac nodded.

Alainen’s twisted deeds were coming to an end.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:46 am

Alainen

He flew backwards against the wall in agony as an audible snap echoed around his room. He hit hard and crashed to the floor. Pain rushed through his body, and it was so sharp he couldn't even scream.

The mate bond with Irideesa had been broken. Alainen felt tears trickling down his face as he battled to not shout. The pain encompassed his entire body, and Alainen struggled to breathe.

He finally released a shriek. It tore through him, tearing his vocal cords.

Alainen heard the running footsteps and knew people were coming for him. Hate welled through him. That traitorous bitch. How dare she break his bond? Irideesa was going to die. Or she would when he could breathe and stand up.

Lanie/Lamia

Her house seemed so different. Lanie knew her time here was coming to an end. They had been home for a fortnight now, and Lanie was putting things in motion to leave her life. They'd visited a solicitor, and Lanie had re-written her will, leaving it all to Mac. With him being able to shift into a different human, it made everything easier for them.

The plan was that they would leave it to him, and Mac would then leave everything to his human shifter side. Simple. Mac and Lanie could continue running her companies as she planned.

Mac had surprised her with an engagement ring, and he swore he wanted a wedding.

Lanie was a little bemused. They were soul mates, why did they need to wed? But she could see it meant a lot to him, so she agreed. The blinding smile Mac had issued her had made her agreement worth it.

They were currently planning her death and, at the same time, dealing with the police. Simon Clare had been seen several times near her offices, and the man was looking more unbalanced. Death threats and dead animals turned up daily, and Lanie was worried about how unhinged Simon Clare was.

Mac, now being like her, was virtually unkillable, but even so, that wouldn't stop him from being badly hurt. Lanie was also ducking the constant media attention. Someone had gotten a snap of her engagement ring, and Laura had been drowned with reporters ringing to get the scoop.

Finally, Lanie had issued a press release stating she and Mac were engaged, very happy, and planning their wedding.

Mac hadn't been amused when he'd been stalked by paparazzi all trying to take photos of him. Ranson had been tickled as he had had to order Fisher to guard Mac and had teased them both constantly.

Other than ducking the reporters, Lanie's day carried on as usual. There'd been no more phone calls from Alainen, but she knew he was lurking, hiding somewhere. Lanie hoped the bond snapping hurt him badly.

"Miss Cross, your half-past five just cancelled and rescheduled," Laura called, pressing the intercom.

"Oh, nice. I'll go home early," Lanie said, cheered.

“That makes a change,” Laura replied. The last several weeks, Lanie had been staying until seven to get work completed. She wanted the transition to go smoothly when things crossed over to Mac.

Mac would die soon after her, but he needed to be around for a while before quietly fading away. Mac had disagreed and wanted them to go together, pointing out that his will left everything to them. Lanie had argued that if the authorities determined Mac died first, his will wasn't viable.

Mac was forced to agree as much as he didn't want to.

“Could you call Mac and Ranson, please, Laura? I might head to the park,” Lanie asked. It was a beautiful day, and it would be nice to wallow in the sun for half an hour.

“Yes, Miss Cross.”

Lanie waited until Ranson appeared, and moments later, Mac joined them. “Can we go for a walk in the park?” Lanie asked.

“Yeah. I don't see why not. Fisher will join us as well,” Ranson answered.

Despite them being mated and Mac being her fiancé, Ranson was still in charge. Mac teased him that was because Mac outranked him at Refuge. Ranson merely raised an eyebrow and ignored his younger cousin.

Lanie smiled as the sun hit her cheek, and she tilted her face towards it. It was a warm day, and white fluffy clouds floated along with minimal breeze. Lanie took a slow walk, noting the couples and families taking advantage of the weather.

“I fancy a barbeque tonight,” Lanie said, turning to Mac.

“That sounds like a plan to me,” Mac agreed.

Lanie smiled and glanced at Ranson. “Want a good old steak?”

“Sure do,” he replied.

Barbeque, some beers, ice cream. Everything sounded great.

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Lanie blinked and groaned. Her head was banging, and when she blinked she realised she had a cut on her head. She looked around, rubbing her eyes, and found she was in a dark room. A cellar?

Her hands were tied behind her back, and her legs were tied at the ankles. Lanie tried to shuffle forward but realised she was attached to a pipe.

