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Chapter Nine

LANCE'S MOOD DIDN'T IMPROVE AS HE RAN A CIRCUIT OF THE bar. Jon and Delilah were nowhere to be found, plus Suzanne and a number of others were noticeably missing as well: Gavin, the Winds, Davey. In fact, at the moment the place was mostly full of locals, with a couple of lone wolf bikers playing pool at the back table.

"What's going on, Kelly?" Lance demanded as he stepped up to the bar.

"Couldn't tell ya, Wind Walker," she answered as she tended the bar with a dexterity he had to admire even now, pouring and dressing three different drinks without missing a step despite his glower. "Mongo might know; he's been here longer than me today."

"Thanks," he grumbled and headed for the kitchen. As the door swung shut behind him Garm lifted his head from the tiles and greeted Lance with a muted woof, before he lay down once more and then returned to snoring in record time. Lance shook his head and looked around at Mongo's controlled chaos. He was struck by the sharp contrast it made to Kelly's bartending. Each was a master at what they did but their styles couldn't be more drastically different.

"Hey, Mongo," Lance called out. No answer. The cook continued dicing onions with singleminded determination as if he hadn't heard a thing.

"Yo! MONGO!"

There was another muted woof from the dog, this one sounding distinctly protesting, but no noticeable reaction from the cook. Lance stalked across the kitchen only to have Mongo whirl around right before he reached him.

"Outamykitchen!" he snapped, "You know better than to come tramping around here at lunchtime!"

Lance just pinned him with a look that would have melted steel.

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“Fine! Quick, then. Whaddaya want?”

“Delilah?”

With grumbling and a disgusted look Mongo flung his hand toward the kitchen door, the one that led to the compound out back, and returned to his knife and chopping board, slicing and dicing with even more energy than before, and infinitely more grumbling.

Lance slipped out the back door, ignoring him.

He stopped dead on the top step of the stoop. “What the *hell!*!”

It was like some demented scene from the *Watchmen* or something. All those he'd been looking for traipsed across the back lot wearing ratty old armor and cheesy grins. They were all, to one degree or another, splattered with great big splotches of screaming orange and neon pink. Gavin, Jon, Rock, and Bubba looked ridiculous with soft red hats perched on their heads. They seemed pleased with themselves, though from the looks of things they'd been thoroughly trounced. Rock in particular had barely a clear patch left on him. In contrast, the other side clearly were the ones that did the trouncing. Dream was immaculate save for a single pink splotch on the battered old helmet dangling from her hand, Delilah had been tagged only a handful of times. The worst from their side was Blow, only slightly less speckled than his brother. And then there was Suzanne. Her helmet was pushed back until it perched on her forehead. Not of an inch of her had seen paint, though a tear in the leather at her shoulder revealed a nasty scratch he meant to ask her about shortly. But for now...damn if she didn't take his breath away. She had a shit-eating grin on her face and a Sheridan pump-action rifle slung over her shoulder. Lance smiled back, the tension running off like sand through his fingers.

Moving ahead of the others, she skipped up the steps as nimble as a doe and just stood before him, grinning.

“Hey, you,” he murmured as he took in the glow and the glee. Though he searched her face he could not find one sign of the shadows she'd battled since the crossroads. Oblivious to anything else from the moment his lady had mounted the steps, Lance reached up and tugged the helmet the rest of the way from her head and dangled it from the door knob. He then reached down and slipped the paint gun from her hand. When they were both unencumbered he slid his hands around her hips and settled them on her ass, pulling her snug against him as he took her mouth like a starving man at the feast. She flowed against him, settling her curves hard against his body from neck to knee. Lance heard something in the background, not that he cared, Suzanne, however,

laughed and tugged her lips away, her hand smoothing down his shirt where she'd reached beneath it.

His shirt. Lance cursed, then scowled in confusion as he looked down at her hand resting calm against his red tank. She laughed again and hugged him. "See, I took care of it," she murmured.

