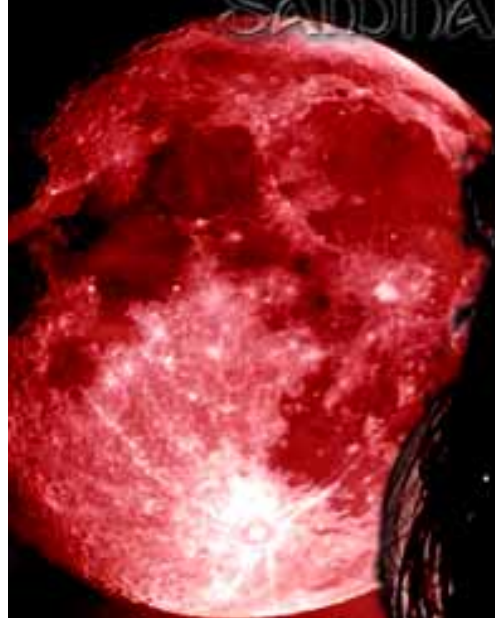


SANDHAIN publishing, Ltd.



# LORD NIGHT

Jessie Verino



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# Lord Night

*By Jessie Verino*

## Dedication

To my Mom & Dad, who gave me the love of the written word, and the freedom to let my imagination have free reign. Your love and encouragement are two of the greatest blessings in my life. To my husband, your love and understanding has helped me more than you'll ever know. To my critique partners, Deb, Kerri, & Leanne, your help and support have meant so much to me over the years. To my editor, Angie, for helping me make *Lord Night* shine. And to the Lord above, you've given me the talent and surrounded me with the gifts of family & friends and love.

## Chapter One

The tiny elevator lurched once before coming to a jerky stop fifteen stories below ground. The sudden loss of momentum had Shannon grabbing for the cold rail to keep herself steady. In a futile effort to still the nervous fluttering of her stomach, she placed a hand over her midsection to calm it. She didn't feel safe wandering around in the abandoned mines of Colorado now serving as laboratories, and hated their elevators even more. The four foot metal box surrounding her barely qualified.

If Creative Energies didn't pay well above market, she would stick to staffing the hundreds of attorneys' offices downtown. Unfortunately, this project employed most of her temp agency's best technicians and administration staffers and paid twice the salary her employees could earn elsewhere. She couldn't afford to lose the business. And if it meant literally doing business underground, she went underground.

The doors grated open, flooding the small space with light, and she escaped into the sterile white hallway.

No noise penetrated this far underground. It unnerved her to hear only the echo of her heels clicking against the floor as she made her way to Dr. Damien Richards's lab. Quickening her steps, she tried unsuccessfully to outpace her unease. The handle of her briefcase slipped in her damp fingers. A few feet shy of the door, she stopped, smoothed her skirt, and took a deep breath before cautiously walking the remaining steps to his lab.

With her hand on the palm plate, she waited while the scan compared her print to the one the guards had taken at the first checkpoint. After what seemed like an eternity, a lock snicked behind the panel.

Dr. Richards opened the steel door. “Ms. Miller.” He backed out of the way and motioned for her to enter. “Thank you for seeing me on such short notice. We’re on the verge of a breakthrough, and I don’t want to leave the facility. You did bring a contract?”

She stepped through the door and followed him. “Yes. Several, in fact. In case we need to make revisions.” The security door closed automatically behind them.

In contrast to the stark hallway, instrument panels, computer stations, electronic equipment, and a few items she couldn’t identify cluttered every inch of workspace in the immense lab. Massive generators and other pieces of machinery took much of the floor space, and it amazed her to see Dr. Richards maneuver through it without the use of his white-tipped cane. She had to watch every step to keep from stumbling or hitting the equipment, and she preferred watching him.

His bronzed skin belied the fact that he spent most of his time in an underground laboratory. As did the solid muscle stretching the white lab coat across his shoulders. The man looked seriously ripped under the shirt tucked snug into the black denim jeans hugging his lean hips.

He stopped before a console. “I’d like to show you what we’ve been working on. It will give you a better understanding of my staffing needs.” He tapped a few keys on the control board.

The sound of rushing air pulled her attention away from his nimble fingers and directed it to the Plexiglas chamber beside them. The sound softened as the winds of energy coalesced and churned into a vortex within the confines of the chamber.

“Inter-dimensional travel. We used the plasma energy to create a, for lack of a better word, bubble, in an alternate dimension. After satisfactory results with the design we converted the energy to matter for buildings, food, cars, even

plant life and animals. Although the latter was much more difficult. What we couldn't convert, we added through holographic imaging."

She eyed the luminescent blue swirling energies and took a cautious step back. "It's...it's...amazing. It sounds like something out of a science-fiction movie."

"It was science fiction until a few months ago."

She eyed the chamber warily. "Have you sent anything through?"

"We've sent several types of tracking devices into the vortex, and lost contact with them as soon as they penetrated what we believe is the veil between dimensions." He walked to the chamber and placed his hands on its wall, as if he could see the vortex by feeling its intense vibrations.

Awe filled his voice. "Not even the smallest particle of any of them was found when the vortex was disconnected." He brought his hands away from the glass. "Of course, even though we've created and programmed the dimension, we can't confirm the programming has worked, or prove its existence."

Stunned, she stumbled back and unceremoniously plopped into the closest chair, letting her briefcase fall to the floor. "Don't you think they might have been *pulverized* in the thing?" She pointed to the chamber behind him, too late registering he couldn't see the gesture, and quickly brought her hand to her lap. "A person would have to be nuts, certifiable, to step into the chamber."

"Or dying." He felt his way to where she sat, knelt in front of her, and took her hands in his. "Imagine being able to walk into the vortex with cancer and emerging in a new dimension completely healthy."

"No way."

"Not now, but in the future we hope to be able to encode the energies and construct an alternate dimension to our own medical specifications. In simplistic terms, we would provide the pattern for a healthy cell and it would be created from the core plasma energy of the vortex. We'd program it to find cancerous cells and replace them with the healthy ones. The medical

possibilities alone are endless.” He clenched his fists and took a deep breath. “But we’re years away from creating a viable, living cell. When we stumbled upon the vortex, the financial backers of the project insisted we explore more economical commercial uses first.”

She cringed, imagining hundreds of people paying huge sums of money to walk through the looking glass. “What sort of commercial uses?”

A broad smile crept across his face. “Video gaming to start. Construction for gaming studios has already started in New York, Miami, San Francisco and Las Vegas. Cities large enough to provide the power we need to generate a stable vortex, and enough employees to man the equipment and monitor the players’ progress. Each studio will feature a different gaming universe.” He let go of her, walked his hands across the workstation, picked up a graphic novel and handed it to her. “If the gaming proves successful, the company will create designer vacation packages. Imagine a tropical paradise without worrying about sharks.” He gave her a conspiratorial wink. “We might even give a few theme parks a run for their money.”

She stared at the cover. It held a montage of demons, exotic landscapes and a dark city with what looked like bits of crystal raining over all of it. In the middle, a man stood silhouetted by a blood red moon. “*Lord Night?*”

“It’s one of the ideas we’ve used as a pattern for the gaming dimension.” He leaned against the workstation. “In the beginning of the story, Lord Night is attacked by demons which steal his soul and shatter it to pieces, sending the crystals to the four corners of the world. Because he has no soul, he is cursed to live in a world of darkness, blind during the day. However, he has perfect night vision and some other weird powers once the sun goes down which allow him to hunt for the pieces of his soul.”

She flipped through the pages. The graphics fit the storyline perfectly, all colored in the surreal hues of forties horror comics. “How does this translate into a video game?”



“The player is transported to the alternate dimension through the vortex and must defeat the demons to obtain the clues pointing to where the pieces of his soul are hidden. Once all the pieces are found, he wins.”

“What if he can’t find all the pieces?”

“The player earns points for the pieces he finds, and loses points if he makes a mistake. If he runs out of points before they are all found, he must exit the game and start over. There are safety features programmed into the controller, like an emergency escape, as well as normal game features like a player’s manual, a holographic display of his progress, and the option to save the game if he needs to leave and continue at a later date.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “And your investors think people will pay money to fight demons?”

“There are other aspects to the game. It is populated by a variety of characters who can help or hinder the player as the game progresses. And there are more enjoyable diversions. Turn to page nineteen.”

She did and gaped at the scantily clad woman lounging seductively on a large, luxuriant bed. “She’s some diversion.”

He chuckled. “Dark desires and passions start to fill the void his soul occupied. He purchases Isobel after he discovers he can purge them by having sex, but like all his other powers, only after the sun sets.”

She smirked. “Isobel is his sex slave?”

“She is programmed to provide everything Lord Night desires. To care for him during the day when his powers are weakened and he is blind.” His voice held no inflection, only the dry tones of a scientist stating facts. “However, we do have a version of the game for couples where a willing participant can play the part of Isobel.”

She closed the book and tossed it on the desk, using the few seconds to match the tone of her voice to his. “Men will be lining up in droves to play this game, and shelling out a lot of money for the privilege. I think we may need to

renegotiate the staffing contract.” Silently, she wondered if they had designed a version of the game where a female lead had a male sex slave. Her pulse quickened thinking about what she would do with Dr. Richards.

“Anything you want.”

Had she only imagined the timbre of his voice deepened to a husky whisper as he seemed to answer her fantasy question? She recovered her composure, reminding herself he couldn’t tell she blushed at his statement. “I promise not to take too much advantage.” Unlike the unfair advantage she had now in watching him, but damn the man looked fine, and she enjoyed the guilty pleasure of her voyeurism.

He straightened and walked past her to stand in front of the chamber. “I don’t care. I need additional technicians and programmers who are willing to live here at the facility until the project is complete. The sooner we can get the gaming up and running, the sooner I can work on the medical dimensions.”

She heard the desperate yearning in his voice and scolded herself, a little, for wanting to take advantage of his predicament. But, obviously his motives were self-serving, and well, business was business. She could live with negotiating a more lucrative contract.

Strengthening her resolve, she picked up her briefcase from the floor and opened it. She pushed the envelope from her brother further into the briefcase and pulled out a roster of employees who met Dr. Richards’ criteria. “I’m certain I have at least three employees who would be willing to work under the conditions you have outlined until the project is complete. I can call them now and have them report in the morning.”

“Your cell phone won’t work down here. You can use the telephone in my office.” He pointed past the chamber. “Through the door to the left. You’ll need to dial nine to get an outside line.”

She shut her briefcase and set it in the floor beside her. “I’ll be right back.” In a hurry to close the deal and get above ground, she stood too quickly and

the movement pushed the chair into the workstation. It ricocheted into the back of her legs, and propelled her into Dr. Richards.

He wrapped his arms around her protectively, but it didn't stop their momentum. Entwined, they fell onto the control panel. Lights flickered, and the door to the chamber slid open.

Dr. Richards shouted over the roar of the vortex. "It's drawing more power. Don't move."

She clung to him, refusing to let go of the protective comfort of his strong arms around her. Currents from the chamber blew her hair and molded the fabric of her skirt to her legs.

His arms tightened with the effort of trying to move them away from the chamber, but it was too late. The increasing tornado-like winds sucked them into the vortex.

## Chapter Two

Shannon awoke lying on a bed wearing a thin negligee—or almost wearing one. The belt was loose, causing the material to drape off her shoulders, exposing her breasts. Light from a single candle crept through the open velvet bed curtains casting eerie shadows over the luxuriant cover. She saw enough of the dark cherry wood to appreciate the intricate carvings on the headboard and the thick posts at the corners of the king-sized mattress.

A shiver racked her body and her nipples tightened in response to the cool air of the room. She tried to pull the flimsy negligee more tightly around her, but a deep male voice broke the silence.

“Please do not. I am quite enjoying the view.” Dr. Richards sat in an English wingchair facing the bed, one foot casually crossed over the opposite knee. The candle bathed him in warm light. Silky black hair brushed his collar and framed his face. His eyes never moved away from her open negligee. A slow predatory smile spread across his face.

She imagined those lips suckling her nipples, and her breasts swelled with the thought, the buds tightening with intense need.

His shirt lay open, the buttons undone, and exposed his broad, sculptured chest. She stretched her fingers, wanting to run her hands through the smooth hair covering his chest and trailing down his abdomen before disappearing under his waistband. Solid thigh muscles and an impressive cock strained against the fabric of his pants.

The air between them hung thick with his desire, the musky scent enveloped her, strong and spicy, and her mouth watered. Her inner thighs quivered in anticipation.

“You can see me?” she asked. “What happened? Where are we?”

His smile broadened. “If I am correct, we are at Brockhurst Manor. The home of Lord Night.”

Dread crept down her spine, its tingling fingers spread through every nerve ending in her body.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out her surroundings. She vaguely remembered the accident in the lab, and the forces pulling them toward the chamber, but they couldn’t have survived the destructive energy of the vortex. “Please, please don’t let me be dead. This is not real. We did not travel to another dimension. It’s all a hallucination.”

She heard the creak of the leather chair followed by the sound of his footsteps when he crossed the short space between them. His hand, warm and gentle, caressed her cheek. “Trust me, you are not dead.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and slid his hand beneath the sheer fabric of her nightgown and between her legs. His voice deepened to a husky purr, and he thrust one finger inside her. “Does this feel like a hallucination?”

Her juices flowed, making his finger slick inside her, and a moan of pleasure escaped from low in her throat.

“Like that, do you?”

Incapable of speech, she ground against him in answer, trying to take him deeper into her pussy.

“Do you want to ride my finger? I can give you what you want, but you must consent to play the game and offer yourself as my leman. Tell me I am Lord of your night.”

She would have called him anything he wanted to have his finger pounding in her. She gasped for breath. “You are—”

He removed his finger from her slick folds and held it against her mouth, silencing her. Tracing her lips, he coaxed them open and stroked her tongue with his cream-covered finger. "Before you answer, I must warn you. When you say the words, you bind yourself to me until the game is finished."

*The game?* No, the game existed only in her mind, conjured from the hot need coursing through her body when the vortex pulled them into the chamber. She refused to believe he was anything other than a fantasy, and she was more than willing to accept her fantasy.

She slid the negligee off her arms and let it pool around her on the bed, exposing herself completely to his hungry gaze. "You are Lord of my night."

The candle flickered and died, leaving the room pitch black.

"Lay back and spread your legs for me. I want to see you."

She hesitated, confused by his request, but understanding crept past her unease. As Lord Night, he possessed the ability to see in the dark. Not being able to see him made it easier for her to give herself over to the fantasy. The air of mystery frightened and excited her. She eased onto the soft pillow behind her, and opened for him.

"So wet, so beautiful," he said and stroked the sensitive labia. "Your cream clings to the curls covering your mound, glistening like stars in the night sky."

He ran his fingers through her pubic hair and pulled it taut, exposing her swollen clit. Sweet agony shot through her when the pad of his thumb scraped across it.

The bed dipped as he lay on his side next to her and wrapped one leg over hers. He leaned over her and nibbled the tender skin of her breast.

Wanting more, she cupped it and moved it higher, offering the hardened nipple to his warm mouth. He plunged his finger deep inside her as he drew the hard bud between his lips.

The cloth of his trousers scratched at her skin with the steady pumping rhythm of her hips. His erection pressed against her thigh. She tried to reach it, but he kept her hand pinned tight between their bodies.

