

## Ladies' Night

You know, I really don't go looking for trouble most of the time. Stop laughing. I can go weeks at a time without a single life-threatening emergency or world crisis. I have a normal life.

Okay, maybe normal is a bit of an exaggeration, but still, I sometimes kick back and relax just like a regular girl. On this particular night, I had normal-girl plans – Friday night out at the club with my best friend Cherise. Like all outings with Cherise, it wasn't a spontaneous event; it required as much planning and preparation as a trip to visit the Pope, only I doubt I'd need quite so much tanning and waxing to meet His Holiness.

As with all of Cherise's efforts, the end results were worth the pain. At nine p.m., I stood in front of my floor-length mirror and did the full turn, critiquing the blue dress. It was tight and short, and it fit in all the right places, showing off my freshly-waxed legs. Not quite short enough to make me worry about showing off what else the body waxer had been up to, but definitely short enough to get me past the velvet rope. I spent the usual couple of minutes lamenting my flaws – you can't fight cellulite forever – but overall, I'd do. I'd broken out a fine pair of pumps to match, and a teeny little designer bag. My hair looked tousled and shiny, my makeup perfect. Ready for my magazine-shoot close-up.

I stuck my tongue out at myself, laughed, and went to answer the ringing doorbell. Hurricane Cherise swept in, trailing a flood-tide of good cheer and dazzle. She was wearing an outrageous gold thing that on most women would have looked like something a hooker might wear to a circus, but on her it just looked sweetly hot. Perfect shoes, of course. She flashed me a wicked urchin's grin, completely at odds with her Florida-hot exterior, and did a little hip-shimmy thing that made all the gold sequins on her dress chime. "So? Fabulous?"

"Beyond fabulous," I said. "I'm sorry, I can't go with you after all. You'd just make me look like your walking Before picture. I refuse to be the sad contrast."

"You're kidding. With those legs? Not too damn likely. Come on, get your self-satisfied butt in gear, Jo. I'm thirsty, and there are men just dying to buy me mojitos."

I could well believe that last part. There'd be guys lining up just to crush the mints for the drinks, knowing Cherise. She was semi-going-steady with my fellow Warden Kevin – so many odd things about that, beginning with the idea that any woman, especially Cherise, would find Kevin attractive, and ending with the whole idea that the obnoxious little jerk was now my colleague. But Kevin wasn't here, and Cherise wasn't one to pine away and weep for any man.

I silently indicated my shoes. She gave them the critical once-over. "Elie Taharin," she said. "Good choice. Classic beauty. Not as out-there as this season's Manolos. Oooh, is the bag a Loubotin? Gimme." I handed it over for inspection. "I like."

"You can borrow it later."

"Duh. Obviously." She gave it back. The bag was just barely big enough to hold a credit card, a driver's license, and a condom without splitting a seam. I'd left the condom out. I wouldn't need one, no matter who showed up at the club, because none of them would be David.

Speaking of David, my lover was notoriously busy these days, and I was getting that fizzy feeling that meant I needed him, and needed him badly. I suspected he knew that, and it was all part of his overall plan to make me even more his addled love-slave than I already was.

Not that that was a bad thing.

We took Cherise's car, which was a sweet little red honey of a Mustang convertible. This was the new one, paid for by the Wardens after I'd kind of wrecked the previous incarnation during a hurricane – again, not my fault – and it was a hell of a nice car. We sang along to the radio and cruised down glittering neon-lit streets, winking at guys at stoplights and generally acting a good deal less than our actual ages.

It was great.

I was almost sorry when we finally pulled into the parking lot of the club. Cherise ignored any possibility of self-parking and cruised up to the valet stand, where uniformed men were waiting to open our doors and hand us out. I took the valet ticket, since the absence of the condom had left room in my bag, and we stood for a moment looking at the line that snaked around the side of the building. It was full of beautiful people, and wannabe beautiful people. "You're kidding," I said to Cherise. "It's like a mannequin convention!"

"We're not here for the deep philosophic discussion," she said. "We're here to drink, flirt, and dance. This is the place."

I realized, with a stab of disappointment, that I might actually be getting too adult for this kind of a good time. I was looking for more. Looking for – well, for David. I could imagine him here, standing in the crowd, watching me with the kind of dark intensity he got that burned me from the inside out. I could imagine him parting the sea of people on the crowded dance floor and claiming me.

I could imagine a lot of things, most of which weren't going to be legal. But none of it was going to happen, because David was working, and I needed to have a life outside of David, dammit.

"I wish David was here," I said. Which was not what I meant to say, but there you go. Cherise gave me a long-suffering look.

"I hate going clubbing with monogamous people," she said. "Fine, he's a total freakin' hottie, all right? But you can dance with other people for a change. Trust me, it's good for you."

"We're never getting in."

