

Lyrical Press, Inc. Presents: Frighteners

A Gargoyle
for the
Hotel Gothica

Ellie Unleashed

Erotica by Ellie Moonwater

Lyrical Press, Incorporated



A Gargoyle for Hotel Gothica
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Edited by Emma Wayne Porter
Book design by Emma Wayne Porter and Renee Rocco
Cover Art by Renee Rocco

Lyrical Press, Incorporated
17 Ludlow Street
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A GARGOYLE FOR HOTEL GOTHICA

by Ellie Moonwater

DEDICATION

For Deb, who gave me the courage to submit, and Dark Eden Press and REC who gave me a theme that inspired. Without them, this journey would have taken much longer to start, and been much poorer for not having Lochinvar and Claire.

For my husband who believed in me even when I thought he didn't, and for my son, who shared me with my books.

To the romance genre for being such a challenge to write that I couldn't resist trying.

And to Lyrical Press for giving me a home.

*“The moon’s on the lake and the mist’s on the brae,
And the clan has a name that is nameless by day;”*
— “MacGregor’s Gathering,” Sir Walter Scott

ARRIVAL AT HOTEL GOTHICA

The crate had been loaded with care, its contents cushioned by foam, and iron bands shrunk around it to ensure it didn't burst open. It had been packed in a shipping container and hauled down from the highlands on the back of a monster truck driven by a driver who should have been certified long ago. Once auctioned, the crate had been loaded onto a ship in Greenock.

Since then, it had travelled three oceans and rounded the Cape. It had skirted the southern reaches of the world's smallest continent and come to rest in that country's only island state. The crew of the freighter, *Hinchinbrook*, was glad to be rid of it.

It wasn't that there was anything particularly sinister about the container—it was a normal shipping container, painted a bright reddish-orange and labelled with the firm's logo, in white, just like all the others. Unlike all the others, however, there were some in the crew who claimed they only had to walk past the thing for it to give them the creeps... and there were some who whispered that something moved within it. Others claimed the wind moaned more loudly when you stood in close proximity to it, and a few claimed the wind moaned when you stood right next to it—even when there was no wind. More than one person hinted at seeing a look of relief cross the lorry driver's face as the thing was lifted from his truck and loaded into the hold.

Claire Handley knew nothing of the rumours when it was delivered to Hobart's docks, and wouldn't have cared if she had. She didn't have time for such things.

The Hotel Gothica—her Hotel Gothica—was due to open in less than a week, and the gargoyle was the last thing that needed to be fitted before the hotel's inauguration. It would form the perfect finish to the guest entrance in what had once been Saint David's

Cathedral.

She'd kept her promise of keeping the main area of the cathedral open for the public. The stained-glass windows and vaulted ceiling provided the perfect backdrop for the Gothica Café, and she had reserved a portion as a chapel, using long tubs of carefully pruned and trellised citrus trees to form a living wall. Smaller tubs containing sweetly scented lavender formed a low border around them, and the two-tiered arrangement gave privacy to those who might need it.

Velvet-covered benches, flanked by statues, more greenery, and iron-work chairs and tables were scattered around the remainder to provide people with nooks where they could settle to wait for loved ones or guests, or simply admire the windows. And all around the place were gargoyles, some hanging from pillars, others hiding beneath benches, and still more peering out from beside potted plants. It was no longer a church, but she hoped it was still a place where people could find solace and solitude.

The benches, statuary and greenery had been set aside to provide a clear path for the crate and its contents to follow, and Claire watched as the workmen began unpacking the creature she'd fallen in love with while visiting Scotland.

Perhaps 'fallen in love' was too strong a term, but she could think of none better to describe the pride and affection she felt for the beautiful carving. Yes, it was a gargoyle, and, no, it wasn't exactly pretty, but it showed superb craftsmanship and elegant lines. She suppressed a flutter at the memory of some of those lines.

The corded muscles of its forelimbs stretched into well-honed shoulders, and the large hands that would rest on the lintel over the guest entrance were curiously human, in spite of the half-extended claws sprouting from their fingertips.

Claire sighed. Whoever had modelled for the creature possessed a fine chest and abs. Very nice abs. And the back below the wings... she felt as if she could run her fingers along those muscle lines forever... Claire shook her head, trying to shake her thoughts in a more businesslike direction. It was a statue, for heaven's sake!

Leaving the workmen to their task, she decided to look for a coffee in the kitchens of the Gothica Café. Matthias, the café's lessee, would probably be in, going over his preparations for opening night. As she turned away from the workmen, she noticed a figure standing at the entrance to the cathedral, a visitor far too early for opening night.

"I'm sorry, but we're closed," Claire said, moving to intercept him. "We don't open

until..." She hesitated, recognizing who he was.

"I know when you open," the man sneered, "but I wanted to see where you'd be putting *my* inheritance, now that the creature's finally arrived."

If it weren't for the sneer, and the fact that every pore oozed arrogance and self-righteous greed, Duncan MacGregor might have been a handsome man. As it was, his dark eyes were like gleaming stones, and the chiselled features of his face were merely the hard lines of a man who didn't care who he bulldozed to achieve his goals.

"It seems a shame to waste all that money getting them to put it there, when you're only going to have to pay them to take it back down again." He took a menacing step forward.

Claire ignored his jibe. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave, Mr. MacGregor. This is a construction zone and it's not safe. Besides, you're trespassing."

He took another step forward, and Claire placed herself in front of him, blocking his way. Behind her, the workmen fell silent.

When he didn't move, she asked, "Do I need to remind you that you are one phone call away from a restraining order?"

At this, MacGregor stopped and stared at her. Neither of them could be considered tall, but Claire's five-foot-eight put her at an equal height to him, and she looked him in the eye. If he found her intimidating, he didn't show it.

He glared at her. Leaning forward slightly, he snarled, "You do realize that *statue* is rightfully mine."

Refusing to back down, Claire stood her ground and regarded him coolly. "We've had this discussion before, Mr. MacGregor. Now, I've already asked you to leave once. Don't make me insist."

His hands fisted at his sides, and for a moment she thought he would strike her. Behind her, there was a shift of movement and, with a growl of frustration, MacGregor turned on his heel and stomped out of the cathedral.

Claire turned and looked up at the foreman, who had been supervising the installation of her gargoyle. "Thank you," she said.

George Beren shrugged. "He looked like he was going to get nasty, and I'd heard you ask him to leave twice. You might have needed help."

Remembering the hostility that had radiated from MacGregor, and his claim that she had stolen his family inheritance, Claire supposed George was right. She didn't tell him that, though. No one outside the police officers who'd intervened in an earlier confrontation with the man knew of MacGregor's attempts to convince her to hand over the items she'd bought at the Scottish auction house—items put up for sale by a recognized claimant of said inheritance. Duncan MacGregor's claim had been checked, and gone unacknowledged. Claire hadn't been joking when she'd warned the man he was in danger of a restraining order.

Pulling a shaky smile to her face, she looked up at George and placed a hand on his arm. "I think I might owe you and the crew morning tea," she said.

"You needn't." He looked embarrassed and glanced back at his men.

"But I want to." She allowed a hint of mischief to curve her lips. "And, besides, I'm the boss."

"All right then, Miss Handley," he conceded, and walked back to the work area before she could say more. "If you need any help, just let us know. We stop at eleven."

Eleven! Claire glanced at her watch. She'd go and see what magic Matthias could whip up in two hours. The café manager was dying to give his kitchen a run.

SECRET HISTORIES

Hours later, after Claire had seen the last of the workmen out the front door, helped Matthias clean up, and finished her tasks for the day, she wrapped herself in the purple folds of her favourite satin nightgown and curled up on the couch.

