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BLOOD LINES, Lupi #5

# Chapter 6

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excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

The inhabitants of Los Lobos didn't see many visitors from los Estados Unidos. U.S. tourists went to the province's capital, Morelia, or to Patzcuaro, near the beautiful lake of the same name. A few made it down to Playa Azul for surfing. But there was little to draw them along the highway that skirted the coast to a tiny fishing village, so the pale-skinned man sitting on the patio in front of the village's only café attracted a lot of attention.

He was probably used to that. No one who looked the way he did could have passed through life without drawing many eyes. Especially female eyes.

Pity he was crazy.

His Spanish was very funny, so at first they weren't sure if he meant what he said, but he'd drawn a picture for Jesús Garcia, who owned the café. He really was looking for el dragón. But his money spent as well as anyone else's, so they shrugged and indulged him. If it made him happy to hunt for creatures that did not exist, why spoil his pleasure?

At the moment the crazy man was scowling at his map as if he could make the little lines move into patterns more to his liking. He had a cup of coffee near his elbow, and his plate held the remains of his breakfast. He'd eaten four eggs and several tortillas, but he'd ignored the sliced mango.

The two old men at the other front table who'd observed and commented on his breakfast sniggered when the waitress approached the stranger's table. Carmencita put so much sway in her hips it was a wonder she didn't hurt herself. But the man was busy disapproving of his map. He didn't notice.

“¿Le gustaría más, señor?”

The tone of voice, more than the words, pulled Cullen's attention away from the topographic

map. His smile was an automatic response to that husky purr asking what more he wanted, but it tilted into real appreciation when she removed his plate and wiped the table—a process that seemed to require her to bend over a lot. He looked where she meant him to, and admired the view.

“Ah . . . ahora, no. Pero mas tarde . . .” He let his expression say what his limited Spanish couldn’t. She understood well enough. She gave him back a torrent of words he couldn’t untangle, though it seemed to involve setting a firm time. He laughed, told her no comprendo, and eventually she had to settle for the ambiguous later that he’d promised.

Considering how well things weren’t going, he might be here awhile. No point in being standoffish, was there? Or depriving himself.

Cullen had stopped in Los Lobos for two reasons. The name tickled his fancy, of course. And his curiosity. The village was farther south than he’d thought wolves ranged even when there had been plenty of his wild cousins in North America. Why name it for animals the natives had never seen?

If he understood the locals right, the place had been named for a pair of peaks, oddly denuded of forest, visible from the village. They, too, were called Los Lobos. From this angle, Cullen supposed they looked a bit like a beast’s gaping jaws. That didn’t explain why they’d been assigned to a wolf rather than a panther, which this region did have. Maybe the village had been named by the Spanish. Spaniards would have thought of wolves.

The bigger reason he’d stopped here, of course, was that his trail did. Dammit.

A soccer ball bounced into the street, followed by a gaggle of screaming children. Boys, mostly, though one gap-toothed athlete wore braids and a dress. She was the one whose knee connected with the ball, sending it flying straight at him.

He grimaced, stretched up a hand, and punched the ball. It sailed over their heads, hit the cement-block wall of the mercado across the street, and rebounded into the stomach of the tallest boy—who landed on his butt on the cracked pavement. The underage mob erupted in hoots, jeers, and a few shouted comments aimed at Cullen.

“Little monsters,” Cullen muttered. They ought to be in school. Why weren’t they in school? It wasn’t Christmas yet, was it? He checked in with the moon, knowing it wouldn’t be full until the thirty-first.

Barely half-full. Not Christmas yet, then. So why didn’t their parents chain them up somewhere?

To his relief, the soccer players chased their ball down the street. He returned his attention to

the topographic map in front of him.

Before leaving California, Cullen had spent three days enspelling his maps—a large one to give him the general direction, with successively smaller maps to pinpoint his target. He was no Finder, but he'd gotten the spell from one, a luscious and annoying amazon who'd gone with them into hell, where they'd found plenty of demons, as expected. And a war, which they hadn't expected.

Also dragons. Dragons who'd returned with them to Earth to escape the war. Dragons who had, in fact, made their return possible because one of them knew more about magic than any Faery lord.

And that damned dragon had flown off before Cullen could ask him one single damned question. Flown away and vanished from sight, radar, second sight, and scrying.

And now from his map. Cullen scowled and moved his coffee out of the way.

He hadn't tried to trace the dragons directly. They knew too much about magic--at least the one who called himself Sam did.; Sam could block any direct search Cullen might devise. He'd blocked Cynna, and Cynna, however irritating she might be, was a powerful Finder. So Cullen had been tracking where they'd been, not where they were now.

Cullen was very good with fire, and fire elementals exist partly in the present, partly in the past and future, so he'd tied the spell to a small salamander. Dragons being of the present, like men, they shouldn't be able to block the past.

Until five days ago, the spell had worked. The thin gold band on his map, invisible to those who couldn't see magic, flowed along the coast, turned into the mountains near this little village . . . and vanished.

Just like those damned dragons.

Since then, he'd been trying to find them by more ordinary means—asking about missing livestock, or sightings of strange creatures. As a result, his hosts thought he was insane. Not that he cared, but they told him whatever they thought he wanted to hear, not what they'd actually seen or heard of.

But he was close. He knew it. There was that tickling at his shields last night—which didn't, he admitted, prove anything. But when he'd tramped well up one of the mountain trails yesterday, he'd hit a spot where magic was damped. That proved he was in the right area. Something about dragons smothered or absorbed the magic in their vicinity. Today he would--

The soccer ball came sailing at him again.

“Dammit!” This time he stood and snatched it out of the air. The herd of children swarming towards him stopped. The girl giggled. The tallest boy—the one who’d ended up on his butt earlier—shot a babble of words at him.

It didn’t sound like an apology. Or a polite request to have his ball back.

Cullen smiled at him in a way that had been known to make grown men nervous. He passed the ball back and forth between his hands. “¿Este es su pelota?”

“Si. ¡Démelo!”;

Cullen gave the kid credit for guts. Instead of stepping back, he puffed out his skinny chest and tried to grab the ball--and fell back, nostrils flared, shocked eyes huge in his thin face.

“Bruja,” he whispered. Witch.

No, Cullen thought, and neither are you. Though you may not have a clue what you really are. For he had caught the boy’s scent, just as the boy had caught his.

To make sure, though, he saw the boy.

Sorcerous vision didn’t involve the eyes, or even some arcane third eye that could be opened and closed. Cullen saw magic all the time, but unless he paid attention it was drowned out by the vividness of ordinary vision. Some sorcerers had to close their eyes to see magic. For Cullen, it was a matter of changing his focus—something that came easier for him now, after spending three weeks without eyes.

The boy’s aura was bright, lively . . . and shot through with streaks of purple. Oh, yeah. The skinny brat was definitely of the Blood, though not full-blood.

Add that to what Cullen’s nose had told him, and the riddle of the village’s name was solved. “Boy,” he said softly, “we need to talk.”

The boy, of course, didn’t understand English.

Jesús came waddling out of the cramped interior of the café, scolding away in rapid-fire Spanish.

Cullen smiled pleasantly, tossing the ball idly from one hand to another as he listened, catching maybe one word in ten. How should he handle this? The boy hadn’t hit puberty yet—both his scent and his aura confirmed that--but it wouldn’t be long. He couldn’t be left to face his first Change alone. Who should he . . . .

An odd, unpleasant scent made him turn his head.

To his regular senses, it was the barest shimmer in the air fifty feet away, a whiff of a carrion stench. To his other vision, it was a nightmare striding down the street.



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