



Saving Dakota (Vampires of Blood and Bones #19)

Author: *B.A. Stretke*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Even when it seems impossible, Fate will always find a path forward.

Dakota Winters is a Detective Lieutenant with the Tribal Police on his Native reservation in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. When police downstate gives a Tribal family the runaround in the search for a missing young man, Eric, Dakota takes on the case and heads into the unknown. The more he digs into this case, the farther he gets into a world he's only heard about in hushed whispers. With a shaman's magic as his protection, he heads to Mt. Pleasant, land of the Nightwalkers, determined to follow this case wherever it takes him. What he isn't prepared for is to find himself attracted to one of the vampires he is supposed to distrust. Surrounded by shifters, vampires, and otherworldly beasts, Dakota is risking his life and his heart to bring home answers.

Terrance Collins is a soldier for the DuCane Coven and a private investigator in Mt. Pleasant. He's good at both of his jobs, especially when the focus of the Coven's attention isn't playing nice with the Sheriff's department. Where the Sheriff and others find suspicion, Terrance finds his forever. Dakota Winters is like no one he has ever met, and his heart sings, knowing this is who fate has chosen for him. As the mystery surrounding them deepens, can Terrance win the heart of his beloved and keep him safe from the evil that has come to town?

Fate never backs down.

Total Pages (Source): 9

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:15 am

"He's been missing for eight days now, as far as we can tell." Able, one of the elders explained to Dakota. "His sister Paula lost touch with him on Sunday, and she hasn't heard anything since." Dakota understood that Eric had gone south to lower Michigan to the Traverse City area on a short fishing trip with his friend Ivy.

"What about Ivy? Has she been contacted?" He asked.

"No, neither of their phones are active. Ivy often fails to pay her bill, and her phone gets shut off, but Eric never lets his phone out of his sight, and it is always on. Paula reported him missing on day five, but the police in Traverse City don't seem to be taking it very seriously. They think he's a runaway."

"He's nineteen. How can he be a runaway." Dakota shook his head.

"Any answer is good enough if you don't care." Able looked away and walked over to take a seat on one of the straight-back chairs in the main room of the Tribal Police Station.

"Why didn't Paula come to us?" Dakota asked curious as to why she didn't seek their assistance sooner.

"She thought she had to contact the police station nearest to where he was last seen.

"Yes, but we can also help. I'll look into it and get back to you this evening." Dakota promised.

"Thank you, Dakota. Eric is a good kid, and I'd hate for something terrible to happen

to him.”

"I'll do everything I can, sir," Dakota swore.

"I know you will." The old man stood and patted Dakota on the shoulder, then turned and left without further discussion. Dakota had his work cut out for him. He needed to have something to present to the family by evening.

Dakota Winters held the rank of Detective Lieutenant at the Lac Vieux Desert Reservation Department of Public Safety also referred to as Tribal Police. He'd been an officer for the past four years and at Twenty-three years old was one of the youngest to reach that level of rank. He was good at his job, and he took pride in serving.

The situation with Eric was not uncommon, and often, as the police in Traverse City claimed, it was a case of a person simply wanting to get away from their home, family, responsibilities, or perceived pain; it could be anything. But Able wasn't one to raise the alarm for no reason, and he was not one to jump to conclusions. If he believed there was a problem, then there was a problem. He was the tribal shaman and was intuitive and able to see things that many others did not.

After speaking with Paula and a few of Eric's friends, he found out that he'd intended to stay no longer than a couple of weeks in the Traverse City area, camping, and fishing with Ivy before returning. He had a job lined up at the casino, which was to begin on Monday, and he wouldn't have missed that. It was a dealer position for which he'd already completed the training and was eager to become part of the team. It was a good job with good pay and benefits.

The police station in Traverse City did not provide much and their disinterest in the case was made obvious. They reported that both Eric and Ivy had checked out of the motel where they'd been staying on Sunday. That was the same day that Paula lost

contact with Eric.

According to the officer he was speaking with, the attendant at the motel told him that Eric mentioned they were going further south. The investigation was left there. Everything they had was half-assed and barely there, and Dakota was not filled with confidence in regard to their concern for the welfare of this young man.

They were convinced he simply wanted to get away from the reservation and his people were overreacting. It was a belief they were not willing to budge on and Dakota figured he needed to pick up this case himself and that's what he reported to Paula and Able when he met with them that evening.

"As you know, I'll have to do this on my own with no backing of the force. I will have no jurisdiction, but my position should afford me some respect and access." Dakota explained. "It looks to me like he may have headed in the direction of Mt. Pleasant. Ivy has family there and reported sightings have placed them near that area. I'll start in Traverse and head south from there and will keep you updated." He promised.

He felt for Paula, who, at ten years Eric's senior, had taken custody of the young man when he was eleven and had worked hard as a single woman to raise a strong and emotionally healthy young man. There had been too much tragedy in that family, and he wasn't going to give up on Eric without a fight.

"Come to my place tonight and I will prepare you." Able told him before parting and Dakota agreed. Able was their shaman and a deeply spiritual individual with powers that went well beyond the natural. He would provide Dakota with blessings and protections for the journey.

"Things have been pretty quiet these last few weeks. I think I could get used to it." Terrance commented as he and Raul headed for the Zen Bar. They ran the local

private investigation office in downtown Mt. Pleasant. It was a cover the Coven used to keep a presence in the town proper and also be on the cutting edge of any problems that might arise.

They had been field agents for most of their careers but came home when the opportunity presented itself. Raul had since found his beloved while working a local job involving rogue wolves, but Terrance had yet to find his forever lover. Raul's beloved Colin was a lovely young man, and the center of Raul's life, and Terrence often found himself anxious to have some of what those two owned.

The love, support, and sense of owning someone's heart touched Terrance and he wanted it all. But as always Fate worked in her own time and the years passed and Terrance was still alone. Soldiers and leaders and even Chef Reid found their forever lover and Terrance was left watching and waiting.

He took a job in Detroit and even accompanied the Coven Second to a meeting in Los Angeles in the hope of maybe connecting with his beloved, but each time, he returned alone. He decided that Fate would bless him when the time was right, and he needed to get his mind off the fact that everyone was finding the one except for him.

"Colin and I are going to the country house for the weekend. We'd love to have you join us if you don't have other plans." Raul mentioned as they entered the Zen and took a seat at the bar.

"Why would you want me to come along on a romantic weekend?" Terrance shook his head. "I'm not that pathetic, am I?" He laughed.

"Colin worries about you, Terrance. He said you're spending too much time alone."

"I appreciate his concern for me and your willingness to allow him to invite me along on this getaway, but honestly, I'm fine." Terrance was touched by their thoughtfulness

but smiled when Raul patted him on the shoulder.

“I would have loved to have to come along but I have to admit I was looking forward to having Colin all to myself in those dark woods.” He laughed and Terrance joined.

"Enjoy your time together because things have been quiet for too long, and we both know what that means," Terrance interjected. "I'll keep watch on the town this weekend because I have a feeling the quiet is about to end."

“Yeah, I feel it too.”

It was Friday morning, and Dakota was sitting on the edge of the bed at the Starlight Motel in downtown Mt. Pleasant. He had been on the road for two days now, and as he'd expected, all the signs pointed to Eric and Ivy being in this city. Ivy's debit card had been used for gas twice, once in Traverse and again about fifty miles from Mt. Pleasant.

His heart and his instincts were telling him that they were there they were somewhere in this town. He got up and showered and dressed before putting in a call to the local police station and asked about the Eric Blackbird missing persons case that was originally filed in Traverse City. He didn't identify himself as anything other than a friend who was making inquiries on behalf of the family.

They had little only what came through the wire from Grand Traverse County, and they claimed to have done a search of the area and found nothing. The officer he spoke to was Deputy Lawson who sounded capable and intelligent but also came off short and distant with little patience to be given to an outsider looking for answers.

He advised Dakota to go back to Grand Traverse County because the likelihood was that Eric was still there. Dakota thanked him for his time and hung up. He was useless and out of touch Deputy Lawson cared nothing about Eric Blackbird and did not

hesitate to make that clear.

He had a strange feeling about this town. Able had told him during the protection ritual he conducted the night before Dakota left on this journey that he would encounter others. By that he meant something other than human. Able had referred to them as nightwalkers and that they controlled this area of the state. But he also mentioned others that shared their spirit with the animals, and he said that the guardians of the nether world, the black dogs, also existed in this territory.

Dakota felt the energy in the atmosphere the moment he drove into town. The magic, the mystery and the shadows abounded. This was the territory of the unearthly and Dakota would have to walk with care and attention. Eric would have felt the shift and would not have lingered, but his heart was telling him that Eric was there . . . somewhere and he had to find him.

He decided to have breakfast that morning at the café across from the bookstore and show Eric's picture to see if he got any recognition from anyone. During his walk last night, he found the least mystical energy to be in that area. That would mean the others don't frequent the area often and Eric would have felt that too so if he was in town he would go there. Someone might recognize him and know where he is or where he went. He decided to walk.

Last night he got many different impressions as he walked the downtown area, and the worst was near the Zen Bar there were heavy magics there and a depressive heaviness that was so thick Dakota could taste it. The nightwalkers, the animal spirits and the black dogs were all present.

He hadn't gone inside, and they did not notice him. Most of downtown was touched by the supernatural except for the café and the bookstore. There might be other places within the city, but downtown was usually a good indicator for the town overall.

Able had told him the nightwalkers ruled Mt. Pleasant, and if that were true, they would know Eric's whereabouts. But the likelihood of them sharing that information was small. He didn't want to think about the possibility that they held Eric for the idea was too distasteful.

The café was busy, but several tables were still available. He took one by the east wall near the front window that looked out on the main street but didn't put him on display. He watched people coming and going, everything looking normal, but in his heart, he knew this town was anything but.

The moment the wolf entered the café, Dakota felt the shift in the atmosphere. There was a sudden charge in the air, and he could see the spirit of the wolf beneath the face of the man. He wore a deputy uniform, and he was looking at him, and there was a strange recognition was almost immediate, damn so much for keeping a low profile.

The officer got his coffee and headed right for Dakota. "Do you mind if I sit here?" He was indicating Dakota's table.

"There are other empty tables," Dakota stated without expression.

"You're new in town." The deputy said with a look that was both derisive and suspicious.

"Is that against the law?" Dakota asked and took a slow sip of his coffee.

"What's your name friend?" The deputy took a wide stance as if thinking he might have to defend himself, and set his coffee down on the table.

"What is your issue with me officer?" Dakota remained calm and detached, and it seemed to infuriate the young man.

“No issue.” He lied. “Just being friendly.” Dakota cocked an eyebrow as he looked up at him but did not comment since his expression said all he needed to say. He was spared further discourse when the Sheriff stepped in and called out to the officer.

“Lawson.” He called and it all made sense. Dakota thought the superior disdainful attitude sounded familiar this was the deputy he spoke to on the phone earlier. The deputy fixed him with a hard stare that Dakota held and returned. He then turned and joined the Sheriff at the door.

Dakota watched as they spoke and then Lawson left the café, but the Sheriff remained, and he was heading Dakota's direction. The closer he came the heavier the air became he was no average animal. The darkness and energy exuding from this man was massive. He was a black dog a fearsome creature and bringer of death. Dakota stiffened slightly in his seat and waited. His fear for the welfare of Eric Blackbird spiked in the face of such creatures.

This man did not ask permission to sit he pulled out the chair and sat down opposite Dakota. They locked eyes and remained silent for several seconds before he introduced himself as Sheriff Kass Keller and then waited for Dakota to do the same but instead merely nodded.

