

The Cauldron of Fire

The Alex Hayden Chronicles Book Three

By

Michael Andrews

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Prologue

Raetia Secunda. 15 A.D.

Torches burned, lighting up the village square as the throng of the villagers crowded forward to hear the verdict of their priest. They had long known about the woman who lived in the small cottage on the outskirts of the village and how she never seemed to age. However, she had been a kindly woman, someone that they could turn to when a child fell ill, or the crops failed to grow. She was someone that helped out when a mystery illness had swept through the livestock, killing most of the pigs. She was someone that the villagers had always looked upon kindly.

But now, she was being looked upon with hate-filled eyes as she was led up the street, her hands bound in front of her, her mouth gagged with a dirty rag. Her eyes pleaded with the families of those she had saved many times over, but it was no good. She stumbled and fell to the ground, her knees scraping on stones as the men of the village, tasked with protecting it, dragged her along until she was pushed down in the muddy puddles in front of her accuser.

She looked up at him, her heart melting as always when she gazed into those dark, black eyes. Oh how she had fallen in love with those dark pools of deep ebony. She saw his eyes soften for a moment before they hardened, and the priest stood.

“Rivkah Pekar, thou hast been accused of practicing witchcraft and communing with spirits from the netherworld,” the tall priest bellowed, ensuring that his deep, powerful voice could be heard over the murmuring of the crowd.

“Father... you know that not to be true,” the dark haired woman begged.

“Silence witch!” the priest shouted, his face a mask of anger. His hands gripped and stroked the ivory crucifix that was hanging around his neck. “Doest thou beg forgiveness from Our Father, the one true God and ask Him to cleanse your sins? Or wilt thou continue to consort with Satan the Corrupter?”

“Father, you, more than anyone, know the truth,” Rivkah pleaded. “Everything that I have done has been for the benefit of the village.”

“ENOUGH!” the priest yelled. He forced himself to stand his ground rather than rush over to strike the witch in his self-disgust. “Thou art guilty and I sentence thee to death by burning, so that the fire of Our Father may cleanse thy soul.”

“No, Father!” Rivkah begged as she was dragged towards a large wooden stake. Two burly villagers lifted her onto the roughly stacked kindling wood and tied her arms behind the wooden pole. The woman searched the eyes of the watching villagers and saw a few sympathetic glances, but most had fallen under the sway of the Catholic priest who stood before them.

“May God have mercy on your soul,” he sneered as he thrust a flaming torch into the pile of wood.

“Father, I am with child, and you know that she is yours,” Rivkah shouted about the crackling of the fire.

“How darest thee say that I would beget a spawn of Satan,” the priest fumed.

“If you turn your back on your child, and on me, then I curse you,” the woman scowled as she felt her feet begin to blister in the intense heat.

She watched as the priest turned up his lip in a sneer and stepped back.

“This is God’s punishment for those caught consorting with the Devil,” he intoned. “Let it be a lesson to us all.”

“I curse thee, you who took my bed willingly, who took my love and now spurn it with fire,” Rivkah said through gritted teeth. “You, who would burn his own child before she has a chance to breath, a chance to see the sun’s rays, I cast aside my love for you to defend my own.”

The sky clouded over, and heavy hailstones began to rain down on the villagers who had turned on the woman who had helped them so many times in the past. They scattered, seeking refuge in their homes, leaving the priest alone, transfixed as the woman he had fallen in love with surged with bright energy.

She let out a scream of pain as flames licked over her body, burning her flesh. Turning her head towards the priest, she gritted her teeth as she spoke in a strong, harsh voice.

“I curse thee that thou wilt ne’er gaze upon the sun’s golden rays once more. Thou wilt burn, like I burn, like our unborn child burns if thou steps into Ra’s golden rays. Thou wilt live immortal, without dying, yet without life, shunned by your own kind to become an outcast, to live in the shadows for eternity.”

“What gives you the power, witch,” the priest hissed.