Normally she would have turned on the television and tried to find a late night movie. Tonight, she turned to the iron-bound chest the workmen had unpacked from the gargoyle's crate and carried up to her apartment at the rear of the hotel. They had set it down in the living room so that it formed a sort of low table at one end of her couch, and she had thrown a table-cloth over it to disguise its true form.

Now, she lifted the tablecloth and peered inside the crate. She hadn't been certain what she'd purchased when she'd agreed to take the chest along with the gargoyle. The two had been sold in the same lot, even though the owner couldn't tell her why.

Claire supposed she should have been grateful. The cost of the statue had been enough to put off manuscript-attracted bargain hunters, and the contents of the chest had been listed as "private journal, faery tale collection and bric-a-brac." Even so, she'd beaten a few strong rivals to get them, and then driven them off again when they'd pursued her after the auction in an attempt to part her from the chest's contents.

"Not until I've had a chance to inspect them myself," she'd told them. "When I know what I have, I'll know if I want to sell." The more persistent ones had needed to be told they were damaging their chances of being included in any sale she might plan before they'd left her alone.

The private journal ended up being something fancifully titled *MacGregor's Journeys through the Magick of Life*, and the faery tales were left untitled in an old

journal of collected folk lore concerning the fae said to roam Scotland's hills. The bric-a-brac was an assortment of archaic scientific equipment, or perhaps the sorts of things you would expect to find in an alchemist's laboratory.

Carefully re-packing the bric-a-brac, Claire settled down against her favourite cushion and stared at the leather-bound *Journeys*. It was either going to be the most boring read of her life or one of the more interesting. That all depended on how egotistical its writer had been.

Remembering MacGregor's self-proclaimed descendant, Claire didn't hold much hope. Still, if she was going to put it into the hotel's Library Gothica, she wanted to make sure it fit the theme, and that meant she had to read it.

Two hours later, she was still reading, her coffee two-thirds full and starting to congeal. It wasn't that the truth was fascinating, but that the story was so vivid.

Laird James Lochinvar MacGregor had done a service for the "people under the hill":

...an unseelie crowd, the lot of them, given to all the vices and pleasures a man can imagine, and some a good man dare not. Still, I drove a hard bargain and they paid their debt—paid it fairly too, mind, which is unusual for these creatures.

Claire had read how the gargoyle had been placed above the room serving as the laird's underground laboratory and the clan treasury. She'd skimmed across the detailed engineering specifics of the pit-and-cistern trap of which the gargoyle had been a part, pausing only to inspect the carefully drawn diagrams of the trap's function.

Apparently, there had been a hidden lever at the bottom of the steps leading to the treasury. If the lever wasn't moved to the correct position by the person entering the hall, and the right password spoken, then the locking mechanism holding the lid to the pit trap shut would be undone and the intruder crossing it would fall into a pit full of sharpened stakes. As if that wasn't bad enough, the opening of the lid would also trigger the cistern doors above the gargoyle and water would pour through the statue's mouth and over the intruder.

Claire snorted. She guessed that meant whoever it was would go from having a bad

day to having a very bad day.

The ‘people under the hill,’ if she remembered correctly, were the faery folk or elves said to dwell in another land. Some hills formed a gateway to that land, and were generally avoided. For a long moment, she pondered what sort of service the laird would have had to perform to impress those legendary people.

Silly woman, she chided herself, shaking the thoughts from her head. The people under the hill were just another Scottish legend, like the magic this buffoon claimed to have found.

Silly or not, the laird’s accounts of the gargoyle, and his experiments in magic, kept her reading. Through a series of exciting escapades, James had discovered that the gargoyle was designed to do more than guard his halls.

It comes alive! he’d written, his handwriting spiking in alarm.

*On nights of the new moon, when the land is clad in darkness,
this beast, this abominable gift, stalks my lands and steals those who
come under my care. I must find a way to stop it. There must be a
kind of unseelie magick that drives it, guiding its hand.*

*It takes only the best of what it can find—the most beautiful of
maidens, the prettiest child, the fiercest warrior, and my prize cattle.
One by one, it takes them all. And I can’t be sure that it will be
satisfied with these—how long before it takes the brightest of my
advisors in a time when I need them most?*

Claire read on. James had set his best huntsman the task of tracking the creature. It was found the beast could hunt on nights when the moon was hidden by cloud, that it shunned all forms of moonlight, and was always back on its perch by dawn. Why, they had yet to discover. They followed it to the door of the very hill from which James had emerged with the elven architects who had installed the gargoyle, the cistern and the pit.

I was a fool to trust them, he lamented in his writing.

All the legends tell of their double dealing—even in a reward

fairly earned—and I cannot go to war with them when I have a greater foe coming at me from this world. I need to find the key to their power. I need to turn the creature to my own purpose. If I could control him, then he'd be a formidable addition to my armies. An ally I would not have to watch twice.

Interesting, thought Claire. The auction house had claimed the creature was almost four hundred years old. She leafed back through the journal, but found that James had encoded the dates with such useless information as “*The year of Helene's wedding, two days after Arrow foaled.*” No doubt if she'd had access to some of the registers of bloodline and pedigree he'd kept, she'd be able to work out the dates—a task that would be made easier if she also knew who Helene had been.

She read on, and discovered what had made the elves turn back on their bargain.

To think they were insulted when I offered the lady my services, he'd written.

I meant it only as the highest of compliments—that she were worthy of being my bride as so few others are. They took it to mean something in a far lewder sense. Perhaps knowing they were creatures of The Pleasures, I should have been more careful of my words. They say the raiding will stop only when I have bested the creature's makers. It's a Challenge, so take it I will. No other-worldly creature has the power to best a Son of Adam.

Claire skimmed the next few pages. They were filled with the technical detail of his attempts to defeat the elvish magicks, although his journey to the land of Egypt, and his consultations with the magicians and priests he found there, were fascinating. If only he'd thought to publish his tales—they would have become more famous than Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

The laird had then created his own spell of control, written it on the finest papyrus in the rarest of inks, and pushed it down the gargoyle's throat. On the next night of the new moon, the creature still woke, but obeyed James's orders to stay on its perch and leave his lands in peace. For a month, James brooded on how he might pay the unseelie back.

He'd ultimately allowed the gargoyle to resume raiding at the elves' request, but he'd enspelled it with an unreasoning hatred for faery folk, causing it to fly into a rage and attack them on sight.

Needless to say, he'd gloated, later in the book,

...the gargoyle has received no further targets, and the raids have stopped. I continue to improve my control over the beast, even though other matters occupy my mind.

Claire read on, ignoring the lateness of the hour, drawn into the story James MacGregor had woven, in spite of his boasting. He'd regained control, all right, but his enemies... Claire sighed. She wished he'd named his enemies, but his paranoia had held fast, and he'd focused the journal on his pursuit of magic.

Somewhere, she knew, there would be another book detailing his campaigns. His enemies had remained a threat. He could not raise and train the men he needed in order to hold them, and so he'd struck on another plan: if he could not find the men, then he would breed them.

Drawing on the Egyptian fertility magicks he'd found in his search to control the gargoyle, he'd woven another spell to direct the creature and bind its bloodline to his own. When this had been done, he released the gargoyle from its perch. Yet even in what seemed to be an act of unthinking self-preservation, the laird seemed to hold on to some sense of honor. The gargoyle was not to 'bond' with women promised in marriage, or to those already married. It was not to attack girls of less than marriageable age. His exact wording was that its *offspring should serve the master of their first sire in all generations.*

Claire shivered. It was one thing to admire the creature's fine artistic lines, but when she thought of encountering it in the dark of night...

