



WELCOME

TO *Fabulous*

**DUNVEGAS**

**2007**

From the  
Authors of

# *Beyond The Veil*

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## Dunvegas 2007

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Cover art by Bianca D'Arc

**WARNING: The following material contains graphic sexual content and explicit language and is meant for ages 18 and over only.**

# Introduction

Welcome to Dunvegas 2007, the brainchild of the paranormal authors of the [Beyond the Veil](#) blog. Offered as a free Samhain gift to our readers, we hope this anthology will be the first of many return visits to Dunvegas, an out-of-the-ordinary Las Vegas casino/resort modeled after an ancient Scottish castle.

Dunvegas is unlike any other casino on The Strip. It caters to a decidedly preternatural crowd and plays host to the annual ParaPleasures Expo, the largest trade show on Earth dedicated solely to the pampering and pleasuring of vampires, weres, dragons, Fae, mages, and everything in between.

So pack light (Dunvegas has everything you could ever need) and confirm your reservation. The concierge desk is just beyond the fangs and hellhounds that guard the portcullis. Just keep your arms and legs inside as you cross the moat—the mermaids and the Kracken aren't just for show. They're real.

And it's feeding time.

Enjoy your stay!



# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Table of Contents .....	4
Things Are Popping Up In Dunvegas, Part 1 by S.J. Willing .....	5
Touch Not The Ungloved Cat by Carolan Ivey .....	11
Never Too Late by Xakara.....	24
Things Are Popping Up In Dunvegas, Part 2 by S.J. Willing .....	35
I Dream of Desi by Jenna Leigh.....	47
NightMare in Dunvegas by Sela Carsen .....	77
Vegas Magic by Ember Case.....	87
The Big Bad Wolf by Bianca D’Arc .....	99
Dunvegas: Alien Attack! by Jody Wallace.....	112
Things Are Popping Up In Dunvegas, Part 3 by S.J. Willing .....	137
About the Authors.....	148

## Things Are Popping Up In Dunvegas, Part 1

By S.J. Willing

Sweat sloughed off my forehead like water from Aunt Mabel's cherub fountain, except the fountain left nothing to the imagination. Once again I cursed George, my boss, as I pulled the two double-oversized suitcases the last few yards down The Strip.

Not that I'd been able to get a good look at the glitzy hotels and casinos and their often half-dressed patronage as I'd walked. I'd spent the last two hundred yards teetering on the verge of heat exhaustion. Everyone else who was baking in the Nevada summer along with me wore cool t-shirts with I ♥ Vegas on them, and shorts—or barely existing bikini bottoms—with a great deal of natural air conditioning. Me? I had to wear the regulation three-piece suit because *“Our Customers like it that way.”*

To make matters worse I had to lug everything I could pack for the booth in two lousy double-oversizers. *“Because we don't want to dip into the accounts for expenses”* was George's other favorite expression.

Anyway, I'd made it. Innovative use of the monorail and Shank's Pony had finally brought me to my destination. This was my first ever trip to Las Vegas and, if the heat didn't kill me, hopefully not my last. George had sent me here to represent the Deathly Buzzing's Marital Aids Company at the ParaPleasure Expo. ParaPleasure was the fifth, ever, expo of its kind and my first, ever, experience of a convention. So I was suitably nervous. Though I'd been told by a contact knowledgeable in our industry, with conventions, like men, size *did* matter.

It probably explains why D.B.'s sales figures are so low, given we only have three employees.

I paused outside the entrance to Dunvegas as a helicopter buzzed overhead and landed on its roof. A totally black aircraft with black tinted windows—obviously an important Vamp arriving for the Expo—it dipped, dropped its cargo and was gone before the public could peek up and say “Oooh!”

Formerly the Mandalay Bay hotel site, the last owners had sold out in a hostile take-over and left the town running—with some of the new owners nipping, literally, on their heels. The old 3000+ guest room building had been torn down and rebuilt as this...

Well, it kind of fitted into Vegas in a gloomy, dismal sort of way. Set back from the sidewalk by ten feet of dark, eddying water—and, no, I wouldn't recommend skinny dipping in there. Those eddies came from a variety of somethings very large, ferocious and hungry. The entrance to the hotel was a huge gothic effect, complete with a twenty foot tall, arched, gargoyle-mouth doorway.