“Mac? Ranson?” Lanie called and coughed. Her throat was dry, and it also hurt. Her eyes stared into the darkness. She sensed someone was there but wasn’t sure who.

“Hello?”

“Monster,” a man cooed, and Lanie reared back. “You can break free if you show your true self.”

“Who is this?” Lanie cried.

“You know who I am,” Simon Clare called.

Lanie did but wasn’t going to admit it. That placed power in Simon’s hands. While she could shift and free herself, something told Lanie that was not a good idea.

“No, I do not. Who are you? What is this? Where are my security team and my fiancé?” Lanie demanded in a scared tone.

“You don’t question me!” Simon screamed, and Lanie winced at the madness in his voice. “You answer to me.”

“What do you want? Money? You won’t get it. My company has a policy, and we will not pay ransom demands,” Lanie cried, interjecting fear into her voice.

“I want you to change. To prove to the world I am not crazy,” Simon demanded.

Lanie went silent for a few seconds. “You’re that insane man, the one who thinks I’m some sort of Medusa.”

“Lamia! Lamia, damn it, Lamia!” Simon screamed.

“Okay! Lamia!” Lanie shouted back.

“Shift and show them, Lamia,” Simon snapped.

“I can’t.”

“Do it!”

“I don’t know how to. I’m not a shifter!” Lanie cried. “And you are frightening me. How do I prove I can’t shift?”

“Lamia, Lamia, just do it, and all this will be over.”

“I can’t. Damn it, why can’t you understand? I do not know how to, I’m not a shifter. It doesn’t matter how many ways you demand it, I can’t do it!” Lanie yelled.

“Don’t make me hurt you!” Simon warned.

“Hurting me won’t change facts. You think monsters exist? They don’t. You’re completely crazy, and you are living in a fictional world!”

“Change your shape!” Simon screamed, and something hit Lanie hard. She fell over on her side, and her head hit the floor.

“Mac, where are you?” she whispered.

What the hell had happened? The last thing Lanie remembered was being in the park. So how had she ended up here? Alone and frightened.

Mac

“He will kill her!” Mac snarled at the cop. His eyes were focused on the screen where a live video of Lanie being held hostage was playing out. Simon Clare, confirmed lunatic, had somehow managed to hack into a news feed and was showing this live for everyone. The news outlet had scrambled to take it off air, but Simon had done something, and they couldn’t. Millions of people were watching his fiancée be tortured.

“We’re doing everything we can, Mr McIntyre,” the officer soothed.

“Are you? Where? You knew weeks ago there was a target on her and did nothing!” Mac spat. That might have been unfair because Mac and Ranson hadn’t found him either, but that was beside the point. Lanie was being held captive, and Mac couldn’t sense her.

His bond was intact, but it was dulled, and it wasn’t working correctly. Mac guess Lanie was either deep underground or in a shielded room.

“We didn’t have a lot of information to go on, Mr McIntyre,” an inspector said, approaching.

Mac glowered at him. “You have nothing. We were attacked in the park by a rocket launcher, knocked out, and Lanie kidnapped, and yet you claim nobody saw anything? Are you working with him?” Mac hissed.

“Mr McIntyre—”

“Shove it. My cousin is back in hospital with head injuries, and the other guard is dead. And Lanie has been taken, and you don’t even have images of the car she was thrown into!” Mac yelled. “Are you totally incompetent?”

His phone beeped, and Mac looked down.

“That’s quite enough, sir—”

“You’re right. It is. My team have managed to get camera footage and the white van’s registration plate that she was shoved in. If my people can do that, why can’t yours?” Mac hissed.

“How did your people—” the inspector began.

“Ask someone who cares. My people will do your job for you,” Mac started, heading towards the exit.

“Where are you going?” the inspector called.

“To get my woman back. Something you lot can’t do. And this is the best you can offer? You’re jokes. My team had a lead in less time than you did. You still don’t have the licence plate. If I wait for you to get your head out of your ass, Lanie will be

dead!”

On that note, Mac headed out. Lanie needed him. He tugged on the cord, hoping for a response, but it was weak and unresponsive. Mac would be rescuing Lanie the old-fashioned way. ‘Hang on baby, I’m coming,’ he thought at her as he raced out of the police station.

Lanie/Lamia

Lanie sobbed as Simon threw a bucket of water over her. So far, the torture had been mild. A few slaps, punches and kicks, but Lanie was also pregnant, and she was terrified he’d catch her stomach.