"Man, you really don't know me at all, do you?" Cherise bypassed the line, went right up to the velvet rope, and leaned on it to smile at the looming bulk of the impassive doorman. He was straight out of hard-ass central casting: what little expression he had was of the menacing variety, and the combination of pumped-up muscles and shaved bullet-shaped head left no room for any doubt as to his sincerity.

Next to him, Cherise looked like a gilded butterfly. I stood back, electing to let the expert work, and made sure that my legs were displayed to good advantage. Best thing I could do. Cherise chatted, smiled, flirted. The doorman lifted the rope for a few people, but not us. A limo pulled up, disgorging a clown-party of drunken, crappily-dressed people who sailed past the doorman like he was a paper cutout. The rich really are different.

Finally, we got the nod, and he held up the velvet rope for us. I heard the hissed curses of those who'd been patiently waiting, and held up my hands in silent apology. I was just the ride-along, and let's face it, Cherise didn't care.

Inside, the club was steamy, thick with pheromones and perfume and alcohol. No smoke, except for a whiff here and there of something that wasn't tobacco. It was also loud. Really loud, and we were just in the lobby. Cherise took in a deep, satisfied breath, and yelled to me, "Ready?"

Whether I was ready or not, it was too late to have an attack of modesty. I nodded and motioned for her to lead the way.

She glowed in the spinning lights of the club like some fabulous treasure. I could see why she'd picked the dress. I looked almost drab by comparison, although when the black light hit me, I lit up like a star, dress and shoes both. Nice. The club was packed, of course, with sweating, beautiful people dancing, screaming conversations to each other over the pounding beat, or making out in booths. There was probably more going on, but I decided the shadows didn't bear close inspection.

Cherise and I achieved our goal – the bar – and ordered mojitos. I paid, because that had been the agreement: Cherise would drive, I would buy the first round. Well, more accurately, I tried to buy, but a man put out his hand in a blocking motion and handed over his own credit card.

I didn't need to hear Cherise to know what she'd say: this is starting out well. Because the man who'd paid for our drinks was tall, dark, good-looking, ripped, and generally conforming to the current standard of hot. He didn't try to talk, just kissed Cherise's hand – a tactic that went over well with her – and did the same for me. I have to admit, it didn't exactly suck for me, either. We both smiled our thanks and accepted the drinks. He gestured toward the back of the club. Cherise nodded, grabbed my hand, and towed me in that direction. It was impossible, in the press of heaving bodies, not to get squeezed and groped, but I tried to avoid it as much as I could. Cherise, small as she was, seemed to have the ability to make space around herself. Presence, that was it. I supposed I could make space, too, but only by summoning enough power to blow people out of my way.

Overkill.

We arrived at a doorway guarded by not one but two doormen, so identical to the one at the entrance they might have been clones. These were no impediment at all; they stepped aside and opened the door, and the three of us – Mr. Wonderful, Cherise, and me – sailed through without pause.

Beyond was obviously the VIP lounge, and it was lush. I hadn't seen so much velour, leather, and velvet since the last Versace trunk show. It was quieter, although the beat went on, and much less crowded. The prettiest people, and the ugliest, lounged in big circular areas, sharing bottles that probably cost as much as a car. A few greeted our mysterious guide, who led us to a secluded alcove off to the right. It didn't look quite as decadent as some of the others – a relatively straightforward couple of couches, a table, some glasses, chilling champagne at the ready.

The shock came because of who was already there, curled like a cat in the corner of one of the sofas.

Rahel blinked hawk-yellow eyes at me, smiled slowly, and tilted her head. She looked unbelievably, outrageously alien just now, all angles and darkness. Even the hundreds of tiny plaited braids on her head seemed to be moving on their own, clicking beads together in a random yet sinister pattern. She wasn't wearing neon yellow, or neon anything. Instead, her dress – yes, a dress, I couldn't believe it – was a tight spring green tube thing that flared out into chiffon below the hips, revealing legs longer than mine. She even had shoes to match, with terrifying stiletto heels.

“Sistah,” she greeted me, and patted the couch next to her. “Sit. I was waiting for you.”

Cherise should have been scared. Humans who encountered Rahel in her fey moods generally were, because there was something about her that triggered all those fight-or-flight instincts.

Apparently for Cherise it was fight, not flight; she copped an attitude and frowned at the intruding Djinn. A miniature little thunderstorm all gilded up in sequins. “You've got to be kidding,” she said. “She's not working. Look, it's one night off, okay? Just one!”

Rahel held up her hand. Her fingernails were lustrously polished in a green to match the dress, with a hint of opal beneath. They weren't quite talons. Exactly. “I did not come to fetch her for the Wardens,” she said.