Aside from the myriad stone carvings of various mythological creatures engaging in some form of non-human copulation, the most imposing part of the gate was the huge white marble fangs. Twelve feet tall, the fangs, marked through with grey ribbons, had been polished until they reflected images like a mirror. Well, apart from where the Red Stuff dripped down from them, that is. I mean, I know it looked like the real thing but surely they wouldn't...

The Red Stuff's journey ended as droplets splashed from the tips of the fangs into two large shallow basins set beneath them. A host of the local rat population had come out in force to drink the stuff and ended up stuck in the sticky rat traps the hotel workers had placed around the bowls. As I watched, a swarthy, goblin chef carefully selected about thirty or forty of these hapless creatures and took them into the hotel.

I made a mental note not to try the famous Dunvegas Rats-on-a-Stick snack from their restaurant. No matter how much they touted it as a health food.

Out in the 1.5 million gallon aquarium, some early arrivals for the convention were sporting in the water, making a big splash and entertaining the tourists. At least I hoped the kraken and mermaid were just playing—the location being a little too public, really, for them to be making caviar. As usual I was amazed the public could never see it as more than a clever special effect

show. Would they ever wise up to the monsters literally tripping past them every day?

Show over, the kraken reached out and snatched one of the hapless tourists and bit, crunchily, into the man's head. The crowd cheered. I don't know why, but Krakens were always ravenous after sex.

Wiping the sweat from my forehead one more time, I pulled the double-sizers back onto their wheels and trudged the last few steps over the solid oak drawbridge, noting the razor sharp points of the portcullis as I walked beneath it. I moved quickly here, as the blades looked deadly enough to cause someone some real damage should it accidentally fall. Going by the detritus attached to some of the points, it already had. Two of the infamous Paranormal and Magical Security guards stood just outside the portcullis.

The PMSers were known throughout the paranormal world as some mean SOBs. Once past the lethal device and guards, I felt relief as wafts of cool air, tainted with the odor of undead, washed over me.

The relief lasted only a moment as I remembered my last encounter with a group of undead. God, I hope my parents didn't show up this time. They loved to embarrass me when I met up with a bunch of Paras. The usual bunched up sensation in the back of my neck grew, only much worse than normal. I always stressed out at times like these, dreading their return.

Wiping the grisly thought from my mind I stepped into the massive automated rotating doorway and passed two more PMS guards into the icy interior of the hotel foyer. Wow, it felt like stepping from the Sahara to the Antarctic. It felt wonderful. Later on, when I was stuck at the Expo booth, I'd been advised to wear thermal undies, but right now I wouldn't change the temperature setting for the world. My contact, Andre, who was a rather impetuous and knowledgeable satyr, explained to me once why the hotels for the undead cool the rooms to just above refrigeration level. Without wanting to seem rude let's say it helps, uhm, keep the body odor *down*—after all some of the undead, like zombies, *are still rotting*, you know.

“Oh, chuppypoo what a lovely place! Have they made you an executive or did you come to meet a lovely girl?”

Dear Lord, no...



“Nice place son. How did you get in here? Break a window?” Dad, as usual, laughed at his lame joke which highlighted, again, the failure he perceives in me.

“Hi Mom, Dad,” I mumbled softly, struggling to make my way to the distant reception desk. Hoping I could get there before Mom tried to set me up with yet another date with a stranger. God, I hope she didn't see Amanda Bast. Mom would be matchmaking within nanoseconds. Why on Earth did my folks always appear at these things?

I don't understand the laws of parapsysics enough to explain it but Mom and Dad invariably coalesce when I meet with a bunch of paranormals like this. It's as if a gathering of magical entities generated a different sort of energy which dragged their little ectoplasmic goo blobs down from the spirit pot in the sky. Indeed, with this amount of paranormals around they looked almost solid for a change. Well, except for the wispy bit around their feet. Mom always lamented the fact that being a ghost and having no feet meant she couldn't wear the fancy shoes she liked.

“I'm here for work, Mom,” I explained, hurrying to the reception area as fast as I could. Once in my room maybe I could persuade my parents to stay there.