“The power of Mother Earth and Lady Luna,” Rivkah cried out and a thunderclap shook the very earth underneath the horrified priest, throwing him to the ground. He felt a burning pain on his chest and saw smouldering smoke where his crucifix lay against him. He pulled it off, burning his hands before a flash of bright light blinded him for a moment. When he regained his vision, the fire continued to burn what was now an empty stake.

Chapter One

Could it be true? I sat, staring at the spider web-like writing on the parchment in my hands. The Latin words meaning nothing to me but the translation of them, according to Y'cart, held the promise of breaking the curse of vampirism. I'd had no idea that the very first vampire was created by a mixture of the curse of a witch and the damnation of the Catholic Church, having assumed that they had evolved from humans. With the journal of Eirwen's research into the matter, it was patently obvious that this curse was indeed the cause of my race's existence.

Mixed emotions ran through me as I read Eirwen's delicate handwriting. For the last fifteen years I had been summoning up the courage to end my undead life, only to have it saved by Harry on the very night that I had decided to take the sunwalk. In the last three months, I had used my supernatural powers to defend the humans of Blackpool; firstly from the vampire pack of Beddows van Hightinger and then, the Lycan pack that had taken the life of my former mother figure.

Now I held in my hands the potential to turn myself back to a human but I was faced with the knowledge that if I did, I would no longer be able to protect the new found friends that I had. Y'cart; ten year old Jason; Vanessa, who was now the new Chief Superintendent; Bill Farrelly, the old hunter and his troublesome niece Petra, whom I still had mixed feelings about.

And Harry Shepherd. My now pretend uncle who had given me a safe haven, only for me to discover that his son Connor had left some twenty months ago with my sire, Chlothar Pfaff, Lord of Shadowvale.

The thought that my former master had been in this very house still sent shivers down my spine, the fear reinforced with the visit of Paulinos du Balurac, Captain of the Royal Guard of Shadowvale. As much as I trusted the word of the Captain that he would not tell Lord Chlothar of my presence, I still slept uneasily, believing that, sooner rather than later, the powerful vampire who turned me would descend to take me back to the Shadow Castle.

I shook off the fear and dressed myself in my usual black attire before descending to the kitchen. Y'cart was already cooking an evening meal for Harry and herself but as I walked in, she stopped to hand me a cup of black coffee.

"I thought you might need this," she smiled at me.

"Thanks," I replied, taking the steaming mug of black gold from her. I sipped at it, revelling in the strength of the coffee bean. I raised my eyebrows at her.

"I had them flown in from Bolivia," Y'cart shrugged. "Call it a late Christmas present."

"Evening champ," Harry greeted me, making me spill my drink.

"How do you keep creeping up on me?" I frowned. "My mind always alerts me to people approaching but you just keep surprising me."

"I've no idea," he replied, stretching his hand forward but I ducked away before he could spoil my spiked blonde hair. He chuckled and patted me on the shoulder instead.

"Have you found anything out in Eirwen's journal?" Y'cart asked, in an effort to take the frown from my face.

"Just little bits," I sighed. "It goes quite heavily into witch lore, something that you'd know more about than me."

"I've already looked through it but nothing makes any sense to me," the former witch replied. "But don't forget, I spent most of my life in Eirwen's service at the Shadow Castle as well as being here in hiding."

"Isn't there another witch that you could ask?" Harry queried.

"Y'cart?" I looked at her, hoping that she knew someone, anyone.

"The only witches that I've had any contact with since I've been in England are new, low level witches and none of them would have the knowledge that you need."

"Don't you know any, Alex?" my uncle asked. "Didn't you say that you knew one from when you were with that Chlothar fellow?"

"Urgh!" I grunted. "The cottage of Evangelina is not a place with happy memories for me and I would prefer to die before having to visit there once again."

"Well, in that case, I guess we'll just have to keep on looking for alternatives."

"That's assuming I want to find out how to break the curse," I huffed.

“But I thought...” Harry started.