“You can make this stop,” Simon cooed. “Just shift.”

“I can’t force my body to do something it’s physically incapable of doing,” Lanie cried.

“Quit lying! Filthy monster,” Simon screamed.

Lanie blinked as a light switched on, and she ducked her head, squeezing her eyes shut. The sudden light hurt them; she had been in darkness for hours. She was also hungry, thirsty, and tired. Lanie had no idea how long she’d been cooped up, but it had been several hours at least.

“I am done with you. You’re so far beyond crazy, it’s insane. No matter what I say, you’ll continue with this delusion I’m something I’m not. Stop talking to me because I’ve nothing to say to you!” Lanie snapped.

She closed her eyes and curled into as tight a ball as possible. What she had seen appalled her. Two large spotlights stood on tripods, blinding her with light, but there

were six cameras pointed at her. All flashing with red dots, which meant she was being filmed. Lanie thought it was live as well. Thank God she'd held back from shifting.

She just had to hold on because she knew Mac would be coming for her. He wasn't dead; their bond was intact but nonresponsive. Lanie suspected because she was being shielded.

Even so, Lanie had faith in Mac. He was her mate; he would come for her. Blows rained down on her back and legs as Simon lost the plot and began beating her. As he came near to her stomach, she flinched and finally cried out.

"I'm pregnant! Stop it!" she screamed.

Simon's arm froze in mid-air as he looked at her.

"You're lying."

"No. I am not. Go and hang yourself, you psycho. But leave my babies alone!"

"Babies? Do monsters have kids? I need to check this," Simon muttered and began walking away. He opened the door, and Lanie's bond surged, and for a brief moment, she connected with Mac.

'Lanie!' his voice screamed in her head.

Lanie began to reply, but Simon shut the door, and she lost connection again.

There was hope.

Mac's voice had been incredibly strong, which meant they weren't too far from each

other. She was certainly in England still, and Lanie reckoned not far from her home.

Vladimir/Vampire

“Anything?” he asked as his siblings came and went through the mirror. They were all out searching for Lanie in their human forms.

“Mac connected with her. She is somewhere local, but we don’t know where. We think she’s in a shielded room,” Manfred replied as he entered Mary’s tower.

Mary was sitting in an armchair, scrolling through the millions of mirrors she had access to. She was looking for any sign of Lanie, Simon, or Alainen.

Vladimir nodded as Manfred headed to the Hall to eat, and then he’d go back out.

“The seas and oceans are quiet. Lanie is not on them,” Jase announced as he came through. Out of all of them, Jase was taking Lanie’s disappearance the hardest. Jase, knowing Lanie was pregnant, was torturing himself with memories of what happened to Harpy.

“Lanie won’t shift, not now she’s seen the cameras. She knows if she does so, then she’ll give us away. That asshole is going to beat the children right out of her. I can see it coming,” Jase muttered.

“Mac will find her first, brother. Trust in him,” Vladimir responded.

“He is hardcore. I don’t know how he’s keeping going. His focus is outstanding,” Jase replied.

“He won’t lose her, not after just finding her,” Vladimir agreed.

“No, but let’s hope he finds her before they lose the babies,” Jase said morosely.

Vladimir nodded. Lanie had suffered enough. It was time to let her heal and have her happiness.

Mac

He looked up as Ranson entered the office. It had been thirty-six hours since their attack and Lanie’s kidnapping.

“What are you doing here?”

“Discharged myself. He is still filming her,” Ranson said.

“Yeah. And we know he’s aware of the public’s reaction,” Mac replied.

The general public were, on a whole, condemning Simon Clare, and candlelight vigils were being held across the world. The news channel had managed to cut Simon’s hack twice, but he’d locked back in a third time. Simon was completely controlling the network.

“Problem is, it’s making him worse. Because he is being called the monster because Lanie’s pregnant. He must prove she’s Lamia, or he’s in the wrong,” Ranson responded.

“Yes. We’ve a lead, though. One of the teams has found Simon used to visit this psychic. They’re checking her out now, she might have some information,” Mac said.

His gaze slid to the TV screen. Lanie appeared to be sleeping, but her arms, legs and face were a mass of bruises. Mac’s fury was beyond anything he’d felt before.

“We’ll find her,” Ranson promised as he sat at a desk.