“Well, that's a shame, chuppypoo.” She gave my cheek her 'affectionate pinch.' “Because there's a lovely girl over there, who's just waiting for you to ask her out.”

“Mooom!”

Geesh, parents! I did get a good look at the woman, though, as she was heading in my direction. Blonde hair frizzed out in an attractive look that hinted at a kind of halo. Her lips had that tender look of someone dying to be kissed and her blue eyes wandered around the place as if she owned it. Given that she was snapping out orders, ten to the dozen, to the other staff present probably meant she was a manager or something. She was literally spinning on the spot now and then to talk to *something* I couldn't see.

She was human as well. Going by the hints of thermal underwear I could glimpse beneath the cream blouse—nicely filled, but no more than a C-cup—and the burgundy silk pants, which incidentally matched perfectly with her lipstick.

She looked so perfect and kissable my own little cock robin was standing up to take a looksee. This, of course, made my tight pants just that little more



uncomfortable. Not to mention my mom could probably see it. *Man, why can't I just die and get it over with?*

"So, which painting you going to steal?" Dad asked, looking at the paintings scattered around the foyer. "I think that Van Gogh, there, should sell for quite a bit."

Exasperated, I dropped the suitcases and turned to face him.

"Dad! Will you quit—oof!"

Somehow the manager I'd seen earlier collided with me, leaving me in the now, perhaps enviable, position of lying on top of her on the floor. She'd somehow, instinctively I hope, wrapped her legs around my waist.

Her eyes were glazed over with a dreamy look and her kissable mouth pouted in an even more kissable "O." Even more disturbing, she was rubbing her crotch against my old cock robin as if she were trying to decide if I kept an iron bar down the front of my pants.

"My, oh my!" My mom stood beside us fanning her face with her hand. Embarrassed? As if!

Geesh, I wouldn't put it past her to have arranged this little "accident" from the start.

"That's my boy!" Dad chuffed proudly, patting me on the shoulder.

While the young lady beneath me continued her dazed explorations of my South, the sharp click of official heels came to a stop on the marble floor—roughly five inches from my head.

Straining my head back, to look up, I could see a sour-faced man in a concierge uniform.

"Are you Roger Ing?" he asked.

From around the foyer I heard a series of titters and chuckles. I ignored my dad's guffaw.

"Regardless to what it appears," I said, "I am Roger K. Ing."

The concierge acknowledged my answer with a sharp incline of his head.

"Very good, sir. If you would be so kind as to follow me. Mr. Fritz, the owner, would like a word with you."

Damn, I hadn't even started the convention and already the world's most evil wizard wanted a word with me. I was dead already, I just didn't know it.

"Okay, let me just..."

Let me tell you, it's pretty hard to finish a sentence when a very attractive young lady is lying beneath you and suddenly decides to kiss the socks off you.

I mean, this wasn't an ordinary sort of kiss, this kiss made my toes and, er, *other things* curl. This was a kiss that drew me soul and heart into a place where I didn't want to even dream of being. A kiss like this could almost make a guy fall in l, lo, lo, lo, lo, llllllove.

All right, I said it! Phew!

I may be a dead man, but wow, at least I died happy.

"Mr. Ing," the concierge said sharply. "Mr. Fritz is waiting."

*To be continued...*



[Click here to find out more about S.J. Willing.](#)

## Touch Not The Ungloved Cat

By Carolán Ivey

*“They’ll fight to the death for their freedom; they epitomize what it takes  
to be truly free.”*

Mike Tomkies

“How’s that, Mikhail? Neck feeling better?”

MacKenzee Kirkwall parted the opening of the richly colored Indian silk fabric that formed the tent that surrounded her massage table and ushered her latest client out into the harsh lights and bustle of Ballroom No. 2.

Too bad she’d had to move her booth out of the relatively quiet corner of The Count’s Ballroom, but the varying scents drifting into her space from the Deathly Buzzings Marital Aids booth had proven too much for both her clients and for her.

Massaging the kinks out of a werewolf’s lower extremities wasn’t made any easier when her client went rigid every time someone next door opened up the tester vial of Full Moon Massage Oil.

Not to mention the havoc wreaked on her own concentration by the sex toys impregnated with catnip essential oil. Roger Ing had tried to accommodate her, sealing all the offending items in plastic bags, but the damage was done. One of them had had to go.