“Well you thought wrong!” I shouted. “I’m going out for a fly.”

I grabbed my trainers, put them on and was out of the door before Harry or Y’cart could respond. That was the benefit of supernatural speed but, as I cruised over the town, the anger I felt inside me slowly faded leaving the emptiness of Eirwen’s death tugging at my heart. I knew that I had hit out at Harry and Y’cart instead of myself. After all, it was my fault that Eirwen had died, wasn’t it? I had gone alone with Greg Leighton, knowing that he was a werewolf, only to be ambushed by Sarah-Louise Norris, the Alpha of her pack. Eirwen had come to my rescue only to die at the fangs of the werewolves.

Did I want to give up my powers and become mortal? Could I live without them, knowing about the paranormal world around us? It was something that I would have to think long and hard about, but not tonight. Tonight, I wanted to kill some zombies.

Of course, not real zombies. I landed in the back street behind my favourite arcade, which remained open despite the lack of holiday makers in the town. I walked in and headed over to the counter, pulling out a twenty pound note and smiled sweetly at the old lady who changed it into pound coins.

“Be careful, Alex,” she said to me as she handed me a can of soda. “Don’t get into any trouble.” She shook her head as I tried to offer her the money for the soda.

My smile at her kindness turned to a frown as I headed over to the zombie shoot ‘em up machine, as I saw four familiar, leather clad youths already playing. Growling in frustration, I popped open the can of soda and stood watching them play. The noise of the can had echoed through the near empty arcade and the nearest of the four turned and our eyes met. I held back a grin as I saw him take a gulp of air and he nudged the lad who was currently playing the game.

“Bloody hell Sam, you just made me lose a life,” the leader of the four complained.

“He’s back, Gaz,” Sam replied, pointing over in my direction.

“Who?” Gaz asked before turning and seeing me. Unconsciously I let a surge of adrenaline run through my body, preparing myself for any confrontation. “You’ve got a bloody nerve to show your face around here, kid.”

“Really?” I responded. “Look guys, we got off to a bad start before. I like it in here and I’m not going to stop coming, but I don’t want to have to have a fight with you every time we meet.”

I could see a couple of them take a step backwards as I stepped forwards, covering the distance between us with six confident strides. I pulled out my wallet and fished out ten notes. I held it out to Gaz.

“I’m sorry that I broke your stereo, so here’s some money to replace it,” I offered. The older youth took it, quickly counting it before stashing it in his side pocket. He grinned at me.

“It was lifted anyway,” he chuckled. “But fair play in offering. I guess we can let it slide and call things quits.”

He held out a fist, which I tapped with mine.

“Besides, you must know some martial arts or something, cos Billy’s hand is still bust.”

I flashed a look at the lad who was cowering at the back of the four and offered an apologetic shrug. After a couple of minutes of small talk, they decided that they were going to spend their new riches in the pub next door and despite considering their offer to join them for a beer, I decided to stay and kill zombies.

There was something calming in killing things, part of my nature I guess, but as I reached a new high score, I felt a change in the air around me. I looked around, frowning as I could only sense the human customers who were feeding their money in a pointless exercise to win it back from the slot machines. Putting the gun back into the holster of the zombie game, I started to leave the arcade when I felt eyes on me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, alerting me to her presence but as I opened my mind, I couldn’t sense anything paranormal.

I continued out of the arcade, deciding to play dumb to her but as I paused by a clothes shop, I caught her reflection in the window. She seemed normal height, for a woman, blonde hair and looked to be middle aged. She looked quite pretty, well she would if she wasn't frowning, and was dressed quite smartly. Wanting to find out if it was me that she was watching out for, I made a point of walking down the street, pausing at several shops and at each stop, the mystery woman managed to disguise her own pauses as intentional stops.

Not wanting to have a confrontation in front of humans, I decided to duck into a side street and before she could catch up, I leapt into the air and landed on the roof. I cast my glimmer glyph around me and watched as she hurried into the street, letting out a string of curses as she couldn't find me. I opened my empathic skills to touch her mind but immediately shut it down as she cast a look upwards, almost straight at me.