"What can I do for you, Sheriff?" He asked.

“My deputy believes that you may be trouble.” The Sheriff spoke honestly.

"Your deputy is very excitable," Dakota responded with a calm he definitely was not feeling, and the grin on the dog's face did nothing to lighten his dread.

"Yes, he can be but as a rule I trust his instincts." Good man, he didn't discount Dakota's feelings and still supported his deputy. The slow back and forth continued for a few more minutes with neither side gaining any real information. Then the

Sheriff stood and, with a full smile that seemed out of place, said goodbye.

There was more to that exchange than appeared obvious. The Sheriff had an agenda, but Dakota was not aware, at this point, of what it was. The town was off, and the citizens closed and suspicious or perhaps it was only the others and not the entire citizenry. Once the deputy and the Sheriff had gone he waited a few minutes and with a picture of Eric and one of Ivy questioned the staff if they had seen either of them.

He identified himself to everyone he spoke with and explained his interest in finding them. He hadn't shared anything with the others and didn't plan on it. The Sheriff's office was clearly a no go since they were all of a similar breed. He wasn't certain if the others were involved in Eric's disappearance but it was very possible so he would deal with the humans of Mt. Pleasant as much as possible and avoid the others for now.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:15 am

"K ass is keeping the guy busy at the Café, and he wants us to go through his motel room and see what we can find," Raul said as he grabbed his phone and the keys to his vehicle.

"Take Eli with you for now and I'll catch up with you. I'm on a call with Caleb from Toledo regarding the disappearance of that young vampire they've been holding for observation. He thinks the guy might be headed in our direction." Terrance explained.

"The one who was infected by some sort of blood witchery?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"That's all we need." Raul drawled sarcastically. He gave Terrance the room number at the Starlight Motel and said he'd see him there, so he left. Terrance finished his call about fifteen minutes later and headed to the motel. It was odd that Kass wanted a stranger's room searched simply because he was a stranger in town. He trusted the man implicitly, but the whole thing was smacking of prejudice, and he hoped that wasn't the case.

They were miffed because the guy wouldn't give them his name or answer their questions. Terrance hoped they would find something that would provide them with a reason for this search. He was surprised to see Raul, Eli, and Lawson standing outside the unit, looking decidedly perplexed.

"What's wrong?"

"Not sure, but none of us have been able to enter the room." Raul spoke up.

"What do you mean?" Terrance walked up to them, and Raul gave him a demonstration. He had already disengaged the locking mechanism, so he tried to open the door, but it would not give. The more Raul pressed, the more resistance was built. Then Eli tried, and Lawson, and neither of them could open an unlocked door.

Terrance looked through the window as best he could to try and see if something was blocking the door. "I looked from the bathroom window which gives a clear view of the door and there is nothing blocking the door." Terrance said with a shake of his head. "It's got to be something mystical."

"I knew it." Lawson erupted. "He's some sort of fucking mystic."

"What's his name?" Terrance asked.

"Dakota Winters," Lawson stated with contempt. "I got that from the waitress at the café. He's hiding something because he flatly refused to give us his name."

"If he was hiding, he wouldn't have given his name to the waitress. I think he just doesn't like you, Lawson." Terrance pinned him with a knowing stare. "What do you have against the guy?"

"He's a cocky bastard," Lawson admitted, and everyone gave a chuckle in response.

"Well, we can't allow that now, can we," Raul added with sarcasm and an eye roll.

"I'm going to call the Sheriff and let him know it's a bust. It'll take another mystic to break this spell, or whatever it is he's using." Lawson was on his call when Terrance walked up and opened the door. It swung inward with ease at his touch.

Everyone stood still and watched as Terrance took a tentative step inside the room. The others approached, but Terrance waved them back. For whatever reason, he was

being allowed inside the room, and he didn't want their presence to ruin it.

Terrance stood in the center of the room and looked around. The scene was native and powerful. Dakota Winters' protections were directly linked to the elements, and he should not have been able to walk in because such protections were ancient and absolute and yet he was allowed inside. As he glanced around the room the mood settled into his heart, and it was beautiful.

Then he took a deep breath, and the truth fell upon his senses. The limits and barriers that Dakota had erected did not apply to him. His power did not affect Terrance. The reasoning for that fact filled his heart and mind and a warmth spread through him affecting him mentally, emotionally and physically.

"He's a sorcerer." Lawson burst out, eager to accuse.

Terrance shook his head. "He's Native American, as I'm sure you're well aware, and he is being protected by a skillful Shaman." Terrance took another deep breath, taking in the heady and thick aroma of sweetgrass and honey, the amazing scent of his beloved.

This stranger in town was his beloved. The realization was a shocker and explained why he was able to open the door. The universe knew their connection and placed no barriers between them. Terrance turned and left, closing the door behind him.

"Why is he here?" Raul asked as Lawson tried opening the door, but once again, it would not open for him.

"Why did the door open for you?" Lawson cut into the conversation.

"He is searching for someone, and his search has led him to Mt. Pleasant." Terrance stated and then turned to Lawson, but he wasn't ready to make his announcement so

simply shrugged as a response to his question and left it there.

"The fact that he's native is obvious, but what about the shaman angle? Is he dangerous?" Lawson was still searching for a villain in the piece.

"I doubt he's dangerous to us, but he's focused and determined from what I felt in that room." Terrance continued to keep it basic and cool, not ready to make any real declarations regarding the man. He needed to meet him and talk to him. "Where is he now?"

"Sheriff Keller was talking to him at the café, and then he arranged to have him followed when he left. The last report had him at the library."

"Thanks, Lawson. I think Raul and I will take it from here. We'll keep you informed." He had no intention of keeping Lawson in the loop, but it was the easiest way to get him to let go of the case.

Eli went with Deputy Lawson back to the police station to report to Sheriff Keller while Terrance and Raul headed to the library. Terrance had a lot on his mind, and he wanted privacy to discuss it with Raul. Dakota Winters was his beloved and he was eager to meet the guy.

Lawson inferred that he looked very native, but that didn't tell him much. He was aching to call up a photo on his phone but resisted as he wanted to see his beloved for the first time in the flesh and not in a picture.

"Okay, what is it that's weighing so heavily on your mind?" Raul asked as they drove together to the library on Union Street. Raul was behind the wheel and kept glancing speculatively over at Terrance. "You've been distracted ever since you entered that guy's motel room."

“He’s my beloved.” He blurted and Raul looked at him and then back at the road and then back at him and then back at the road.

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.” Terrance shifted his gaze to look out the side window as he remembered the feeling of that amazing aroma as it enveloped him. “Sweetgrass and honey it was intoxicating.”

“So that’s why you were able to open the door.” Raul nodded to himself. “His voodoo doesn’t work on you.”

“I’d like to keep the connection between us quiet until I figure out what we’re dealing with.” He asked and Raul agreed.

“Do you think he will know?”

"He recognized Lawson and Keller and went to the only part of town that is predominantly human. I believe he knows a lot more than we think."

"Lawson said he got the impression the guy knew what he was, and then he went by his expression to assume he recognized Keller." Raul pointed out. Terrance rolled his eyes and looked over at Raul.

“What do you think?” His sarcasm was barely noticeable.

"Yeah, you're right. Lawson is pent-up about this guy, but he's also a good deputy with good instincts. The guy might not know exactly what he's dealing with, but I'm sure he has a good idea." Raul relented, and Terrance concurred.

They pulled into the library lot and parked by the building and then just sat there for a

few minutes. Raul turned and looked at him with a half grin on his face. “So, are you ready to go inside and get a look at your beloved?”

“My heart is beating out of my chest I’m anxious but also a little scared.” He admitted. “He clearly held no love for the wolf shifter, or the hellhound so how will he feel about the vampire.”

“You’re his beloved so whatever his issues they will work themselves out.” Raul patted him on the shoulder. “Come on let’s go meet your forever after.” He teased and they both exited the vehicle.

“Dakota Winters.” He said the name under his breath and sensed the importance wash over him. The minute they stepped through the doors he felt his presence and he breathed in the heavy scent of sweetgrass and honey. Dakota Winters was still in the building.

They stepped up to the desk and looked around. Terrance could feel his vibrations tingling along the surface of his flesh. He knew the man was nearby and then he saw him. He was standing at the end of the long desk speaking with a man and showing him a picture. As if on que, Dakota turned, and their eyes locked for only a few seconds but it was monumental. His dark eyes flashed with awareness.

He appeared surprised, not in a startled way but rather in a thoroughly shocked fashion. He obviously recognized them as supernaturals, but the look he gave them was more than that. Terrance was certain that Dakota knew there was more there he must have felt some of what bombarded Terrance at that brief encounter.

His heart was pounding wildly in his chest while his breathing was reduced to short, shallow pants. Dakota was stunningly beautiful beyond anything he could have imagined. His Native American background was obvious in the dark hair that hung straight and glossy to the center of his back. His eyes were dark brown and looked at

him with curiosity and with an intensity that shook. His skin was tan and his bone structure solid and angular. Handsome did not go far enough in describing his incredible looks.

He appeared to be about five foot ten or maybe six feet, it was hard to tell at this distance but either way he was not short or diminutive in any way. He was a strong and solidly handsome man and Terrance ached to know him. They headed in his direction, but Dakota quickly ducked down an aisle clearly attempting to avoid them. He and Raul split up and tried to trap him, but he was out the back door before they could complete the maneuver.

"He really doesn't want to talk with us." Raul drawled, and Terrance nodded his head as he considered their next move. "He's going to keep running for whatever reason, he doesn't trust anyone he perceives as not human."

Terrance went back to the librarian with whom Dakota had been speaking. He used a glamour to get the guy talking because he did not have the patience to play games. "He was asking about a young Indian boy who disappeared. He showed me his picture, but I hadn't seen him, and I didn't recognize the name."

"What is the boy's name?" Terrance prompted.

"Eric Blackbird. He was last seen in Traverse City with a young girl of the same age named Ivy Lee. There was evidence apparently that they'd headed in this direction."

"Did this man identify himself and explain why he was looking for the boy?" Terrance had his name but was hoping the man may have shared more with the librarian.

"He said he was Detective Lieutenant Dakota Winters from the Lac Vieux Desert Reservation in Watersmeet up north. He was sent to find the boy." Terrance thanked

him, and he and Raul headed back to their car.

"That cleared up a lot, but it's still unsettling that he seems to be able to recognize us. How is that possible?" Raul threw out the idle question.

"He's a member of the Lake Superior Chippewas, which are known to possess spiritual and mystical abilities and insights. Based on what I saw in his motel room, he knew exactly what he was going to be dealing with here and prepared himself accordingly." Terrance stated, a bit disheartening. "By the shocked look on his face, I don't think he was prepared to meet his beloved." He threw out as he dropped into the passenger seat of the car.

Raul sat behind the wheel but did not immediately start the car. Instead, he turned to his friend. "You know how this works." He began. "Fate makes her design, and fight as you might, she always gets her way. He may not know it yet, but you, my friend, are his destiny, and soon he will understand that fact. He will be drawn to you just as you are drawn to him. Make yourself available." Raul nodded with a knowing smile and started the car.

"Make myself available. Is that all you got, Raul?" He mocked.

"It's all you need, trust me."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:15 am

Dakota hurried down the alley and stepped behind a restaurant dumpster, confident that the pungent odor would mask his scent. They were looking for him, and their presence was immediately obvious. They were nightwalkers, and one of them was particularly powerful.