“Do not move.” The breath of his words blew over her feverish skin, caressing her. “Lie perfectly still.”

She fisted the comforter, forcing herself to remain motionless as the first wave of release moved through her.

He positioned himself on his knees between her legs. Leaning over, he kissed her stomach and slid his hands under her ass, pulling her down the bed until her butt rested on his thighs. His hot fingers parted the folds of her sex and with slow, deliberate strokes, spread her juices over her heated flesh.

Mesmerized by the erotic movements of his hands, she tightened her legs around him, trying to draw him closer, urging him to fill her completely.

His left hand moved up her body, leaving a sweet trail for his mouth. Fingers played at her opening while he licked her neck, tickling her, and sending shivers through her until the muscles of her pussy tightened and throbbed. He thrust his fingers deep inside her, pounding until she screamed her release. Pleasure flooded her and left her limp with its intensity.

Light from the dawn crept into the room and he lowered her back to the bed.

Shannon closed her eyes and snuggled into the soft mattress.

She felt the bed move when he shifted his weight away from her, but after a moment, he was next to her again. She barely registered the light touch of his fingers against her breasts, it already felt natural, but the slight pressure she felt on her nipples caught her attention. She opened her eyes and saw he had adorned her with a nipple chain. An amethyst pendant glittered between her breasts in the soft morning light.

She touched the gem. “It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

“Do not remove it...for any reason. It protects you during the game, and marks you as mine.”



Sunlight crept through a small opening in the red velvet bed curtains, and the muted rays brought her slowly awake. She stretched languidly on the plush mattress, savoring the feel of the silk sheets their bodies had warmed.

It hadn't been a dream. They had actually done it; made it through the vortex without being torn apart, and now they were trapped in the game. Last night, panic had gripped her to the point of denial, but she had sampled the pleasures she could only experience in this alternate reality and she wanted more. Damien would never cross the line of professionalism between them in the real world. The need he stirred in her overpowered any fear she should have.

He moved beside her, and his hand snaked underneath the covers and rested on her hip. “Shannon?” His voice, still husky from sleep, whispered over her. The question in his tone reminded her how vulnerable their trip through the vortex had made them.

She tried to sound soothing, gentle. “I'm here.”

“Are you still wearing the amethyst?”

The slight tug of the chain had felt natural to her the moment he tightened the loops around her nipples. Even without his warning, removing the chain would never have occurred to her. She looked at the stone glowing against her skin. “Yes.”

“Promise me.” His fingers dug into her skin, even though he sounded drugged, groggy. “Promise you won't take it off, for any reason.”

She laid a hand on top of his, stroking until his fingers relaxed beneath hers. “I promise.”



He let out a long relieved breath. "Thank you."

He went back to sleep almost immediately, and the stone lying between her breasts dimmed until only a hint of its warmth touched her.



Damien tentatively opened his eyes, careful of his surroundings. Last night, his vision had returned with a bright burst into his mind, shocking him to the point where the lights and colors he hadn't seen in years incapacitated him. He didn't understand why he had regained his sight, but he didn't question it. Once they returned to the real world, he would work on that particular puzzle. The results might be the key to a breakthrough with the medical dimensions.

The enormity of this success overwhelmed him. Knowing the endless hours of programming had worked, and he could see, at least in this world, had taken him to his knees in gratitude.

Then he had seen Shannon. The opulence of the room faded until all he saw was the woman lying on the bed, her creamy skin softly glowing under the moonlight, chestnut brown hair spread across the silk pillowcase. If he only had one moment of seeing her, it made the long hours, the sucking up for continued funds from his backers, the pushing of himself past the point of exhaustion, everything, worth it.

He closed his eyes and hid the memory deep inside him, preserving it.

Tentatively, he peered through the slit in the bed curtains. The small opening allowed him to watch the world take shape without being bombarded with images as the sunset moved slowly across the sky.

He glimpsed Shannon moving through the room, exploring he presumed. The thin, slinky robe she wore hugged her lush body when she walked. The smooth material flowed over her like water, and his fingers itched to feel it, to stroke the warm skin beneath.

Her voice had taunted him through the months they had worked together to staff his project, and he smiled thinking about the times he had called to hear her. He loved the way she'd call him "Dr. Richards" with such professionalism, but the breathy undertones always had him fantasizing about soft, lush lips and a lady who knew how to use them to make him crazy. He wanted, needed, to see the fantasy, the woman who made his heart pound and his palms sweat.

He smiled to himself. In the game, anything was possible.

Perhaps he shouldn't have powered the vortex, but he couldn't regret it, or their accidental tumble into the chamber. He'd known the danger, but he'd wanted to impress her. Instead, Shannon Miller had more than impressed him, exceeding even his wildest dreams. Her response to him last night had left him hard and aching when the morning crept across the horizon. A situation he intended to rectify as soon as he regained full strength with the setting of the sun.

By design, the bed curtains opened completely when the night descended upon the city. The skylight above him revealed a full moon, and its rays streamed across the bed. He stretched tired muscles, drained during his deep sleep, and enjoyed the decadent touch of the silk sheets against his skin.

All of his senses heightened with the return of his sight. Shannon's quiet movements about the room stirred the very air around him, affecting him like an aphrodisiac. His body responded instantly. Blood rushed to his groin and engorged his cock with throbbing need. He struggled to breathe normally, but his chest constricted and made the task difficult.

"Shannon." Her name erupted as a strangled plea across his lips.

It seemed like an eternity passed before she approached the bed. Her hands covered his where they clutched at his chest, suffusing the area with soothing relief. "Are you hurt?"

His nostrils flared at the scent of her. He saw the outline of the amethyst resting between her breasts through the opaque gown. The stone deepened to a shimmering purple as her nipples hardened and darkened to their own dusky rose color. The effect fueled his desires more, and he fought the compulsion to rip the gown from her shoulders. “I need your body—now.”

He thought she stiffened for a nanosecond, but it passed quickly so he couldn’t be sure. Fighting against the tightness in his chest, he supposed he might have imagined it. But all thoughts fled when she peeled the sheet down to reveal his erection and straddled him, her fingers tangled in the hair on his chest.

She still wore the thin robe, but he didn’t care. In his enhanced night vision, the icy blue gave her an ethereal glow. The glossy material shimmered and bunched at her hips when he guided her sex over his cock. Her slick heat enveloped him and he lost all control, impaling her with one deep thrust.

She arched her neck back. The pale column of her throat gleamed under the moonlight, and he noticed the rapid beat of her pulse. Her breasts strained against the robe, the nipples hard and erect.

“Damien, please.” Her nails dug into his chest.

Hearing his name, a whispered plea from her lips, drove him wild. He bucked underneath her, driving with full force into her tight pussy. In the back of his mind, he knew it shouldn’t be like this. The woman riding his cock and crying out in pleasure deserved more than a quick screw. But he couldn’t stop pounding into her. Couldn’t control the frenzied need compelling him.

He tried to slow the pace, but he felt her climax building and he was lost. Her muscles clenched around him, and the first waves of her orgasm drew him deeper until his cock throbbed and he exploded with her.

She collapsed on top of him, and he wrapped his arms around her waist and stroked her back. The pain in his chest diminished to nothing more than the lingering sensation of Shannon’s fingernails digging into his flesh.

The game programming worked.



Shannon forced herself out of the plush bed and straightened her dressing gown. No matter how tempting, she couldn't stay. "How do we get out of this alternate reality?"

"Alternate dimension," he corrected absently. "We need a controller. I know some of the technicians talked about producing a more powerful controller equipped with 'demon radar' and other extras. Once the player reaches a certain level, it can be purchased, but I don't know if they actually developed it."

"Please, tell me we entered the game at a level where we can purchase one if it's here."

He scrubbed a hand over his face. "I think it best if we simply wait it out in the house. My staff will be back on Monday. When they see the destruction in the lab and play the security footage, they'll pull us out."

"What about the guards, won't they notify someone when I don't leave?"

"No. It's not unusual for people to enter the facility and stay for days."

Damien rolled to his side and propped up on his elbow. "Would it be so horrible, living here in hedonistic luxury, every hidden and unspoken desire fulfilled? This dimension will provide all we need."

Worry crossed his features and he tensed. "You're not married, are you? Children?"

The question silenced her for a moment. If she answered yes, would he try to buy a controller? Most likely.

She sighed, better to tell the truth. "No, I'm not married and I don't have any kids, but since my parents died, it's just been me and my brother. And, I have a business to run." She didn't stretch the truth tight enough to have it

snap back in her face, but she hadn't spoken to her brother in years. To say the least, their relationship was strained. "What about you?"

"Blissfully unattached. I'm sorry about your parents. How long?"

"They died when I was fifteen. Robert, my brother, had only turned nineteen a few months before the accident, and he took guardianship of me." She didn't add or offer any more information. Didn't tell him Robert had packed up and left her alone to deal with life—the day after she graduated high school. The rift between them spanned a lot more than the physical miles between Charleston and Denver.

He visibly relaxed, but she sensed something still bothered him. He wouldn't meet her gaze, and he fidgeted with the edge of the pillow case.

"What are you not telling me?" she asked.

## Chapter Three

He pointed to the black silk robe draped over the chair. “Do you mind if I...?”

A hint of a blush crept into his face, and she couldn’t hide her amusement at his embarrassment to walk around nude after having sex. She turned and stared into the fireplace. “No, go right ahead.”

She heard him rise from the bed and turned back around in time to see him tie the belt in a double knot. “Okay, spill it.”

“The problem is time. It’s not a constant, it’s relative. In our reality two days may elapse, but it could be two, three or ten days here. I have no way of knowing.” Frustration showed in his eyes. “It’s one of the last obstacles to our success. Why I needed the extra technicians to calibrate the dimensional shift.”

“Are you telling me Monday morning might be a month from now?”

He gave her a weak smile. “Or, five minutes from now.”

“How can we find out?”

“We can’t.” He walked to the bar in a corner of the sitting area and poured a drink. “However, we’ve been given a fantastic opportunity. We know the game works. We can stay here in the home of Lord Night until we’re rescued, or play the game.”

His enthusiasm raised her defenses. She was not going to be ditched by another man who wanted some excitement. “You mean leave me here as your human defibrillator while you go soul hunting and fight demons?”

He flinched. “Of course not. We entered the game together. The programming is designed to detect the number of players and start the game in the correct mode. In our case, it should be in team mode.”

After she calmed down, she had to admit the thought appealed to her. Video games were her secret vice a few years ago, a refuge from the stress of getting a new business off the ground. She had escaped in them the same way some people escaped in drugs or alcohol. Breaking away from them had been worse than fighting an addiction.

However, in this game she couldn’t hit a button and restart if she got killed. “It sounds dangerous. What if we get hurt? The pain in your chest was real.”

“There are safety protocols built in. It wasn’t comfortable, but it doesn’t cause any real damage. Neither do the weapons. A direct hit from a laser may break the skin, and give you a tingling, numbing sensation, like hitting your funny bone. If the player has certified training, like martial arts, military, or boxing—with the proper documentation—controlled hand-to-hand combat is an option. But the standard version only allows the lasers.”

He made everything sound so logical, so clinical, but she wasn’t convinced. “What if someone has a car accident?”

“All the vehicles have governors and won’t travel over a certain speed, and some of them won’t even go into certain areas. Conceivably, a player could be injured in a car accident, or from jumping out of a window, but EMTs will be discreetly placed in the game to provide medical attention if needed.”

“They aren’t here now,” she pointed out.

He winked. “Then we’ll drive very carefully, or stay away from windows and vehicles altogether. Except for the motorcycle. I have got to take a ride on that machine. It’s a one-of-kind, custom build from Harley. Their engineers worked with our designers and created one hell of a bike.”

She hadn’t been on the back of a motorcycle since she and her brother were teenagers. She’d idolized his reckless, devil-may-care attitude and daring to

almost heroic proportions. Unfortunately, those same characteristics had led him to join the military in search of adventure and move halfway around the world the day his guardianship was terminated. That's when she learned heroes didn't exist, and she couldn't depend on anyone except herself.

Still, she missed the rush of the wind in her face. The feeling of freedom. Damien was right, the game offered them a fantastic opportunity, and she feared she might easily get caught up in the excitement, in Damien. She'd already abandoned herself more with him than anybody she'd met in the last few years. Staying here with him was more dangerous than any accident of the game. The feelings she already held for him scared her. The excitement of the game wasn't worth the potential letdown of the morning after. She had to get out. "I'm sorry, I can't take a chance and hope your team can pull us out. I've got to find a controller."

"Please, not tonight. Give me a chance to show you the world we created. As long as you wear my amethyst, you can search the shops for a controller tomorrow while I'm asleep."

"Deal, but no demons tonight." She held out her hand, almost expecting a spit shake from his boyish enthusiasm.

He took her hand and pulled her to him, her breasts pressed against his broad chest. He wrapped an arm around her waist, preventing her from moving away. "This is how you seal a contract." He placed his mouth on hers, and his tongue ravaged her lips, demanding she open to him.

Fear and arousal mingled with the distinctive promise of power in his simple kiss. She closed her eyes and yielded her mouth, opening to his hunger.

The musky taste of masculine lust sizzled through her, awakening dark desires. Unable to resist the potent lure, she clung to it, to him, as though he were an addiction.



Relaxing in his embrace, she pulled her tongue back, teasing him into pursuing her. A frisson of sensual delight made her brave enough to capture his tongue and draw him deeper into her mouth.

He groaned. The masculine sound vibrated through her, creating hot currents of need rippling through her heated blood.

The sound of the door opening didn't register until she heard someone cough. Startled and embarrassed, she broke the contact of their mouths and tried to pull away, but Damien refused to relinquish his hold.

He spoke to the man while nibbling on her neck. "Malcolm, I won't be needing your services this evening. I'll be giving the lady a tour of the city." His hand moved up her ribs until he cupped her breast. His thigh intruded between her legs and rubbed her crotch.

Shock and arousal had her heart beating wild, and desire pooled between her legs.

The butler, who looked exactly like the quintessential prune-faced servant from every bad cliché, waited. The silver tray in his hand gleamed, but the folded black sheet of paper in the middle of the tray caught and held her attention.

Damien's fingers found her hardened nipple through the fabric of her robe and squeezed while he whispered in her ear. "Exciting, isn't it? Knowing he watches?"

She gasped and ground her hips against his erection. "Is Malcolm real?"

Damien chuckled and applied more pressure to her mound. "He is real to this world, as are the other servants, objects and people here."

Malcolm walked to within a foot of them, seemingly oblivious to Damien's actions. "Begging your pardon, sir, but you have a previous engagement and a tour will not be possible." He took another step forward and held the tray out to Damien. "Your voucher for the party at Club Orchid."

"You take it, Malcolm. I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time."

The butler's stern features intensified, drawing his face tight over his bony features, and his eyebrows rose. "I have no need, as I am not in search of what can be found at this particular establishment."

As if cued by an unseen force of the game, Damien clutched his chest, and his knees buckled. Struggling under his weight, she tightened her hold to keep him from crumbling to the floor. His reaction was much worse than the one earlier, and she knew sex wasn't going to make it go away this time.

Malcolm's voice softened. "Take the voucher, sir."