She closed the book and stared at the door to her small apartment. The auctioneer had said the statue had been taken from an estate 'fallen into disrepair.' How could that be, she thought, if James had been successful in his plan to use the gargoyle's offspring to defeat his enemies? Why had the family abandoned their home so completely? Reluctantly, she re-opened the cover and continued reading.

The next few entries were mundane—more reports on the concept and progress of

his next foray into magick. There was some gloating, too, at the way he'd bested the unseelie fae. Claire frowned. The end of such boasting was usually bad. One did not make a song of beating the Scottish fae. They tended to take umbrage.

In the end, the fae had attempted to tie the gargoyle to its duties as a guardian of the trap, and James had taken great delight in writing how he'd discovered he could release it from those duties with a word. The last entry of the journal, however, lacked any delight whatsoever...

I have packed up the household, and sent my wife and the bairns ahead, he'd written.

I fear that there is no room for me here. My enemies press me mercilessly, so that I cannot hold my estates or keep my people safe, and the unseelie have taken to murdering my household guard. Whether this is in warning to me, or because my guardsmen stop the fae from taking my life, I do not know. I fear, however, that this cannot go on.

I must leave this place, and go to a city where the cobblestones bury the land, and the houses have replaced the trees. Only there will I be safe, for it is well known, an established fact, that the faery folk do not like the city and cannot thrive there. And mine enemies will not pursue me once they possess my lands.

I have not told my wife the half of this. She would only think me mad. I have let her believe that we flee from the enemy, and that we will return when the danger is over. This will be my last entry to this book. I have bound the gargoyle to its keeping. Neither the fae nor mine enemies will have the satisfaction of reading it.

Claire flipped to the next page, eager for the next instalment, but found it to be as blank as the laird had promised. She turned each of the final pages of the journal with care, hoping to find what had become of the laird, but to no avail. Whether or not his plans had worked remained a mystery.

Claire slid her feet off the couch and padded to the kitchen. Rummaging around in the emergency drawer, she pulled out a torch. It was just past midnight and she knew she

had read too much, but she also knew she wouldn't sleep until she had seen for herself that the gargoyle still stood on its perch above the guests' entry to the hotel proper.

Pulling on slippers of purple satin and brocade, she picked up her keys and padded quietly down the hall that would lead her into what had been Saint David's Cathedral.

STAINED-GLASS MEMORIES

Beyond the window to the hall, Claire noted the darkness of the night. In respect for the next scheduled cricket match, it had decided to rain. She felt a tug of amusement at the irony, and then her thoughts returned to what she had read in the journal.

The gargoyle had been set the task of breeding. MacGregor had made it clear that this had been one of its imperatives. At certain spots in his journal, he had noted the disappearance of certain village girls and speculated.

Towards the journal's end, he'd also noted the sudden attacks of 'the vapors' suffered by his eldest daughter. In spite of his declarations at this point, Claire began to wonder if the gargoyle had not also been a part of his worries. After all, his daughter hadn't been promised, either.

She shivered. It was one thing to meet the creature if you had been foolish enough to be out on a moonless night, but to be stalked by it in your own home...! Claire hesitated. She wasn't promised to anyone, and hadn't been since she'd discovered her fiancé's betrayal.

That had been shortly after she'd bought the cathedral, three nights after the purchase to be precise. David had backed out of a dinner date, pleading a late-night meeting and a headache. Since it had been the second time that week, and followed two months of late meetings, business dinners, last minute emergencies and distressed phone calls from his mother—the last of which she'd found out were a falsehood, when she'd inquired after that lady's health—Claire had finally faced the truth. Her David, her fiancé and business partner, and the love of her life, was having an affair.

Unsure at the time as to how to prove it, Claire had wandered down to the cathedral

looking for comfort. For some reason, the building had always drawn her, wrapping her in its silence like a welcome guest. Whenever she stepped through its doorway, she felt she'd come home.

That night, however, she'd stepped through its doorway to the sounds of passion. Her hand had hesitated on the light switch, as she'd noted the brilliance of the moonlight streaming through the stained-glass windows. She remembered how she'd told David how much she wanted to make love in the light of those very windows, and her sense of betrayal grew.

Walking silently in the shadows between the moonlit reflections, Claire had approached the lovers. Their voices guided her to find them, cushioned by picnic blankets in a clearing of pews. David and his Delilah. Or, in this case, Sarah Terratso.

Cloaked by the shadows, and ashamed of her tears, Claire had watched them. David suckling at Sarah's breasts, running his tongue around her coffee-coloured nipples until they stood upright, and Sarah shuddering at his touch. David's hands continued where his tongue had left off, while his mouth trailed kisses down Sarah's stomach before supping at the juncture of her thighs, his tongue working the magic that had once sent Claire into ecstasy.

Sarah had writhed beneath him, her hands tangling in his hair and her nails leaving red trails across his shoulders. Claire had watched in dumbstruck misery.

It hadn't been until David had kissed his way back up to Sarah's mouth, and then thrust himself inside her while he nibbled at her lips, that Claire had found the strength to speak.

"I'd say this is one hell of a late night meeting!" she'd exclaimed, the anger in her voice cutting across David's moan of pleasure, and Sarah's first yelp of satisfaction.

The meeting had gone downhill from there. Besides his annoyance at frustrated passion, and his irritation at being caught, David was angry at her lack of trust. And things had only gotten worse with Sarah's protest of, "You told me she'd never know!"

Claire had flung her engagement ring onto David's exposed back and stalked from the cathedral's hall. She'd gone home and cried herself to sleep, forgetting all about the joint account they'd set up only two months prior. By the next afternoon it had been too late.

How close she'd come to losing the cathedral, Claire didn't want to contemplate. She

could only thank her lucky stars, or a very merciful God, that the bank and those creditors David had left unpaid were prepared to be patient. There had been nothing she could do about getting her money back, no charges she could lay about his use of the account.

She'd sold her house, her city apartment, and her car to clear most of the debt and then refurbished some of the cloisters at the cathedral to live in. It had been an interesting battle with the council, but she'd managed it. Now she didn't have to worry until the first of her business repayments came due. The cathedral was hers, and a loan from her parents had ensured the contractors had been paid on time.

Clawing her way back into the hotel race had been the easy part. Walking down the streets she'd walked with David, and eating at restaurants she'd shared with him, had been much harder.

Now that those struggles were over, Claire looked up to note she'd reached her private entrance to the cathedral proper. In contrast to the night she'd caught David cheating, it was cast in almost total darkness. A feeling of foreboding washed over her, but whether it was a result of her memories of David's betrayal or something else entirely, Claire couldn't be sure.

She only knew she felt that something wasn't right. Looking out into the darkness, the feeling of wrongness grew stronger and she couldn't work out why.

She was reaching for the light switch when she heard a scream. The fright she heard there froze her to the spot, and then it came again. Ignoring the light switch in favour of the torch she was still holding, Claire ran for the front door. The screams sounded as though they came from the street right outside the cathedral, and there was a phone in Reception she could use to call the police if she didn't think she could help.

Whether it was the beam of her flashlight, the way she threw the doors open after unlocking them, or her angry shouts of "Get away from her! You leave her alone!" that made the girl's attacker run away, Claire didn't know, but she hadn't thought twice when she'd seen the scene outside.

A large man-shaped *thing* had its arms wrapped around a young woman in the street, and was trying to drag her into the shadowy service lane that ran by the cathedral. Seeing only one attacker, Claire acted immediately. She flung the doors of the cathedral wide and ran towards the pair, shouting at the top of her lungs.

With an expletive that didn't fit with the strangely flapping wings, the man—it *had*

to be a man—let go of his victim and fled into the dark angles of the lane.

“And don’t come back!” Claire shouted after him, hurrying across to the woman. She lowered her voice as she approached. “Hey, are you all right?”