Dakota did not feel he was prepared to deal with all the supernatural elements of Mt. Pleasant just yet. Able's work had shielded him to a great extent, but the nightwalkers were the most powerful among the others. He wouldn't be able to avoid them for long.

The two who entered the library were formidable beings and not the caliber of nightwalker he'd encountered in the past. These men were solid and focused and appeared to be very comfortable among the humans. Their glamour probably kept their secret for them but still how could their power and essence be missed it saturated the air.

The dark one was particularly impressive, and Dakota found it difficult to put him out of his thoughts. His hair black as the night and with eyes to match he had the presence of a leader a power beyond what Dakota was prepared to meet. His gaze had captured Dakota and held him for several seconds and during that time he felt the heat and force of the man.

He didn't know his name, but he was certain that they would meet again. There was a calling between them, which Dakota did not understand, but it had meant something. The feeling of knowing that man was filling him, but he had never met him before. As hard as he tried to dismiss the feelings and put them aside, the more the vision of his perfection overwhelmed him. Dakota hadn't been in a relationship for a very long

time, and he was looking at this nightwalker with a hunger that he should not be feeling.

Dakota hurried down the block to his rented car and headed back to his motel room. He needed to make some calls based on the information he had gathered. Eric had been seen by the cashier at the café.

He had been alone and had appeared rushed and jumpy. He'd ordered two coffees and a ham sandwich and abruptly left. Dakota planned to check the local motels and campgrounds to see if he could pick up a scent or further direction. He'd started earlier and hit some of the establishments with no luck. But Mt. Pleasant had quite a few low-dollar motels and a fair number of hangouts that a person could crash at for little or nothing.

Dakota drove into the Starlight and parked across the lot. He didn't like parking in front of his unit because it disturbed his line of sight. In a town like Mt. Pleasant, you wanted to keep your vision clear. He settled in with a coffee he'd picked up at a gas station and made his calls.

He identified himself to everyone he spoke to, apart from the Sheriff and his deputy, so it was just a matter of time before the others knew exactly who he was and why he was there. Whether they left him alone or involved themselves in his business remained to be seen.

As he sat there considering his next move, his mind once again trailed back to the dark one, and the prevalent scent of fresh-cut cedar filled his senses upon seeing him. The pleasant scent had a meaning, but he couldn't remember what it was or where he'd heard about it. Like the man himself, the scent took over his heart and mind, filling him with satisfaction and longing. He had no idea where this would lead, but he knew for a fact that he would be seeing the tall, dark one again very soon.

"Paula, did Eric happen to say anything to you about his relationship with Ivy? Did he tell you they were serious or simply hanging out together?" The lady at the café had alluded to Eric commenting on his fiancé being unwell and that he was bringing them something to eat. She was certain he'd referred to them as his fiancé.

"They're just friends, as far as I know, Dakota. Eric would have told me if it had gotten more serious. Ivy is not his fiancé, and I'm not sure why he would tell someone she was."

"Maybe it means nothing. He might have just used it for expediency. Eric wasn't one who liked long explanations." Dakota theorized.

"You have a solid lead on him in Mt. Pleasant?" She asked.

"He was here four days ago, and people saw him and spoke to him." He told her.

"Find him, Dakota." She was trying to stay strong, but her pain was evident.

"I will, Paula, I promise." He wouldn't usually make such a statement, but he felt certain that Eric was still in the area, and it was just a matter of time before he found him. He was just about to contact his captain with an update when he felt a wave of energy, the likes of which he had never encountered before. It swamped him, constricting his breathing and filling him with fearful alarm.

"He probably went back to the motel," Raul said as they made their way down the main street.

"Most likely, since all his protections are there." Terrance agreed. "We need to convince him to talk to us, but he seems to have a twisted view of the supernatural."

"Maybe that's his experience where he's from. Not all communities are a positive

experience. There are some real bastards out there, and you and I have met quite a number of them.” Raul defended the man, and it brought a smile to Terrance's face.

"I'm going to send the information on Detective Lieutenant Winters and Eric Blackbird to Easton and see what he can find out for us." Terrance quickly sent the text, followed by the file.

“Detective Lieutenant is a notable title why would they send him on a case like this. It’s a missing person which should be handled by their officers keeping in touch with the local authorities." Raul was trying to sort out the information. "They either care deeply for this boy, or they know something we don't."

"It's probably both." Terrance was going to elaborate when he received a text from Easton. "Master DuCane wants us to bring Detective Lieutenant Winters to the Palace. He wants to speak with him." Terrance read the message out loud. They looked at one another, knowing full well that Detective Lieutenant Winters would not willingly accompany them anywhere, let alone the Palace.

“Hell, he hasn’t even agreed to speak with us yet.” Raul shook his head.

“I’ll explain our situation and see what he wants us to do.” Terrance offered and sent an explanation to Easton outlining the man’s distrust and apparent awareness of the supernatural. He also added that Dakota Winters was his beloved because the Master was not someone you kept information from. After a few minutes, to his surprise, Terrance received a response from Master DuCane.

"The Master will meet us at the Starlight," Terrance stated.

“He’s coming here?” Raul looked as shocked as Terrance felt.

"Yes, if Dakota Winters won't come to him, then he's coming to Dakota Winters."

They pulled into the lot parking across from Dakota's unit and waited. It wasn't long before the Master's car pulled into the lot and parked right in front of the unit in question. Master DuCane was not someone who hid in a back lot he always made himself known.

Ira was his driver and followed a few steps back as Master DuCane headed for the door. Both Raul and Terrance hurried to catch up and stayed back with Ira. The Master knocked on the door and then waiting only a few seconds he then opened the door swinging it inwards and stepping inside. Whatever Dakota was using it wasn't powerful enough to keep Master DuCane outside.

Raul and Ira hung back, not able to walk across the threshold. Terrance stepped up to the Master positioning himself on his left and back a couple of feet. Dakota was across the room which was no more than about fourteen feet away. He watched them but did not move or speak. His expression was unreadable, but tension filled the air between them.

"Why are you in my territory?" Master DuCane asked, and his tone did not leave room for silence or denial. Dakota did not respond immediately as he sized them up and considered his options. Thankfully, he had the good judgment to give the Master what he asked for.

"I am Detective Lieutenant Dakota Winters from the Lac Vieux Desert Reservation in Watersmeet." He began by explaining Eric Blackbird's disappearance and his family's concerns. He also spoke of the disregard he encountered with the police in Traverse City and the Sheriff's Department in Mt. Pleasant. Their shaman had indicated trouble, mystical trouble, surrounding the disappearance, and he was sent to find the young man.

"You spoke with the local police regarding the boy's disappearance?" Master DuCane asked for clarity.

“Yes, I spoke with a deputy named Lawson and he couldn’t have cared less. I was dismissed and forgotten before I even closed the call.” That explained a lot regarding his disdain for the police and the paranormal population. It was surprising behavior for Deputy Lawson unfortunately.

Master DuCane stared at him for a few minutes neither of them speaking. Dakota held his gaze for a bit but ultimately dropped his gaze to stare at the floor. It was a sign of respect and Terrance wasn’t sure if Dakota knew what he was doing or not, but it was the right thing to do.

“You know what we are.” The Master stated but he was waiting for an answer. Dakota nodded.

"You and those standing with you are nightwalkers. Lawson is a wolf, and the Sheriff is a black dog, a guardian of the underworld." He spoke plain and did not falter to his credit.

"I am Master Louis DuCane, a vampire, and I lead Coven DuCane. This is Terrance, one of my soldiers." Terrance nodded to Dakota. Master DuCane then turned to the two standing by the door. "At the door are Raul and Ira, a soldier and a guard. Deputy Lawson is a wolf shifter, as are several of the officers, and Sheriff Keller is a hellhound. There are many different paranormal groups in this area, and I'm sure you are aware of them." The Master glanced around the room, taking in the evidence of protection.

"I was informed and prepared for this journey." That was all he said.

“I apologize for the behavior of my deputy, and it will be addressed. Your concerns and requests should have been given the care and respect they deserved.” Dakota seemed surprised by the apology.

“We will help in any way that we can my people and resources are at your disposal. I would ask that you take one of my people with you to make sure that you and your concerns are treated appropriately. You may choose who you wish to accompany you. Either Terrance, Raul or Ira but you must have an escort while in my territory.”

Dakota was stunned, frozen to the spot but tried desperately to not show fear or uncertainty. This one, Master DuCane, and the one called Terrance were completely unaffected by his charms and talismans. Those by the door were being held back just as the wolf and his companions had been denied entrance.

These two were powerful, especially the Master. Dakota understood the hierarchy in a coven and had come face to face with a Master vampire before, but none had exuded the aura that this one held. His very presence left Dakota drained and immobile, but he could not show weakness in front of this crowd.

Able had told him he would be dealing with the strongest and most feared among the others, but he'd foolishly assumed Lawson and the Sheriff to be the worst. They didn't hold a candle to the man who stood before him now. He was apologetic and offered him help but also included a chaperone in the deal. He wanted to keep an eye on Dakota, which was understandable. There was no trust between them, but there was a measure of honor and respect.

Terrance did not speak, but his eyes conveyed volumes. There was so much there beneath the surface. He sensed it first at the library, and the feeling of familiarity did not fade. When he stepped into the room behind the Master, Dakota was bombarded by the same thick smell of cedar. It enveloped him in a wave and soaked into his heart and mind. Terrance was important, and his presence brought calm and peaceful elements to it. Dakota knew his feelings were confusing and not something he really should be dealing with right now, but he went with his heart and decided that he needed to understand this man more fully.

“I choose Terrance.” He said after a few seconds of consideration. Terrance looked pleased by the choice and in turn that brought satisfaction to Dakota. It continued to be confusing all the way around.

"Very well." Master DuCane trained those black eyes on him once again, and Dakota was certain he could feel the cries through the ages, dark, angry, and ruthless, reaching for him. Then he broke off the connection and turned to the door. It was a small taste of who he was, and it shook Dakota to the core.

They left all except for Terrance, who remained standing before him, silent and waiting. The seconds stretched into minutes, and neither moved as they sized each other up. Whereas the Master's stare was bruising, Terrance's was warm and welcoming. His eyes appeared to see everything, and that was okay. Dakota was clear on the fact that he and Terrance were connected in some way. The peace he felt around the guy and the familiarity were both positive. He looked forward to getting to know him better because the attraction he felt was phenomenal.

“I’m sorry about your tribal member and I hope we will discover what happened to him and his friend and bring them back to you.” Terrance spoke earnestly and reached his hand out to Dakota. Dakota took the hand and held it in his.

“Thank you, Terrance.” He spoke the name, and it felt right on his tongue. “I appreciate any help that you can offer me.”

"Let's start at the Sheriff's office. I know you have had a rough start with our officers, but they are not all like Lawson. His treatment of you is an embarrassment and not what I would have expected from him." Dakota noticed that he had not yet released the man's hand, so slowly let it slide from his grip. He immediately missed the strength and security of his touch.

"I don't trust them," Dakota responded honestly.

"Sheriff Keller is a good man and a very capable sheriff. I'm sorry if you got off on the wrong foot with him, but he may have answers for you." Terrance spoke softly but there was command in his tone. His voice slid over Dakota's nerves, soothing and agreeable. There wasn't anything about Terrance that Dakota didn't find enjoyable. He looked away from those piercing dark eyes and pulled his focus back to the issue at hand.

"I did not share my information or concerns with the Sheriff after he clearly supported Deputy Lawson. I have no time for their opinions or games. I've found over the years that I move best and fastest when I move alone." He wasn't doubting Terrance he simply didn't want to deal with the assholes at the Sheriff's office.