With shaky hands, Damien took the paper from the tray and immediately relaxed in her arms. His breath still sounded ragged, but he quickly regained his composure and stepped away from her. "I'd forgotten about the other protocols of game play. We initiated them to ensure the player entered the game and actually played instead of spending all of his time with the character of Isobel. There are certain situations where the player must search for the missing pieces of his soul, or the pain becomes almost debilitating in its discomfort." He rubbed his chest. "Better get dressed, dear. Thanks to Malcolm's clue, it looks like we're going to the club for a little soul hunting. I'm afraid the controller will have to wait."

A satisfied smile spread across the butler's face. "And what should I lay out for you, sir?"

He waved his hand. "Whatever the current fashion for the soul-searching, demon fighter is these days. However, have the maid lay out the red gown for the lady."

Malcolm bowed his head. "Very good, sir. Come with me."

She watched and waited as Damien followed Malcolm into the adjoining master's bath and dressing room, before heading to the door leading to the mistress's bath.

During her earlier exploration of the house while Damien slept, she had discovered the bath was actually a miniature suite of sorts. One part held the

usual accoutrements, but separate bathing chambers surrounded it. She had glanced into each chamber, but only one excited her, played into the fantasy. The small room done in the style of an ancient Roman bath house.



Excited by thoughts of Damien and the night ahead, Shannon stretched in the steaming pool. The onyx marble glistened beneath a myriad of candles perched around the sunken pool.

An array of jewel-toned genie bottles lined one of the mirrored walls. She opened each one, enjoying the surprise when she pulled the glass stoppers to reveal their contents. The large assortment of bath salts and scented oils made her choices difficult. After testing them all, she decided on a delicate citrus-scented body wash and shampoo. To her delighted surprise, each one lathered the color of the bottle containing it. The orange spice oil completed her selections. She stood and poured a generous amount into her hands and smoothed the warm liquid over her body.

Her hands moved of their own volition, wandering over her breasts and down her stomach until they slid through the tuft of soft curls covering her sex. Every nerve ending tingled in anticipation as she prepared for her lover, softening her skin for his touch. It aroused her like nothing else, surrendering to this man who claimed her. She stopped short of quenching her arousal, knowing the anticipation would only add to the pleasure awaiting her, and exited the luxurious bath.

She dressed quickly, barely taking the time to brush her unruly hair, afraid to lose any of their precious night to unnecessary preparations.

Taking one last look in the mirror before joining Damien downstairs, she discovered Damien proved to be the master of overstatement when he called the material a gown.

*Gown?* The paper thin, backless sheath barely qualified as a dress. The claret crepe material didn't cover much with the side slit exposing her leg from the four-inch, low vamp stiletto red pumps to her hip. The neckline concealed her nipples, but no more. The maid had sprayed a fine mist of water and moistened the material enough to have it cling to Shannon like a second skin. Thankfully, the strings of her lace thong stayed hidden well above the slit of the dress, and the amethyst laid flat against her skin, the small bulge barely noticeable beneath the fabric.

Damien stood at the bottom of the curved staircase, dressed in formal black and looking every bit the rogue. He didn't wear a tie, and the shirt exposed a nice view of his chest where he hadn't fastened the studs. His smoky gaze traveled the length of her body, lingering for a heated moment on her exposed breasts before moving over her bare shoulders and finally meeting her gaze when she reached the last step.

He didn't speak. He didn't need to. She saw everything in his bold gaze, and her heart skipped a beat. Pure, raw lust shone in his eyes, and she grew hot under the intensity of it.

She placed her hand in his, and they exited the house. A slow, appreciative sigh escaped her for the Rolls-Royce Phantom I Playboy replica parked in front of the house, complete with a driver standing next to an open door. Damien helped her into the seat, handed his voucher to the driver, and settled beside her. "Fritz, to Club Orchid, please, and step on it." A wide grin broke across Damien's face, revealing a boyish charm she hadn't noticed before. "As a child, I always played imaginary games of intrigue. Although, in my versions, I always said, 'and don't spare the whip' as I imagined myself a British nobleman off to save the world from Napoleon."

"I don't think your games have changed much, *my lord*."

The engine purred to life, and they rode in silent luxury to the club.

The city fascinated her. The landscape portrayed the gothic tones of the graphic novel completely. The entire city looked awash in black light. Shocks of color stood out against the inky blue/black backdrop of skyscrapers and a dark sky; the yellow of the full moon, the garish, flashing neon signs. The bright yellow of a fire hydrant reflected on the dampened cobblestone streets where it spewed a steady stream of water from a loosened spigot.

The limo stopped in front of Club Orchid, a speakeasy type of place, with no outside lights and only one small sign to indicate its presence on the shadowy street.

The driver helped her out of the car, and she took a tentative step on the cracked sidewalk. The air chilled and fog curled around her feet. Icy cold fingers formed out of the mist and caressed her ankles. "Damien." She whispered his name, afraid to move.

His arms slipped around her and his lips trailed tiny kisses over the bare nape of her neck. "I'm here, sweetheart. Remember, it's only a game, and as long as you wear the amethyst, nothing can hurt you."

She leaned into his solid chest, savoring the warmth of his embrace. "What about you? Whatever is waiting for you inside the club is evil. And you said we don't know how the controls are set. You don't even have one of those laser weapons."

He chuckled behind her. "Yes, I do. Malcolm laid it out with the tux. In fact, I also have a small one for you. Turn around."

She did as he asked, and his hand slid up her bare thigh. "You wear it here. Let everyone see it." He took the small harness from his pocket and secured it around her thigh.

He took a step back and admired his work. "Damn, you look sexy as hell with the pistol strapped to your leg. Dangerous."

The derringer-sized weapon felt odd against her leg. "I feel more foolish than *femme fatale*. Can we go in and get this over with, please?"

Their driver stepped confidently to the door and pressed the old-fashioned buzzer twice.

She expected a pair of beady eyes to appear when the panel opened and a raspy voice to ask for a password, or something as equally absurd. Instead, the small panel in the door opened and revealed—nothing.

Rigid in his stance, Fritz unfolded the voucher, held it in front of the opening, and a red beam scanned the document. When the scan completed, the panel slid closed and the door opened. She felt cheated.

Damien placed his hand at the small of her back. “Shall we?”

## Chapter Four

Damien had an idea of the opulence they would find hidden in the dark, forbidding structure, but the reality didn't come close to his imagination. He took a deep breath, enjoying the crisp smell of fine tobacco and aged bourbon. He had instructed the team to go for an "elegant dive" when programming this establishment, and they had succeeded.

A curved mahogany bar ran along one side of the large, oval-shaped room, its polished surface showing none of the normal nicks or scratches. The bartenders wore the traditional uniforms of their trade, black pants and white, long-sleeved shirts complete with black service vests. Bottles of every spirit known to man were arranged in perfect order on the glass shelves lining the wall behind the bar. Polished to a gleaming shine, wide mirrors, stretched from the shelving to the ceiling and reflected the pulsing movement of the crowd on the dance floor. In awe, she stared at exact replicas of some of the world's greatest paintings hung between the mirrors in gilded frames. They gracefully adorned the burgundy walls, giving the club a gloss of sophistication over the seedy undertones.

To the right, booths lined the wall, each boasting wide circular benches and velvet curtains which could be pulled for privacy. In contrast, tall, round tables, looking like they might collapse under the weight of cold drinks, dotted the perimeter of the dance floor. The entire club seemed to undulate along with the bodies on the dance floor under the soft, muted light of the crystal chandeliers.

Damien led Shannon through the crowd, ignoring the open curiosity from the other patrons. He chose a booth offering the best view of the club and seated Shannon before motioning for a waiter. The stunned look on her face told him she hadn't yet adjusted to her surroundings.

A young man hurried to their table. "How may I serve you this evening?"

Damien took the wallet from his breast pocket and produced a one-hundred dollar bill. "I would like a double bourbon, neat, and the lady would like a screaming orgasm, but I'm afraid she'll have to settle on a cosmopolitan...for now."

He felt the sharp force of her elbow in his ribs and smiled. His teasing comment had brought her out of her shock.

The waiter turned to leave, but Damien caught the man's arm. "There is more." He pinned a hard gaze on the man. "Something valuable was stolen from me. I believe it is hidden somewhere in this club, and I'm willing to pay well for any information that will help me find it." Damien placed the bill on the table.

The waiter's face remained pleasantly passive, but his eyes showed interest. "Who, if I may be so bold, is inquiring?"

Damien replaced the wallet. "Lord Night."

The waiter's face paled, but he gave Damien a sharp nod, took the money from the table, and turned on his heel to head toward the bar.

Shannon crossed her arms and leaned into the plush cushion behind her. "Your little comment was totally unnecessary, and where did you get all that money? Is it real?"

He couldn't help grinning at her. "Yes, it was. The money came with the tux, and it is—"

"Real to this dimension. I shouldn't have even asked, and I fully expect to receive my screaming orgasm before the night is over."



Placing a hand on her bare leg, he let his fingertips graze over the exposed flesh. "You will, sweetheart. You'll be drunk on them before the sun rises over the horizon."

He noted the shiver racing through her, and the anticipation shining in her eyes. Her breasts swelled inside the gown until he knew the weight of the nipple chain was the only thing keeping them from completely spilling out of the material. He felt the muscles in her thighs tighten, but it couldn't stop the musky scent of her arousal from reaching him.

The waiter arrived with their drinks, set them on the table with brisk efficiency, and left without speaking.

She reached for her glass. "I think you make him nervous."

He caught her hand before she touched the glass and brought it to his lips to mask the action. "Don't drink. The alcohol is real, and we need to stay sober."

She nodded in understanding.

Low strands of music drifted to them from the stage almost hidden in the back of the club. He stood and bowed. "May I have this dance?"

He didn't wait for her response. He pulled her into his embrace and led her to the dance floor. Its smooth, dark surface gleamed under the soft glow of candlelight.

Shannon simply took his breath away.

He tightened his embrace as they floated across the dance floor, their movements fluid and sinuous. Unable to resist the temptation of the soft flesh of her neck and shoulder, he whispered kisses on the bare skin, lingering on the pulse point. The fluttering of her heartbeat beneath his lips set his blood on fire, and his whole body pulsated with need.

He felt a little shiver ripple through her body when he nipped the sweet flesh. His need, as intense and shocking as the colors he now saw, charged hot through his veins, uncontrolled.

Instinct honed by years of blindness compelled him to touch, to experience every facet of her. Of their own volition, his fingers slid through the silken hair brushing her shoulders. He loosened the pins and let it cascade in an auburn waterfall over the smooth skin of her back. His lips sought her heat, trailing tender kisses from the warmth of her mouth to the swell of her breasts above the décolletage of her gown.

He hadn't danced in years, not in his dark world, and not ever with this intricacy of movement. Their thighs brushed with each step, bodies entwining for the briefest of moments, teasing his cock to rigid attention.

He molded his body to hers, pressing his erection into her softness. His hand trembled from overpowering need as his fingers found the slit of her gown and traveled up her thigh to her soft, rounded ass. The heat of her sex drew him closer to her opening. Surprise stopped him for a moment when he discovered the thin string of a thong already soaked through with her juices.

His breath escaped in ragged gasps as his tongue traced patterns of desire on the heated skin of her neck, identical to the movements of his fingers over her swollen labia, all orchestrated by an unseen force to unleash a lady's passion.

"I need to see you."

Shannon stepped back from his embrace, her nipples threatening to free themselves from the low bodice of her gown with every breath. The music segued to a slow, blue-light jazz tune. Shannon's hips swayed with the wave of the saxophone as she walked toward the table, beckoning him to follow her. She moved slowly, and his heart pounded by the time they reached the booth.

He closed the privacy curtains behind him.

She climbed on top of the table and, staying on her knees, gripped the hem of the gown. Teasingly, she worked it up her legs until her ass was bared and she bent over, giving him a private view.

The thread of her thong disappeared between the perfectly shaped cheeks and drove him wild. It drew his gaze to the scrap of material between her legs covering her clit, but left her opening exposed. With every ounce of self control he possessed, he forced his hands to stay at his sides and looked away before he lost control and took her here in the booth. "Your thong is driving me crazy. I want to remove it with my teeth and nibble on the succulent treasure it protects."

She turned toward him with a cat-like smile spread across her face. "As soon as I get my screaming orgasm."

He smiled back at her. "Sweetheart, that's *how* you'll get your screaming orgasm."

The curtains rustled behind him, and he helped Shannon off the table. "Enter."

The waiter cleared his throat. "There's a gentleman at the bar who is interested in doing business with you."

Damien followed the waiter's line of vision. A lone man sat hunched at the end of the bar. Damien couldn't see his face, but something about the man seemed familiar, which he knew was ridiculous. Probably another aspect of the game programming, but he didn't ignore the feeling. His body tensed on alert.

Shannon leaned into him and he felt her hand on his arm. "I don't like this," she whispered. "I'm getting the same creepy feeling I had outside."

He squeezed her hand to reassure her. "It's nothing. I'll meet with him, learn what I need, and we can retrieve the item and move forward to the more pleasurable aspects of the game."

He retrieved another bill from his wallet and handed it to the waiter. "Buy the gentleman another round of whatever he's drinking and inform him I will meet with him in five minutes."



She watched the waiter move through the crowd and stand beside the man at the bar. The bartender joined them and they huddled together, speaking in hushed voices.

“You’re staring. It isn’t polite,” Damien pointed out.

“I don’t care about manners right now. I want to know what they’re talking about.”

He turned and moved closer, effectively blocking her view and trapping her between the back of the booth and his broad chest. “They’re probably plotting my demise.”

She tried to look around him, but he grabbed her shoulders and crushed his lips against hers. She was too stunned by his actions to do more than cling to him and accept the assault to her mouth and her senses.

He broke the kiss as quickly as he had started it. “Stay here,” he directed. He stood, straightened his jacket, and walked confidently to the bar.

She waited until they were engrossed in conversation before slinking out of the booth. Keeping to the shadows, she crept along the edge of the room until she was close enough to hear the mystery man’s voice.

“I’m not comfortable talking out here in the open like this. It ain’t healthy, being seen talking to you.” He pointed to another booth, almost hidden in the dark recess at the other end of the bar. “I like to conduct my business in private.”

She had to bite her lip to keep from calling out to Damien.

The man rose from the barstool, but Damien laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. “And I don’t like being taken for a fool. Either you have the information I seek, or I take my money elsewhere. You won’t get it by drugging my drink or ambush in a dark booth.”

She let out the breath she’d been holding, thankful Damien didn’t slide too deep into his role of Lord Night and accept the invitation.

The man threw a scathing look at the bartender who only shrugged in response and walked away.

The man hunched over the bar next to Damien and chuckled. "You've got the right of it there, mate. I prefer a good whiskey, a willing woman and an easy day's work." He drained his glass. "Can't blame a man for trying."

Damien unbuttoned his jacket to reveal the laser gun strapped at his side and sat on the barstool next to the man. "Talk."

"Okay, see. I heard two of 'em whispering, the demons living off a piece of your soul." The man gestured, a sweeping motion with his hand. "They own this gin joint, and they were expecting you. Laughing about it, they were. Said you'd never find it in the light."

"How do you fit into this little scenario?"

"They caught me listening in and offered me a business opportunity, so to speak." He banged his glass against the bar. The bartender looked agitated, but pulled a bottle from the shelf behind him and refilled the man's glass.