“Do I look all right?” the woman snapped, sobbing. “That maniac...” She allowed Claire to wrap an arm around her waist and lead her back into the cathedral. “I’m sorry,” she sniffed, when the doors were locked behind them. “It was stupid...” She let out a little squeal of fear as Claire turned on the lights, standing frozen in renewed terror at the sight before her.

Puzzled, Claire turned to see what had caught the woman’s attention. “What is it?” She could see nothing out of the ordinary. The inside of the cathedral was its usual calming self. Following the woman’s gaze, she noted how the gargoyle, her Scottish gargoyle, shone in the glow of the faux coach-lights set on either side of him.

“Don’t worry,” she soothed. “I had him brought over from Scotland for the guest entrance. It’s a statue.”

Her guest managed a nervous smile, and hesitantly followed Claire across the cathedral proper to the café. The woman’s eyes darted from one gargoyle statue to the next and she pressed closer to Claire. “I don’t mean to insult you,” she said, “but it’s really creepy in here.”

Guiding her guest onto a stool near the café bar, Claire glanced around. “Are you sure?” she asked. “I’ve always found it soothing.”

“Well, yes,” the woman gulped, huddling closer. “Those...*things* are everywhere. They’re terrifying! After what that freak out there tried to do...”

Now Claire understood. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t think.” She got up as though to take her guest elsewhere. “We can—”

“No, no, no...” The woman managed a nervous laugh. “It’s okay.” She watched as Claire took an electric kettle out from under the bar and filled it. The mundanity seemed to soothe her.

“I’ll make you a coffee,” Claire told her, “and then we can call the police.”

“No, no police,” the woman said. “I couldn’t...” She glanced back at the gargoyles populating the cathedral. “I mean, it’d be silly to say I was attacked by some guy with a monster fetish. It’s like he’d spent a bit too much time in here... No offense!”

Claire managed a polite smile, and continued making the coffee her guest insisted she wanted. “No police, just a cuppa and a cab.”

They hadn’t shared much beyond that, and Claire felt oddly relieved when the stranger had gone. Alice was her name, and Claire didn’t think the woman would be back to spend the Gothica Cafe gift voucher on opening night.

Once Alice had left, Claire made herself another coffee and sat staring at the Scottish gargoyle. “Well,” she murmured, staring up at him, “you’re a fine one. First she doesn’t want to talk about her attacker, and then she describes him as a nut case in dress-ups. And you...” she said, sipping thoughtfully, “I would have sworn you weren’t there when I went to help her.”

The gargoyle didn’t respond, and Claire tidied the kitchen and returned to her rooms. She was going to bed. Or at least that was her intention, until she found her apartment door wide open and a breeze blowing in from the street entrance down the corridor.

BY THE PRICKING OF MY THUMBS...

The world outside had lightened to a pre-dawn monochrome by the time the police had arrived to take her statement. They'd closed off her apartment, pending forensics and 'further investigation,' taken photos and ascertained that no unexpected visitors remained, and then they'd left. Their exit ended the most eventful twenty-four hours of her week.

Fortunately, the arrival of George and his crew had seen some semblance of normality return, and Matthias had turned up to see to the Café and created a fuss. They'd all assured her they'd keep an eye on her, but Claire hadn't wanted to take a room and try to sleep.

She'd spent the rest of the day finalizing her preparations for the festivities surrounding the hotel's opening, before retiring for an early night. It bothered her that the thieves had taken just the contents of the chest. They'd left her jewelry and an antique brass vase alone, but absconded with MacGregor's journal, the collection of faery tales, and the 'bric-a-brac.' They'd done it when she'd been helping Alice and she hadn't heard a thing.

Opening Night arrived without any further excitement, and Claire used it to divert her attention away from the nagging doubts and suspicions the raid on her apartment had created.

It was with great satisfaction that she cut the ribbon to the cathedral and welcomed Hotel Gothica's inaugural guest. She hadn't told him he'd be staying for free in return for his good-natured cooperation. And he, surprisingly, hadn't asked. She could have hugged him, and almost did, but he took her hand with a smile and gestured for her to lead him

inside and away from the gathered crowd.

“Thank you, my dear,” he murmured. “Now I will have a hundred photographs with which to remember this part of my stay.”

Claire had signed him in and shown him to his room before returning to the launch party being held in the cathedral proper.

Matthias was in his element. Gothica Café was bouncing with life and the hotel restaurant had started with appetizers at the Inaugural Preservation Fund Dinner.

Claire circulated, chatting with press-men, posing for photographers, and making everyone feel welcome. All the while, she looked for faces she recognized. There was George and his team, and some of the people she’d worked with before embarking on this crazy enterprise. Even her parents had put in an appearance. But these weren’t the faces she was looking for, the faces she hoped not to see.

Those faces belonged to David and his latest conquest. They’d arrived fashionably late, but only she had noticed. Claire had seen them comfortably installed in the Preservation Fund Dinner, and hidden a small smile. One of them was paying the five hundred dollar fee, and she was pretty sure it wasn’t David. She almost felt a twinge of pity for the girl on his arm, but squelched it quickly. Each to their own, and David’s true colours were a lesson in life that couldn’t be bought.

Another of the faces on her dread list had surfaced in the crowd when she’d been cutting the ribbon with her first guest. She’d managed to excuse the tremor that ran through her hand as nerves. *The cheek of him!*

While she’d kept her suspicions to herself, she was fairly certain that only one person would have raided her apartment for the journal and the chest’s other contents. Duncan’s well-defined face watched her with the arrogant satisfaction of a cat that had taken first lick from a bowl of cream. Claire pretended not to see him, and then watched for him throughout the night.

He kept to the Café and the main cathedral, but she noted, later in the night, when her other guests had started to drift away, he stood before the gargoyle and gazed up at it. This, in itself, wasn’t unusual. Hundreds of guests had done the same thing the evening over. No, it was the way he seemed to be speaking while he looked at it that bothered Claire.

She circled closer, noting with a sudden tension that his cellphone wasn’t in his

hand. Whatever he said didn't take long. Either the other guests didn't notice, or they studiously ignored the strange man. After all, the gargoyle looked real enough. If someone wanted to speak to it, why not? At least it could be seen. By the time Claire was close enough to be sure, he'd finished. After a moment's pause, he said one more word, bowed his head to it, and then strode purposefully from the building.

His actions unnerved Claire. She watched for his return until she'd seen the last of her guests from the room, and even the trio of stunning men who stopped to admire the gargoyle before going for coffee, and then returning to admire the creature some more, couldn't lift her spirits.

Their faces reminded her of that elf king in *Lord of the Rings*, the dark-haired one, since not a one of them was fair. Narrow and fine-boned, but not showing the signs of age he'd carried. No, their faces were unlined, and their eyes were spectacular. One had a gaze as green as an emerald forest, another as blue as the Derwent on a good day, and the last, the darkest of granite greys. Claire had caught herself staring and looked hurriedly away.

She'd been left with the after-image of suited bodies that held a look of power bound by grace, of lean thighs, nicely-shaped shoulders, and tapering waists. She could only imagine the asses that went with those. Oh, yes she could. Now why would they be so fascinated with her Scottish sculpture?

Concern over Duncan MacGregor's whereabouts drew her away from them and, by the time she thought to look again, they were gone. Unfortunately, the unwelcome thoughts triggered by the sight of him speaking to the gargoyle, and seeded by James MacGregor's journal, were not.

They plagued her more than Matthias's latest brew, so at first she couldn't sleep, and then she slept late. After that, it was too busy for her to follow up on the crazy notion that something of what she'd read in the journal might be true. That, and the slowly growing fear Duncan would return and use the statue against her.