"That's true in some instances, but the land and the people here are not familiar to you, so let us help you, and together, we will solve this, I promise." Terrance took a step closer and once again held Dakota's gaze.

"I made Eric's sister a similar promise," Dakota commented softly.

"Let me help you keep that promise." Terrance said softly and with a tenderness that touched his very bones. Dakota looked up at him and saw something in that gaze that endeared and pleaded. He was reaching out and Dakota could not resist responding. He reached out and took his hand while eyes never wavered from Terrance's intense stare.

"Who are you Terrance?" Dakota voiced his bewilderment. "Since the moment I saw you I felt that I knew you. Your heart calls to me beckoning me near and my heart responds. I need you close your touch gives me comfort and support. What is this between us and is it real or simply a glamour?"

Terrance moved slowly, took Dakota's hand, and held it in both of his hands, keeping his eyes trained solidly on Dakota's. His expression was open and happy, and he took

another step, putting him just a few inches in front of Dakota. "I recognized you too, Dakota, the minute I stepped foot into the library and took a deep breath. My lungs were filled with the sweet essence of sweetgrass and honey. I saw you at the end of the desk, and my heart began to hammer in my chest."

Dakota listened and saw that Terrence's reactions mirrored his own, and Terrence wasn't afraid to tell him exactly how and what he felt. "This is not fake and not a glamour. This is our destiny, Dakota. You are my beloved, and I have waited centuries to meet you." Dakota knew the word, he'd heard it before and knew its importance. Terrance bent and gently took Dakota's lips in a soft embrace. The contact was electrifying, sending thrills through Dakota, sensitizing every inch of his body.

He reached up and cupped the side of Terrance's face reveling in the touch of his warm skin and the amazing contact of his soft demanding lips. His mouth was searching and insistent and Dakota opened to his demands needing more and returning the kiss as ardently as he was receiving. The taste and the sensations of this kiss filled him with a sense of belonging and trust and a desire so deep he could feel it in every cell of his body.

The kiss came to a slow end with neither of them wanting to stop. Terrance pulled back on a strained deep breath and then pulled Dakota into his arms hugging him to his chest and burying his face in Dakota's hair. He could feel him taking long intense breaths while his fingers dug into Dakota's flesh. It was an embrace that was completely immobilizing, and it felt wonderful.

Dakota closed his eyes and did the same he took one deep breath after another drinking in the fresh scent of cedar and his natural manly scent. Dakota would have been satisfied to have stayed like that for hours. After a few minutes, Dakota looked up at Terrance searching his face for something.

“This is just the beginning.” Terrance whispered against the side of his face and then straightened still looking down at Dakota. “Let’s find Eric and settle whatever is going on with him and then focus on you and me.”

"You and me." Dakota's eyebrows raised, and Terrance smiled that heart-stopping smile.

“Oh yeah, there is definitely a you and me.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:15 am

Terrance was thrilled to have been able to move their connection forward. Dakota was a straightforward kind of guy and didn't waste time. He had a few questions based on his feelings and he wasn't shy about getting clarity. The relationship was out there now, and Terrance could begin building their bond but first they needed to find Eric Blackbird.

Terrance figured the Sheriff's office was a good place to start in order to set hard feelings aside and get everyone on the same page and working toward the same goal. Dakota seemed a bit resistant at first but came around. His hostility toward Lawson was deep and set, considering they only had a handful of contacts. Lawson screwed this up spectacularly.

He guided Dakota out to his vehicle, and they were soon on their way. "Your Master is very old and very powerful. I felt that stare right to my bones." Dakota stated.

"Yes, he is." He answered with a subtle smile covering both points. "Master DuCane and his second, Ismael Patronne, came to this area when the French were immigrating many centuries ago."

"The DuCane Coven controls this area?"

"It controls most of Michigan and parts of Ohio." Terrance clarified.

"The covens in the western U.P. are not as organized or civilized as those in the east or lower peninsula. They tend to be hostile and aloof, so I apologize for assumptions I have made about you and yours." The apology surprised Terrance, as did the description of the covens up north.

He planned to discuss the matter with Master DuCane at a later time. They had taken over most of the covens in Ohio because of behaviors that put them, the vampire community, in jeopardy. Perhaps the Western U.P. deserved the same scrutiny. They soon pulled up out front of the Sheriff's office and headed inside.

"I understand your feelings regarding Deputy Lawson, and I am sorry he was so bad at his job when dealing with you. But with that said, Sheriff Keller and the other officers are very good at their jobs, so please give them a chance." Terrance placed his hand on Dakota's back, enjoying the contact and lending some support before they entered the station. Dakota nodded with a tight look of concern but did not speak. He was clearly not ready to be friends with the local authorities as of yet.

To say that their arrival was not expected would be an understatement. Lawson was across the room speaking with one of the other deputies and Sheriff Kass Keller was in his office. The minute he and Dakota stepped inside Lawson moved towards them and his stance was still adversarial until Terrance took a sidestep moving to put himself between Lawson and Dakota. The man was being a complete jerk.

Lawson didn't say anything, but his expression spoke loudly of his continued dislike and disdain. "I'd like you to meet Detective Lieutenant Dakota Winters from the Lac Vieux Desert Reservation in Watersmeet."

Lawson should have checked him out and should have been aware that he was dealing with a fellow officer, but he'd chosen to be an asshole from the start instead. Now, he had the nerve to look surprised. Kass came out of his office at that moment, obviously having just finished a phone conversation with Master DuCane. He did not look happy.

Kass looked at Lawson who gave him his attention immediately. "Go to my office and stay there. I will be with you as soon as I'm finished here." He said and his tone was short and clipped. Lawson did not argue and left the room disappearing into the

back office.

Kass made his apologies to Dakota for himself and for Deputy Lawson. “Assumptions were made by us all and it would be best to put it behind us now and work together to find Eric Blackbird.” Dakota accepted the apology with no anger or sarcasm. He didn’t seem to have a problem with Kass. Terrance was impressed with Dakota’s rational attitude.

He truly was a man who saw the bigger picture and avoided petty pitfalls and obstacles. It became clear how he achieved his position at such a young age and also why he was given the task of finding Eric in a land laden with the unknown and the supernatural. His beloved was a thoroughly competent investigator and a very intriguing man.

They shared information with Kass, giving him a copy of the missing person's report and the progress of Traverse City detectives, which was mostly nothing. "I am sorry that we didn't take it seriously, especially when his sister and you contacted us for updates. With that said, we were sincerely under the impression that he had left voluntarily, just as the Traverse people had intimated."

“He was scheduled to start work as a dealer at the local casino, a job he trained for, and had waited a long time for an opening. He'd worked minimum wage until this position came his way, and he would not have just blown it off. He had plans that included college and working his way up in tribal politics he wouldn't have run away from something he saw as his future.” Dakota was adamant that Eric was a solid individual with clear goals and not someone searching for himself or needing to run away.

“What about this Ivy Lee?” Kass asked.

"No one has seen or heard from her, although the cashier at the café said that Eric

referred to a friend who wasn't feeling well. I've found no one that has actually seen her in town."

"Are they a couple?"

"No, just good friends, according to Eric. She isn't from the reservation, but they met working in town at the pizza shop last year." He paused for a moment and then added. "Eric is gay, and as far as I know, he hasn't had any serious relationships in that regard."

"Whose idea was the trip to Traverse City?" Terrance asked thinking that perhaps Ivy wasn't the person they were assuming.

"His sister Paula said they announced it together, and Eric made it sound like something they decided on as a nice getaway before he started his new job." Dakota glanced at Terrance, reading his meaning and giving him a slight nod. "Ivy, although friends with Eric, never got close with his family or spent time on the reservation."

"Ethan completed a background check on Ivy Lee," Terrance announced as he got the notice and skimmed through it quickly. "She's still in Traverse City staying with a cousin. She said that Eric continued on to Mt. Pleasant to do some fishing, but according to her, he wasn't planning on staying long." As he finished the report, Sheriff Keller got an alert.

"They found his vehicle." He announced the location and gave it to Terrance. "Deputy Walsh will go with you." Terrance patted Dakota on the arm, and he followed him out the door. Terrance noticed Kass heading into his office and considered the fact that he would not want to be Lawson right now. Kass was a stickler for professionalism and treating everyone with respect two things that were sorely lacking in Lawson's treatment of Detective Lieutenant Winters.

He could feel Dakota's excitement about the lead and hoped it rendered further information as to Eric's whereabouts. "It was spotted by a DNR officer by the river south of town. It's a popular spot for fishing so he might have gone there with that goal in mind." Terrance offered.

"That doesn't explain why he hasn't answered his phone or why he has not contacted his sister in over a week," Dakota stated.

"True." Terrance added and he started to wonder as to whether or not Eric would be found alive. The possibility of a tragedy having taken place was high and he was sure that Dakota was thinking the same thing.

"He may have suffered an accident." Dakota put it out there. "I honestly don't feel the heaviness of death I feel that Eric is here somewhere, and my intuition is usually correct." Terrance reached over placing his hand over Dakota's. To his delight Dakota took his hand and held it in a grip that was firm and purposeful. Terrance enjoyed the aura of his beloved and the enveloping scent of his presence.

Silence took them after getting into the SUV and heading out, both caught up in their own thoughts. After about twenty miles, Terrance ultimately pulled off the road and onto the state park land leading to the river. He hoped so hard that Eric was not dead he didn't want to present his beloved with something so disheartening and sad. He wanted to find this young man well and in one piece for the sake of Dakota.

"This boy is important to you." Terrance sensed that there was more to the assignment than just a law officer searching for a missing person.

"Eric's parents died when he was twelve, and his sister Paula, who had a life elsewhere and was building a career, dropped everything to come home and raise him. She gave up a lot and put her life on hold in order to provide for him." Dakota was on the edge of becoming emotional, but after a few deep breaths, he continued.

"For everything she sacrificed, it cannot end like this. It can't all be for nothing." Terrance felt his distress and, in that moment, would have done anything to make it go away. He squeezed his hand.

"We'll find him, Dakota." He said it, and it was a pledge.

Terrance pulled up to the turn out by the river and they got out walking a short path to the riverside and saw the small blue Ford. "This is his vehicle." Dakota announced and began looking it over without touching it. Soon Deputy Walsh arrived, and they did a thorough check of the vehicle. It was perfectly clean no sign of either Eric or Ivy.

"It cleaned out," Dakota stated. "Eric kept his car clean, but not this clean and definitely not while on a fishing trip." Terrance and Deputy Walsh, who was also a vampire, exchanged glances. Both had picked up on the scent of a vampire clinging to the vehicle. It wasn't a DuCane member, and this scent was acrid with tones of decay. It was the smell of rogue, and it sent a chill through them both. It did not bode well for young Eric to be in the company of such a creature, but there was no smell of death not in the vehicle or in the immediate area.

It appeared as though the car was cleaned out and dumped at the river's edge. There was no evidence of a human being in it there was only the putrid smell of rogue. Whoever the vampire was they had been touched by some sort of black magic.

It could perhaps be the young vampire that Caleb had warned them about. He relayed all of this to Walsh when Dakota wandered to the water's edge and crouched down, staring into the water.

Walsh called it in requesting additional officers to search the area. Terrance walked over to Dakota and stood next to him and waited. "Eric was never here. I don't feel his presence. Someone other than him brought that car here and parked it for us to

find.”

“I agree with you and so does Walsh. They’re canvassing the city to hopefully find out where he was staying before he disappeared. It will give a starting point in our search. Sheriff Keller will keep us informed.” Terrance tried to give him some hope.