Mikhail Voskov rotated his neck and shoulders with a sigh of relief. “Much better, Ms. Kirkwall.”

“Remember to alternate sides of the neck when you feed. I know you’re a lefty, but you need to change it up.”

“Of course.” The vampire nodded as he pulled on his leather jacket. “Allow me to express my gratitude. Would you join me for dinner later?”

Zee pasted an expression of regret on her face. “Er, no. I have plans.” Luckily, this was true. “Rain check?”

Voskov sighed. “Alas, I fly out at midnight.”

*Literally*, she thought. “Another time.”

He bowed cordially. “Until then.” A soft *pop*, and Vostov was flying above the chattering crowd that perused the wares offered for sale at the ParaPleasures Expo.

He was her last scheduled client of the day. But instead of relaxing, her body hummed with adrenaline.

Time to put aside her cover as proprietress of Magic Touch Massage and get down to her real job.

She moved to her display table, intending to pack away her brochures and business cards.

“I have a delivery for you, Ms. Kirkwall.”

Zee looked up at the sound of the husky, feline purr. Amanda Bast, Dunvegas’ hostess and right (and left) arm of the seldom-seen Mr. Fritz, stood holding a tiny package between her gold-tipped fingernails. She was a vision of perfection in a matching gold suit that left very little to the imagination. Though standing perfectly still, the woman somehow managed to give the impression of slow, sinuous motion. A fact very few nearby hot-blooded — and a few cold-blooded — males missed.

Feeling a little dowdy in her own purple scrubs, Zee reached out and accepted the package gingerly, just avoiding getting stabbed by Amanda’s lethal looking claws.

“Thanks.”

“There’s a note attached.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

Amanda’s tip-tilted eyes glowed. “It could be an invitation.”

“Ah, yes, maybe.”

Amanda leaned over the table, generous breasts nearly falling out of her top, and ran a single finger along Zee’s wrist. “If it is, I hope you’ll consider inviting me along, too.”

*Do I have "eat me" written on my forehead or something?*

Zee was running out of time. She caught Amanda's wrist in one hand and stroked the back of the woman's hand with the sensitive pads of her fingers. Underneath her polished, cool exterior, Amanda Bast was a seething mass of cat in heat. Zee leaned in close to her ear.

"If it is, I'll pass it on to you for your own enjoyment. I have other plans tonight."

Amanda withdrew, eyes still sparkling as her professional persona dropped in place like a theatrical curtain. "Do," she murmured, one corner of her mouth turning up. She moved away with a smooth, sensual walk that looked slow but covered a lot of ground. Three steps and she was already answering her cell phone, putting out some demanding high roller's fire. Every pair of male eyes in the area following her path until she disappeared through a set of double doors, which were guarded by two frowning, sunglasses-clad gargoyles.

Zee took the chance to slip inside her tent unnoticed, letting the flaps fall closed behind her.

She turned the tiny, square package over in her hand. It was about the size of a condom packet. With one fingernail she lifted the edge of the folded note taped to the blood-red wrapping.

*I hope you will accept this token as my apology for any inconvenience.*

*—Roger Ing*

"Aw." She smiled and tucked it into the pouch around her neck. Whatever it was, if it was catnip scented she didn't need to be opening it here.

Within seconds she stripped bare, skin reacting instantly to the chill, damp air of the subterranean ballroom. It was kept that way to keep the odors of various preternatural food samples down to a minimum. Dragon kibble tended to get stenchy after a few hours outside the freezer case.

Her sensitive nose caught a trace of a familiar scent, there and gone in an instant. She froze in place, arms instinctively crossed over her goose-bumped breasts.

*William?* No, couldn't be. There was no way her rival in high-end thievery could have tracked her here. Thanks to a well-timed tip—and the tipster's heavily paid-for silence—she was days ahead of him.

She had the stone in her possession, pried from the fireplace hearth of Mr. Fritz's office itself. The object had come out of its niche easily, as if it had just been placed there and the mortar hadn't quite dried. She shrugged off the nagging sense of uneasiness at how simple it had been to get past Mr. Fritz's massive security system.