Claire went back to inspect the creature, intending to put those doubts to rest before the evening became full night. For once, she was grateful for the late sunset. At nine o'clock at night there was still daylight—if she was going to put her hand into the monster's mouth, she'd rather do it when the sun was up, just in case MacGregor hadn't been imbibing a really special brand of Highland tea when he'd penned his journal.

Once she was sure the guests were settled, and the last of the sightseers had been shoed from the hall by the night watchman, who now monitored the cathedral's closed front doors, Claire went and fetched a ladder from the maintenance closet. Bringing it back to the statue, she climbed up and inspected the beast carefully.

He was magnificent, she decided again. As magnificent as he had been when she'd found him at the auction house. Very carefully, she ran a hand over his body, stroking down his side, along the soft curve above his hip, across the lines of his back. She ran her palm down his haunches, admiring the musculature of his thighs, the tense bulk of his calves. She sighed, and then she dared to turn her attention to his face.

Here, if the journal told the truth, lay the secret of the gargoyle. When MacGregor had broken the power of the unseelie fae over the creature, he'd enspelled it with an incantation of his own.

Slowly, Claire's hand crept towards the gargoyle's open mouth. MacGregor had written the magick down in the finest of inks on a piece of papyrus that he'd pushed down its throat, although how he'd protected it from any water, she couldn't tell. Perhaps he'd disabled the gargoyle's connection to the cistern and the trap?

Claire ran her fingers along the gargoyle's lips, tracing the edge of well-carved teeth. She edged her hand over the tongue and into its mouth, wondering at how warm stone could feel. Using her other hand, she held onto its forearm for balance. Further she reached, feeling the miraculously smooth interior of what served as the gargoyle's gullet. When she had almost given up hope, her fingertips brushed against something.

Paper?

Claire stood on tiptoe until she teetered atop the ladder, and might have lost her balance had it not been for her grip on the creature's forearm. She manoeuvred her hand until the paper was held between her fingers. Carefully, she started to pull her arm free. She'd just wormed it clear of the beast's throat and managed to wrap her whole hand around the piece of paper when the gargoyle's jaws closed over her wrist.

Shocked, Claire found herself staring into eyes the colour of smoke—eyes that looked back at her with amused curiosity and speculation, while the odd scrape of claws on stone told her she might be in more trouble than she knew. She almost sobbed with relief when her premiere guest returned late from an outing to raise the night watchman, and came in through the front door.

“Why, Miss Handley!” he exclaimed. “Whatever are you doing up there?”

The sudden release of her wrist almost had her falling, but a sudden desperate grab at the gargoyle’s other leg steadied her, and she climbed hurriedly down.

“Just inspecting it for cracks,” she lied. “One of the other guests swore he saw a crack just under the jaw line. I can’t see it,” she contempORIZED, moving to pick up the dropped parchment. “Can you?”

That stopped him. He came and stood beside her, inspecting the statue from the floor. “No, can’t say as I do,” he admitted. “Perhaps it was a stray shadow?”

Glancing up at the gargoyle, Claire could have sworn she saw one of its eyebrows quirk upwards, and a faint grin curve its lips. A stray shadow indeed! She invited her guest for coffee, but he politely declined.

“Too old, you know,” he said. “The evening is late enough and I can hear sleep calling.”

Watching him go, Claire glanced once more up at the gargoyle, and retired to her recently released apartments. As she left, she would have sworn she felt it watching her.

...SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES

How she managed to sleep with the papyrus clutched in her hand and her heart doing a disco beat every time she thought of her encounter with the gargoyle, Claire wasn't sure. She only knew that, after securing her apartment's windows and door, and straightening things that didn't really need to be straightened, she'd dropped into bed, and into sleep.

Her first vision of the papyrus had haunted her dreams. Like paper, but unlike any paper she'd ever held, the scroll should have been brittle with age. Instead, it had flexed beneath her fingers, supple as skin, unrolling to fill her palm with startling colour.

Claire had blinked when she'd first seen it. She blinked now in her dream. The writing blazed out at her, convincing her as nothing else had that the magicks of which MacGregor wrote were real.

Little pictures seemed to float just above the page, while appearing to sit just beneath its surface. As she watched, what looked to be a stylized wheat ear slid across the parchment to change places with a beehive. Blue outlines flared as they touched. Red ink caught the energy and touched it with purple.

Frowning, Claire stared harder at the writing, trying to make sense of what she saw, but the pictures moved in front of her. Strokes of bold darkness, highlighted by golds and reds, yellows and blues. Brown reeds danced at the edge of the page as though affected by the wind that ruffled her hair. The smell of the river, muddy and fragrant, rose about her, on warm damp currents of air.

The scent of spices tickled her nostrils, vying with the river stench for her attention. With a growing sense of alarm, her dream mimicked the way she'd let the scroll roll

closed. Around her, the world shimmered like a mirage as she woke.

While it was no longer warm, the breeze persisted and the sheer curtains at her bedroom window were flowing inwards with the night breeze. The faint scent of spice persisted also, but it was the slightly spicy scent of liliams and not some other exotic fragrance. Staring around the room, Claire relaxed when she heard and saw nothing more, save for the odd bundle on top of her dressing table.

Scrabbling to regain the scroll, she clutched it again in one hand and flicked on her bedside lamp with the other. The wooden floor was cool beneath her feet, but not uncomfortable, and nothing but the curtains moved to frighten her.

The bundle consisted of a bunch of cream and red liliams, their stems still damp with night dew. Bound to them, with a thick, red ribbon, were two ancient books—Macgregor’s journal, and the collection of folklore. Stacked in a basket set beside the dresser were the items of ‘bric-a-brac’ from the chest.

What was this? Claire thought of the gargoyle, and brushed the thought aside. Firstly, she couldn’t be sure—didn’t *want* to be sure—that it had really closed its mouth on her arm. And secondly, she wasn’t sure it was capable of such a romantic gesture, or why it would make one. The gold-edged band of scarlet was completely unexpected. That only left her wondering who else might have returned the items. Duncan certainly wouldn’t have given them up.

A quick inspection of her apartment revealed the doors and windows were still secure, although a careful look at the window ledge in her bedroom showed claw marks. A gouge along the lintel revealed how a talon might have been used to slide the catch of the lock sideways, giving the creature entrance.

Clutching the bundle of flowers and ribbon-bound books to her chest, Claire lay back down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. The more she thought about it, the more likely it was that the gargoyle had been responsible. Still trying to puzzle through its motives, Claire fell asleep once more, until sunshine spilled across her face to wake her.

Late, she rose, hurriedly placed the liliams in water, dressed, ate breakfast at the hotel’s restaurant, and set about the business of the day. It was mid-afternoon before she visited Matthias at Gothica Café for another coffee and a ham and cheese croissant. She was halfway through the croissant when a shadow fell across her table.

“Is this seat taken?” The sound of Duncan MacGregor’s voice ruptured her

concentration. "I thought not," he added, before she could reply.

With a mouth gone suddenly dry, Claire chewed and swallowed the last of the pastry, and took a long, careful sip of coffee. Duncan MacGregor sat himself across from her as though the meeting had been arranged.

"Do you truly want to have me file a restraining order?" she hissed, keeping her voice low and noting the ominous look of thunder that darkened his face. It cleared momentarily as the waiter brought his coffee, and then returned as he leant forward.

"Don't you play the innocent with me, Claire," he growled. "We both know you're after the gargoyle for yourself. All I want is what is supposed to be mine."

"The Scottish High Court chucked your claim out on its ear," Claire retorted. "It seems the true heir had already been identified!"