“Before or after we lose our children?” Mac hissed.

“Have faith, I have,” Ranson replied.

Mac arched an eyebrow and looked back at his laptop. The cameras had lost sight of the van after several turns. It had to be somewhere, and Mac was going to find it.

Lanie/Lamia

“I need a drink, please,” Lanie whispered.

Her throat was sore and dry, and she could barely talk. Numerous times, Simon had put an electric collar around her neck and allowed her to use a dirty toilet in the corner of the room. But he’d not been forthcoming with drinks or food.

“The information is confusing. Some say monsters can’t give birth, but then Lamia was not a one-off. Neither were werewolves or vampires. The only way to check is to look inside you,” Simon announced.

“What?” Lanie croaked.

“I need to cut you open and see if you’re pregnant,” Simon replied.

Lanie felt her blood run cold. “Go to hell! You’ll kill my babies!” Lanie shrieked.

“If you are, then they are monsters too and need exterminating,” Simon said, getting to his feet. He picked up the shock collar.

“Don’t do this!” Lanie cried.

“Shut up. I’m doing this for humankind. To stop you. If I allow you to procreate, then the world will be filled with creatures.”

“You’re the monster!” Lanie cried as he snapped the collar around her neck. Lanie spotted the button to activate the collar around his own neck.

She gathered her strength, tapping a little into Lamia. The hell she was going to let him cut her open. Simon undid her cuffs and hauled her to her feet. Lanie sagged against him as she pretended to be weaker than what she was.

Simon was struggling to hold her as her body became boneless, and she slipped towards the ground.

“What is wrong with you?” Simon boomed.

“You’ve not fed or given me drinks. What do you think is wrong?” Lanie cried. “I’m human. This is torture!”

“Stop lying!” Simon screeched in her face. His smelly breath blasted her, and Lanie gagged. She clutched his tee and suddenly snapped her elbow up. She hit him straight in the jaw and sent him tumbling. Lanie reached out and snagged the button, ripping it from his neck. She kicked him as hard as she could from the ground, hurting both of her feet, and then booted his groin.

Simon let out a different type of scream as Lanie kicked him again in the groin and then face.

She bent and struggled to untie her ankles but got them undone.

Lanie rushed towards the door and burst through it.

‘Mac,’ she screamed. If she connected with Mac the others would find her.

Proceeding down a dimly lit corridor, she noticed a flight of steps at the far end of the hallway. Lanie ran towards it and began climbing them.

She found herself in another small hallway with further stairs. Lanie kept going until, finally, she burst through a trapdoor and discovered she was in a warehouse.

Not stopping for anything, Lanie raced towards the door in the distance and shot through it.

“Bitch!” someone said, and a punch sent her unconscious.

Mac

“We have the van, it’s moving away from the town. Out into the country,” Ranson cried, standing up.

“Do you think she is on it? We saw her escape? I heard her call for me,” Mac asked, desperate. “I can’t feel her bond anymore, either. That van can’t be shielded.”

“What are you thinking?”

“The camera feeds turned off. But I can’t sense her. She’s still there. Simon wouldn’t have killed them. He wanted the world to know he was right. He’s running. I bet anything Alainen has just raised his ugly head and has her, which means we are fast running out of time,” Mac replied.

“The Legends are chasing the van now. They’re fifteen minutes behind,” Ranson said.

“That’s fifteen minutes we are wasting. I think she’s in a warehouse. Which one? I don’t know, but let’s head there, and we’re on hand in case I’m right,” Mac replied. He needed to do something. It had been two days of watching Lanie suffer.

“If you’re sure,” Ranson responded.

“Hell no, I couldn’t be less certain, but I can’t sit here any longer. Lanie and my kids are out there. I got to find them,” Mac replied.

Mac knew Ranson could hear the agony in his voice, and Ranson nodded.

“Come on, Cuz, let’s get your family,” Ranson said.

Vladimir/Vampire

As fast as the van was travelling, it couldn’t out speed the Legends. They were on it as soon as Ranson had called it in. Mary planned to use the van’s wing mirrors to move the Legends, and they could see the sweaty human driving it. Fear rolled off him in waves. It was Simon Clare, and he was clearly fleeing something.

“I’ll go first,” Vladimir said, shifting into Vampire.

Mary opened the portal, and Vampire flowed through it. He landed in the seat next to Simon.