"I checked all the cheaper motels and flop joints, and he hadn't stayed at any of them. I think whatever happened took place shortly after he arrived in town. He is a very capable outdoorsman and would have no problem camping almost anywhere. It leaves the possibilities wide open." Dakota continued to stare at the water as he spoke with Terrance.

Terrance was getting a strange vibe from the river, and he was pretty sure Dakota was feeling it, too. He placed his hand on Dakota's shoulder and squeezed, and Dakota leaned into it. "What do you feel?" Dakota asked. "Every nightwalker I've known has had the ability to scent out people, beings, and even highly charged situations." He turned and looked up at Terrance.

"He wasn't in the car when it was dumped here. The scent inside the car is sharp and acrid, indicating something otherworldly is involved, just as you thought." Terrance was careful with what he said, not wanting to give too much supernatural information until he was sure of Dakota's understanding.

“Otherworldly?” He asked with a slight squint.

“Not human.” Terrance clarified.

“I’d like to walk the river for a ways.” Dakota requested without further comment on the word, otherworldly, and Terrance nodded and fell into step beside him. “I’m getting something from these waters.” He announced after a few minutes of silence. “It’s not powerful but still hanging in the air. Probably not from Eric or whoever it

was that stole his car.” Dakota was speaking his thoughts as he ruminated over the information he knew and what he was feeling.

"Not long ago, a water mage used this river to escape detention. His beloved, a powerful vampire mystic, followed him, and he used the river to follow him. It could be their essence that you are feeling." Terrance offered an explanation.

"It all worked out for the best, I hope." Dakota flashed a smile that set everything in Terrance's heart and mind on fire. The wash of pleasure that came over him at that slight expression was stunning.

“It turned out nice for both of them and the DuCane coven gained a very powerful alliance.” Dakota stopped and looked around then looked up at Terrance.

“It’s a feeling that’s vibrating in the air.” He held his hand out as if touching something. “Do you feel it, Terrance?”

“No.” Terrance shook his head. “But I believe you’re more intuitive than I regarding subtle differences in aura and atmosphere.”

“Thank you for not writing off my impressions.”

“I never will.” Terrance stated casually but it was a vow. “You’ve shown yourself to be capable and correct. You knew that Lawson was a wolf, that I was a vampire and that DuCane was the Master so why would I not trust your opinion now.” Terrance glanced down when he felt Dakota touch his hand.

"I find your touch comforting and stabilizing." Dakota suddenly changed the subject as if needing to understand. "Every time you touch me, my spirit calms and my mind clears." He continued, and Terrance stayed silent but took Dakota's hand in his and brought it to his lips for a kiss that lingered for a few seconds. He then continued to

hold it as they resumed their walk along the edge of the river.

"I chose you because I was drawn to you. You entered my room effortlessly when others could not, and I know that it was not the first time you were there. I recognized your presence when I returned to my room." He glanced up at Terrance, and they stopped and turned to face one another.

"I understand why the Master moved about with ease he's at a level that far exceeds my abilities to stand strong as a vessel of my shaman's power. But you should have been thwarted just as the others were." Dakota searched his face over and over he was looking for something that would answer his questions.

"I sense no heightened powers within you, and yet my protections and the medicine that my shaman put forth are ineffectual. Able is a powerful medicine man and thoroughly prepared me for the experiences and confrontations I would have in this land. Yet you walk effortlessly through every barrier and limitation. I look at you, and I see the thunderbird, the protector." Terrance was freshly astounded by the sensitivity and insight of his beloved and grappled with what to say to him.

"You are my beloved as I said earlier, and I am your protector. Everything you're feeling is correct and I'm here for you Dakota." Terrance concurred and was about to explain further when his phone went off and he quickly answered. "Hello." He said but never took his eyes off Dakota.

"We've found Eric Blackbird." It was Kass calling. "Lawson and Sergeant McShane were combing some of the more obscure local areas and found him behind the Pettiford mausoleum in the Maple Ridge Cemetery. He's in bad shape and has been taken to the Palace for treatment."

"Was he dumped there?"

“I believe so or perhaps he escaped either way, it’s not good.”

“Thanks, we’re on our way.” Terrance closed the call and before he could say anything Dakota spoke.

“They found him.”

“Yes.”

“Is he alive?”

“Yes, but he’s not in good shape.”

“Is he being taken to the hospital?” Dakota turned and started back to where they’d parked the car.

“They’re taking him to Coven DuCane.” That statement had Dakota stopping in his tracks and turning to Terrance with a dark and stormy expression.

“Why in the hell would they take him to a coven for treatment?” He said through a clenched jaw.

“His issues are not something a human doctor would understand. Remember the acrid scent from his car?” Dakota nodded. “We believe he was in the company of something dangerous.” Dakota just stared at him for several seconds processing what Terrance wasn’t saying and then nodded his head.

"Let's go then. I need to see him." They jogged quickly back to their vehicle and took off for the Palace.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:15 am

The news that Eric was found should have brought relief but the fact that he needed the skills of the supernatural to heal him brought a tense uneasiness. He trusted Terrance even though he knew little about the tall handsome nightwalker he felt in his soul that the man was true and solid and there for him like the thunderbird in his visions.

“What is Eric’s condition?” He asked for just the basics or a heads up knowing that once he got to the coven house he would know the situation as long as they allowed him to see Eric.

“Kass told me that he was unconscious when Deputy Lawson and Sergeant McShane found him lying in the long grass behind the mausoleum. He is alive but unresponsive.” He could tell that Terrance was holding back. He’d only known the man for a few hours, but he found himself tuned into his expressions and behaviors.

“Has he been affected by one of the others? By the danger that was in his car?”

“The others?” Terrance asked.

“Everything supernatural is referred to as others in my culture.”

“Yes, he has been touched by something dark and powerful.” Terrance did not hold back this time.

"Is Eric still present?" Terrance would know what he meant. Just because he was still breathing didn't mean that his soul was present.

"Kass is a hellhound. He knows when someone has passed over, and he said that Eric was still there, but he was bound by the darkness that touched him." It made sense now that Eric was being brought to the coven house rather than the hospital.

"Does this darkness have a name?"

"Blood witchery." That was a shock that Dakota had not expected.

"Witches?" He said the word with disgust, and Terrance nodded.

"A witch doing blood spells of some sort. Our experts are not completely familiar with what is being used or why your friend was targeted." Terrance elaborated. Dakota shook his head and remembered Able telling him that there was trouble in Mt. Pleasant hard and terrible trouble. He fully understood now all the precautions that Able had put in place and all the purifications and protections he'd laid down.

"Crime of opportunity most likely." Dakota offered. "Eric is a good kid with a very big heart. He would graciously help anyone who needed help."

"We'll figure this out." Terrance assured. "We have some of the best people and have virtually unlimited access to whatever we may need. He'll get through this." Terrance was making a huge promise, but his confidence touched Dakota who was also sensing that Eric would come back from this. He held fast to Terrance's hand channeling his own certainty while gaining support from Terrance as well.

He was suddenly struck silent when they entered a gate nothing extravagant and rather out in the open, but it was clear that eyes were everywhere. Dakota could feel the scrutiny touching him and then they came to the main gates, the true gates of Coven DuCane. They were massive and menacing and sent a clear message of stay out or deal with the consequences. Terrance spoke briefly with a man tall, muscular and threatening. He was pleasant to Terrance but cut a suspicious glance at Dakota

before sending them on.

"He was very intimidating," Dakota commented.

"That's his job." Terrance turned to him and smiled, and it was an expression that went straight to Dakota's heart. The sensation of connection and caring was washing over him just as the previous feelings of protection had touched him. This thing that existed between them was potent.

It wasn't long before the majesty of the gates gave way to the grandeur of the Palace. "The title of Palace is quite apt. Such a structure as this existing hidden in the back woods of this small town is incredible."

"The Master enjoys a regal existence but also values his privacy." Terrance smiled, and Dakota melted once again. "He built this place to somewhat mirror the grand luxuries of his homeland."

"His people are very lucky to have such a leader," Dakota commented.

"He's an excellent leader and a good man," Terrance spoke from a place of loyalty, but Dakota remembered the look in Master DuCane's eyes when he stood in Dakota's motel room and looked right through him. The man possessed a darkening and a fierceness that he held in check but was it was always there pressing on the edges eager to be released.

It was very clear that none could compare to the DuCane Coven in terms of its size, capital and competency. This place was a mighty city all unto itself and the feeling of the supernatural gradually became heavier as Dakota drew closer. Dakota took a deep breath and was filled with the soothing scent of cedar. "I love the way you smell . . . fresh cut cedar . . . it is amazing." Dakota commented.

Terrance parked in a back lot and turned off the vehicle before responding. "You smell like sweetgrass and honey, and it is absolutely delicious." Dakota stared at him, holding his gaze, and the exchange was charged and emotional.

"What does it all mean, Terrance?" He wished he could have taken the question back as soon as it left his lips. He didn't want to get into whatever this was right now. He had Eric and the vampires and this cursed supernatural place to deal with. His mind was reeling, and his body was feeling all kinds of reactions to the oddities that were swirling around him.

"Let's speak with the Master and see about Eric's situation, and then we will talk." It was curt and blunt but did not feel dismissive. Terrance had something to say but wanted to wait, which was good. Dakota did not have the headspace to deal with whatever the issue was on top of everything else.

Clearing one problem before moving to the next was a good policy. Terrance leaned over and placed a hard kiss to Dakota's lips and the move was unexpected but welcome. "I'll explain everything." Dakota smiled and nodded completely under the spell of Terrance Collins.

The minute he stepped out of the vehicle the elements of the preternatural assaulted his senses. The protections he wore minimized their effect, but the presence of such power was tremendous. The strength of the Master was everywhere and was compounded by the energy and force of his people. The weight of it took his breath away for a moment.

Terrance came over to stand beside him. "You okay?" He asked and cupped the side of Dakota's cheek in the palm of his left hand. "There is a lot of energy pumping in this space, and it can be overwhelming if you're a sensitive." He understood and Dakota simply nodded. He then took him by the hand and led him to a side door of this colossal mansion.

Once inside, he released him, and Dakota stood and looked around. The door opened to a grand entryway, and beyond that was a wide hall and an imposing staircase. Terrance led him to the staircase.

"The elevators can be rather constricting for someone as sensitive as yourself. The open air of the staircase will lessen the pressure of the supernatural that you are feeling right now." They went up two flights and down a long corridor and ultimately arrived at a pristine white door. Terrance knocked once and then entered, holding the door open for Dakota.

He stepped cautiously inside noticing Master DuCane first since his presence filled the space. Next he saw Deputy Lawson standing off to the side with another officer that he did not recognize. The presence of Lawson filled him with a sudden animosity that was not missed by anyone especially Lawson. After the Master cut him a quick glance, he stepped back and left by a side door.

They stood together in this clean white room, and introductions were made. Terrance stayed close to him and at times took his hand or placed his hand on the small of his back. The contact coincided with each emotionally laden statement that was made, and there were plenty. The officer with Lawson was introduced as Sergeant McShane, and the other two people present were medical personnel Dr. Axel Faraday, and a medical researcher named Dr. Julian Mane.

"Eric Blackbird is in the connecting room. He has been examined by Dr. Faraday, who is a specialist in the supernatural, specifically magic, curses, hexes, maledictions, and every derivative thereof. Dr. Faraday and his assistant, Dr. Mane, are our best." Master DuCane was careful and complete in his description of those who were overseeing the case. They clearly were preparing him for the outrageous and fantastical things they were about to tell him regarding Eric, and Dakota was listening closely.