His face purpled and he looked fit to choke on his current mouthful of coffee. In his hand, the coffee mug shook. "I'll have you know I'm contesting that... that imposter's claims," he sputtered, took a deep breath and forced himself to calm. "So," he began, almost conversationally, "what did you do with them?"

"Do with what?"

"The journal and that book of folktales you stole."

"You're the only thief here. I haven't stolen anything!"

"If *you* hadn't stolen anything, then how come I don't have them anymore?" His tone was quiet as he settled back, raising his mug to his lips. "After all, I have a dozen witnesses who can say where I was last night, but I doubt you can say the same."

Claire sighed. "I retired early, and slept like a babe the whole night through."

Abruptly, his demeanor changed, and he leant forward again. "Look," he began, "you don't know what you're dealing with. This creature, Lochinvar, my ancestor called him, takes a great deal of strength to control. Now, I have been practicing magick since my mother taught me what it was, but I doubt you even knew of its existence until you read my great-great-grandpère's book."

Claire allowed a small smile to curve her lips. "You might be shy a few 'greats,' there," she said, and watched his face redden once more.

His hands clenched around the coffee cup until she thought the white-knuckled grip might break it, and then he took another deep breath, cleared his throat and tried again.

“What I’m trying to do,” he grated, “is save you from a potentially lethal situation. I know how to control the beast, and you do not. With the parchment inside it, it must obey someone of my bloodline.”

“Really?” Claire said. “Then how come you didn’t explain this to your however-many-times removed cousin, or whatever he is?”

MacGregor’s lips tightened. “Because he has as much regard for the existence of magick as you do. Less, now.” He raised his mug to his lips, before continuing in an almost pleading tone. “Look, Claire, it’s a dangerous beast. The things my grandpère made it do, the attack here the other week, and—”

“I beg your pardon?” Claire forced herself to remain in her chair.

Duncan lounged back, a smile playing around his lips. “Oh come, now, Claire. Alice still goes out at night. She’s just a lot more careful about who with, how, where and when. And then there’s the break-in on your apartment. You wouldn’t want your guests finding out just how dangerous an area they’ve decided to stay in, would you?”

Claire stared at him dumbstruck. Alice hadn’t wanted to press charges against her attacker. And Alice should have known better than to be walking on her own at night. Claire narrowed her eyes and glared at him. “If you even try to spread those kinds of rumors about Hotel Gothica,” she whispered, “then I will make sure the police find my stolen goods and have the chance to fingerprint them, and I’ll make certain they investigate the connection between the theft and your desire to acquire your ancestor’s belongings. Am I quite clear?”

MacGregor’s smirk wasn’t comforting as he set down his mug and stood. “It was lovely talking to you Claire. I’m sure we’ll meet again,” he lowered his voice, “some dark and lonely night...”

Before she could respond, he left the café and sauntered past the gargoyle on his way out through the cathedral’s front doors. Angry beyond belief at his threats, Claire stalked back to her apartment, set a match to his ‘great-whatever- grandpère’s spell parchment, and then washed its ashes down the sink. “Good luck with finding those,” she said, and set about planning how to confront the gargoyle later that night.

THE WATCHER IN THE NIGHT

The gargoyle pre-empted Claire's plans.

She woke to the weight of it pressing down on the bed as it crouched over her. She woke to the strength of its hand across her mouth, and its fanged maw a foot from her face.

With a squeak of terror, she tried to sit up, to move, to and struggle free, but its weight pinned the blankets over her in a surprisingly effective cocoon.

"Shhh," he whispered, glancing towards the again open window. "I mean you no harm."

His voice was a smooth rumble, its rich texture touched lightly by the Scotch brogue, and something else more alien. It reminded her of chocolate. Oranges and chocolate. Keeping his hand over her mouth, he continued, "I've come to thank you for my freedom from the spell. And I've come to ask you for a favour." Slowly, his hand lifted.

Claire drew a careful breath. "What?" She relaxed as he lowered his hand. Obviously, he'd been expecting her to scream.

"I'd like to stay in the cathedral... in the place you've made for me." He waited, his dark eyes intent on her face. "You're so beautiful."

Tension flooded Claire's limbs once again. The gargoyle raised his hands. "I didn't mean to frighten you. It just sort of slipped out. Can I stay?"

Something like pity tugged at Claire's heart. The odd affection she'd felt for him as a statue turned into something else. She pulled a hand free of the covers and placed it on his chest. It was as smooth as it looked, but it rippled with muscle, rose and fell with his

breathing, and was warm to the touch.

“You’re real,” she breathed, then hesitated. “Are all the things MacGregor wrote about real, too, then?”

He turned his head away, and something like shame mingled with sadness settled over his features. “Aye,” he murmured, “but I don’t have... I don’t want to follow those ... do those... things any more. I don’t know if it will make you think any different of me, though. Mayhap you won’t want me t’stay.”

For a long moment there was silence between them. Silence like the coming home of the cathedral, silence that asked nothing, but accepted them both while Claire formulated her answer.

“Did you leave the flowers?” she asked.

His lips curled into a soft smile. “Aye, and I fetched back your book. Didn’t seem right, MacGregor having it. The flowers seemed to suit you.”

“And the ribbon?”

He laughed at her demand. “And the ribbon,” he admitted. “I couldn’t go giving a pretty lady a gift without wrapping it in a ribbon, now, could I?”

Again the silence spoke between them, and Claire caught herself feeling almost content.

“You know the other week wasn’t me, don’t you?”

His question caught Claire off guard and she had to think back until her mind provided the image of an oddly-dressed figure attacking a woman. “Alice? I never thought you were the one who attacked Alice. I’d started to think it was MacGregor. After all, the books disappeared while I was looking after her.”

“No, it wasn’t him, either. He was busy robbing your apartment, I think, but he paid the woman, your ‘Alice,’ and some other fellow to distract you. And if their performance cast doubts on me, then so much the better.”

Well, that makes a lot more sense, Claire thought. “So, you don’t have to build MacGregor’s army anymore?”

The gargoyle shook his head and shifted so he no longer loomed over her, but sat beside her on the bed. “No. He freed me from the elves’ spell, and you freed me from his. Now I can do what I please. Only thing is, I don’t know what that is, beyond staying here

for the meantime.”

Claire pushed up into a sitting position, pulling the blankets up to hide the fact she preferred to sleep naked. That she was also hiding the way her nipples had tightened into small peaks, and that her breasts felt fuller at his proximity, was merely convenience. How could she feel lust for a statue? Since he was also built like a man, beyond the fangs and the part-wolf-part-cat visage, and those long, long claws. For one brief, insane moment, she wondered what it would be like to kiss him, to feel the smooth strength of his palms gliding over her skin while his claws did her no harm.

“You can stay.” She saw an expression of gratitude settle on his face, and no longer had to wonder what his lips felt like, or how his hands would feel on her skin as he seized her in a hug of joy, and kissed her.

His lips were surprisingly soft, smooth as stone, but warm where she had expected cold. Pliable too, she thought in surprise, as he kissed her carefully on the mouth. His hands on her shoulder were gentle, his claws not noticeable. He put her down, just as abruptly, though, and scooted to the edge of the bed.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I shouldn’t have done that. I forgot myself.” Then he looked up and his eyes widened. “And I’ve set ye in disarray.” His accent grew thicker as he picked up the blanket and held it before her. When she snatched it from him, he grinned. “Ye’re a bonny beautiful, lass.”

He rose as if to leave, and Claire reached for him.

“You can’t go.” She moved to stop him. “I don’t know your name.”

“It’s Lochinvar Stone.” he turned towards her. “And I must go, lassie, since the sight of you sets me afire.”

Claire’s heart skipped a beat, and as if they had a will of their own, her eyes dropped down, past his naked chest and perfectly-rippled abs to where the breech-cloth was failing to hide his arousal.