Simon jumped and stared as the van swerved out of control.

Vampire wrenched it to a stop, overturning it down a grass verge and grunted as he landed on top of the human.

Vampire dragged him out of the smashed front window and shook Simon hard.

“He’s pissed himself,” Swamp Creature hissed, appearing.

“Oh God. Monsters are real!” Simon squealed.

“Where is the woman you kidnapped?” Vampire demanded, shaking Simon.

“I knew she was one of you!” Simon howled. “I won’t tell. You’ll have to kill me!”

“Rip his head open, I’ll eat his brain and discover where she is,” Frankenstein roared.

Simon passed out in fear.

“The great hero!” Dullahan sneered. “I’d not even shown him my party trick yet.” The head under his arm caught alight, and flames danced around it. Sighing, Dullahan put it out.

“Can you read his mind?” Frankenstein asked.

“Yeah. It’s foul and a cesspit, and he has an inflated opinion of himself. He’s not certain Lanie is Lamia because she wouldn’t shift. But he really wanted to cut her open. He was going to get off on that. Here, I have it, send this to Mac immediately,” Vampire ordered, reeling off the address.

“What do we do with him?” Swamp Creature asked.

“We’re going to leave him alive and send a message,” Vampire said with a grin.

Frankenstein frowned. “Is that wise?”

“Yes. Lanie needs to die. She will die at his hands. In his head, she’ll go hideous and in pain. He’ll have sliced Lanie open and ripped her human babies from her, which killed her. Simon will be convinced that Lanie was Lamia until the autopsy is done. That’ll prove she’s human. Slowly, doubts will creep in and drive him crazy as he realises he was brainwashed willingly by Alainen.

“Before he goes totally insane, Simon will tell everyone all he knows about the Hunters. He’ll liken them to a cult and name names. He will spill everything he has on them, and they’ll become famous for murdering Lanie. The Hunters will become the hunted. Then and only then shall Simon succumb to insanity for killing an

innocent woman,” Vampire said.

“Oh, that is bad. That’s bloody genius,” Frankenstein replied with a smirk. “A healthy dose of Fear will help.”

“Will he remember us?” Swamp Creature asked.

“No. He’ll never know.” Vampire grinned.

“Good. Let’s go,” Dullahan declared, looking around him. “We are too in the open.”

“Call Mary. We need to support Mac,” Vampire agreed.

Luckily for them, Mary only needed a sliver of mirror to open a portal, and she did so instantly. Usually, they carried a small pocket mirror but, in their haste, they’d forgotten it. And plus, mirrors were abundant nowadays.

Mac

He looked at the text he received.

“Turn around, we’re heading the wrong way. Lanie is at the old glass works,” he announced.

“Damn, that makes sense,” Ranson said, spinning the wheel. He performed an illegal U-turn and shot off down a dual carriageway in the direction of the immense building. It’d been used for a multitude of things, but there were rooms underneath that had been used to store dangerous materials, so it made sense why Mac couldn’t feel Lanie.

Fear was coiling in his gut. Because Vampire had confirmed that the van had been

empty and only Simon had been inside. Which meant either someone else had Lanie or Alainen had caught her. And if Alainen had Lanie, she didn't have long at all.

"Put your foot down," Mac demanded hoarsely. Lanie's life was in danger; he sensed it deep in his gut.

Lanie/Lamia

Lanie came to with a groan. Her jaw hurt, and she nearly screamed in frustration when she saw she was back in the cellar. It was still lit, but the cameras had been smashed to smithereens. Lanie was tied to a table, and she yanked on her bonds.

"Irideesa, how could you betray me?" Alainen murmured as he ran his finger down her cheek.

"Who are you?" Lanie demanded. She needed to buy time, and the best way was to play innocent.

"Stop the games," Alainen replied and slapped her cheek gently. He turned her face roughly to look at him, and Lanie flinched. Alainen's face creased in anger.

"The scar, Irideesa, look at how you marked me. A warrior of God!" Alainen snarled.

"I don't know who she is, please let me go," Lanie begged.

Alainen leant closer and licked the side of her face.

Lanie squirmed.

"Do not lie, Irideesa. Do you think I don't recognise my own mate?"

“I’m not your friend, we’ve never met?” Lanie denied.

“Stop!” Alainen boomed. “Drop your glamour, or heaven help me, I’ll harm you.”