The man closed his eyes and sipped the dark amber liquid. "Promised me they'd let me keep my own soul and a tidy sum on top of that if I'd help them get rid of you."

Shannon wanted to shoot the man herself for being such a slimy weasel, but she restrained the urge and kept to the shadows. She thought about what he'd said about the light, and it didn't make sense. Surely they weren't expecting Damien to venture out during the day while he was blind and weak. No, it had to mean something else.

A movement at the bar caught her attention. Two men exited the booth the man was supposed to lure Damien into, and they didn't look pleased to see the two chatting.

The bartender ducked behind the bar, and the weasel nearly fell trying to slip off the stool, but he regained his footing and ran toward the door.

No, not men, she realized when they moved closer. Demons. And they headed straight for Damien. Sharp features etched their long, thin faces. Their pale skin appeared almost translucent, and their red snake eyes glowed unnaturally in the muted light of the bar. One of them dragged his long, bony fingers over the polished wood and scratched the surface with his sharp nails.

Damien's right arm rested on the edge of the bar, his fingers inches away from the gun, and his left hand nursed the drink left by the weasel. What was he waiting for? Why didn't he shoot them?

If he lived through this, she was going to kill him.

She refused to stand by and do nothing. She pulled away from the wall, and out of the shadows protecting her, and walked brazenly toward Damien. Slowing a little to match pace with the demons, she stepped behind Damien as the demons flanked him. She played with the hair curled at the nape of his neck and bent over his shoulder. "Darling, you didn't tell me you invited friends."

The demons' eyes brightened, and she suppressed a shudder when their lips curled in sinister smiles showing yellowed, jagged teeth.

Damien tensed beneath her hand.

The barstool spun slowly until Damien faced the demon on his left and she stood with her back pressed against Damien's, facing the demon on his right.

She took a deep breath and eased her sweaty palm down her thigh. Her fingers brushed against the holster. She leaned forward and shimmied. "Why don't we get this party started?"

The demon licked his thin lips and leered at her, but his attention centered right where she wanted it, distracting him long enough for her to palm the small gun.

She felt Damien's arm move, took quick aim at the most direct target—the demon's balls, and shot from the hip. He shrieked with pain, but she didn't let

off the trigger, landing hits with the laser over his torso and chest. Damn, the thing just wouldn't die.

Damien jerked off his seat, toppling the barstool to the floor. "Shit! These things have sharp nails."

"How bad?"

"Nothing more than a scratch down my arm." He nudged her with his shoulder and they walked back to back away from the bar, shooting their laser guns as they moved.

The demons followed, staying close and swiping with their talon-like fingers. The sickening scent of charred flesh filled her nostrils and mingled with the coppery scent of Damien's blood.

The club fell silent. No music, no steps echoing on the dance floor, no tinkling of glasses. Only the hissing sounds the demons made filled the air, each breath rushing out like an icy damp wind over her skin. It chilled her, numbed her fingers, and made it hard to grip her weapon.

Unable to hold the gun steady, she squeezed the trigger as best she could and sprayed laser blasts at the creature, praying no wild shots struck a bystander.

The demon flailed in front of her, gurgling from a wound in his throat. The cold vapor dissolved. She sent another, longer blast into its neck and it crumbled to black dust in front of her. One of its gnarled talons survived, and she kicked it away from the pile of ash as if its presence might revive the demon.

"Go for the throat!" she shouted over her shoulder.

The adrenaline rush pumped through her, warming her blood, her hands. She held the gun in front of her and dared not turn around to help Damien in case other demons lay in wait, hidden.

Another horrible gurgling sound told her Damien had found his mark. The music started again, and she heard the soft hum of conversations under the

melody. The threat had passed and everything seemed normal again. Her labored breathing evened out, and she placed the gun back in the holster.

Damien didn't speak. He simply took her hand and led her to their table. A vicious gash marred his jacket and blood darkened the cuff of his shirtsleeve.

She pulled the privacy curtains tight and peeled the jacket off him before he sat.

"It looks worse than it feels," he protested, but he didn't try to stop her from ripping the sleeve and surveying the damage for herself.

Without any warning to him, she picked up the bourbon and poured the contents over the wound which had already started to heal. The alcohol still burned and had him hissing between his teeth.

She studied the injury. "Amazing. In five minutes, there won't even be a scar."

He unclenched his fists. "If you had asked first, I would have reminded you that the wounds caused by the demons, like the ache in my chest earlier, are painful and uncomfortable, but cause no real damage. You didn't have to waste a perfectly good shot of bourbon trying to disinfect a fading gash."

"You weren't going to drink it anyway," she mumbled.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

She ignored his question and changed the subject. "I thought the amethyst was supposed to protect me. Someone should have told the demons."

"It does protect you from being claimed by another game character, but not from demons. Without it, you could be stolen from me during the day, or any of the men in this bar could challenge me for your company."

A shudder racked her body. She'd rather take her chances with a demon than be claimed by any of the men she'd seen so far in the game.

He opened the curtains and signaled for the waiter to bring another drink.

The waiter appeared and Damien took a drink from the tray. "Now, all we have to do is find the piece of Lord Night's soul."



“Don’t you know where it is? I thought you programmed this game?”

“My team and I programmed literally thousands of hiding places on a random sequencer. The programming ensures no two games are alike and players can’t share information. We know it’s somewhere in the light, but it doesn’t fit the game play. The parameters are set to very strict specifications. Lord Night and the demon characters are almost vampiric.” He grinned. “You know, sleep all day, party all night.”

“And Malcolm said it was in this establishment.” She sucked in her cheeks trying to imitate the butler.

His gaze swept over the myriad of table lamps and wall sconces and echoed the weasel’s words. “*In the light.*” But, which one?”

He surveyed the club, his eyes studying every inch from the darkened corners to the bandstand. “The most difficult one.” He pointed to the highest crystal chandelier above the dance floor. At least fifteen elaborate tiers consisting of hundreds of tiny crystals glittered above them.

“Well, Mr. Almost Vampire, can you fly?”

“Not without my vampire bat-copter.”

She thrust her hands in his waistband. “Is there anything in your utility belt we can use?”

“Sweetheart, you can use whatever you can get your hands on—as soon as we get the chandelier down.”

She grazed her fingers over his erection, teasing it, before she pulled her hands free. “Shoot it.”

“Excuse me?”

“The chandelier. Shoot it down. I’ll get everyone off the dance floor.” She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and sashayed toward the band.

The musicians stopped playing when she stepped onto the stage and tapped the microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, please exit the dance floor.”

She stroked the gun strapped to her thigh for effect, and everyone scurried to their tables.

“Well done,” Damien shouted. “Cover your ears.”

A laser blast hit the ceiling above the chandelier. The massive fixture seemed to move in slow motion as it fell to the wooden floor below, landing with a loud crash that reverberated through the club.

She walked gingerly through the destruction and met Damien at the center. Most of the crystals had shattered upon impact, but one landed on its point and glowed brilliantly in the darkened area.

Damien wiped his palms down his trousers and without any further hesitation, kneeled down and retrieved the crystal. His fingers clasped tight around it, and she had to close her eyes against the sudden brightness engulfing him.

The crystal burned hot in his hand. The rush of power sliced through his body and overwhelmed him; crippled him. His recovered sight couldn't handle the onslaught of the bright, vivid colors emanating from the perfectly cut crystal. It pierced his vision, like looking straight into the sun.

He stayed on his knees until the heat waned to a comforting warmth in his hand. His eyes adjusted to his surroundings, and even with the knowledge of how the game worked, he was amazed to find the chandelier hanging high above him and everything back to normal.

Shannon stood beside him, her stance protective with one hand resting lightly on his shoulder, the other hovering over her weapon. Her voice held a hint of amusement. “As much as I love it when you're on your knees, I think we should leave now.”

Another flash of energy hit him and full strength returned.

This time, it had nothing to do with the crystal and everything to do with the lady beside him. He pressed his face against the soft curve of her hip and tried to control the overwhelming desire to ravish her there on the dance floor.

Reluctantly, he stood and pocketed the crystal. “I think you’re right. We only have a few hours until dawn, and I believe I owe you a screaming orgasm.”

## Chapter Five

They had practically dived into the back seat of the Phantom to get away, and laughed in triumph as their driver made a mad dash through the city. They ran up the stairs and locked the bedroom door behind them. Shannon leaned against the closed door, breathless and giddy in expectation of what the rest of the night would bring.

Damien braced his hands above her shoulders and held her captive between his body and the dark wood. She had only a moment to inhale the heady male scent of him before his lips crushed down on hers. His kiss held no mercy. He teased her mouth open and she was helpless, drowning in the taste of him. Only their mouths touched, but arcs of desire connected them.

Her breasts ached with need, and she moved her hands over them. Damien broke the kiss and threaded his fingers through hers. Her hands in his, he pulled them above her head and held them tight against the door. "You surrendered your pleasure to me. It is in my hands now. Mine to provide. Mine to savor."

He feathered kisses down the column of her throat. "Tell me what you want."

She drew a ragged breath. Her breasts weighed heavy with desire, and moisture tickled down her thighs. "I want your hands on me; your cock inside me."

He freed her hands. "Unfasten my pants."

She struggled to keep from ripping them from his hips as she undid the button and unzipped his fly, avoiding the rigid erection straining against the fabric of his boxers. She tugged the shirttails out of his waistband, and his stomach clenched when she made contact with his bare skin.

Musky desire emanated from him, and she inhaled the stimulating scent, enjoying the warmth of his body as she thrust her hands underneath the material of his trousers to clutch his ass, trying to pull him closer.

His arms flexed to prevent the contact. His raw strength and control fed energy to her frenzied need for release.

She slid her hand to the front, tucking her fingers under the elastic of his boxers. Pulling them and his pants down, she released his erection. His breath hissed between his teeth when her hands grazed the sensitive head.

“Lift your dress.”

With shaky hands, she pulled the material up her thighs and widened her stance.

Damien moved one hand from the door and latched his fingers onto the triangle of material covering her mound, moving the string to one side. “Your thong has been driving me crazy all night.”

She almost came from the brief contact as the heat of his touch released the full force of her juices and they flowed over his fingers.

He crouched slightly, his slick fingers sliding behind her thighs, and lifted her. “Wrap around me.”

She shifted her weight, leaning on his shoulders for support, and wrapped her legs around his waist. His body crushed her against the door, and with one quick motion, he buried himself deep inside her.

Wrapped in a web of ecstasy, she surrendered to the pure pleasure and her pussy muscles clenched around his throbbing cock. She needed to feel him pound the hard flesh into her.

The corded muscles in Damien’s neck tightened. “Ride me.”

She heard need in his husky demand, and it ignited her. Desperate for release, she obeyed, rocking her hips in rhythm with the frantic beat of her heart. Within minutes, the grinding friction created an explosion of heat. Shockwaves from the intense orgasm rippled through her body. She screamed her release.

A pained moan escaped from deep in Damien's throat, and her sheath tightened, milking him, until he went to his knees, drained.

"Are you still alive?" she asked when she caught her breath.

"Yes, barely."

"Good." She stood on shaky legs. "I need to get out of this dress and freshen up. Don't go anywhere."

Damien watched her walk a little unsteadily to the adjacent master bath before he examined his own sorry state. His pants were still wrapped around his knees. *I should be locked in a cage, like some wild animal.* What had this dimension turned him into that he couldn't control his own lust? He'd taken her against a door, worse than an animal, caring only for his satisfaction without a thought to Shannon's needs.

He feared she didn't want to freshen up as much as to get away from him. He didn't blame her. He closed his eyes and cleared his mind of all thought. Logic never failed him, and he needed it now. He was a scientist, damn it, not some rutting beast. He had to apologize for his crude behavior.

He discarded his clothes, walked across the room and sat in the bay window. A storm brewed on the horizon, but he still saw a scattering of stars across the sky.

Lost in thought, he didn't hear Shannon approach. When she spoke, her voice wrapped around him like silk. "It's beautiful. No pollution or city lights to dull the brilliance of the night sky."

His first reaction was to explain the nature of the plasma energy he used to open and create this dimension, but when he saw her, all rational thought disappeared.

She stood beside him, wearing a white diaphanous robe. The material fit snug down her sides, draped over her hips, and clasped slightly above her mound, leaving her stomach and breasts exposed. The gold chain hung delicately from her breasts, the loops around her nipples making them constantly erect. The amethyst pendant drew his gaze. "I have to admit, had I seen this display earlier, I might have more to apologize for than my overly aggressive lovemaking."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "What? Overly aggressive? I don't think so."

"You weren't appalled?"

She smiled. "No. But maybe a little disappointed because it ended too soon."

Relieved, he let out his breath and pulled her close. "I think I can improve on the timing."

She ran her fingers over his chest, tangling her fingers in the fine hair covering it. "I'm counting on it."

A shiver trembled through her. "Let's go inside by the fire. Malcolm sent up a selection of fruits, cheeses, breads and desserts. Would you like some champagne or strawberries? "

"Right now, I could eat almost anything. I'm starving."

"Allow me to satisfy all your hungers this evening."

He led her inside, closing the doors behind him. She settled on the plush rug, leaning provocatively against silk pillows before the warmth of the fire. The little gold clasp of her robe winked at him, inviting him to explore the secrets it hid. But he wanted to go slow and savor the rest of the evening. Enjoy Shannon. He backed away from her before he acted on carnal impulse, and turned his attention to the champagne.

The loud pop brought an explosion of bubbles over the lip of the bottle and sprayed his chest with the cold liquid, helping him maintain control.

After he placed the two flutes filled with the sparkling wine on a silver platter, he added a little taste of everything, and two personal fondue bowls brimming with warm melted chocolate.

The mirror above the mantle reflected his nude image bearing the large tray. Rather like a male slave of ancient Greece servicing his mistress. He smiled at the thought of playing the meek role before turning the tables and dominating the unsuspecting mistress with his dark passions. The thought had him hard and throbbing.

He placed the tray beside her on the floor. "Mistress, my humble offering."

He watched her gaze move from the tray to his rigid cock. Her tongue moistened her lips. "Not so humble a feast at all."

"Champagne?" he offered.

She took the flute and held it high, never looking away from his midsection. "To feasts. May they always be...bountiful."

He held the other glass to hers and answered. "May you always have your fill."

She bit on her lower lip. "Everything looks delicious. I don't know where to start."

He settled on his knees next to the tray. "Allow me," he said and reached for a plump strawberry. He bit into the succulent fruit, releasing the sweet red juice. He traced the fleshy morsel over her parted lips, tempting her, before allowing her to take it into her mouth.

Sweetness burst on her tongue when she sank her teeth into the berry.

She watched in anticipation as his fingers hovered above the tray, but he didn't choose another strawberry. Instead, he produced a small red mask from the tray. "I have a few surprises myself. This will make the experience more...tantalizing, more daring."



Her stomach quivered at the thought, and a delicious shiver ran from her hardened nipples to her swollen labia, releasing a scintilla of moisture. She leaned back into the pillows when he moved to straddle her, and she stretched languidly, rubbing her legs together, trying to increase the sensation.

He placed the mask over her eyes. "Turn over," he commanded.

She felt the tug of the mask as he tied it into place. When she rolled onto her back, she opened her eyes, testing it, but couldn't see even a speck of light through the thick red silk.