“Are you sure it’s not some spell?” She forced her gaze to seek out his face. She could *not* be thinking of doing... Well, what she was thinking of doing! She couldn’t.

When their eyes met, she found that, indeed, she could. As beastlike as his face was, and as fearsome as his fangs were, she found she wanted him to kiss her again, that she wanted his arms wrapped around her again. And she wanted more. She wanted to trace those lines she had so admired before, to run her fingers along the planes of muscle on his

chest, and feel his nipples brush against hers.

She inhaled, breathing him in, and finding his fragrance elusive, a hint of stone mingled with the scent of the liliiums. “Hold me,” She stretched her arms towards him.

“Ye don’t know what ye’re asking,” He would have backed off the bed if she hadn’t caught his forearm and held on, until she was kneeling before him.

His eyes flickered over her form before returning to her eyes. He swallowed. “You are so... a Highland beauty.” He tried to pull away once more. “I cannot.”

When Claire didn’t let him go, he crouched toward her. “You don’t understand. I’ve never been with a woman who was willing. I might—”

“You won’t,” Claire soothed him. “You won’t, and I want... I need... Could you? Even if it were just for tonight?”

He sighed. “But what if I wanted to love you for more than this night?”

Claire let her hand glide up his arms, and then stroked them down his sides, over his flanks, tracing the curve of his belly until it reached his thighs. Her hands tangling beneath the breech cloth to cup the heaviness of his balls. She traced circles on them with gentle fingers. “Please,” she whispered.

Carefully, he reached toward her and ran his own hands over her body. He traced the smoothness of her shoulders, the curves of her hips and waist, the roundness of her breasts. When he weighed those breasts in his palms, and dipped his head to trace her nipples with his tongue, Claire whimpered, her fingers untying the cloth at his waist and exposing all of him to her touch.

As he suckled at her breasts, her arms slid around him so she could knead his ass. Her body tightened, the flesh between her thighs grew damp and ached with growing desire. Slowly, she drew him closer until they knelt hip-to-hip. Determined, she slid along him, her body begging, while she captured his lips with her own and ran her tongue against his teeth.

“Please,” she begged, sliding against him, asking for more with the press of her body.

With a groan, he lifted her towards him, filling his hands with the soft flesh of her ass cheeks and lowering her down onto himself, over himself, around himself, as she guided him in. Claire wrapped her legs around his waist as he laid her back against the coverlet.

“Lochinvar,” she breathed, as he began to move to a rhythm older than time. “Lochinvar Stone,” she sighed, finding the rhythm and moving with him, feeling his long strokes tantalizing the walls of her pussy, tightening herself along his length as though she’d refuse to let him go.

Her whole body felt linked, from the tautness in her breasts, to the tautness in her belly, to the growing crescendo that had her gasping and dragged a moan from his lips. “Claire.”

He drove firmly into her once more, and she cried out with satisfaction, her body’s sudden hunger causing a snag in his rhythm until the pleasure overwhelmed them both. It synchronized them in the final moments of love-making, and their voices echoed around her bedroom and fled into the night.

HOSTAGES AT HOTEL GOTHICA

He left her before dawn, drawing the covers over her form and kissing her from chin to ear lobe. “My beautiful Claire,” he murmured, donning the loin cloth once more before returning to his perch above the guest entrance.

Claire woke just after the sun had risen, but not because of its light. She woke because of the sound of gunfire, and the short-lived screams of terror drifting out the hotel windows and into her bedroom. With her mind still cloudy with remembered passion, she snatched up her purple satin dressing gown and pulled on the matching slippers.

Something was going on in her hotel, and despite the fact her heart was going into overdrive and her fear suggested she should hide under the bed until whatever was happening was over, she would have to deal with it. MacGregor was *not* going to win her gargoyle this way. MacGregor was going to be in more trouble than he’d ever dreamed. Using her anger to energize her, Claire headed for the door out of her apartment.

It was locked, and resisted her key. Trembling with outrage that MacGregor would dare to lock her in her own room, Claire reached for the journal. There was a spell there, a spell of opening. Grandpère MacGregor had used it to open locked chests his men had ‘retrieved’ from their enemies. It had been the main way he’d funded his research. A mere apartment door could not resist the words as she read them from the book. It tore free of its hinges and embedded itself in the wall on the other side of the corridor. Later, she’d have to find a workman to replace it.

This is insane, one part of her mind squeaked. Magick doesn’t work. It isn’t real!

No, the other part of her mind retorted when she reached the cathedral proper, *this* is

insane. What do those maniacs think they're doing to my statue?

She hadn't thought this through, Claire realized. She really hadn't thought it through. There they were, three very beautiful and familiar-looking men, two of whom were armed with what looked like silver ball-peen hammers and explosives, while the third held the stubby black body of a machine gun. The gunman stood watch while the other two crowded close to the doorway supporting Lochinvar's perch.

She still wasn't thinking, she realized as she opened her mouth and said, "What on earth do you think you are doing?" in the most imperious tone she could manage.

At the sound of her voice, all activity ceased, and three very lovely sets of eyes—one green, one blue, and one grey—turned to take her in.

"We're destroying it." The green-eyed man signalled for his blue-eyed companion to move closer.

Claire ignored him. "You can't destroy it. It belongs to me."

"But we can't control it," the green-eyed man reasoned. "MacGregor took that power from us long ago, and now it's no longer on the estate where we can monitor its dormancy, it needs to go." His face twisted in sudden anger, the ferocity of his temper making his features so gargoyle-like that Claire had a sudden and disturbing insight into who, or what, might have modeled for the creature.

Fae! *They* were the gargoyle's unseelie creators! Claire pushed down a sudden spike of fear. She had to... had to...

"No one controls Lochinvar," Claire replied, and masked her amusement at the astonishment that crossed their faces.

"It has a name?"

Claire nodded. "Yes, *he* has a name."

"*He* has a name?"

This time, Claire allowed herself a very small smile of mystery to shape her lips. "Oh yes, *he* has a name."

"And no one controls i—er... him?"

"No," Claire insisted. "No one controls him."

The second man, elf, faery, cleared his throat. "I was of the understanding that the MacGregor clan controlled him."

“Oh no.” Claire tried to keep her tone airy. “No, I took care of that.”

“*You* took care of that?” The second elf was about to say more when his companion took him firmly by the bicep and led him to the far side of the room.

Claire watched them go in silence.

After a whispered conference behind a pillar and a small trellis of jasmine, they returned. “It makes no difference,” the first one told her, “or, rather, it makes it even more important that he is destroyed now.”

As the meaning of his words became clear, Claire felt the colour draining from her face. “No,” she whispered. “No. You can’t. You mustn’t. He’s alive and he... he’s mine.”

The green-eyed one turned to her. “You’re claiming him?”

“Yes,” Claire affirmed. “He’s mine.”

A glance passed between them and the blue-eyed elf stepped forward. Claspng her by her shoulders, he leant carefully forward and breathed in, inhaling her scent from the cleft of her collar bones to base of her ear. Still holding her at arm’s length, he turned back to his commander and said something in Gaelic, finishing with the name Elorien.

Elorien’s response, in the same language, could only be translated as, “You’re sure, Beaudich?”

Beaudich’s slow nod confirmed his analysis. “She has the scent of him under her skin. She will bear his child before the year is out.”

Claire gasped. “But...” she started, stopped, and started again. “But we only... just ...”

“Just once?” The grey-eyed elf smirked. “Just this night gone? Stole MacGregor’s control and then bound the creature to yourself in one fell swoop?” He paused, catching the incomprehension on her face. “You didn’t know?”