Lance's gaze swept over the group again—this time noticing Bubba's family coming up from behind, none of them paint-spattered, and the boys, various paint guns slung over their shoulders, sprawled in a fit of fake gagging—it finally sank in what he was seeing with the red caps and the trouncing.

"You didn't let the boys play?" Lance asked.

Suzanne gave him a wry grin, "The point was to *improve* my self-confidence, not trample it."

The boys laughed as did Lance, as he made sure she could see the pride in his eyes. "Aren't you clever?"

She grinned and nodded, clearly pleased with herself. Laughing harder, he couldn't help but caress her rear, still conveniently nestled in the palm of his hand.

"Alright, already!" Sammy called out, "My boys don't need you givin' them ideas!" Her words weren't too heated, though, as the boys were back to the gagging, striving to outdo themselves with melodrama, setting everyone off in another laugh that dispelled the last vestiges of Lance's tension.

That is, until he noticed the slight bulge in Suzanne's front pocket and playfully tugged the item free. "What'ya hiding?" he murmured so only she could hear. His innuendo was quickly forgotten as he looked down at the scrap of cloth in his hand. Half was moist; the rest was stiff and dry. And brown.

The moist, flexible half was bright red.

His gaze jerked up to pin hers in place. "Suzanne?"

No one was laughing anymore.

Suzanne just stared at him the grin still on her face, but her eyes solemn and steady. "It's nothing. I took care of it." The last words held a thick ribbon of satisfaction.

Lance nodded and eased back on the testosterone.

"I bet you did, angel." He then glanced from the back door to those waiting on the ground. "Best we go around to the front today, unless Delilah wants to find a new cook before dinner; Blow and Rock are still dripping and Mongo's on a tear." He slung his arm across Suzanne's shoulder and they started down the stairs. They made it one step down

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from the top when something slammed into his chest, sending him sprawling backward and then sliding down the rest of the stairs. By some miracle he didn't take Suzanne with him. He saw violent flashes behind his eyes as his head bounced on concrete, and his chest felt like a SWAT team had taken him out with a battering ram. It took several blinks before he could see, but he squeezed his eyes shut again as his attempt to look down for a gaping wound sent an explosion through his head.

Vaguely, he heard mass panic around him and felt hands looking for damage. Strangely, none of them went toward his chest. He groaned and shoved them away, his own hand going to the point of the most pain. He didn't feel a thing. Of course, he wasn't the most reasonable source at the moment. Rather than risk another detonation, he brought the hand up before his eyes. He'd expected blood, or at best, neon pink paint.

There was nothing but smooth, clean skin.

Scrambling to his feet he swayed and grabbed for the railing. His head fell back and his body bobbed forward and back in a slight state of shock as he realized he wasn't breathing. It felt like a hand pressed against him, branding his chest, and then a nova blazed beneath his breast bone. He gasped and arched and would have fallen, but for his bulldog-grip on the rail.

And then he experienced something only ephemerally felt before:

His mother's love.

Followed by the nearness of his father's pending death.

"NO!" Lance screamed in anguish. The nova spun and it was like being in the center of a whirlpool. He was the convergence for more mage power than he ever conceived instantly drawn from everything around him though he'd made no effort to summon the energy. His wings flared like a nova and he felt as if his molecules were about to fly apart. Vaguely he sensed when Dream and Bubba both threw up shields barely in time to protect those in the immediate vicinity, but the rest of Lance's focus was on what was happening to his father. He stared hard at Jon and forced breath into his own lungs enough to growl, "We have to get to Cam's."

And then he vanished in a vortex of mage energy.



He landed on his feet.

Barely.

What the hell!? His powers may have gotten stronger once the fae half dominated but nothing as strong as what had just happened. He



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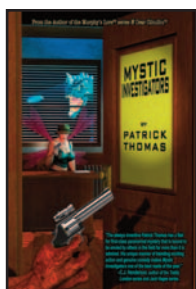


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