

Faerie's Ring
By Jaylee Austin

Chapter One

Lara took a needed break. Earlier that morning, she'd given two psychic readings and one soul retrieval. Ler'shy, an eclectic boutique of metaphysical stones, oils, and trinkets had been her sanctuary for the past five years. Contented with the morning's sales, she made a cup of mint tea and took a seat behind the counter.

The door chimes jingled, and a sandy-haired boy slipped inside. His gaze darted every which way, before he allowed the door to slide silently shut. He browsed the shop, and then thumbed through a used bin of comic books located in the reading nook of the boutique.

Curious about the visitor, Lara centered her thoughts, inhaling a deep breath, and tapped into her sensory perception.

Her sixth sense went on high alert. A female's essence filled her mind's eye, desperate, frantic. Lara pulled away from the overpowering strength of the spirit and onto the boy's psyche.

An echo of loneliness haunted him—his mother—tragic death. Scared.

The woman's spirit screamed for her help.

Lara reached out to the spirit energy. "Slow down, I can hear you."

The tortured spirit spoke in a rasping frantic voice. "*He's in danger, save him from the daemon.*" Her strangled voice gasped for air and faded. A brief flash of her human death filled Lara's mind. She'd been murdered. Lara's hands went around her own throat, feeling the struggle of the woman's last moments of life.

A huge cyclone of dark particles swarmed across the street, easily mistaken for a desert dust bunny. No intelligence of its own, just a mass of dark energy.

A shiver slithered along Lara's spine. She'd seen them in the Oak Creek Canyon, along the riverbed, and a foreboding omen seeped into her thoughts.

After a time, a voice she couldn't identify called out a name. "*Cherie.*"

Lara looked in the direction of the boy.

He was thumbing through the comics, unaware of her scrutiny.

Where had the voice come from, and who was Cherie?

The chimes jingled again. Two women entered and began browsing the shelves.

"Is there a restroom?" one of the women asked.

Lara pointed to the right and they disappeared inside.

Tourists.

November, with its fall colors, was a great time to visit, except this year, the summer heat hadn't ebbed. As a result, flowers still bloomed and summer clothes were still being worn.

Lara wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead. She looked forward to evening, when the temperatures cooled.

The boy's gaze caught settled on the X-box 360 and his eyes brightened.

Seated behind the counter, Lara clicked on the player. "Do you like Spider-Man?" *Edge of Time* appeared on the screen.

"Yes." A huge smile stretched across his face.

She chuckled at his enthusiasm. "Spider-Man is one of my favorite games."

"Me too." He scratched his cheek. "How did Eddie Brock capture Spider-Man?"

Witty kid. He was testing her knowledge. "Brock steals Spider-Man's vision, power, and mind." Lara offered him the remote.

His icy hand slid over hers.

At the moment of contact, a gray mist circled her mind.

"Awaken," a quiet voice whispered.

Lara dropped the remote and shuffled back a step or two. She eyed the boy. *Who was this kid?*

A sudden coldness hit the center of her belly. Outside, the brown particles grew stronger, more of them dancing across the road.

Her mind fuzzed like muddied water. Lara moved against the wall while trying to determine the connection between the boy and the particles.

Picking up the remote, the boy's gaze flitted around the room, his cheeks, a ghastly white.

"Calm down," Lara uttered to herself, drawing in a breath. Her gaze shifted to the kid. "What's your name?"

"Peter."

"I'm Lara." Her telekinetic skills escaped like a stolen thought. She ran her fingers through her hair and tried to decipher what was happening.

The two women emerged from the restroom, interrupting her thoughts. Lara's gaze followed them as they shuffled through various displays of jewelry, before selecting a decorative piece of pottery, and some red rock candles. Once they left, Lara returned her attention to the boy playing the game.

She wanted him to leave, but felt an odd sense of obligation. His mother's spirit had asked her to protect him from the daemon. But what daemon? She felt like she'd entered a house of horrors.

"Peter, where are your parents?"

"My father's working at his office. I like your flower garden. It reminds me of my mom."

"What happened to your mom?" Even though she already knew—she needed him to say the words—make them real.

"She died." The boy's tone was meek, like he'd disconnected himself from the tragedy.

Before Lara could offer her sympathy, the door chimes jingled and the front door slid open.

A massive man strutted in with shoulders like a linebacker. A deep purple vein pulsed along his neck.

With her third eye, Lara saw the brown particles inside him. What were they? Whatever just entered her store wasn't human, that was plain.

The hair on her neck stood at attention. She reached into a drawer and grasped one of her shaman amulets. If provoked, she'd use the soul-catcher to

suck out any malevolent spirit that might be residing in the man. A somber and breathless calm hung over her. Strength regained, she slid from her chair and stood in front of Peter.

The boy stood petrified, his skin ashen, his fear of the man with the dark energy, evident.

“May I help you?” Lara squinted her eyes as she tried to summon the man’s spirit guides. But there weren’t any she could detect, only a faint reminiscence of a fledging soul, a captured spirit.

“I’m here to retrieve my son.” The man reached for Peter.

Lara couldn’t get a read on his life pattern. His soul was captive to something dark. She pulled her soul-catcher in front of her body for protection against wandering misguided spirits. “Leave.” She waved the catcher in his direction, warning him she meant business.

“Peter.” His tone was low, but demanding. “Let’s go home.” The man backed toward the boutique’s door, never taking his eyes from Lara.

Peter stepped out from behind her, his head hung low—shaken to the bone—submissive. At the door, he tilted his head to the left.

Lara heard him whisper, “*its time*,” before the pair left the shop.

Once they were gone, Lara slammed and bolted the door. She flipped the sign to closed and texted Angie.

Something was definitely wrong in Sedona.

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