He turned to Elorien and fired off a rapid burst of Gaelic that his leader answered in kind. Their exchange lasted a mere handful of minutes, long enough for Claire to grasp the full import of what had been said, and that the grey-eyed elf’s name was Cleddichaun.

I’m pregnant? She swayed under Beaudich’s hand, only his grip keeping her upright. It tightened, holding her in place, her motion distracting them both from the sudden drop in lighting and the soft shift of claws and stone above them.

Like lightning Lochinvar moved, but the elves moved faster. The gargoyle’s claws

had barely left the lintel above than Claire was pulled into Beaudich's arms. One forearm curled across her chest with his narrow fingers pinching her throat, and the other holding a long knife across her belly. Cleddichaun and Elorien stepped to flank her.

"Now, now, Lochinvar," Elorien purred. "We've only come to destroy what's ours."

The growl that answered him could never have come from a human throat.

"But he's mine," Claire whispered. "He's mine. I fought MacGregor for him. I purchased him and paid to have him shipped here." Beaudich's hold on her tightened, and she whimpered.

Again Lochinvar's growl echoed like thunder through the cathedral. With an abrupt swirl of movement, he spun and loped away from them. The sunlight caught him again, freezing him in place before he'd reached the side door to Gothica Café.

Beaudich relaxed his grip on her, the knife at her belly disappearing as swiftly as it had appeared. Claire stomped her satin-clad right heel onto the instep of his leather boot, trying to get free enough to follow Elorien and Cleddichaun to the gargoyle's frozen form.

"He can bring MacGregor to you," she exclaimed, suddenly understanding why her lover had tried to leave. "The only MacGregor who knows the secret."

Her voice dried up in her throat as the two elves spun to face her. "The secret?" they asked. "Whose secret?"

"The secret of how MacGregor outwitted the Unseelie court." She knew it was dangerous, to prod their egos like this, but she was gambling that it was the only way she could secure any kind of future for herself and Lochinvar. In the distance, sirens began to scream.

"If you go now, the police won't trap you here," she said. "The guests don't need to be harmed."

For a moment, she held her breath. The sirens yelped closer, and then went suddenly quiet. Through the stained glass windows, Claire thought she could see flashes of red and blue light. A long look passed between Elorien and Cleddichaun. Beaudich just waited for them to decide what to do, his hold on Claire not loosening.

As a definite strobe of red and blue disturbed the dawn light outside, Elorien nodded and raised his head. He pursed his lips in a whistle and trotted towards the Gothica Café. Claire made a note to check security on the loading dock for the café, and she needed

some books on Scottish faeries. If they were anything like vampires, they had to have some weakness she could use to keep them out.

The last of the three to leave was Beaudich. He unwound his arms from around her, but before he followed his leader, he turned and grasped Claire's jaw in his hand. Dipping his head toward her, he captured her lips with his, and kissed her long and hard.

She was breathless when he released her, and his lips curved into a wicked grin.

"I owed you that," he grinned, "for the boot stomp." Tracing his fingers along her jaw line, he stepped away and trotted in his companions' wake. "We'll see you around, princess."

Still short of breath from his kiss, and from the events that had occurred since she'd come out to investigate the sounds that had awakened her this morning, Claire watched him go. She was still standing and staring at the entrance to Gothica Café's kitchens when the police's first call came over the loud hailer. Pulling her dressing gown more closely around her, Claire hurried to the front door of the cathedral.

For a moment, she was petrified that she'd be shot, but then the second call came over the loud hailer, and she knew she had to do something. The police were acting as though they thought half a hundred terrorists were hiding inside. She hoped they wouldn't shoot one lone woman in a purple quilted satin dressing gown.

AN UNSEELIE ‘GIFT’

It took most of the day for the police to find the guests and take their statements. Most of them had been locked in their rooms, but by what means, no one could say. The few who’d been out of their rooms when the ‘terrorists’ had struck spoke of being herded into one of the hotel’s conference rooms and made to lie on the floor. No one could say why the terrorists had suddenly left. It wasn’t until almost midnight that Claire was free to tell Lochinvar of her plans.

“Pray that I can find him in time.” He bent forward to plant a fierce kiss on her lips. “Pray this hunt is successful.”

He did not say what might happen if the hunt failed. He did not need to. His existence, and the future of Claire’s happiness, was at stake. If Duncan MacGregor was not found, their world would end in disaster, for the unseelie were not forgiving, and they did not relent.

Two hours before dawn he would face them, members of his creators’ race, and his nemesis. Two hours before dawn, he had to bring them Duncan MacGregor.

He was successful, and handed the hapless heir to the unseelie without a word. It was as they were turning to leave that Claire emerged from the night watchman’s office.

“What would you give us,” she asked, “in return for the book that holds the secret of MacGregor’s magick and related matters?”

“We would swear not to harm you or yours for the length of your bloodline.”

“That you have given us already,” Claire said, pointing at MacGregor, “in return for him.”

MacGregor moaned and was ignored.

“Agreed. A human form, then,” Elorien proclaimed, “for your lover.”

MacGregor turned green. “You didn’t...”

“A form as fair as your own?” Claire noted the tension leak from Lochinvar as she clarified her request.

“So shall it be,” Elorien said, and advanced, holding out his hand. “Are we agreed?”

“We are agreed,” Claire said, and gave him the book.

With Lochinvar sheltering her in the curve of his arm and the shadow of his wing, she watched them leave, taking MacGregor with them.

EPILOGUE

One must always be careful when bartering with the fae, Claire later wrote in her newly started Tales from the Hotel Gothica. They deliver what they promise, but there's always a catch.

When asked why she'd had a replica of her Scottish masterpiece made to sit above the guest entrance, Claire always said it was to protect the original from the type of vandalism the 'terrorists' had planned. And, when asked of her partner's absence after the sun had set, she merely said he became agoraphobic at night. "Too many unknowns in the dark. It's a terrible thing."

Of course, no one was up early enough to note that his elegant and purely masculine figure only arrived with the dawn. For Claire, making love at either end of the sun's arc was an extraordinary experience—one she hoped to continue for many years to come.

ABOUT ELLIE MOONWATER

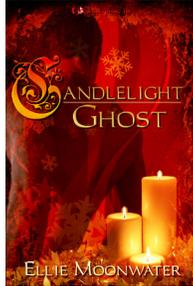
Ask me about one of my characters or their worlds and I've got plenty to say. Ask about me, and everything dries up. I write pretty much anything. Show me a writing style I haven't tried and it's like Christmas as I try to work it out. Actually, I never work it out because I tend to get lost in the story, so writing is always like Christmas for me.

At the moment I write romance—it's fun, and you meet the nicest people. Playing with the paranormal, fantasy and science fiction genres is what I do best, but the occasional contemporary tale creeps in, too. And then there are the mainstream novels.

Personal stuff? Well I live in Australia, with my husband and son, and like to bounce ideas off my writing friend, Angel Waterman. Angel's writing has a streak of darkness running right to the core, and her worlds inspire me, so as well as working in my own corner I'll sometimes explore hers as well. I like making her blush.

Reader email: elliemoonwater@gmail.com

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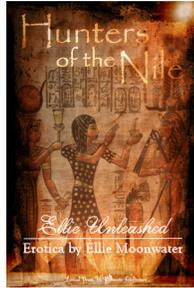


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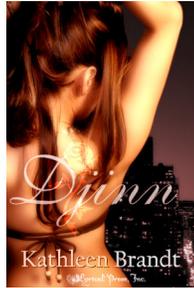


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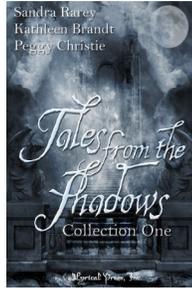
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