The room was charged just like the entire land but with so many powerful individuals in one room the pressure was substantial. But Dakota was not going to show them his weakness and drew on the energy imparted to him by Able. He also touched Terrance's hand with the back of his just needing the contact for support. Terrance immediately took his hand holding it loosely in his.

Dr. Faraday stepped up. "The patient shows no signs of serious injury but was unresponsive upon arrival. Our examination indicates an external cause for his malady, and we have determined that cause to be supernatural in nature." He was very academic about it, and Dakota just wanted him to get to the point.

Terrance must have sensed his agitation because his grip tightened, and he took a half step to the side putting himself closer so that their bodies were nearly touching. The move calmed him, and he took a deep breath as he continued to listen to the doctor.

"He's been infected with a type of witchcraft referred to as blood witchery, and it takes on a form similar to possession. It interferes with the chemical balance in the brain, rendering the victim unconscious at first and then progressing to a frenzied hysteria, and then ultimately they become mindless and thoroughly under the control of the witch involved."

"A zombie?" Dakota's face betrayed his skepticism. "Let me see him." He demanded as his brittle patience came to an abrupt end. The assistant, Dr. Mane, walked over and threw a switch that brought his attention to a large observation window in the wall.

He walked over with Terrance at his side and looked into the room next door. Eric was there on a bed. There were sensors and gauges, but the room was deathly quiet. He looked like some macabre sacrifice, and it hit Dakota all wrong.

He started shaking his head and stepped back. "No, no, this isn't happening. I don't

know what it is you're trying to do, but this is fucked." He moved quickly to the door and jerked it open, hearing the other yell for him to stop. Dakota rushed inside and placed his palm on Eric's forehead while staring down at him, willing him to wake.

Terrance stood beside him but did not interfere. The doctors remained by the door, and Master DuCane walked up to the opposite side of Eric's bed. "Eric," Dakota spoke, and there was a subtle movement, but Eric did not wake.

He pulled the stiff white sheet down and saw that Eric had endured cuts, bruises, and burns to his chest and arms. He then checked his lower extremities, and the injuries were similar. They weren't deep or serious, but they showed the trauma he'd suffered.

He covered him once again and again placed his palm on Eric's forehead. He then looked up at Master DuCane, who stood across from him, and their eyes locked. The last time, it was blistering, and the intensity was brutal. This time, there was a touch of sympathy in that gaze.

"Is this your doing?" Dakota asked him bluntly.

"No, this plague was placed upon him by a witch. He was infected by the blood of another who had also been plagued." Master DuCane was calm and forthright, but Dakota still believed something was not right, and after a brief pause, he told him what it was. "The only cure for Eric is finding the witch who put this upon him. Their blood is the antidote." Dakota was instantly thinking it was a needle in a haystack situation and how would they ever discover who and where they were.

"It's not as hopeless as you might think. Magics like this witch leave markers and Dr. Faraday and his assistant have already identified several. I've dispatched two teams of soldiers to follow these markers. They're combing the area between here and Toledo, and they will find them. Your friend is not lost."

“We are very good at our jobs, Dakota. Our people are specialists this witch cannot hide from us.” Terrance drove home their assurances. Dakota brushed back the hair from Eric’s young face and arranged its length along his shoulders. He had been a strong and healthy young man with dreams and aspirations which included his sister and his tribe.

"He is still here, and I can feel his life and struggle," Dakota stated, taking hold of Eric's hand. "He is young and strong, and he will fight this with everything he has." Dakota took a leather amulet bag from his pocket that Able had made and laid it on Eric's chest. He then spoke the words in his native tongue that called down the spirits of protection, and when finished, he stepped back and took hold of Terrance's hand.

He still saw him as the thunderbird the giver of strength and he needed all he could get right now. “Thank you for your help.” He said and cast a glance at everyone in the room.

“Go with Terrance and he will answer any questions or concerns you may have. When we know more I will alert you immediately.” Master DuCane was going above and beyond for him and for Eric and having a man like Terrance at his side was a bonus he’d never expected. Terrance was turning into someone he leaned on and looked to for strength and stability.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:15 am

Terrance's heart went out to Dakota, and he wished he could take away his worry but they had to wait. They would find the witch there was no doubt about that, but the waiting was excruciating for his beloved. They left and did not speak until they reached the staircase. Dakota stopped and leaned with both hands on the banister and dropped his head. It was a look of being beaten and Terrance would not tolerate it.

Terrance came up behind him and took him by the shoulders, massaging the tense muscles. "Master Louis DuCane has taken on this matter personally, and he will not be defeated by a rogue vampire or a worthless witch. He has conquered nations and faced down demons from hell, so I can assure you that this matter will be solved, and Eric will come back to you." Dakota turned to him, and Terrance instinctively took him into his arms. Dakota did not resist. He laid his head against Terrance's chest and took a long, deep breath.

"I feel so damn helpless." He growled and wrapped his arms around Terrance, holding him in a firm embrace. Terrance loved the experience of having his beloved in his arms, providing mutual love and support.

"If it weren't for your relentless diligence, Eric's case would have been overlooked, and he might have never been found. His life would have been over, but you didn't stop, and you made everyone you met listen and take your concerns seriously. He would not have survived without you." Terrance drove home the truth of the matter in no uncertain terms. Dakota had nothing to feel bad about; he did his job and saved that young man.

"It's not over yet, and all I can do is wait." Dakota's voice was muffled against Terrance's suit jacket.

“You did your part and now we do ours.” They stood there like that for a few minutes drawing strength and support from one another and then Terrance suggested dinner he was certain Dakota hadn’t eaten since early morning.

“Sounds good.” He relented and they slowly made their way to the dining hall. Terrance pointed out particularly impressive parts of the Palace on their way and even stopped at one of the large windows to admire the gardens. Dakota appreciated the beauty and the craftsmanship, but Terrance could tell that his mind was still consumed with worry for young Eric Blackbird.

Dakota took in the marvels of the Palace which were many even on his short trip to the dining hall. The place was magnificent and there was no challenging that fact, but the gardens were his favorite. Terrance said they surrounded the property and took in miles each being meticulously tended and cared for. The Coven house and grounds was an extraordinary site.

Dinner was very good and definitely not your run of the mill dining hall. This was more like a high-end eatery but set up like a dining hall. Terrance told him the chef was highly trained and skilled in his art, and it showed. DuCane did nothing halfway and that was apparent in everything he owned and operated. His confidence in Master DuCane’s grew by the minute. Terrance was right he would not tolerate failure and that went directly in Eric’s favor.

Terrance introduced him to several people and they were pleasant and welcoming. The weight of the place was feeling less dire than when he’d first arrived. His opinion was lightning as well, and the vampires came across as conventional beings and not someone to be feared.

Then there was Terrance, the picture of masculine beauty and someone Dakota desired to the depths of his soul. That was a strong statement, but it was true the longer he remained in his company, the more his need grew. He'd known handsome

men in the past, and not one had affected him the way Terrance had affected him. If he wasn't careful, it could turn into a full-on obsession. They were discussing Terrence's position as a soldier and the cover he held in the town as a private investigator. DuCane kept eyes everywhere, which was probably wise. Suddenly, Deputy Lawson appeared at their table, and Dakota stiffened and leaned back, not sure what to expect from him.

Terrance looked up at him, but nobody spoke. Lawson looked at a loss for words looking back and forth between Dakota and Terrance but finally he found his voice. "I wanted to apologize for the way I delt with you on the phone during our first contact and for the dismissive way I treated you throughout." He stopped briefly and fidgeted with his hat that he held in his hands. Neither Dakota nor Terrance responded sensing there was more to come.

"If I'd handled this the way it should have been handled from the beginning, perhaps Eric Blackbird would not be in the condition that he is now. I take full responsibility for the slow start of this investigation, and I will strive to do better going forward. Again, I apologize to you, Detective Lieutenant Winters."

After a short pause Dakota responded. He stood and reached out his hand to Lawson who took it, and they shook. "I accept your apology and I thank you for ultimately doing your job and finding Eric for us." It was a backhanded acceptance, but Dakota was still feeling a little sting from the deputy's original contemptuous attitude.

"Thank you, sir." He said. He turned to leave but stopped and turned back. "I really am sorry, and I wish we could have gotten to him sooner." He didn't wait for a further response and simply left the room.

"That looked difficult," Dakota commented on Lawson's apology.

"Only in the sense that he was ashamed of his previous behavior, and it's always hard

to face up to your shortcomings." Terrance came to the deputy's defense. "I always found Deputy Lawson to be a stand-up guy and a good officer. The attitude he had with you was out of character."

"It doesn't really matter. I doubt the wolf and I will see much of one another from here on out." That statement got him a curious look from Terrance, who masked it almost immediately. After they finished dinner, Terrance took him on another short tour of part of the Palace before taking him to his quarters.

"I think it would be best if you stayed here at the Palace while Eric is being treated, and we search for those responsible for his condition." Terrance led him into his large living quarters that although was as grand and opulent as the rest of the Palace rooms held a comfort and warmth that was welcoming and seemed to reach out to Dakota. "I have a spare room, and you can be at hand for any developments."

"Thank you," Dakota answered, genuinely pleased by the offer. "I'd like to stay at least tonight, and hopefully, the situation will be resolved soon." He walked over to stand before Terrance, looking up at him and wondering where this was going. He shouldn't be daydreaming about this man gushing and romanticizing their connection when he had a job to finish, but he just couldn't get his mind off Terrance Collins, vampire extraordinaire.

"I've been thinking about that kiss," Dakota stated bluntly. "It was a surprise and yet also expected. I feel so many things for you, Terrance, and although I've fought hard to ignore those feelings and push them aside, I cannot."

Terrance smiled and reached out to cup the side of Dakota's face and to thread his fingers through his long dark hair. "I want you too." Terrance answered, making himself clear. "It's destiny Dakota, you feel it and I feel it. You are my beloved and you know what that means. I'm not sure how the covens in your area deal with beloveds but at Coven DuCane they are a sacred gift from Fate."

“I probably wouldn’t believe you if I wasn’t swamped with such powerful emotions every time I look at you. My mind and my body are tuned only to you, and the longer I’m with you, the more complete and perfect it becomes. I’m not so dense as to not recognize the work of the universe and the power of Fate.”

"Many in my Coven have found their beloveds over the past few years, and I had hoped that I would be likewise blessed, but I waited while others were chosen. I never gave up hope and then today I walked into your motel room and felt the embrace of the one." Terrance stepped toward him and reached out his arms. Dakota did not hesitate to walk into the waiting embrace. The arms strong and sure wrapped around him and the sense of forever filled his heart.

"What does this mean for us, Terrance?" He asked.

"It means that we are one, and the universe has deemed it so."

Terrance was taken aback by Dakota’s open honesty in regard to his thoughts and feelings. It made everything so much easier but still there remained some confusion but nothing Terrance couldn’t clear up. Having him in his arms was an amazing moment and his reference to their kiss opened the door wide for many more.

Terrance bent his head and kissed him on the cheek first and then Dakota looked up and the offering was there. His eyes shown with the same want that was pumping through Terrance’s veins. He took his lips in a fierce and heated kiss going deep and plunging inside those gorgeous lips. He was a strong and formidable human and yet he was handing himself over to the love and excitement being offered.

The kiss went on for several minutes with their hands exploring each other before Dakota made the first move and cupped Terrance's hard cock in the palm of his hand. Despite being behind several layers of clothing, the touch was instantly erotic and intoxicating. He caught his breath on the sensations that rushed through him.