Within an hour, she'd be several million dollars richer. Rich enough she'd never have to steal for a living, ever again. Rich enough to disappear for good.

Yet just the memory of William's scent, his whisky-gold eyes, inexplicably made her insides go liquid, made her want to lean against the massage table and stretch like the cat she was, to slip her fingers between her legs and tease herself.

She hunched a shoulder in annoyance. Nonsense. William MacGillivray was her rival and the bane of her existence.

She chalked it up to going several months without while she'd tracked the stone's unusually rapid path through the labyrinth of the black market. The thing certainly had all the characteristics of a hot potato.

She had no idea why a six-inch cube of Scottish granite should be so valuable. It was one of many gleaned from ruins around the world to add authentic touches to the Dunvegas casino and resort. She only knew someone was willing to pay a large fortune to get it back. And that was all she needed to know.

Right now all she had to do was pick it up from its hiding place, meet her buyer, and she'd be out of here one rich-assed werecat.

She closed her eyes, tilted back her head and willed the shift to begin. It never happened without at least a little bit of pain, easily bitten back as she felt bones melt and reform, skin change texture and develop its thick, black-and-grey striped coat.

The shift complete, Zee smiled to herself and headed for the flaps of the tent, confident no one would notice her passage.

With a muffled *poof*, the package she carried in the pouch around her neck exploded, shooting grey-green dust into her face.

*Catnip*, her rapidly fuzzing mind observed. And not just ordinary catnip, this stuff was on steroids.

Coughing, every one of her senses rioting from the overdose, she lurched through the tent opening.

Straight into a live-trap cage.

Panic screamed down her nerve endings as the spring-loaded door snapped shut and someone shoved her, cage and all, into an oversized rolling suitcase. The cage was too small for her to shift back, not that she could have done it in her herb-crazed state.

She could do nothing but fling herself against the sides of the cage and yowl.

\*\*\*

William MacGillivray, his face shielded from public view deep within the hood of his cloak, grimaced and picked up his pace as he headed for the double doors. He'd expected Zee wouldn't go quietly, but her ear-splitting screeches were drawing far too much attention.

He threw back his hood and offered a rueful grin to several scowling faces turned in their direction, including a suit who sported dark glasses, an earpiece, and a PMS armband.

*Security. Great. That's all I need.*

"She's overdue for her shots," he shouted over the noise emanating from the bouncing suitcase. "And the lass is none too happy about it."

The faces relaxed into smiles and understanding nods. The PMS boy lifted a lip and turned away to continue scanning the crowd for shoplifters.

William gestured politely to the gargoyles, who muttered at him as he lugged Zee through the double doors.

The instant the doors clicked shut behind him, a blur of gold fabric swooped in and latched itself to his one free arm. He risked letting go of the suitcase handle long enough to pull from his pocket three black onyx casino chips, each emblazoned with a 24kt., white-gold "D".

"Here you are, my dear. You certainly went above and beyond tonight. I couldn't have managed without your help."



“You can keep your money,” Amanda breathed. “It was no trouble at all. I am, of course, willing to accept your...thanks...in any other manner you find pleasurable.”

She hooked her claws into the folds of his cloak, pulled him close and attacked his mouth with open lips. The grinding of her pelvis against his brought his cock to instant attention.

He allowed himself a few seconds to savor the taste of aroused female, regretting that at least at this time, he couldn’t indulge in what she offered.

For he could detect on his tongue the fact that Amanda Bast was not of his kind. He tasted a trace of clan blood, but only a trace. She wouldn’t be fitting into his plans—or his bed—until Choosing season was over.

Amanda pulled away, licking her lips as disappointment dawned on her face. She tasted it, too. She could take no part in what he had to do.

“It’s that time, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry, Amanda.”

She stepped back and shrugged a slender shoulder. “You wouldn’t happen to have a half brother anywhere?”

The suitcase lurched and Zee fell disturbingly quiet. She needed the antidote and needed it now. He renewed his grip on the handle, fumbling with his other hand inside his cloak.

“As a matter of fact...yes, here it is.” He pulled out a key card and handed it to her. “Owen’s a distant relative. I’m sure he would enjoy your company, as he’s, ah, a bit restless himself this time of year. He’s in Hangar Nine.”