"Damn, she's a sensitive," I huffed, annoyed that my easiest investigative option was ruled out. I quickly leapt over to the roof on the other side of the street in an effort to hide myself and smiled grimly as I saw her eyes still searching the rooftop opposite for any sign of me.

"So who the bloody hell are you?" I whispered to myself as she turned and left the dark back street. I was tempted to follow her, but with her sensitivity to my empathic skills, I wanted to take some safety precautions before I started. After all, it was my previous lack of preparation that had gotten me into trouble before.

Not wanting to bump into Harry or Y'cart so soon after my blow up, I flew up to my bedroom window. I opened it and quietly walked over to the closet where I stored my pride and joy. Lovingly, I stroked the scabbard of Venenum Draconum before fixing it to my back. I had altered the belt so that I could wear it as a sling around my upper body, which made flying a hell of a lot easier.

I headed back to the town centre but after scouting around for about an hour, I sighed in frustration at not being able to find the mystery woman. I was just heading back home when I felt a vibration in my pocket. Fishing out the phone, I read the text from Harry.

Chapter Two

I jumped from the roof of the building next to the police station, landing easily on the balls of my feet and looked around to ensure that I was alone. I cast aside my glimmer and walked through the front door of the building.

And I walked into chaos.

People were screaming and shouting at the uniformed officers, detectives and at each other. A quick scan counted ten members of the public, seven men and three women and all of them were acting insane. If I didn't know better, I would have thought that there had been a breakout from a local asylum but there wasn't anything like that around here. At least, not one that would house crazies such as these.

"Alex, be careful!" the sweet voice of Sergeant Macaulay warned me as my instincts reacted with a duck and roll as a fist came flying in my direction.

I gritted my teeth to hold back an instant transformation and watched as the young female officer spear tackled a man, who was seven inches taller than her, to the ground. He grunted in pain as his head bounced off the wall and I smiled as his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Need any help, Sarge?" I chuckled as she dusted herself off.

"I've no idea what's going on... it's not even a full moon," Sergeant Macaulay huffed, getting her breath back.

"Maybe they've had too much to drink?" I offered. "This is Blackpool after all."

"That was my initial thought, but all of them are stone cold sober," she countered. She grabbed a dark haired woman who was running past her to attack another, locking her in a headlock before taking her knees from underneath her. As the crazy woman hit the ground, the Sergeant quickly handcuffed her, leaving the woman struggling on the floor.

"GUN!" I heard Detective Jackson's voice yell over the bedlam and my eyes locked onto a man who looked to be in his fifties. His grey hair was neatly combed, but his eyes were unfocussed. I frowned as I assumed drugs were now involved but with the man waving a gun around, I wasn't taking any chances with any of my friends' lives.

"ALEX!" Harry's shout almost distracted me, but with my mind focused and a surge of adrenaline rushing through my body, I gave my supernatural instincts a little kick as I danced between a beat officer and a crazy woman to position myself in front of the gun bearer. His eyes fixed on me for a moment before a smile settled on his lips.

"Die you demon spawn!" he whispered and I saw his finger tighten on the trigger.

"That's a bit uncalled for," I muttered. "I'm not a bloody demon!"

I surged forward and smashed into his arm, forcing the gun upwards and a deafening shot rang out. Turning my body, I dropped an elbow into his stomach, hearing a satisfying gush of breath leave his body before I squeezed his hand. I felt bones give way as I tightened my grip, crunching his hand with my strength until he could no longer hold the gun. Spinning around as he dropped it, I delivered a telling roundhouse kick, my trainer smashing into his jaw. He fell to the ground with a satisfying thud.

I looked around and saw that Blackpool's finest had managed to secure all of the people, either in restraints or lying unconscious on the floor. I felt my back prickle as an uneasy feeling passed over me but it was gone almost as quickly as it appeared.