Our hottie drink-buying guy settled down on the other couch. Cherise promptly took the place beside him, leaving me to perch uneasily next to Rahel. I sipped the mojito. Bittersweet, cool, biting hard on the tongue. Perfect, of course. “Then why are you here?” I asked.

“Have you met Fredo?” she asked, and indicated Mr. Wonderful. He gave me a model’s heartbreaking smile. “An old friend.”

“Djinn?”

“Silly girl. No. Just a man.” Rahel poured herself a glass of fizzy champagne from a bottle with a pink rose climbing it, and sipped. “Can I not also have a night off?”

“Not while we’re having one,” Cherise said. “Look, no offense, but you’re kind of scary. Like, Grace Jones on crack scary. I just want to dance and have a good time and not worrying you’re going to take any lyrics about burning this mother up literally.”

Rahel raised one thin, sharp eyebrow and sipped again. “I can mind my manners,” she said. “I have been around humans before. I can behave.”

I doubted that. Her golden eyes were taking in everything around us – especially the passing strangers – with the hungry intensity of a lion watching antelope.

“Fine,” Cherise said. “Behave, then. Fredo? Would you like to dance?”

I wasn’t absolutely sure he spoke English, actually, but the invitation was universal, and he smiled in agreement. He guided her back toward the dance floor.

Leaving me stuck on the couch, with the supernatural scary person.

“So,” I said, and guzzled mojito. “What exactly do you do to have fun when you, ah, go out?”

“People watch,” Rahel said. Her lips shaped a smile, but the expression in her eyes was a lot more forbidding. “Absorb the culture. It’s necessary, you know. Djinn must stay connected to the world around them if we are to blend in.”

“Oh, yeah, honey, you blend,” I said. The rum was starting to take effect. “You do this often?”

“Often enough,” she said. “I like coming to places like this. So much energy. So much – passion.” Her eyes drifted half-closed, and she sipped champagne. “Here is where people are the most honest, I think. In their quest to fulfill their most basic urges.”

“I’m not here to fulfill any basic urges, beyond swilling some ethanol,” I said. “Look. No condoms.” I opened the purse to prove it. Which earned me a what the hell? look from a Djinn. That had to be a first. “I’m just here because Cherise thought it’d be a good idea for me to get out and, you know, relax. Loosen up. Meet people.”

“Dance,” Rahel said. “Yes?”

“Yes. Of course, dance.”

“I used to dance.” She sounded positively wistful about it. “Before – “

“Before?”

“Before I was as I am now,” she said. “When I was a girl.”

I knew that Rahel was what was known as a New Djinn – that she’d been born human, died, and been reborn as a Djinn. But somehow, there wasn’t much human about her. Far less than there was in David, for instance, or even Alice, who’d never been human at all. Rahel always felt ... other.

So hearing her talk about being a girl was startling. “Tell me about what it was like, when you were young,” I said. “Not like this, I’m guessing.”

She laughed. “More like this than you could suppose. My people danced constantly. We danced for power, for celebration, for prayer, for rain, for sun, for food, for the waning of the moon. And yes, it was the same for us – we found lovers this way, dancing, admiring, feeling the hot flutter of attraction as we danced. You have taken this ritual, stripped away the magic, but the core is still there. Still living.”

I took another gulp of my drink and tasted sugar. Oh. Already down to the bottom. Probably ought to take it slower. “How old were you when – “

“When my people died?” Rahel toyed with her champagne glass, not quite looking at me. “Seventeen. Old enough to be a mother twice over. We married early in my day. We died early, too.”

“How did it – “

“I will not relive my horror for your amusement,” she interrupted, and her eyes focused directly on mine with unmistakable threat. “Ask any of us for tales of our past, and you will find slaughter, suffering, and pain. I did not come here to dredge up such memories.”

“Sorry.” I swallowed, tasting mint and rum and sugar, and wished desperately that I’d gone with Cherise. Not too late, of course, I could get up and walk away. But Rahel was holding the stare, and I didn’t dare look away.

“I worry,” Rahel said, “about your intentions.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Toward David.”

“I – what?”

“He looks at you and can’t see past his own passion,” she said. “But I know humans, I know them perhaps better than he does. Are you constant, Joanne? Or will you find a lover elsewhere, and betray him? I ask because humans are flawed, and their love is flawed.”

She was warning me. I was sick of being warned. Everybody had hammered it into me, from Lewis to David himself, and now Rahel. Frankly, I was tired of people doubting me.

“Look,” I said, and put the empty mojito glass on the table. “Maybe I’m flawed. Maybe I’m screwed up. Maybe I’m just a weak-willed human woman with the spine of a jellyfish. But I’m not going to betray David. Ever.” I let a beat and a breath go by. “You don’t believe me.”

Her eyes narrowed. “No,” she said. “I don’t. Humans are not capable of the kind of commitment that we feel.”