He was warmed to see the sensual curve return to her full mouth as she tucked the card into her décolleté.

“I owe you, William.”

He tucked the chips between her breasts and winked at her. “Think nothing of it. He’s my pilot, though, and we’re leaving in about two hours. I suggest you hurry.”

\*\*\*

“Here you go, love. Sixty seconds, and you’ll be good as new.”

William capped the vial of imbine oil and arranged Zee’s limp form comfortably on a cushion in the far corner of a steel cage, which sat a safe distance from any and all possible weapons in his fire and lantern-lit chamber.

He risked a few seconds to lift her eyelids to examine her pupils. Dilated, but shrinking rapidly as the aromatic antidote took effect.

Too rapidly.

“Bugger,” he muttered, launching himself backward and slamming the door just milliseconds before a fully shifted Zee hit it. The force of her charge scooted the heavy steel structure several inches across the floor.

*Holy shite.* He kept backing up, because her arm shot between the bars, missing his throat by inches. Her rich scent assaulted his nose, and he fought the wildness that swelled his cock.

“Bastard!” she snarled. “I thought I smelled you. What the hell is this?”

Her glorious body vibrated with rage, every inch of her firm, bare skin flushed. Her black hair waved in a wild cloud around her face. Her gaze zinged rapidly to all sides of the cage, and an entirely different expression took over. Panic. He knew that feeling well.

“Let me the fuck out of here,” she said, low and hoarse. “Now.”

“Not until you’ve had a chance to calm down, love—”

“Don’t call me that.”

“—and I’ve had a chance to explain.”

“This is for the Lisbon job, isn’t it? I beat you to that amphora fair and square.”

He bit back a retort and forced himself to say, “That you did.”

His admission did nothing to calm her, and she began pacing the cage, whacking the flats of her hands against the bars, narrowed eyes searching the steel for any weakness.

“William.” Her tone went strangely flat. “I have to get out of here.”

She paced in ever decreasing circles until she ended up frozen in place in the center.

He cautiously approached the cage, eyes narrowing as he watched her breasts rise and fall, rise and fall. Then stop.

“You have to breathe, love.”

After an agonizing few seconds, her chest heaved.

“It’s a natural reaction. It will pass.”

She wrapped her arms around her smooth, flat belly and turned her light silver eyes on him. "What would you know about my reactions to anything?"

"Because you and I...we are the same kind."

Eyebrows slammed together. "We are nothing alike. I would have sensed it."

"No. You wouldn't. You were raised outside the enclave and never taught the finer skills."

Suddenly she was at the bars of the cage, lifting her arms to grab a handhold high above her head.

"I'll show you skills. Just let me out."

Her nipples were tight little buds, and he couldn't keep his hungry gaze from caressing them. Her warm scent washed over him. Sweet mother of Camma, she was ripe and ready. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to get her back to the enclave without mating with her.

When he made no move to comply, she shoved away from the bars and continued pacing. She kept herself side-on to him, which put her high breasts and curvy butt on display. If she was looking to distract him, it was working.

"What enclave?"

He swallowed hard. Blood pounded painfully in his groin. To distract himself he busied his fingers taking off his cloak. Big mistake. Her gaze swept down to the front of his pants and she purred at his reaction. He kept talking, because it helped him to remember to breathe.

"Our ancestral home in Scotland. You, along with your entire litter, was stolen from us not long after you were born."

" 'Us'? Who's 'us'?"

"Clan Cugar. Our families have hidden in the Highlands for thousands of years. It's time for all of us to come home."

A strange expression chased across her face. Hope? He couldn't be sure; it was gone too quickly.

"Home. There's a concept. Funny, you people never seemed terribly interested in bringing me 'home' before. Why now? After all the years we've been in competition?"

He risked moving closer to the cage, resting his hands on a crossbar. Her eyes followed the movement and her pink tongue darted out to lick her lips.

*Concentrate, you fool.*

“Once a Cugar is separated from the clan, our wild, loner nature takes over and it’s near impossible to bring anyone back. Our numbers, particularly our females, are dwindling. These past months we have been gathering what’s left of our clan for the Choosing. You are the most feral of the lost ones, so you were left for last.”