“I have no clue who you’re talking about. You are all freaking whack jobs. Monsters and strange names and warriors of God. Lunatics!” Lanie yelled.

She hoped to see a momentary doubt in Alainen’s eyes, but instead, they hardened. He drew a dagger from his waist, and Lanie swallowed hard.

Without a word, Alainen stabbed downwards, and Lanie screamed. Alainen stroked her face as he murmured to her. Tears fell from Lanie’s eyes as she saw the dagger enter through her arm and embed into the table.

“Look what you made me do. Irideesa, just drop the glamour,” Alainen muttered.

“That’s what every abusive male says!” Lanie cried.

Alainen’s countenance darkened, and Lanie struggled to get free. He yanked the dagger free and stabbed her other hand. Lanie’s screams bounced off the small room as Alainen once again stroked her.

“Irideesa, you’re my mate, I’d know you anywhere,” Alainen said. “But you betrayed me. Broke our mate bond, do you have any idea of the agony I was in? Did you care?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” she replied, crying.

“Liar!” Alainen lifted the knife and held it above her stomach. “Did you think I didn’t hear you say you were pregnant? Your betrayal of me is twofold. How dare you take another man to your bed?”

His arms moved down to stab her unprotected belly when the door burst open.

Mac rushed through it and tackled Alainen, taking him down. Alainen roared as he fought back against Mac, who was in human form.

Ranson followed Mac through the door and headed for her. He grabbed the dagger Alainen had dropped and began cutting the ropes. All the while, his head swivelled to see if they were being filmed.

“Mac!” Lanie screeched as he flew backwards. Mac was a soldier, but he didn’t have the strength of being born as God’s chosen protector.

Alainen went after him, and Mac found himself on the defence.

“Shift!” Lanie screamed.

“I don’t know how!” Mac yelled back as Alainen’s fist hit where his head had been a mere second before.

Lanie sat up and shifted herself.

Alainen roared as he saw Lamia. “You bitch! I knew that was you!”

“You forced a bond on me, you were never my mate!” Lamia cried.

Alainen’s God Sword appeared in his hands as Lamia hissed. “I was yours!” he boomed.

“No. I was yours, you were never mine, you abusive piece of shit!”

Alainen came at her, and Lamia’s own God Sword appeared. She parried his blow

and struck back. Alainen dodged her strike, and Ranson scrambled out of the way as they began fighting in earnest. The table went flying as Alainen pressed his attack, insane rage and hate on his side.

Lamia hit him into a wall, leaving a man-shaped dent as she fought for the lives growing inside of her.

Alainen had abused her for thousands of years. And had tricked her before she absorbed Anger. Lamia had righteous anger, and she used every drop of it.

Mac was sitting slumped, shaking his head. Alainen had hit him hard, and Lamia yearned to get to him.

Alainen ran at her like a bull, and she hit him with her tail. "I'll take your head, foul creature," he promised.

"You're going to die today," Lamia snapped in return. Alainen spun and threw a dagger straight at Mac.

"No!" Lamia screamed.

Mac moved to one side and shifted. Alainen's eyes widened. "Two of you?"

"My real mate. Not forced on me. It was my bond with Mac that broke your hold on me," Lamia taunted.

Alainen roared in fury. "I'll kill you both!"

"You can try," Lamia cried and launched at him.

Alainen found himself hard-pressed as Mac struck from one side. He swung at Mac,

rightfully judging him to be slower and less used to his form. Alainen missed by inches, but Lamia didn't.

Her sword cut deep in the other side of his face, and blood sprayed everywhere. Blinded, Alainen swung wildly, and Mac hit him with the table.

Alainen stumbled back, and Lamia's sword cut deep once more.

His eyes widened and held hers as slowly his head rolled off his shoulders.

Lamia gasped as his head fell at her tail, dead eyes looking at her.

"No more than you deserved," she hissed.

"Are you okay?" Mac demanded, sliding over to her.

"I'll heal whilst I'm in this form. What do we do now? Simon Clare is still out there," Lamia asked.

Mac wrapped his arms around her and drew her in close. "We'll figure that out," Mac reassured, raining kisses down on her face.

"Lamia!" Vampire shouted as he rushed down the stairs.

"I'm here," she called, laying her head on Mac's chest.

"Thank God, sister. I was worried," Vampire admitted as he slowed down.

"Well, now, time didn't do him any favours, did it," Swamp Creature said, looking at Alainen's head.