Even sensing his movements, she still gasped in surprise when the next strawberry touched her lips. Warm, creamy chocolate coated the fruit and it spread over her tongue as she ate. Oh yeah, she could get used to this.

"I need another sip of champagne."

The brush of his fingers against her bare skin tickled, but the light caress didn't linger. He grasped the amethyst and pulled gently on the chain. "You didn't say please."

She arched her back and lifted herself to her elbows, careful not to let the slight tension lesson. "Please?" The word escaped her in a breathless supplication.

The cool rim of the flute coaxed her mouth open, and he allowed her one sip of the sparkling liquid before denying her another.

Her frustration mounted as he played with her this way. Each time she felt the tug of the chain or the taste of sweetness on her lips, she begged him to satisfy her, or end the torment. He refused to do either.

He sucked her firm nipples, holding them taut with the chain, until she cried out from the agonizing pleasure of it, only to be rewarded by the caress of his breath across the wet buds and nothing more. She squirmed beneath him, trapped between his strong thighs and the chain, helpless to do anything but whimper in pleasure.

When he finally unfastened the gold clasp of her gown, it fell away, exposing her fully to his gaze. The head of his shaft played against the skin above her mound. The little droplets of moisture he left behind only heightened her fervor.

“Do not move,” he commanded. The weight of the chain lessened and he placed the amethyst between her breasts.

She had begged for relief from the sweet torment earlier, but now the loss of it made her crave it all the more. The heat of his breath caressed her bare stomach when he crouched low over her, like a predator stalking her scent.

She fisted her hands in the plush rug underneath to keep from moving and held tight when he nipped the sensitive flesh below her navel. The sensation of his love bite stayed even as he backed away until she couldn't feel any part of him touching her.

“Spread your legs for me.”

The skirt of her gown feathered over her legs when she opened for him. She held her breath in anticipation, fully aware of his gaze on her. She felt his triumphant smile when her juices surged and flowed over her swollen labia.

He nestled between her legs, and she clenched her hands in an effort to keep from raking them through his hair and pulling him closer. An eternity passed, but she lay motionless as he had instructed, refusing to beg him. Every muscle in her body trembled, taut with expectation, until one slow stroke of his tongue shattered her.

She squirmed beneath him, exposing more of herself to his mouth. The moist warmth of his tongue penetrated her swollen flesh, sending waves of ecstasy through her. He kissed her opening, plunging into its hot depths. Her muscles tightened around him.

He pulled out before she came. “You have a greedy little pussy, Shannon. Fortunately, I'm a generous man.”

Suffering from lack of completion, a low cry of frustration escaped.

“I’m going to kiss you again. Sample your sweet nectar until I’m drunk from it. Don’t come until I allow you.”

Her breasts swelled and ached. She moved her hands to massage them, but he caught them and placed them back at her sides. “Every part of you is *my* pleasure.” His strong fingers found her nipples and squeezed as his tongue delved deep inside her once again.

Writhing beneath him, she struggled for control. Her own desire held her captive, ensnared her, even as his lips grazed her overly tender clit.

“Now,” he ground out. “Come for me now.” He sucked her clit and flicked the sensitive nub with his tongue.

A scream formed in her throat and escaped as the force of the orgasm swelled through her.

Sated and still wrapped in the warm haze of pleasure, she barely noticed when Damien removed the nightgown, cradled her in his arms and carried her to the bed.

The covers were folded back, and the cool sheets felt good against her heated skin. She turned over and snuggled deep into the soft down pillows, exhausted and weak, but he didn’t give her a chance to recover.

The sensory onslaught began as soon as the palms of his hands glided down the curve of her back and rested on her backside.

His hands skimmed her thighs and he spread her legs. He positioned himself between them, kissed the ticklish spot behind her knee, and pushed them forward until her back arched allowing him easy rear entry.

Even expecting the hard, deep thrust, she wasn’t ready for the jolt of energy it poured through her over-stimulated system. The pillows muffled her primal moans of pleasure, but the man taking her from behind roared his passion unashamedly.

Fueled by a surge of frenzy she couldn’t control, she ground against him, slow circular movements, taking him deeper.

Strong hands held her hips and stopped her movement. She moaned in disappointment as he pulled away until the tip of his shaft pulsated against her rim. She strained against him, wanting his cock to fill her completely, but his hold remained firm.

“Patience,” he soothed.

She took a calming breath and stopped struggling against him, but it didn’t help to quell the fiery need consuming her.

He skimmed his hands over her back. The feather light touches sent delicious shivers through her, and she relaxed into the languid, soothing massage.

He sank into her, inch by slow inch.

Their bodies fell into a steady rhythm. He pumped smooth and deep, a gradual building of friction until she groaned with the pleasure of it.

Her climax rolled through her, an endless rippling of flowing waves satisfying the desires Damien stirred in her core. She felt his thighs tense behind her, the pressure of his fingers biting into her ass, holding her motionless while his cock throbbed and he exploded inside her.

He rolled to his side, taking her with him until they lay spooned together. It was the last thing she remembered before falling to sleep.

Damien waited for another twenty minutes, making sure she slept soundly. He leaned over her and kissed her gently on the temple. “Thank you,” he whispered before guilt had him sneaking out of the bed.

He turned away from her and walked to the balcony. Opening the double doors, he stepped outside, needing the brisk night air to clear his head. But the cool breeze couldn’t drive the burning heat from his body, or Shannon’s scent from his skin. It only whispered promises of a reality even he had never dreamed of, but he refused to hear it. Refused to believe she affected him so deeply.

His eyesight started to fade with the coming dawn, and he stepped back into the room. Because of the game, his strength slowly drained with the light, and he would soon be forced to sleep. But he knew his rest wouldn't be peaceful.

He left the balcony, locking the doors, and climbed into the bed, letting the darkness take him. He reached out to her, tracing his fingers across her soft cheek before pulling the thick comforter over her. She gave a contented sigh and burrowed deeper into the pillows.

## Chapter Six

Shannon awoke snuggled against Damien's hard body. Their night together had been the stuff of fantasies. The musky scent of their lovemaking still scented the air, clung to the bed, to her. She smiled, remembering the way he had cuddled her into his arms when she was too exhausted to move.

She stretched and opened the bed curtains. Sunbeams streamed through the windows, scattering any lingering illusions she harbored, hoping the paradise could last. In the light of day, the realization of traveling to another dimension couldn't be ignored. She had complete confidence in Damien, but the possibility of not being able to get back home lingered in the back of her mind.

Damien hadn't stirred. Because of the game, he wouldn't wake until nightfall, but she needed to get up and distance herself from him. She forced herself out of his embrace and the comfortable bed and made her way to the bathroom. She needed a long, hot shower to clear the sensual cobwebs from her mind before she went shopping for a controller.

However, she smelled the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and detoured toward the sitting area. The remains of their food from the night before had been removed and replaced with another tray filled with a variety of breakfast and lunch items. She passed over the lunch fare and opted to splurge with an asiago cheese bagel and a cup of hot, strong coffee. It felt like morning, although the clock on the mantel showed the time to be late afternoon.

She slathered the bagel with cream cheese and walked to the windows. Dark, ominous clouds gathered in the distance and covered the sky over the city. A strong breeze from the building storm tugged the blossoms clinging to the cherry trees lining the cobblestone driveway. With dark, muted colors, and bold, inky lines, the artists and programmers had captured the noir comic-book atmosphere perfectly.

From her vantage point, she saw the garage beside the house and knew from the size it held more than the Phantom they had traveled in last night. A high, stone wall circled the estate, and about a mile beyond its protection, the dark world of Lord Night crept toward the heavy, iron gates. By nightfall, the entire grounds of the estate and everyone in residence would belong to the urban gothic world of Damien's creation. The romance and adventure of this dimension whispered on the breeze, daring her to lose herself in its seductive game.

For the first time since she entered this strange universe, she marveled at the amount of work Damien and his staff had done to create such an elaborate world with its many characters and with such attention to detail. The city rivaled New York in size, and she tried to imagine the kinds of shops, clubs and other fascinating places created to fill the city's landscape.

She reluctantly backed away from the window and temptation and headed to the shower. She couldn't allow herself to get caught up in this game, or Damien and the desire his touch easily coaxed from her. All too soon, it would be nothing more than a cherished memory.

Last night, she hadn't paid much attention to the shower, preferring to luxuriate in the Roman bath. This afternoon though, she ran her hands over the smooth tile and gasped in awe at the chamber.

Gold-plated fixtures glittered in the natural light, and the enclosure had at least a dozen inset showerheads placed precisely to ensure every part of her body would feel the pulsating streams. A handheld massage head hung next to

the soap dispenser. She turned on the faucet, and steam rose as the water cascaded from the jets, soothing her aching muscles. She was deliciously sore in places she hadn't thought possible.

Surrounded by the decadence of this dimension and captivated by the sense of being under a waterfall in a rainforest, she wondered what it would be like to live here permanently. But it was a fleeting thought. She didn't belong here. She owned a profitable business with employees who depended on her, clients who trusted her to provide quality temporary services—and a niece and nephew she had never met.

The thought of her estranged family made everything around her seem like an aberration, and the hot water failed to soothe the ache in her heart. She turned the shower off and stepped out with a new determination to mend the breach with her brother...when and if she made it home.

Wrapped in a plush towel, she made her way to the closet. Yesterday, the maid had retrieved the gown Damien had requested, not giving Shannon a chance to see any of the other clothes. But when she entered the walk-in space, she discovered the closet was bigger than her bedroom, and held a variety of clothing from day dresses to slacks to outrageous costumes. She dropped the towel and examined all of them, like a child playing dress-up. Finally, she decided on a pair of relaxed jeans and a boxy, long-sleeved T-shirt as much for comfort as to detract from the sexual haze that sucked her in whenever she came in contact with Damien.

"Those clothes will never do." His voice from the doorway startled her, and she yelped in surprise. It couldn't be nightfall already. Damn, she must've slept longer than she'd thought. Another day wasted when she should have been searching for a controller.

"Don't you ever make any noise?" she snapped. "You nearly scared me to death. And why are you out of bed, you're not supposed to be awake until—"



His laughter interrupted her. "About thirty minutes ago. You were so engrossed, you lost track of time. I've already showered, and you need to change your clothes."

"I refuse to fight in heels again." She crossed her arms in defiance. "If we're going up against more demons, my feet are not going to suffer."

He ignored her and started rummaging through the closet. He finally pulled a pair of leather pants off a hanger and handed them to her. "There should be a vest and jacket somewhere in there, and a pair of boots. We're going to take a spin on the Harley." He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and turned to leave. "I'll meet you out front in say, thirty minutes?"

She waited until he left to enter the dressing area, tearing off the clothes she had donned earlier, including her underwear. A black-lace, open-cup bra had caught her eye earlier, and it matched the outfit perfectly. If she left the top snaps on the vest open, it would allow a nice view of her cleavage and nipple chain. There was a pair of matching panties, but she decided to ride commando.

The buttery soft, black leather pants hugged her hips without constricting her movements. The vest and fringed jacket wrapped her in warmth like a second skin. Even the boots fit like they had been handmade for her.

A definite change of attitude came with the outfit. For the first time in her life she actually strutted, and not the way models strutted. Her walk had an edginess, a bad-girl swagger, and a confidence. The transformation amazed and excited her as she made her way through the house.



She heard the motorcycle before she made it to the landing. The rumble vibrated through the house, and she hurried down the stairs. The black custom Soft Tail looked ghostly under the full moon.

Malcolm waited at the front door with his usual dour expression, as if she arrived late for an appointment. A double-holster gun belt draped his arm, and he held a pair of lightly tinted sunglasses and a half-shell helmet.

Damien leaned against the idling bike. He wore a pair of leather chaps over well-worn jeans, a white T-shirt and a black leather jacket. However, she couldn't seem to look away from his crotch, outlined to perfection by the cut of the chaps.

Malcolm cleared his throat and shoved the gunbelt into her hands. She strapped it around her hips and tied the leather strips to her thighs. The weight started to feel natural, and it worried her a little, but the thought fled when she realized Malcolm had provided the weapons.

She took her helmet and glasses, but stopped the butler before he entered the house. "Malcolm, if we lost our controller, would you be able to get us another one?"

A look of reproach crossed his features and his eyebrows drew close together. "Have you lost your controller?"

Trying to look sheepish, she lowered her voice and hedged the question. "During the fight last night..." Letting the statement trail off, she hoped he thought they had lost a controller. For some reason, she didn't want Malcolm to know they had entered the game without one.

Malcolm's beady eyes focused sharply on Damien. "Did you retrieve the item?"

Damien left his perch against the bike, wrapped his arm around her waist, and gave her a quick hug. "Yes, we did."

She leaned into him, appreciating the show of support.

The butler gave an imperious snort. "I suppose if one were to lose the controller, one could find a replacement at a shop in the city."

"Which shop?" Damien asked.

“The name of the establishment is Chasity’s Closet.” Malcolm grimaced and shuddered as though saying the name left a horrible taste in his mouth. Without further comment, he turned on his heel and walked briskly into the house, effectively dismissing them before they had a chance to ask for directions.

She shrugged. “Remember, we have a deal. I played last night and slept almost as long as you did. Now, it’s time for you to keep to your end. Do you think you can find Chasity’s Closet?”

Laugh lines etched Damien’s eyes, and a low chuckle escaped from deep in his chest. “Oh, I think we’ll find it.”

“Okay, what’s the joke?”

“Actually, the joke is on Chasity, one of our best programmers, and she is going to be royally pissed when she hears about this.”

He walked to the bike and removed his helmet from its perch on the mirror. “She and Gabriel, one of our digital artists, have been arguing with each other throughout the project. He and another programmer threatened to name a sex shop after her if she didn’t give in to a few of their suggestions.”

She fastened her helmet under her chin. “Looks like she refused to give in to them.” When he mounted the bike, she stepped on the peg, flung her leg over the backrest, and positioned herself on the “bitch seat”.

Only when she looked in the side mirror and saw him put on the dark sunglasses, did she remember he was blind in the real world and started to have doubts. She tapped him on the shoulder. “Can you operate this thing?”

The sound of his voice in her helmet startled her. With no visible microphones, she hadn’t realized the helmets had headsets. “Yeah. I rode quite a bit before I lost my sight, and I took a few turns around the estate to get the feel of the bike before you came out.”

She settled against the backrest. “Then what are you waiting for? Let’s ride. I want to see Chasity’s Closet.”



Damien took a circuitous route through the countryside and stayed outside of the city. “Hold on, we’re getting close to the Blood Dragon.”

“What!” Unwanted images popped into her mind of giant, colorful, fire-breathing creatures with claws and scales. Demons she could handle, but the comic book didn’t have any dragons, and she wasn’t prepared to do battle with one.

“It’s a road, based on a well-known biker haunt on the border of Tennessee and North Carolina called the tail of the dragon. The real one has over two hundred switchback curves in an eleven mile stretch.”

The thought made her stomach flip and a small knot formed in her throat. Having only ridden in the relatively straight roads of Florida, and not since her youth, she didn’t like the idea of feeling the heavy bike lean toward the pavement.