He reached down and took hold of Dakota's marvelously round and meaty ass, kneading the flesh in his large hands. Their mutual need and desires continued to heighten, and ultimately, clothing began to be discarded. Terrance dropped his jacket, and his tie was instantly loosened and removed. Dakota did not waste time pulling Terrance's shirt free and quickly opening it to his greedy touch.

Having his beloved's hands on his bare flesh sent a burning need through him that had him suddenly picking Dakota up into his arms and carrying him off. "Let's take this to the bedroom." He told him and Dakota seemed surprised at being carried. He wasn't a small man, but Terrance carried him with ease.

He then placed him back on his feet, standing just a few inches away from the bed. Dakota instantly picked up where he left off, and soon Terrance was naked to the waist, and Dakota's lips were trailing hungry kisses along his chest and abdomen. He was a man who obviously knew what he wanted. Terrance quickly caught up by removing Dakota's henley top and carefully raked his fingers through his utterly gorgeous hair. The feel of those locks sliding between his fingers was heavenly.

He felt Dakota's fingers at his belt, and then the sensation of freedom as his zipper was lowered, and his aching cock felt a cold rush of air. Dakota's grip tightened, and Terrance couldn't hold back the salacious groan that had escaped his lips. He looked down at Dakota, and their eyes locked for a moment. Then, Dakota dropped to one knee, and the implication brought Terrance's heart right up into his throat.

He took Terrance's hard, thick length between his lips and swallowed him down, taking all of him and sending a storm of desire raging through Terrance. He took him down over and over, massaging as he went, pushing and forcing the ultimate sensations to shatter all limits and reserve.

Terrance buried his fingers in Dakota's hair and held on as he took him on a ride that was explosive. He closed his eyes and took in every aspect of the moment every

experience and feeling. Dakota sped up and increased his pressure in just the right amounts pushing Terrance to the edge of his control and he was soon lost coming so hard he saw stars.

Dakota took it all, working him until Terrance thought he'd been turned inside out. Slowly, he came down from that incredible high and watched as Dakota licked him clean before standing up and kissing him hard on the lips. His beloved was amazing. "That was mind-blowing, and I do not use that term often." He said, his voice still deep and husky from the experience.

"Now it was his turn." He said, wasting no time taking over. He kicked off the remainder of his clothes and pushed Dakota back a few steps while nailing him with a ravenous stare. He grabbed the waistband of his jeans and pulled him closer, and after a hungry kiss, he removed his jeans, jerking them down his body and knocking Dakota off balance, so he fell backward onto the bed. The smile told him all was well. The pants were off, as well as the well-worn boots and Dakota lay there in all his naked glory. Terrance had never seen anything more beautiful.

He took him by the ankles, flipped him onto his stomach, pushed him back further onto the bed, and followed him, positioning himself between his outstretched legs. He grabbed the lube from the side table and used it liberally.

He didn't give Dakota time to think about what he was doing and just grabbed that luscious ass spreading those cheeks and pressing his fingers deep inside, stretching the tight muscle. Dakota moaned and pushed up from the bed but did not move away. Instead, he pushed his ass back toward Terrance, forcing his fingers deeper.

They worked together, stretching and preparing him until Terrance was confident that his beloved could handle what he had to offer. He took him by the hips and plunged his hard and throbbing cock inside, burying himself completely. He began circling his hips and gave a few brief hard thrusts going even deeper. His beloved sighed and

moaned in perfect harmony to his own breathless pounding of his lover's tender ass.

Dakota gripped the bedspread with his fists and panted hard while he pushed backward, meeting Terrance with each of his thrusts. The only sounds in the room were ragged breaths accompanied by the sharp slap of flesh, and it was marvelous. Terrance had never enjoyed something so much, and the dizzying pleasure progressively grew more and more intense.

Reaching up, he swung Dakota's long hair to the right, baring his left shoulder. He hadn't planned on claiming him so soon, but the urge to do so was overtaking him. His vampire was pushing to the forefront as his climax was brought once again to the edge. He slammed inside over and over and held his firm grip on Dakota's hips, steadying them both and increasing the strength of each thrust. It was nearing the end when the rush came over him, and the need to claim was inevitable. He couldn't have stopped if he wanted to.

Terrance drove his hips forward, plowing inside, and pulled Dakota up, burying his teeth in the tender flesh of Dakota's shoulder. He felt the flutter of mystical energy pass between them as soon as Dakota's blood entered his system, and the energy skimmed along his nerve endings.

Dakota stiffened and then came in a sharp jerk, followed by a series of delicious trembles. He leaned back against Terrance and rolled his head to the side. The soft moan and the way Dakota held onto him made Terrance feel settled, satisfied, and completely fulfilled.

The bond was instant and snapped into place as soon as he took the first taste of his beloved. It was more than he'd ever imagined as he felt the change throughout his body exploding in every cell.

Dakota's heart and mind opened to him, and he knew that Dakota was sensing him as

well. The world passed between them all doubt, insecurity and confusion came to an end. He knew his beloved and his beloved knew him.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:15 am

Dakota felt the bite and it was exquisite nothing like he thought the bite of a nightwalker would be like. Terrance gave him something that hit and then exploded into the most extraordinary experience of his life. They were connected now truly connected he could feel Terrance in his soul walking with him side by side and hand in hand.

Beloveds were honestly the most sacred of connections, and Dakota reveled in the fact that such a perfect and pure relationship was his. He understood, and a complete awareness of Terrance's world opened up to him. He saw the nightwalkers or vampires as good and bad like everyone else, and he saw the DuCane Coven as the pinnacle of power in this supernatural world.

Terrance licked the wound bringing it to a sharp sensitivity and then placed a kiss on the spot sending a thrill through him at the touch. Terrance slowly pulled out and gently laid Dakota back onto the bed. He removed the bedspread and tossed it aside and pulled the sheet up to cover them both. Dakota just went with it letting Terrance guide him and loving the tenderness of every touch.

He was tucked close to Terrance's side with his arm draped lovingly across his middle. There had been no words, but words were not necessary the emotions that spread out between them were more than enough for the moment. They lay there like that for several minutes gathering their thoughts and relaxing. Slowly his heart eased back to a natural pace and his breath was no longer ragged and rapid.

The lovemaking was not unexpected and for all intents and purposes unavoidable. He desired this man like no other before and coming together was something they both wanted.

They'd been sharply aware and reacting to one another all day. Finding out what a true beloved really was turned out to be an incredible bonus, and Dakota was not sad that their bond had been struck. How it would affect him going forward was not certain, but strangely, he was not bothered by that fact.

"I completed our bond," Terrance told him while Dakota rested his head on Terrance's chest. Terrance was running his finger through Dakota's hair, and he found it so soothing. "I'm sure you're already aware of that. Your mystical influences, those personal to you and those bestowed by your shaman have touched me as well, just as my vampire presence has touched you. We are one in mind and spirit." That sounded perfect to Dakota, and it was clear they were both feeling the same.

"I do realize that there should have been more talk and getting to know one another before thrusting this step upon you, but I have no regret for completing our bond. You are mine, and I am yours, and everything else can be worked out."

Terrance was direct and to the point and Dakota could not argue with anything he had said the bond was inevitable. He may have jumped the gun a bit but what's done is done and he told him that and then added. "And like you, I have no regrets. Let's see where this goes."

Terrance turned out the lights, and they settled in for the remainder of the night. It had been a long day in many respects, and Dakota's mind was reeling. The situation with Eric was dire, and yet he believed Terrance, and he trusted the capabilities of Master DuCane and his people. The witch and the rogue would be found, but whether or not Eric would recover was still a gamble as far as he could see. There were no guarantees that he would ever come out of the coma, and if he did, would he be Eric or simply a shell?

Then there was the situation with Terrance, which was so amazing that he felt guilty for feeling so good while Eric's life lay in question. He turned to look up at Terrance,

and his heart was filled with tenderness and adoration. Terrance was his future he saw it during the solidifying of their bond, and he saw it in the visions of the thunderbird. They were meant to be and would always, no matter the circumstances, find their way back to one another. It was a lot to process, but it was true.

"I can feel your worry," Terrance said and tightened his arm around Dakota's shoulders. He still had his head resting on Terrance's chest, and he found the contact and aroma calming.

"I'm worried about Eric and the outcome of this spell. Witches are unpredictable, like all magic makers, but they are especially cruel in the things that they do. I'm here enjoying my time with you and the dreams of the future, and poor Eric lies in a hospital bed in a coma, waiting for something to happen and for someone to help him." Dakota shared his concerns openly.

"You've done all that you can do. You have not neglected your duty. You have fulfilled it to the best of your ability. Do not feel guilty because you happen to experience some happiness in the middle of it all. You are allowed to live for yourself while helping others, and one does not preclude the other." Again, he made perfect sense, and it was exactly what Dakota would be telling someone else in his position, but the guilt would not leave him. He could not fully be the partner that Terrance deserved until Eric had his life back and his family was at peace.

He hadn't contacted his captain since morning, so he chose to wait until, hopefully, things were resolved and he could present the good news. Damn, he sorely prayed that in the coming days, it would be good news that he would be imparting.

"It's still early. Try to relax for another hour or so, and then I will check with the Master about the progress of his searchers." Terrance offered, and Dakota moved his body up beside him and leaned onto one elbow so as to look down into his sweet lover's face, which was so handsome in the dawning light.

"I'll visit Eric when you go see the Master," Dakota stated, feeling better knowing that he would spend some time with him. Come morning he planned to call Able and explain what was happening. He could do a ritual and prayer to help stave off the foul magic that had infected Eric.

"I'll meet you there when I'm through."

"And hopefully, you will have good news."

Terrance slipped his hand around the back of Dakota's neck and pulled him down for a loving kiss that quickly grew into a ravenous kiss. Every embrace with Terrance was charged and passionate, and Dakota readily opened up to his explorations. "You taste wonderful," Dakota commented when the kiss slowly came to an end. He once again slid down Terrance's body to lay his head on his shoulder.

"So do you, my love."

Terrance could still sense the uneasiness coming off Dakota and he wished he could give him some peace. It was a waiting game at the moment and although he was confident that the waiting would not be for long it was still going to take time to locate and apprehend the witch and the rogue.

It would help Dakota to spend some time with Eric. Dakota's mystical protections could aid Eric in finding his way back it was a long shot, but anything was worth a try. He'd experienced Dakota's mysticism during their bonding, and it was much more powerful and deeply engrained than he'd first thought.

It wasn't magic. It was pure and honorable handling of the power of the elements. His power seemed to be derived from a source similar to Ezra's abilities. Perhaps in time, they could get together and discuss their connections. With that, though, he instantly began to consider Dakota's job in the north and his tribe.

Would he be willing to relocate? There was a Chippewa tribe a few miles to the south, but they had little to do with the residents of Isabella County, and Terrance knew nothing about them. After meeting Dakota, he felt that it was an unfortunate oversight. They'd always lived separately, and neither group reached out. Perhaps Dakota could be the one to bridge that gap. He pushed everything from his mind and, cuddling his newly bonded beloved close to his side, closed his eyes in hopes of getting a few hours of sleep.

"The witch had the rogue with him and was using it as a servant of sorts and for protection or defense. We found the rogue and had to kill him he was beyond the cure." Quincy, the leader of the search teams, reported. Quincy was bonded to two hellhounds and, therefore, possessed a natural resistance to most magics. He often took the lead when dealing with magics in the field.

"Are you near to apprehending them?" Master DuCane cut in.