“What about Patrick and Sara?” Patrick had been human. Sara had been Djinn. And the two of them had loved with a passion that had never faltered.

I realized, the second I said it, that I'd invoked the wrong thing. I hadn't followed that to its logical conclusion – to the tragedy of the romance. Patrick, dying. Sara reaching out to break the laws of the universe to drag him across to the Djinn, and breaking the core of her own power in the process. Dooming herself to a half-life existence as an Ifrit, preying on other Djinn for her very life.

Rahel said, "Ah, yes. I see you comprehend my point. Such tales never end happily."

"Ours will."

"I admire your determination, if not your objectivity." She drank the rest of her champagne in a single gulp. She stood up, shimmying her hips to get all her chiffon ruffles in place. She was impossibly tall, impossibly gorgeous, and she held out her hand to me. "Come."

I frowned at her. "Where?"

"To dance."

Her hand felt dry and hot in mine, and she led me out through the VIP doors and into the madhouse of the dance floor, of people moving and swaying together. Cherise was dirty-dancing with Fredo, looking absolutely beautiful, rapt and ecstatic in the moment. Fredo was looking like the experience was approaching rapture for him, too.

Rahel's hand slipped out of mine, and the lights and music spun me around, and I felt the pulse building inside of me. I saw her moving in an alien, sinuous rhythm, dancing with no one and everyone, and then Fredo turned to me and included me in the dance, and I felt my body taking over, reaching for that elusive moment, that connection that tied us all together in that moment.

The music threaded its way through my ears, through my body, and spun me around in a frenzy of lights and passion.

I stopped, because at the edge of the dance floor stood a dark shape, unmoving, facing me. Light flickered and caught his face, highlighted the intensity of his stare and the beautiful face. David had left off his glasses, and traded in his plain clothes for a soft, matte-black shirt and tight black leather pants.

My breath left me in a rush.

Neither of us moved for a moment, and then he walked slowly toward me, and just as I'd imagined, the crowd parted in front of him. He came closer, closer, until our bodies brushed together. He leaned down to put his lips close to my ear, and said, "I know it's your night out with Cherise, but –"

I grabbed the collar of his shirt and kissed him. He tasted like caramel and rum, and I wondered if he'd been drinking. If he had, it looked fantastic on him.

"Dance with me," I said.

His body fit in with the curves of mine. We kissed again, slowly, deeply, and then his hand found the hollow of my back and I bent backward, relying on his strength to support me as my hair brushed the floor. He lifted me sharply, hard against him, and my right leg lifted of its own accord and wrapped around the back of his thigh. Holding him there. Our eyes were inches apart, and his were burning. Incandescent even in the flaring, uncertain light of the club.

He made a low, rough sound in the back of his throat, and I felt his hand move lower, pressing my hips closer against his. His breath pistoned hot against my neck as I rotated my hips, gently at first, then in widening, provocative circles. We were pressed together, every muscle trembling and full of tension, humming like two

halves of a circuit. Our lips were close enough to touch, but we didn't kiss. I slid my hands down the slick, warm leather of his hips. The heat inside me had built to a bonfire, flushing my cheeks, my lips, glowing right under my skin.

I turned my back to him, and oh, yes, that was good, there was absolutely no disguising how aroused he was right now. I rubbed slowly up and down against him, and felt his hands wrap around my hips to pull me breathlessly close. He kissed my neck, feather-light, and I felt myself go weak against him. His hands were so hot they seemed to burn through the thin barrier of cloth to sear their imprint directly on my skin. As incredible as it seemed, I was pretty sure it wouldn't take much for either one of us to climax right here on the dance floor, in these moving, liquid shadows.

Magic, Rahel had called it. And ritual.

"Jo," David whispered. Voice lower now, deeper in his throat, a purr like velvet on her skin. "Turn around."

I did, never moving away from him, and we were so close all that held us separate were our clothes and some last vestige of sanity. His hands left my hips, slid up between us, and left trails of heat where they touched. His lips were touching mine now, not quite a kiss, an unbearable tease for both of us. "Having fun?" he asked. Despite the constant driving beat of the music – the deafening beat – I could hear every suggestive nuance of what he said.

"You're kidding." My voice was uneven and out of control. "Not sure fun quite covers this."

Another low-in-the-throat, amused rumble, subsonic and audible to me mainly through the vibration in my skin. His lips moved down the column of my throat, and he knew just where to focus their heat where I was most needy, most vulnerable. I felt a tremble building inside, a crescendo that followed the building climax of the music. His teeth scraped along the tender line of my throat, and I pressed harder against him, out of breath and wild and vibrating right out of my skin. I caught sight of Cherise laughing, whirling in the arms of the tall, gorgeous Fredo, and Rahel, dancing an ancient sensual rhythm, face alight and exultant in the strobing flashes of color.

Ladies' night.

I could get used to this.

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