“Sweetheart, you don’t have to hold me so tight. We didn’t recreate it exactly. Our version only has twenty-five curves, more or less, and the switchbacks are a lot further apart. They’re spaced like the roads on Blood Mountain in Georgia, but without the incline.”

She exhaled and loosened her death grip from around his waist and comprehension dawned. “Ah, Blood...Dragon. Original.”

The ride exhilarated her, and she let the power of the sleek machine vibrate through her. She reveled in the sound of the pipes, the gleam of the chrome against the inky backdrop of the countryside. She had more freedom bound to this man, in this world, than in all the years she had lived as an “independent woman”.

They took the first curve at a slow speed and accelerated coming out of it. It wasn’t as scary as she thought it would be. She’d had trouble trusting her

brother when they'd ridden as teenagers, he'd had too much of a reckless streak.

However, she felt safe, comfortable with Damien, even after they had gone through the last curve and she heard the scrape of metal against the road when the pegs dragged. Still, she couldn't resist teasing him. "Hey, take it easy. You're not Evel Knievel, and I don't want to kiss the pavement."

He let off the throttle. "Sorry, got a little carried away."

The Blood Dragon ended and she saw the edge of the city in the distance. Some of the buildings seemed to lean ominously over the border, jealously guarding their territory and daring anyone to enter.

Damien stopped at a side street. "Here's the sector of the city Gabriel worked on. Chasity's Closet can't be too far from here. Are you hungry?"

"Starving," she admitted.

"There's a diner about two blocks from here. Want to chance it?"

"Demons, dragons or diners, I'm game."

The boxcar type restaurant sported a long, white counter and booths lined the windows. They chose a booth toward the back and ordered the standard burger and fries special.

Shannon took a sip of the cold fountain Coke. "This place is incredible. I keep expecting to wake up in your lab with a concussion and discover it's all a dream."

"It has been my dream for four years now."

"Is that how long you've been..."

"Blind? Yes, but I started losing my sight long before then due to a degenerative disease. My work in particle physics had already led me to start work on practical applications for plasma energy in other areas of engineering. The doctors informed me years ago there was no cure, and I turned my focus to biophysics. I'm hoping this successful development in the project will garner more funds for medical research and quantum specialists."

Their waitress returned to the table with their specials, and she bit into the burger with relish. “Whoever your cook is, don’t you dare fire her. This is delicious.”

“Thanks. My mom will be glad to hear it.”

Thinking of all the sexual content of the game, the casual bit of information floored her. “Your mom helped with the project?”

“She provided several of the recipes for our programmers. She and Dad are retired, and it gave her something to do.”

An attack of envy gripped her, and she wondered if he knew how fortunate he was. She’d give anything to have her mom around to help her.

“So,” Damien broke the silence. “How long have you lived in Denver?”

“I moved here after I graduated from FSU with a degree in business administration. The ink on my diploma didn’t have a chance to dry before I got on the plane.”

“You left the sun and sand for cold, snowy, Denver?”

“I needed a change of environment.”

Her clipped answer quieted him for a minute, but after he finished the last of his fries, he spoke again. “You’ve made quite an accomplishment yourself. Building a business as successful as your agency usually takes years. I know I’ve been impressed by the quality of work your employees have provided Creative Energies.”

His praise made her blush. “Believe me, I didn’t plan it as an aggressive strategy. I was forced to take temporary or short-term positions because no one was willing to hire someone fresh out of college with no work experience.” She’d literally built the company from nothing, refusing to touch any of the money she’d received from her parents’ deaths. “When I finally had more work than I could handle, I had to hire someone, or let one of the big agencies get the job. In the three years since, I’ve managed to grow the company into a major competitor in the Denver market.”

“Well, I know Creative Energies will continue to give you business. In fact, since I now know the dimension exists, I’m thinking I may ask for an exclusive contract. Of course, you and your employees would need to sign confidentiality agreements.”

She smiled. “I don’t think it will be a problem, Dr. Richards. I’ll work on it as soon as we get back.”

“Good.” He placed his napkin on his plate and signaled for the check. After he paid the bill they were back on the bike and riding toward Chasity’s Closet.

They found the two-story shop a few blocks away in a cramped space between a Mexican restaurant and printer. The exterior brick looked charred, and the corners had begun to crumble in places. The one display window held an odd assortment of vintage risqué clothing and toys.

Damien parked the bike, and they took off their helmets and entered the store. The interior shocked her. Instead of the low lighting, rusted shelving and dusty merchandise she expected, the place glittered. It reminded her of an elegant boutique. Spotless glass shelving tastefully displayed every sex product known to man, and a few looked like maybe they had been invented exclusively for this game. Another section held a variety of books, magazines and DVD’s, with yet another section dedicated to lingerie.

A tall, platinum-blond woman who looked like she materialized off the cover of the magazine displayed in the window greeted them. “How may I help you?”

She didn’t quite know how to answer. Asking for a controller straight out might not be the best approach here. She nodded to Damien. “You’re more familiar with what we need.”

He cleared his throat and glanced quickly around the shop. “Are you Chasity?”

“I am.”

“Good. We are interested in purchasing some items, one in particular, I am told can only be found here.”

Chasity smiled and nodded toward a locked cabinet behind the register. “You must be in need of a controller. We stock the entire line.”

“Yes,” Damien answered. “Plus a few other products. We’d like to browse for a bit.”

“Of course. Take all the time you need.” Her voice had a patronizing quality and sounded as if she were making fun of them.

Damien ignored the clerk’s attitude and strode to the toy section. Out of earshot, he burst out laughing. “The real Chasity is going to *kill* Gabriel.”

“I take it she’s nothing like the ice maiden back there?”

“Not in the least.” His gaze wandered over the selection of toys in front of them, and he took a miniature flogger off the wall rack. “Now, have you been naughty or nice?”

She held her hands in front of her and backed up a step. “Nice! I’ve been very nice.”

He replaced the flogger and pulled a wireless, vibrating egg from the shelf. “Too bad. There’s a dungeon in the house.”

“No, there isn’t. I’ve explored the place from top to bottom, and I haven’t seen one.”

“Because you didn’t know where to look. The players have to be cleared for the dungeon, and it only opens if you’ve got the password.”

Wanting to change the subject, she tried to grab the package he held. “What does this thing do?”

He gave her a mischievous grin and started walking toward another part of the shop. “You’ll find out later.”

Deciding she didn’t need to know what else he had on his list, she followed him out of the toy section, but veered toward the lingerie section. The skimpy



outfits struck her as gaudy and unimpressive compared to the assortment of intimate apparel the game had already supplied.

Damien joined her at a rack of corsets. "Ready to leave?"

"Anytime you are."

She followed him to the register and watched in awe as he placed the items on the counter.

Chasity gave him a frosty smile. "And, I believe you needed a controller?"

"Yes, please. Basic level two."

She unlocked the cabinet, removed what looked like a small PDA from the shelf, and placed it with the other items. Her movements were unhurried as she scanned each item, wrapped them in tissue, and placed them in the bag. "You're total comes to one hundred and seventy-three credits and one demon talon."

"Excuse me? One demon talon?"

"For the controller." She smirked. "Surely you have killed at least *one* demon if you desire the BL2 model."

"Of course we have."

"Then you should have collected the talon."

He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Okay, forget the BL2 and sell us the basic level one model."

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you'll have to purchase the BL2 model as I have removed it from the case, and as with all our exclusive products, once removed it cannot be placed back into inventory."

Shannon saw Damien's clenched jaw and the vein throbbing in his temple and knew she had to do something before his temper erupted. She stepped between Damien and the counter. "Will you hold the items for us?" she asked Chasity.

"Certainly, but it will require a deposit."

She turned her back to the woman and put her arms around Damien's neck. "Pay the nice lady the deposit, darling."

He took a deep breath, and the fury she had seen burning in his eyes a moment ago faded. He gave her an affectionate squeeze. "Of course." He stepped away from her, pulled some bills out of his wallet, handed them to Chasity, and pocketed the receipt.

She waited until they were outside and on the bike before she burst out laughing. "Oh, that was priceless!"

She heard Damien growl through the headset. "Forget Chasity, *I'm* going to kill Gabriel."

"Come on, quit sulking. As one of the game's designers, you should have known to pick up the talons. We simply need to go back to the club and get them."

"I had other things on my mind, like finding the piece of Lord Night's soul, and we can't go back and get them."

"Why not? That's how it works in every video game I've ever played. You kill a bad guy, treasure or weapons appear in the grease spot, and you can pick them up right after the kill, or go back and get them later."

"Not in our game. We went with the 'use it or lose it' philosophy. And since the lovely Chasity has required a talon for our purchase, we have no choice. We must fight another demon."

## Chapter Seven

The rumbling of the pipes echoed through the narrow, garbage-filled alleys as they wound through the darkest bowels of the city. The streets looked deserted, but she knew danger lurked around every corner, hidden in the shadows.

They emerged between two buildings onto a street filled with activity. The sudden burst of red from a neon sign flashing “vacancy” against the black backdrop shocked her out of her quiet caution. She heard the distinctive sounds of drunken laughter and fighting from several of the bars. People milled around the doorways, but very few of them dared to walk over the cracked and crumbling sidewalks. The air grew cool and damp, and she shivered. “Where are we?”

“What the natives affectionately refer to as The Cell.” He pointed to the windows of the hotel. Metal bars covered all of the window openings and squeaked idly on rusted hinges at the hotel’s rotting doors. The surrounding buildings showed the same lack of care, the same metal bars, the same ominous feeling. Years of grime covered what was left of the cracked and broken glass panes. Cardboard peeked between some of the bars, a small amount of protection against the cold breeze blowing constantly through the buildings.

The hiss of a match and the orange glow of a cigarette caught her attention. A group of young men stood on the corner, one of them leaned against the wall

of the hotel. The others stood around him, their stances blatantly aggressive with a violent curiosity that made her shudder.

Damien rolled to a stop beside them, but kept the clutch held in, ready to take off if the need arose. She tightened her left arm around his waist and casually laid her right hand on her thigh, resting it next to the gun.

The leader pushed away from the wall and took a long assessment of them. He flicked the cigarette to the sidewalk, pulled his jacket collar out snapping the stiff leather, and sauntered to them. "Nice night for a ride, but you and your lady friend ought to be careful." The thick Brooklyn accent fit his image perfectly. "It ain't safe traveling through The Cell alone."

His companions laughed, but he ignored them. "Some of the citizens here, they're not as friendly as me and my associates."

It happened so fast, she almost missed it. His hand moved like lightning, and before she could blink, he'd pressed the blade he held against Damien's throat. "It'd be a real shame if something bad happened to you and your pretty lady."

Her hand twitched, but she forced herself to stay in control and not reach for her gun. She'd never get it out of the holster anyway before the punk's blade sliced into Damien's throat. And despite Damien's earlier assertions about injuries from game play, she didn't think the dimension could heal a cut through his carotid artery before he bled to death.

His composure amazed her. He hadn't even flinched when the knife landed against his throat. She felt him take a shallow breath and exhale it slowly. He spoke, almost a whisper, and the deathly calm of his voice sounded more intimidating than the brash threats made by the punk. "Don't be stupid, boy. I only let you get this close to save face with your friends. You don't want to take me on."

What the hell was Damien doing? In the rearview mirror, she saw the kid's hand tremble. She noted the tensing of his jaw, the slight blush of embarrassment. His temper was ready to blow, and one slip of the knife...

The kid's voice took on a whiny timber. "What you want down here in The Cell?"

"I need information." Damien waited a heartbeat, long enough to make the kid think. "Don't make me beat it out of you when I'm willing to pay for it."

"I could just stick you now; take the money, the bike and the pretty lady."

Damien snorted. "You could try. The pretty lady killed a demon last night for laughs. You'd be nothing more than target practice to her."

She gave the kid what she hoped was a menacing smile and patted the gun.

He eyed her warily. "You the ones who snuffed those two demons at Club Orchid last night?"

"Right on the first guess," Damien answered.

"You're Lord Night. Wicked." He backed the knife away from Damien's throat and sheathed the blade. "Name's Rafe. Me and my associates been slicing and dicing, but the things keep coming. Like an infestation of cockroaches. Ruining our business." He grinned, like a brilliant idea had come to him. "How 'bout a collaboration? Yeah, you scratch our backs and we'll scratch yours."

Damien leveled his gaze on the kid. "How about you tell me where the demons are calling home, and I'll let you and your *associates* live—tonight."

The kid swallowed hard. "Uh, sure. Works for me. We've noticed them comin' in and out an abandoned hotel. The old Paradise over by the river."

Damien put the bike in neutral. "Which river?"

Rafe nodded toward tall, dormant smokestacks. The whole section of the city looked dead. "The River Styx, man."

The bike leaned as Damien let off the hand brake and held it steady with his legs. He shifted in the seat, took a wad of bills from his pocket, peeled off a

few and handed them to Rafe. "Take some advice and find another line of business, kid. You'll live longer."

Rafe's eyes widened at the amount of credits Damien had handed over. "Sure thing. Listen, you need us, for anything. Ask anybody in The Cell for Rafe. They'll know where to find me."

Damien nodded in acknowledgement, but didn't say anything. He simply put the bike in gear and rolled away from the curb.

Neither one of them spoke until they reached the edge of The Cell. Damien visibly relaxed, loosening his grip, and she felt the tension flow from him when they crossed into friendlier territory.

The levity in his voice sounded forced. "Close call. I wasn't sure he'd back down. We're not supposed to have the information on the demon nest until a much higher level in the game."

"You handled it well."

"I was bluffing. Rafe should have flashed the knife instead of trying to kill me with it. Apparently, some of the safety protocols aren't in place yet. The gang is supposed to rob the player, causing the player to complete more difficult tasks to get more credits."

Her throat constricted and a sick feeling settled in the pit of her stomach when she thought of what almost happened. "Bluffing? You might've gotten killed. The blade was at your artery. Why in the hell did you take the risk?"

"Because my chest hurts, and I knew I couldn't ride much longer." He stopped the bike at an intersection. "I had to find out where the demons nest. The location changes every game. Without working safety protocols, nothing is as important now as purchasing the controller. Nothing."

They rode cautiously through the streets in silence, until he pulled onto a pathway. He followed the narrow, paved strip to a deserted park at the edge of the river and shut off the bike. No streetlight reached into the wooded expanse,

and in the still of the night it looked like a private oasis in the middle of the concrete jungle.

“Why are we stopping?”

“I need to stretch my legs.” He lowered the kickstand, removed his helmet, and dismounted.

She removed her own helmet, and Damien helped her off the bike. Pavement gave way to soft grass as they walked. The sounds of the city faded into the melodic song of night birds calling to the wind. The scent of wildflowers perfumed the air and bright stars winked at them through the curtain of trees.

Mesmerized by the sheer beauty of life pulsing through this world, she stopped and closed her eyes, letting it engulf her senses. It hummed through her blood until it became a natural part of her.

Refreshed, she opened her eyes to find Damien staring at her. His fingers traced a path over her cheek and across her lower lip. “You are so beautiful. Do you know how many times I listened to your voice and imagined lush, red lips wrapped around my cock?”

The helmet slipped out of her fingers and hit the ground.