"They were headed south. We tracked them to the border, and I assumed the witch was going back to his Coven or community in Ohio. But we have evidence that he reversed course and is now on his way back toward Mt. Pleasant. We have a clear trail and should have him soon." Quincy stated and then added. "The witch moves at an unnatural speed, and he has a hyper sense of smell it's been hard getting close."

"We'll watch for him at this end Sheriff Keller and his men are patrolling the city and my guards are assisting. Keep me posted and let me know when you have eyes on him." Master DuCane closed the call and turned to Ismael his second in command.

"The witch has gained these abilities by draining the rogue. That was the purpose of unleashing the infection, and I believe it has returned in the hopes of doing the same to Eric. It knows the rogue infected him and is looking to take advantage of the outcome. Alert those in town to watch for more of the infected, that rogue could have cursed more than just Eric."

“I’ll take care of it.” Ismael responded and then asked. “How’s he doing?”

"He's being watched, but there is nothing the doctors can do until the witch is found."

"From what I hear, the tribal cop was pretty dogged in his pursuit. He upset several at the Sheriff's office." Ismael smirked. "They need to be taken to task every now and then it keeps them on their toes."

"Detective Lieutenant Winters was a force for sure. He and his shaman, a man by the name of Able, according to Ethan's information, are formidable mystics. Winters is a dedicated warrior, and I look forward to welcoming him into Coven DuCane." Ismael looked at him surprised and then smiled.

“He’s a beloved?”

"Terrance claimed him last night. I felt it in the air."

"That's wonderful. We need more mystics in our ranks. Unlike the Hadden Coven, who have cornered the market on mystics and sorcerers, we have very few."

“Native magic is pure and powerful and not even Nik Hadden possesses Native magic in his ranks.” Just then there came a knock to Louis’ door and Ira his guard announced that Terrance was there to see him. “Show him in.”

Terrance had contacted the medical wing where Eric was being treated and let them know that Dakota was coming to sit with him for a while. Dakota had called Able and explained where things stood with Eric and the danger that he was in. Able immediately began to pull together the things he needed for the protection ritual and healing prayers. Dakota could sense that the day was going to be filled with dangers, and he wanted all his defenses in place.

Breakfast had been just coffee and juice since neither he nor Terrance had much of an appetite after having a late dinner. "Able and Eric's friends and family are gathering for a prayer it will aid to shield him against any further interference of the witch." He explained to Terrance who sat next to him on the sofa as they finished their coffee.

"Your energy and that of your people will be a great help to him," Terrance responded. "He won't wake up, but he will know that you are there with him. The doctors are keeping him in a catatonic state in order to stave off the mindless rage and the insidious progression of the infection."

They stood, and Terrance pulled him in for a full-body embrace, holding him wrapped tightly in his arms. It was a wonderful feeling to have someone of his own. His only family had been his grandmother, who raised him, and she'd died just over three years ago.

He had many friends and associates, but nothing felt as good as being in the arms of your lover and knowing their devotion was true. He knew very little about Terrance since they hadn't had those talks yet, but still he trusted him above all others. It was absurd and ridiculous considering everything but all he felt was blessed and he knew he was exactly where he needed to be and where he should be. He did not question Fate, and he did not challenge the universe.

"I'll meet you as soon as I finish with the Master," Terrance repeated and then pulled him in for a heartfelt kiss, which Dakota reciprocated eagerly. They'd made out a bit while getting dressed that morning, and while Dakota had his mind on Eric and his recovery, his thoughts always seemed to stray back to the gorgeous man in his arms. He looked forward to more of what they had last night. He would never get enough of this nightwalker, Terrance Collins.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:15 am

Terrance knocked on the Master's door and waited for permission to enter. He was met by Ira, the Master's personal guard, and escorted to his office. Master DuCane was there, as well as the second in command, Ismael Patronne. They dispensed with the pleasantries and quickly got down to business.

Master DuCane explained the status of the search, and Terrance informed him of Dakota's call back home. Master DuCane nodded and looked pleased. "Their works will help build his strength and fortify him against what the witch has planted. He will be in a good state when the doctors administer the cure."

"I know that we are dealing with a lot right now, but I wanted to make you both aware that Dakota is my beloved, and I have claimed him. He is not unaware of our world, although he admits there were some serious surprises."

"Not the least of which was you, I'm sure." Ismael laughed and congratulated him, as did Master DuCane.

Dakota made his way to the medical wing and entered the outer room he walked to the observation window and peered in at the still and silent body of Eric Blackbird. There was a technician with him but otherwise he was alone. Dakota stood there for several minutes taking it all in before entering and introducing himself to the tech.

"He's been quiet as you see the entire night." He told him and offered him a chair so he could sit by Eric's bedside. He then stepped out and positioned himself in the outer room to give Eric time alone with Eric but also allowed him to maintain his observation of the patient.

Everyone apart from Deputy Lawson had been pleasant and helpful recognizing that they were both seeking the same end which was saving an innocent young man. He took Eric's hand and held it in his feeling the essence of his spirit in that touch. Eric was strong and he was a fighter. Dakota talked to him telling him about his sister's concern for his safety and the tribes support for his recovery.

"You're not alone, Eric. You will never be alone." He assured him, and he felt the gentle stirring of his presence. Eric was pushing to return. He sat there and continued to talk to him, explaining to him what had happened and where he was. "The Coven is not like those back home, Eric. These people care about more than just themselves."

He heard a commotion from the outer room, he stood and looked out the observation window. He saw the technician on the floor and a tall man dressed in all black with flowing white hair standing over him. Dakota rushed for the door, intent on keeping the thing out of the room and away from Eric. He sensed the power and depravity of the witch and Eric's vulnerability.

The witch blew past the door like it wasn't even there, knocking Dakota backward onto the hard floor. He was back on his feet in an instant, using himself as a shield and standing between the witch and Eric.

"Move aside your power is no match for me." The voice crackled, and the eyes the color of dried blood tracked Dakota's every move. Dakota remained rooted to the spot and held the monster's gaze. "I will drain the young one, and then I will drain you." It laughed with a sour tone of anger and hatred.

"The boy is weak not worth your time take me I will not resist if you promise to spare the boy." Dakota made the proposition.

"I don't care if you resist me the fight makes the blood and the energy that much

more delicious.” He said and began advancing on Dakota.

Terrance was just leaving the Master’s office when a sense of distress washed over him. It took him a moment to recognize the source and then it hit him, and panic exploded in his mind. “Dakota’s in danger.” He shouted and took off racing to the staircase with Master DuCane on his heels. His mind was reeling with the possibilities Dakota was not a man to fluster easily.

“It’s the witch.” Master DuCane shouted, and the area was instantly mobilized somehow that fiend and gained entrance to the grounds and ultimately the Palace itself. It was unthinkable.

Terrance burst through the doors of Eric's room and saw the black witch standing over Dakota, who was desperately trying to shield Eric. Terrance had never known such terror and such rage.

"Stay back, or I'll kill them both." The witch yelled and snickered, believing he held the upper hand. Terrance felt Master DuCane and Ira standing behind him, one to the left and the other to his right.

Fear of doing the wrong thing and losing his beloved held him frozen for a few seconds but then he felt the warm presence of his beloved. He and Dakota locked eyes and Dakota was telling him not to worry the witch would not win. Terrance wanted to believe but what stood before him reeked of power and destruction darkness and pain.

He took a step closer, as did those behind him. Master DuCane and Ira moved forward to the left and to the right, widening their circle. Terrance immediately offered himself up in exchange for the safety of Dakota and Eric, but the witch merely laughed.

“Everyone is so eager to die for one another this pain will be a glorious feast.” He lunged forward and the room exploded Terrance, and the Master rushed them, and Ira grabbed Eric from the bed and ran from the room. The moment the witch’s hand touched Dakota there was a flash of light that cut across the room. the white light burned the witch, and he recoiled falling backward into the Master’s merciless grip.

Terrance threw himself in front of Dakota, putting himself between him and the witch. But it was unnecessary because Master DuCane had him in a stranglehold and had run him through with his short sword. The blade was rammed through his back, and the tip burst from his chest.

He was held fast as the Master twisted the sword twice and then pulled it free and slit his throat, nearly removing his head from his body. Terrance held Dakota behind him to protect him from the witch and protect him from the grisly scene before him.

Master DuCane dipped two fingers in the witch’s blood and walked out of the room and towards Deputy Lawson who was holding Eric in his arms. Ira had passed him off to the deputy and returned to the fight. Terrance was unsure why Lawson was there, but he was holding onto Eric with a grip and stance that was more than just duty bound. He would have to look into that later.

Lawson stepped forward as Terrance took Dakota’s hand and they followed after Master DuCane. Neither was sure what was happening, but both thoroughly trusted the Master. “Bring him here.” He said and then Lawson moved to stand directly in front of the Master. Eric was still unconscious and lay almost lifeless in his arms. Everyone stood still and no one spoke.

Master DuCane took his two fingers and placed them against the middle of Eric’s forehead and drew the line of blood from that point down the length of his nose while repeating words that no one understood. Lawson cut a tense glance at the Master and then over at Dakota who was observing him with a shade of mild hostility. Terrance

held Dakota's hand firmly and pulled him close as they all waited.

The awakening happened suddenly, and Eric opened his eyes with a jerk and a loud curse. "Fuck!" He said and drew it out into at least five syllables. Lawson tightened his grip, holding Eric secure, and seemed unwilling to release him just yet. "Dakota!" He shouted. Dakota rushed up to him.

"What's going on who are these people?" Eric looked up at Master DuCane and quickly dropped his gaze feeling the depth and power of that gaze. He then looked up at Lawson and smiled.

"They found you and brought you back from the nether world. They saved your life, Eric." Terrance noticed that Eric's eyes did not leave Lawson, who was still holding him.

"Thank you." He said, and Lawson looking like someone had just given him the moon nodded and returned the smile.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:15 am

Eric was taken away to be examined, and it was not surprising that Deputy Lawson carried him there and stayed with him. Master DuCane arranged for a purification of the medical unit and the disposal of the witch's remains. A thorough investigation took place analyzing how the witch had gained entrance and was not discovered until he presented himself in the medical ward.

Whatever spell the witch had utilized would be discovered and countered. The idea that such a monster had gotten to the heart of the Coven left everyone on edge and a little angry. He was a formidable dark one, but when faced with the purity of Dakota's native mysticism and support, he was rendered powerless. Master DuCane set his experts on the task of discovering the source and potency of Dakota's abilities and those of his people. It was time the Coven got acquainted with the local tribe.

Dakota accepted the position offered to him of Detective Sergeant serving under Sheriff Kass Keller. He still held him membership and some responsibilities to his home up north, but he would be concentrating on building a relationship between the others and the Isabella Indian Reservation.

"Are you ready? The induction ritual is purely ceremonial, but it solidifies your place in the Coven and is a really nice party you're going to love it." Terrance was dressed in his best and Dakota made sure to try and mirror his style but kept his boots rather than trying to squeeze his feet into those dress shoes. He gave them a good shine so they should suffice.

"You look so handsome my love." Dakota walked up and after a loving kiss ran his hands down Terrance's arms to then take hold of both his hands.

"I don't look even half as handsome as you. You make my blood burn every time you look at me. Everything about you, from that gorgeous long hair to your luscious round ass, begs me to take you now right here and to hell with the ceremonies." Dakota laughed and pulled Terrence down for another intense and probing kiss.

"I love you, Dakota." Terrance declared in a breathless pant.

"I love you, Terrance, my gorgeous nightwalker."