“All the cameras have been destroyed, and the laptop smashed to pieces. The footage did cut off when you escaped Clare,” Dullahan explained, his head twisting around.

“That’s good because I was terrified one had continued recording,” Lamia replied. “But I wasn’t going to let him harm my babies. I couldn’t, even if it risked exposing us.”

“I understand,” Vampire soothed, and Lamia knew he did. Vampire had Amari, his precious daughter.

“What do we do now? This is going to be hard to explain,” Mac demanded.

“Burn it,” Ranson suggested.

“No. I’ve an idea. Listen...” Vampire said.

He explained what he’d done to Simon Clare and how they’d left him injured for the police to find. Vampire laid out the last of his plan.

“That’s going to take some manoeuvring,” Mac stated.

“Not really. Lilith can magic a body, I can hypnotise those we need to, and Mac can play the grieving fiancé.”

“Let’s do it,” Lamia said, and Vampire nodded as he called for Lilith.

Lanie/Lamia

“In a shocking turn of events, the world mourns the loss of Lanie Cross this evening. For three days, we all sat mesmerised and prayed for her escape or rescue. Tonight, the sad news was revealed that when Miss Cross escaped her kidnapper, she was

recaptured and tortured to death. The suspect, Simon Clare, then fled the warehouse and was involved in a car accident. This led to him being arrested by local police.

“While no details have been announced, it’s been noted that several officers who entered the derelict glass factory were seen to be physically sick. A source has reported that Miss Cross was horrifically tortured and has even announced her unborn babies were cut from her stomach.

“Her fiancé, Mr Joe McIntyre, has been informed and has identified the body. He is said to be highly distraught but thanks everyone for their prayers and well wishes. Mr McIntyre will be arranging Miss Cross’s funeral and that of his children. This is a tragic day for the world who watched and prayed, and gatherings have been held across Miss Cross's hometown and England. Candlelight vigils are being planned and held in respect of what happened.

“The new station is also investigating how Mr Clare was able to hack in and stop them regaining control of their satellite. This allowed him to control the media and not let them block his filming...”

???

Mac turned the TV off and dragged Lanie on top of him.

“Bored already?” she asked as she straddled his hips.

“Of you? Never. Of the news? Yes. But everything’s going to be fine. We’ve a plan in place, and you’re safe once more,” Mac soothed.

“But I can’t go out into the world again. I’m either constrained here or Refuge. I’ll miss my freedom,” Lanie complained.

“Baby, I know,” Mac said and rubbed her arms.

Lanie’s likeness had been plastered everywhere. Nobody would be able to walk past Lanie and not recognise her. Lanie bitterly regretted losing her freedom and knew it was permanent. Her human shifter side had been bust wide open. Even if a hundred years should pass, Lanie would be recognised by photographs. Her future in the world was over.

An uncomfortable prickling bubbled over her skin, and Lanie rubbed at her arms where Mac had been touching her. Had there been something on his hands.

The sensation increased uncomfortably, and Lanie gasped.

“Lanie?” Mac asked, but he seemed to be a long way away.

“Something’s wrong. Call Lilith,” Lanie demanded as her skin felt like it had caught on fire. There wasn’t pain, but she felt like she was shedding her skin like a snake. It reached fever pitch and then suddenly faded.

“What the hell?” Lanie demanded.

Mac let out a squeak, and she was dumped on her ass as he shot out of bed.

“Mac?” Lanie asked.

“Who are you, and where’s Lanie!?” Mac yelled.

“What?”

“Where is my fiancée?” Mac shouted as he backed away from her.

“Right here, you blasted idiot,” Lanie snapped and blinked. Her voice sounded different. She raised a hand and paused. Her hand was paler and daintier.

“Mac!” Lanie wailed. “What’s happening?”

“Lanie?” Mac asked, confused.

“Yes!” Lanie shrieked as Lily entered. She spotted Lanie sitting on the bed and changed into Lilith.

“Who the hell are you? How did you get here? Why haven’t the alarms gone off?” Lilith demanded.

“It’s me!”

“Who’s me?” Lilith retorted, her hands lifting in an attack.

“Put those weapons down! It’s me, something’s wrong. Have I shifted?” Lanie exclaimed.

“Lanie?” Lilith asked, peering at her.

“Yes. Someone, tell me what’s happening!”