He framed her face in his hands and brushed his lips across hers in a soft kiss. Sliding his hands over her shoulders, he unzipped her jacket and slipped his fingers into her vest. The sound of the fastenings unsnapping barely registered until the cool air caressed her bare skin when the material parted and exposed her to his gaze. “Seeing you like this, wearing my amethyst. Knowing you put your trust in me when you had no reason, it’s more than I ever imagined. You’re more than I imagined.”

A deep, strangled sigh escaped him. “I thought losing my sight was the worst thing in my life. But knowing when we leave here I’ll never be able to see you again, that’s my own personal hell.”

Hearing Damien confess her thoughts into words stunned her. Emotion choked her, and she didn’t know what to say. How to respond. Intensity

burned in his dark eyes, making her skin tingle, and a shiver tightened her nipples to , little buds. “We don’t—”

He kissed her hard, refusing to let her finish. He knew, she realized, what she had been about to say. She’d almost told him they didn’t have to leave tomorrow. But the desperate passion in his kiss told her they couldn’t stay. Their run-in with the gang had proved how dangerous it was to remain. And not only to her physical well-being—her heart was in danger as well.

She’d always liked Damien, fantasized about him, but the man himself drove her beyond mere desire. She couldn’t let him suffer, not when she needed the sex to ease her own longings as much as he needed it to ease the pain in his chest. She craved him; the feel of him, the scent of him, the taste of him. It overwhelmed her senses like a fine, spiced wine, and she couldn’t get enough.

Breathless and greedy for more, she tore off the jacket and vest and went to her knees in front of him.



Some moonlight managed to filter through the trees, and bathed Shannon in its shimmering rays. He stood mesmerized, watching her undo his jeans. Hunger shone in her eyes as she slipped the material over his hips and let it drop to pool around his ankles.

She tugged his underwear over his erection and licked her lips. The simple gesture sent hot currents coursing through his veins. More blood pumped into his aching erection and almost had him coming like a schoolboy.

Shannon drew close and he felt her tongue take one long swipe from the base of his cock to the sensitive tip, swirl lazily around the crown, and slide back down. He hissed through his teeth and clenched his fists at his side in an effort to keep from thrusting completely into her warm, wet mouth.



He focused on her breasts while she continued to tease him with her tongue. Firm and round, they gleamed pale in the moonlight. He caught a glimpse of the amethyst and his mind roared. *Mine.*

The power of knowing she belonged to him was a heady sensation, and he reveled in it. Something dominant and primitive rose inside him, an unrelenting impulse to mark her with more than the amethyst.

He felt her nip and suck his balls. The feel of her lips pressed tight against his sac drove him wild. She buried her face against the hot skin, took his cock in both hands, and rubbed it over her face. This was the satisfaction he craved, his scent on her. An amethyst could be removed, but her willingly spreading his scent on her skin provided a bond older than any ritual.

Her fingers slid to the base of his cock, and she licked the moisture from the tip before easing her mouth over the engorged head and enveloping him in her heat.

Tangling his fingers in her hair, he urged her to take him deeper. Liquid fire encased him, ignited him. The head of his cock brushed the back of her throat, but he couldn't control the demands of his body, the driving need to fill her completely.

She sucked and swallowed, swirling her tongue around his shaft, and took all he had to offer. Her hands crept up the backs of his thighs and clutched his ass, and he felt the satisfying sting of her fingernails digging into his cheeks.

Unable to resist the sweet invitation, he pounded into her mouth, losing himself in the sensation of her lips pressed tight around him. He exploded in a rush of wet heat.

The heaviness in his chest eased, and he took his first easy breath in hours, inhaling deeply of the fresh night air until his lungs filled to bursting. Spent, he joined her on the soft grass and cradled her in his arms. "You're incredible. Thank you."

She gave him a hug. "How's the chest?"

His heart hurt, but it had nothing to do with the game. Now he understood the emptiness inside Lord Night. “Better.”

A gentle breeze blew through the park and cooled his feverish skin, but did nothing to soothe the fervent emotions threatening to erupt. His heart had claimed Shannon as surely as his body had, and it didn’t hesitate to lead him into more danger than he faced from any of the renegade game characters. Rafe had held a knife to his throat, but Shannon unknowingly held his love.

And he would never tell her.

He had resigned himself to the fact that his blindness was permanent, and had managed to survive the loss by spending most of his life in an underground laboratory creating other people’s visions. Shannon deserved a healthy, whole man. He wouldn’t insult her by offering anything less.

The nipple chain was the only thing binding Shannon to him. A cruel illusion drawn by the game. No matter how many programmers he employed, or how many dimensions he created, he couldn’t change his reality. Reluctantly, he released her and managed to pull his pants back into place. Hands shaky, he reached out and tried to remove the delicate chain from her nipples.

She swatted his hands away. “What are you doing?”

“There’s no reason to wear the amethyst. With the safety programming out of whack, it doesn’t provide the protection it’s supposed to.”

The most alluring blush colored her cheeks, and her voice softened to a shy whisper. “Leave it.”

“Are you sure? It still marks you as mine.” Inwardly, he kicked himself for asking. To his ears, it sounded more like a needy teenager asking her to wear his class ring and go steady.

Shannon shrugged. “I’ve gotten used to it being there.” She retrieved her vest off the ground and donned it without giving him a chance to say anything else.

For some reason, her answer thrilled him, and his chest swelled with pride because she wanted to remain his. *Through the rest of the game*, his inner voice reasoned. But, he didn't listen. Instead, with what he knew was a silly grin, he picked up her jacket and helmet and handed them to her. He was ready to take on this world and win. "Are you ready to kick some demon ass?"

She fastened her helmet and they walked back to the motorcycle. "I have one question before we go. Who, in your mad scientist lab, decided it would be good idea to put a hotel named 'Paradise' on the River Styx? That's just wrong."

Damien laughed and mounted the bike. "Wait until you see what's in the river."

Smiling, she put a steadying hand on his shoulder and climbed on the bike. "I'm afraid to ask."

## Chapter Eight

Damien slowed the motorcycle when they approached the waterfront. Fog shrouded the riverbank, and she heard the rushing sound of turbulent waters over the rumble of the motorcycle's exhaust. The streets looked empty, and the buildings abandoned, but she felt hundreds of beady, little demon eyes following them. "Sheez, didn't you guys create anything *fun*?"

"Sure. There's a movie theater, an opera house, a museum and putt-putt."

She rolled her eyes. The excitement of putt-putt was a sure way to make the next *Geeks Gone Wild* video. "What about something really fun, like an amusement park?"

"Trust me, you don't want to go to the amusement park."

The ominous warning, coupled with her first view of the hotel, made her shudder. Its sign had faded to a dull, rusty red, and most of the bulbs decorating the marquee had busted or burned out. A few still flickered weakly, struggling to illuminate the building's lost grandeur. Ragged curtains flapped out of broken windows, and a low, keening wail emanated from the darkened lobby. "I don't want to go inside the Paradise either."

He stopped the bike opposite the entrance. "Don't worry, we won't. The player is only required to enter the demons' nest toward the end of game. It's the only available route to the river and the final level of the game. For the next player, the nest will be in a completely different location, a warehouse, a department store or even a deli." He pointed to an island in the middle of the river. "But the pyramid will always be the last obstacle."

How had she not seen the towering structure when they arrived? The massive stone pyramid rose at least fifty stories out of the mist. “Is that a diamond balanced on the tip?” she asked. The light from the jewel radiated in every direction, but its rays only cut through the obsidian night like a cold beam without illuminating the surrounding darkness.

“No. It’s the last piece of Lord Night’s soul. After the player has found all the other pieces, he must find the magic coin for the ferryman to travel across the river to the pyramid. Once inside the pyramid, he has to navigate through traps, solve puzzles and defeat the strongest of the demons to retrieve the final crystal. When he’s won, the darkness ends and the world of Lord Night turns into a luxury resort on a tropical island, complete with those cute little umbrella drinks.”

Staring at the crystal, she saw everything he described in its depths. The vision was so strong, she actually felt the warmth of the sun on her face and smelled the salty spray of the ocean. She lounged content in an Adirondack chair and watched the clear, blue water lapping at the sandy beach. A gentle wind blew through the palm trees. Seashells littered the shore, their opalescent colors winking under the sun, beckoning her toward the surf. She stretched her legs and tried to push out of the chair, but an unseen heaviness held her in place.

“Don’t stare at the crystal!” Damien’s voice thundered in her helmet and jolted her out of her reverie. “It’s a trap to lure you inside the hotel.”

He had leaned back against her, folding his arms over her thighs, trapping her between his body and the seat.

Blinking several times, she slowly came out of the hypnotic state. “It seemed so real.”

“It’s supposed to, but if I hadn’t stopped you, you would have walked right in the front door, happy as a clam, straight into the demons’ welcoming arms.

Of course, the nesting demons aren't as formidable as the ones we fought last night, but they're still dangerous."

"My idea of fun in the sun—not. How do we lure one of them out here instead? I'm pretty sure we left the demon bait at home."

"They'll smell my scent on you and won't be able to resist coming after you. Draw your weapons and stay alert."

The temperature around them increased, and she heard the sizzle of moisture as the sweltering heat boiled the humidity from the air. Sweat dampened her skin, but quickly evaporated carrying small wisps of Damien's scent in every direction.

It didn't take long to attract the demons' attention. The creatures crept out of the doorway, crouched on all fours, moving like spiders in the shadows. The one who led them out of the hotel stopped at the edge of the canopy, raised its rounded head, and licked at the air with its long, pointed tongue. The young ones scurried into the shrubs for cover.

Damien bent low over the gas tank of the motorcycle and used the handlebars to steady his weapon. She copied the position, leaning over him to steady the gun at his shoulder, careful of her balance as he still held the bike upright between his thighs. His refusal to put the kickstand down told her he expected to make a fast getaway.

The demon caught one of the wisps with his tongue, and its eyes blazed with predatory excitement. It stood, stretching to its full height, and its reddish-brown skin rippled from the expanding muscles enveloping its skeletal form. With no more warning than the sound of evil laughter, it bolted into the air, wings sprouting, and flew straight for them.

Survival instinct kicked in, and she shot wildly at the beast, nicking him once on the shoulder.

It stopped in mid-flight and roared in fury. The air surrounding it caught fire and burned with ethereal blue flames which coalesced and cocooned the demon, protecting it from their weapons.

“Hold your fire until it gets closer.” Damien’s voice calmed her. “We can’t penetrate his shielding at this distance.”

She took a deep, steadying breath of the hot, dry air and forced her fingers to loosen on the trigger. *This is just another video game. Stay cool. Lead the target.*

Sudden quiet engulfed them. Through the speaker in her helmet, she heard the beating of Damien’s heart echo against the gas tank. Behind her, water dripped from an old pipe onto the street. In front of her, the demon hovered like a ghost, watching them, waiting for the moment when they tired of holding their guns. Content to let the quiet attack unnerve them. Make them vulnerable.

*To hell with it.* She squeezed the trigger and let rounds fly into the bushes where the demon’s friends had hidden. Damien followed her lead, and together they forced the demon to fight to protect the fledglings.

It used its massive body and shielding to deflect the shots, but enough made it through to weaken the fiery web around it. Without its protection, it flew straight for them, claws outstretched, in an attempt to knock them off the bike.

They both fired into the demon’s neck as it passed close enough to swipe at Damien’s helmet. It fell to the ground, sending a shudder through the street, and disintegrated into a fine, grey dust. One sharp talon survived.

Damien provided cover fire into the bushes. “Grab it and let’s get out of here.”

She crawled off the bike, keeping low, and grabbed the talon. Once she had it firmly in her jacket pocket, she jumped onto the bike. “I’m on. Go!”

Shannon didn't holster her weapons until they reached Chasity's Closet. She entered the shop and slammed the talon onto the counter in front of the proprietress.

Chasity picked up the blue talon and inspected it. "I see you met Chaos, and defeated him. Impressive." She placed the payment in the drawer containing the credits Damien had given her earlier, took their bag from a shelf and handed it to Damien. "Enjoy your purchases."

"Do you have a dressing room?" Damien asked.

"Of course. In the lingerie section."

Damien grabbed Shannon's hand and led her through the store. When they reached the oversized, circular dressing room, he locked the door behind them. "Lower your pants and sit on the bench."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "No. I am not going to have sex in a dressing room, and especially not with Chasity on the other side of this very thin wall. She probably even has hidden cameras in here."

He took the egg and batteries from its package. "We're not having sex. For now, the appetizer will do."

Skeptical, she eyed the toy warily as he put the batteries in, but her curiosity won out. She unzipped her pants, slid them down her legs, and sat on the edge of the bench.

Damien went down on his knees in front of her and opened her legs. "Spread for me, sweetheart."

The mirrors in the dressing room showed them at every possible angle, and watching his mouth close over her clit was a heady experience. It intoxicated her and chased away any inhibitions she'd had earlier.

He suckled the hard bud until she bunched the cushion tight in her fist, and she had to bite her bottom lip to keep from making any noise and giving their position away.



The smaller rounded tip of the vibrator rubbed over her wet fold, and she felt Damien apply enough pressure to push it into her pussy. The egg shape seemed to fit perfectly.

“Don’t move.” He showed her the control and smiled as he pushed the button.

A sound of surprise escaped her when the toy vibrated inside her. The gentle pulses rippled through her. *Oh yeah, she was definitely going to have to buy one of these when she got home.*

“Feel good?”

“Hmmm, mmmm.”

He turned it off.

“Hey, no fair.”

“No, but I love watching you squirm, and I don’t want you getting off—yet.”

Even though the ride home wasn’t as spine-tingling as the curves of the Blood Dragon, it was still as thrilling. She found herself holding her breath, waiting for Damien to push the button. The short, pulsing bursts, coupled with the normal vibrations of the motorcycle had her so sensitive that by the time they reached Brockhurst Manor she was ready to explode.

Damien parked the bike at the front door, and she didn’t waste any time getting inside. She dropped her helmet in the foyer and didn’t care when she heard it crack against the black and white marble floor. Sparing one quick glance in the large mirror, she ran her fingers through her hair. Impatient, she followed Damien into the spacious living room, leaving a trail of leather clothing behind her.

Panting with need, she stopped short when the exquisite vibrations started again.

“Don’t move.” Damien stood a few feet in front of her. The controller and his bag of goodies were on the coffee table behind him. His voice held a hard edge,

reminding her of a master who would not tolerate disobedience. Remembering the dungeon, she decided not to disobey and stood still.

It drove her crazy to watch him undress and not be able to touch him. He seemed to sense her agitation, because he took his blessed time to shed his clothes. Finally undressed, he walked to where she stood and circled her like a predator, running his hands lightly over her body.

Moisture coated her thighs, and her breasts weighed heavy with need. His fingers traced over one nipple and across the chain to the other, teasing them to painful hardness before trailing down her stomach and tangling in her damp curls. Moaning in frustration, she thrust her hips forward, trying to direct his fingers over her neglected clit.

The vibrations stopped. "You moved."

"I need more."

"More of this?" He pushed the button and quickly engaged the toy.

"Or this?" His fingers probed her swollen mound.

She removed the vibrator and let it fall to the floor. "I need you to love me. Only you." She spoke the answer without realizing what she'd said until she saw the look of shock cross Damien's features. By then, it was too late to take back the words. But, after being hurled into another dimension and forced to fight demons, she could face anything. No longer afraid to confront her feelings, she stood tall and waited for the rejection she knew was coming.

## Chapter Nine

Damien's mouth went dry. Shannon looked like a warrior goddess standing nude before him, lust and love blazing in her eyes, daring him to refuse her.

Logically, he told himself the attraction was linked with the premise of survival instinct in this reality, but his heart refused to acknowledge what his mind knew. And his body...his body was hard and throbbing, eager to take her.

Feeling his strength starting to weaken, he knew the edge of dawn loomed on the horizon. A sense of urgency drove him, and he led Shannon toward the thick arm of the oversized leather sofa in the middle of the room. Powerless to control his need, he bent her facedown over the side of the couch and spread her legs.

Seeing her ready to accept him with her ass up and fully exposing her wet pussy unleashed something wild inside him. He held her hips steady and slid his cock inside her, letting her liquid heat engulf him as he buried himself to the hilt. Her muscles tightened invitingly around him, drawing him deeper.

Building a rhythm of slow, deep thrusts, he savored the sweet feel of her, knowing they had precious little time left.

The ability to sense her body's nuances in such a short period of time after becoming lovers amazed him. It wasn't a give and take, experiment and gauge the results, they shared the experience equally as if they felt what the other felt. Something inside them touched, intimately, and they joined more than physically. And God help him, it made him long for things he couldn't ever have in the real world.

Shannon moaned, and it was all the encouragement he needed. He quickened the pace, pumping hard and fast. The sounds of flesh slapping against flesh and breathless panting quickly filled the room.

He wrapped his left arm around her thighs and gently stroked her clit until her body tensed. He increased the pressure and rode over the edge with her.

Soft light from the dawn chased away the last vestiges of darkness and drained him of his eyesight and what little strength he had after the explosive orgasm. Fighting the pull of sleep, he felt his way to the front of the couch and sat. "I don't have much time before the game forces me into deep sleep, and we need one of the tracking devices. Ring for Malcolm."

Shannon walked to the intercom panel next to the door and directed Malcolm to meet them in the parlor, and to bring her a robe. By the time she returned to the sofa, the butler had arrived with two black cashmere robes. He discreetly draped them over a chair and turned his back while they covered themselves.

"Malcolm." Shannon summoned the butler back into the room. "Before we got here, did you see any strange devices around the house?"

"Yes. Several, in fact. I placed them in Lord Damien's study."

"Would you bring them to us?"

The butler nodded. "Certainly." His brisk steps echoed over the marble floor of the foyer, and in a few minutes he returned with three of the tracking devices.

Barely awake, Damien spoke in a hoarse whisper. "Thank you, Malcolm. You can put them on the coffee table. That will be all."

"Now what?" Shannon asked when Malcolm left.

He pointed to one of the devices. "The one on the left has a digital recorder. Point the lens toward me and turn it on."

She did as he asked, and stepped out of the camera shot.

“My name is Dr. Damien Richards, and I am recording this message from Brockhurst Manor.” He leaned forward and leaned his elbows on his knees for support. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have succeeded in creating an alternate dimension—almost.”

Shannon zoned out when Damien’s voice took on the dry, scientific speech of his profession. He described the world of Lord Night analytically, what worked within the programming, and some of the problems they had encountered.

When she heard him mention her name, she perked up.

“Most of you know Shannon Miller. I agreed to sign several more contracts with her employment agency before we were pulled into the vortex, and I give you full authority to execute those contracts upon her return. I don’t think I need to tell you how important the extra manpower is with our most recent discovery. Chasity, please recalibrate the controls for a one-player game and disable the sex-driven parameters.”

He wouldn’t, couldn’t send her back alone. But he confirmed her suspicions with the next sentence.

“I’m staying here to further evaluate the programming. Of particular concern are the safety parameters regarding interaction between the player and game characters.”

He continued, outlining a plan of reports and communications, his voice growing weaker with every word. The second he told his team goodbye, she switched off the camera and tried to hide the hurt. “I’ll send Malcolm to help you upstairs.”

“Shannon, please understand.” He struggled to get the words out. “Too dangerous for you here.” A pained look crossed his face. “My sight. Can’t lose it again.”

Thank goodness sleep finally overtook him before the tears escaped silently down her cheeks. She understood, perfectly. He wanted to experience his

make-believe world without any responsibility for her, like Robert had. When the hell would she learn?

She wiped away the useless tears, picked up the controller, and headed upstairs for a quick shower before going to bed herself. For some reason, she didn't feel comfortable leaving it downstairs unguarded.



Feeling a little better after a long, hot shower, she entered the dressing room, removed the nipple chain, and donned the jeans and T-shirt she had discarded last night.

As tired as she was, she couldn't bring herself to even look at the bed she had shared with Damien, much less get any sleep in it. Like the rest of this dimension, the bed and what happened in it were a fantasy, and the fantasy had ended. She grabbed the controller off the table and placed it and the chain on Damien's pillow. The pain in her chest had nothing to do with the game, She walked out of the room and shut the door and the fantasy behind her.

Before she realized where she'd gone, she found herself back in the parlor, curled up in a chair, watching Damien sleep.

A strong breeze startled her and drew her attention to the foyer. Surely, Malcolm hadn't left the front door open. She walked to the door of the parlor and stopped dead in her tracks, completely stunned. The vortex swirled in front of her, wreaking havoc with the flowers, vases and other knick-knacks in the foyer.

Starched and scowling, with a look of stern disapproval etched on his face, the butler appeared next to her, yelling over the sound of destruction. "Miss, what have you done?"

"I didn't do this. I left the controller in the bedroom." Which could only mean one thing...someone at Creative Energies had powered the vortex.

The real world waited behind the swirling curtain of energy, one step away, and it was time she faced her demons there.

A world without Damien.

She backed slowly into the parlor, never taking her eyes off the vortex until she reached Damien. She bent down and touched her lips to his, secretly hoping the kiss would wake him like some magical fairytale, but he remained in a deep sleep. “Goodbye,” she whispered. She grabbed the tracking device with its recorded message and took off in a full run toward the vortex.

## Chapter Ten

A dozen hands tried to help her up from the bottom of the chamber.

“Miss Miller, are you okay?”

“Were you actually in the alternate dimension?”

“Where’s Dr. Richards?”

Question after question bombarded her until she wanted to scream at all of them to shut up and leave her alone.

She finally quit struggling with their “assistance” and called out the name of the one person she could remember. “Chasity?”

A petite brunette, the polar opposite of the woman Shannon had met in the game, elbowed her way through the crowd. “Okay, everybody back. Give Miss Miller some room to breathe.” She glared at a young man standing next to her. “You’re smothering her.”

The crowd backed off and grateful, Shannon held out the tracking device to Chasity. The woman took it in one arm and helped Shannon to her feet.

“Thanks.” She gave Chasity a weak smile.

Chasity led her to a chair. “You all right? Want some water or something?”

“Water would be great.”

The ice cold water relieved her parched throat, and she sipped it slowly while everyone gathered around the tracking device to watch the video.

It seemed most of the destruction in the lab had been cleaned and/or repaired. No calendars marked the desks or walls, and she wondered what day



it was, but everyone's attention was focused on the recording and she didn't want to disturb them.

"Wow, you were only there for what, a little over two days?" one of them asked.

"Yes. How long did you think we'd been gone?"

"A little longer," Chasity answered. "It's Tuesday afternoon."

"Tuesday? Oh my God, I've been gone four days! My business! What have you told my assistant, Angie?"

Chasity took the glass from Shannon's trembling hands and set it on a nearby desk. "We showed Angie the security footage, and she agreed not to call the police until we repaired the equipment and tried to pull you out. We've worked around the clock and finished this afternoon. As soon as you appeared in the chamber, we called her. She's on her way."

Shannon stood on shaky legs. "Look, I know you must have a thousand questions, but all I want is to go home and sleep. Do you mind if I wait for Angie topside? This is all rather overwhelming."

Chasity gave her a look of understanding. "Of course. Your briefcase was pretty much scattered, but we think we found everything, including a battered letter, but it looks like the photographs are still intact. It's at the guard station."

"Thank you. I'll see myself out. You go ahead and watch the tape. I'll be fine."

By the time she made it to the tiny elevator and took the slow ride up to the surface, Angie had arrived and was pacing in front of the guard station. "What the hell happened to you? Did you actually get sucked into another dimension?"

She let Angie usher her through the gate and into the waiting car. "Yes, and I don't want to talk about it. Please, just take me home."



Damien awoke alone, the exposed areas of skin sticking to the leather sofa. He hadn't expected Shannon to be snuggled next to him, but disappointment shadowed his good mood. Maybe he'd get to surprise her awake with another one of the toys he'd purchased last night.

He bounded up the stairs, feeling on top of the world. His work had paid off, far more than his expectations, and he could come and go in this dimension as he pleased. Shannon might love him, the possibility existed, despite his being blind.

He'd definitely have to program some date spots in this dimension to bring her for special occasions—like wanting to see her smile.

With his thoughts leading him, he snuck into the bedroom, not wanting to wake her...yet.

The bed curtains had already opened, and the covers hadn't been disturbed. He saw the controller on top of the pillow, and when he reached the bed, he found her discarded nipple chain.

"Malcolm!" He roared.

The thin man appeared almost instantly from the hallway. "Yes, m'lord?"

"Where is she?"

"If you are referring to the charming young lady who has shared your company of late, she left."

"Left where?"

"Through the portal. It appeared in the foyer this morning, bringing destruction in its wake, and she stepped through."

Shannon couldn't have produced the vortex in the foyer with the controller in the bedroom, which meant his team had activated it from the lab.

She'd left without saying goodbye.

The pain in his chest had him gasping for air and had nothing to do with the game parameters.

Concern edged Malcolm's voice. "Sir?"

"I'm well, Malcolm." He patted the butler on the shoulder. "Let's see what the night has in store for me, shall we?"

Damien started for the shower as Malcolm marched to the dressing room. He barely heard Malcolm's muffled voice over the roar of the water.

"Which automobile do you desire this evening?"

"The Ferrari," he answered a little too quickly, as if he could outrace Shannon's memory.

"Very good, sir. I'll have it brought straight 'round."



The city went by in a blur as he drove the sleek little sports car toward his destination. Without Shannon there to experience the discovery of this dimension with him, the scenery seemed to lose its vitality, the game lost its thrill. The old doubts he'd had—about his ability to work, to live a normal life—when he'd first lost his eyesight, resurfaced with a vengeance.

He slammed his fist on the steering wheel and hit the brakes. *Damn it! I am more than the sum of my defective parts.* The car spun in the road and nicked a newsstand with the fender before coming to a stop, but he didn't care. A few keystrokes and the car would be good as new. Laughing at what a sorry-assed fool he'd been, he put the car in gear and headed back to Brockhurst Manor.

He didn't deserve Shannon. She'd fallen in love with him, defects and all, and he hadn't seen it, even with two good eyes.

## Chapter Eleven

Exhaustion tugged at her shirttails as Shannon opened Robert's letter. It was time, she decided, to finally listen to what her brother had to say with a clear head, and not through the eyes of a disillusioned teenager.

The pictures caught her attention first. Those cute kids bubbled with life, with love, and they needed an aunt to spoil them and tell them funny stories about their daddy.

Robert's letter was the same as always, detailing their lives with little anecdotes, and how much their daughter, Olivia, looked like Shannon. But this time, in her mind, she heard him saying the words, and the regret in his voice mirrored her own.

She couldn't finish reading the letter for the tears in her eyes. They had wasted too much time. No, she had wasted it, and she planned to make up for it, every lost second. Once she settled things with Robert, she'd come back and confront Damien. Nothing else in her life was going to be wasted.

She let the mundane guide her for tonight. The routine of making flight reservations and e-mailing instructions to her assistant calmed her fractured nerves. The business would run smoothly without her for a week, or three, while she visited her brother and his family.

She stared out the bedroom window at the last of the spring snows as she got ready for bed and prayed the runways would be clear tomorrow afternoon when her flight left.

When she finally crawled into her bed, she cocooned herself in the warmth of her down comforter. In the solace of the night, she didn't have to face the reality of being home. She could imagine for one more night Damien's arms held her close in sleep.



Several feet of snow didn't faze the many business travelers bustling in and out of the Denver airport, and it added a shimmering layer of excitement for the skiers disembarking. But very little of the whirlwind touched Shannon as she checked her one bag and waited in a coffee shop.

She trusted Angela to handle the day-to-day stuff, but the young assistant had panicked that morning, causing Shannon to consider rescheduling her flight. Creative Energies had called several times regarding the new contracts, and one of the assistants, Gabriel, wanted to talk to her personally to gather data. Shannon refused the request to speak to him until she returned.

When her cell phone rang again, she groaned as the caller ID showed her office number. She considered not answering, but caved on the third ring.

"Hello."

Angela sounded relieved. "It's me. Listen, the guy from Creative Energies called back and asked me to try one more time. I told him I'd give it a shot, but not to hold his breath."

"I hope you told him *nicely* that I intended to be out of town for a few weeks, and would speak to him when I returned," Shannon answered.

"She did."

Shannon dropped her cell phone on the table at the sound of Damien's voice behind her. He picked up her phone and ended the call with a thank you to Angela.

“The only way I could find you in this crowd was to hear your voice, so I asked Angela to call.”

She noticed them then, the white-tipped cane and dark-tinted glasses, as he moved around her and sat at the small table. With tears in her eyes, she covered the hand gripping the cane with hers.

“Thank God, I made it in time. I was afraid I’d miss you because of the time differential between the dimensions.”

“But why? You told me you...your sight...” She couldn’t finish.

Damien smiled. “I still see you.” He took her hand and placed it over his heart. “Here. I love you.”

Emotion choked her, and she couldn’t find her voice, but it didn’t matter. Damien continued. “I had been scared of loving you, and more frightened you’d reject me because I’m blind.” His voice smoldered with passion. “Please, don’t turn away from me now.”

The words, barely spoken, echoed in her heart.

Everything around her faded from view. “You’ve blinded me. I can’t see anyone but you, and I’m never letting you out of my sight again. I hope you’re up for a trip to Charleston. I’m going for a long visit with my brother and his family.”

“Charleston sounds perfect this time of year. I love the ocean, and I can’t wait to meet your brother.”

She cleared her throat. “Um, there are definitely a few things I need to tell you while we’re on the plane. I’ve refused to see or speak to my brother for over seven years. It may be a bit awkward.”

He squeezed her hand. “I’m sure your brother and his family will love you as much as I do. And if they don’t, we’ll send them to another dimension.”

She burst out laughing, trying to imagine her proper military brother up against a horde of demons. “Speaking of dimensions, what about your research? The rest of the evaluation?”

“I’ve given most of the team a three-week vacation. They’ve earned it. Besides, there won’t be an opportunity for anyone to take any time off once we take the data to our investors. They’ll demand we go public as soon as possible.” A sly grin crossed his face. “And, I’ve sent Gabriel and Chasity in to finish the evaluation.”

“Oh, you are bad. Those two will end up fighting each other more than the demons.”

“Or, they could fall in love.”

“They could. I think I fell in love with you the first time I saw you silhouetted in the candlelight, looking all dark and mysterious.”

“You saw the fantasy.”

Oblivious to onlookers, she leaned across the table and kissed him deeply. “No, I saw you, and you’ll always be my Lord Night.”

# Jessie Verino

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