“You are no longer Lanie. Or the Lanie you were, how damn confusing. You’re a redhead, sister, with green eyes and freckles. The complete opposite of your usual human form,” Lilith explained as Mac kept his hands held high.

“Why are you doing that?” Lilith asked, exasperated.

“Because one moment I was fondling Lanie, and the next she was in my bed. Yeah,

until I get confirmation that's my woman, I want my hands free and clear!" Mac snapped.

"I didn't need to know that, Mac!" Lilith retorted.

"Then don't ask. If you're Lanie, shift," he ordered Lanie.

Lanie did, and everyone relaxed.

"There's my girl!" Mac stated and walked towards her to fold her in his arms.

"Change again," Lilith demanded, and Lanie did.

"Well, that's a surprise. You are a redhead," Lilith said, shifting back to Lily.

Lanie frowned and headed for a mirror. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "How has this happened?"

"I think it's the spell we cast. We asked that your identity be hidden from the human world. Because you're now not hidden from the world, the spell has reactivated and remodelled your shifter form," Lily mused.

"It can do that?" Lanie gasped.

"I'd have said no, but with you being pregnant and the universal danger to you, it's possible."

"Damn," Lanie replied, looking at Mac.

"I'll love you no matter what, but I can't help feeling like I'm betraying you with another woman," Mac replied with a short laugh.

“I can see why.” Lily giggled as she began leaving their bedroom. “Next time, Mac, try not to bellow so loudly. You almost gave poor Jess a heart attack when you reached out to us, although I can see why. Having a strange woman straddling you must have been disconcerting!”

“Sorry,” Mac murmured as he studied Lanie. “This is damn confusing,” he finally admitted, and Lanie laughed.

“Poor you. Did you think I’d been spirited away?”

“Yes, I was ready to break your neck. Can we not do that too often?” Mac demanded.

“I didn’t know we could, and Lily did not either. But it gives us hope if we’re outed,” Lanie replied.

“I love you, babe, I do not care what you look like as long as you don’t change inside,” Mac said, dropping a kiss on her lips.

Lanie smiled and placed her hand on her stomach. “I thought love had passed me by, and then you came along and proved me wrong! Thank you for being you.”

There was hope. They had Refuge, and several other shifters had returned to them.

The Hunters might be hunting, but they’d lost a leader, and Alainen had been killed. Soon, Simon Clare would start spilling the beans on what he knew. And the Hunters would be outed as a cult.

A battle was coming. And this time, the Legends didn’t stand alone. And that was a relief.

But for now, all Lanie needed to know was that she was loved. And that was the most

precious gift of all.

Gargoyle

There it was, a silent whisper against his mind. He'd been locked down in his statue side for years. The Hunters had tried experimenting on him, but his stone was too hard to break.

Gargoyle gingerly reached out. There was a familiarity in the essence he sensed.

A smile broke out in his head, and he caught the tendril of thought again.

'Hello, sister!' he murmured. 'It's time. Come, free me!'

Ranson

He was smiling as he shut the laptop down showing Simon Clare ranting like a lunatic. Simon had pitched a full-on fit and claimed that Lanie was a monster and had insisted on seeing her body.

McIntyre had given permission, and Simon had returned hysterical.

'All monsters shifted into their natural form when dead,' Simon had kept screaming.

The cop with him pointed out that Lanie hadn't, so she wasn't a monster. Add into the fact that Fisher had died in the explosion Simon had caused, and the man was not coping. Simon had escalated into a meltdown of hysteria and guilt. Simon idled at wailing he'd murdered innocents and swearing everyone was deceiving him.

Either way, he was heading for maximum security psychiatrist lock up and would not likely be released ever.

Ranson left the room he had been given as a guest and headed for Mary's tower. He wanted to head back to Refuge for a bit. He'd lost a man to this, Fisher, and although Fisher had been buried, some guilt remained.

Ranson had ensured Fisher's family were heavily compensated. It would not bring him back, but they wouldn't suffer monetary problems. His boots stomped through the castle, and he entered an archway and banged into a woman.

Brown eyes held his before panic laced them. Ranson felt like he'd been hit with a barge pole.

"Oh, hell!" the girl exclaimed and raced past him.

Ranson stared after her in shock, feeling a warm sensation in his chest.

There was no time to think. Ranson chased after her, intent on hunting down what he believed was his mate!