“Ah.” She padded closer to him, completely unconcerned about her nudity. In fact, she seemed to be enjoying it — and its effect on him. Only a tell-tale ripple along her jaw line and the sheen of moisture on her skin betrayed her distress at being caged. “So that’s why my last few jobs have been so easy. You’ve been busy herding cats.”

She was only inches away now, her silvery eyes fixed on him. He stared at her lush lips, tightened his fingers on the bar to keep from reaching for her. He must wait for the Choosing. She might not be for him. With so few pureblood females left, there was a very real possibility that none of them would be for him.

The thought of another male plunging his cock inside her body, marking her satiny skin... His knuckles whitened on the bar, and sweat broke out on his forehead. Not even his years of disciplined training could prevent it.

“No. Not a herd. Just one. One’s—”

She reached for him first, slipping her hands through the bars and closing them over his cock, pumping him hard through his pants.

“—enough,” he groaned. He let go of the cage and cradled her breasts in his hands, thumbing the tips and reveling fiercely in the sounds she made.

“And the stone?” Her face loomed maddeningly close, so close her breath poured hot over his lips. “That was a plant, wasn’t it?”

“No, it’s not. But I let you have it first because it was the only way I could get you in one place long enough to...*shite*.”

She caught the head of his cock between her thumbs and toyed with it.

With a low growl he reached around her as far as the cage would allow and pressed her closer. The cold metal dug into her flesh, and she shuddered in reaction but kept up her assault and reached for his lower lip with her tongue.

A single tiny taste of her, and he knew he would be lost. He shut his eyes to try one last time to regain control.

By the time he realized his mistake she had his cock gripped in one hand, and with the other she pressed his own belt buckle knife to his throat. He was trapped on the outside of the cage, suspended between heaven and hell.

*Damned hormones.*

“Would you like to hear where my ‘home’ was for the first three years of my life, William?”

He managed a ghost of a smile. “I’m not going anywhere, lass.”

Her chest pumped air in and out. “A cage. In a zoo.”

His smile fled and he stared at her face, now twisted with fury.

“When they tried to use me in their breeding program—”

William closed his eyes and hissed.

“—I went crazy and learned damned quick that I could shift. The zookeeper learned, too. He learned, after they scraped his balls off the floor of my cage, there wouldn’t be a next generation in his family. Now if you’re planning on having your own litter someday...*Get. Me. The fuck. Out of here.*”

He ground his teeth. “The key is in my left front pocket.”

Quick as light, the knife left his throat and sliced soundlessly through fabric.

“Easy down there, love.”

“Easy is the one thing we never were, *love.*”

She planted one hand on his chest and sent him into the nearest wall.

He bounced right back, but she had already skinned out of the cage. He snagged her around the waist in mid-air as she leaped for the window, never mind the stained-glass panes weren’t designed to open, and they were 70 stories up.

His momentum carried them both into the far wall, where he had to use every skill he possessed to pin her, spread-eagled, to the cold stones. The damp chamber air chilled his back where her nails had ripped his shirt to shreds and left stinging scratches behind.

The only part of her not under his control was her mouth. She opened it, and he braced himself for the curses he was sure were about to pour out.

She extended her fangs and sank them into his shoulder.

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She expected him to roar with pain, to release her instantly as her teeth ripped through black fabric and pierced flesh.

Instead, he went perfectly still.

His warm blood flowed into her mouth. Something that felt like electricity shot through her, and she forgot about everything except the heat of his hard body against hers, the press of his cock between her legs. She released him and gasped, the back of her head bumping the wall as she licked his taste from her lips. Oddly, hot tears formed in her eyes.

“Oh, lass,” he groaned. “You shouldna have done that.”

He released her hands and raked his fingers into her tangled hair, pulling it off her face. His own russet queue had come loose, and his eyes burned into hers. His face hardened with an emotion she had never seen before. On anyone.

“William,” she gasped. “What’s happening?” Of their own volition, her hands gathered handfuls of what was left of his shirt, began slowly tearing it the rest of the way off his body.

He made no move to stop her.

He buried his face in her neck, and she felt his lips moving erotically just under her ear.

“You have Chosen, lass.”

He pushed away from her and took one step away, letting the shreds of his shirt fall to the floor.

The tears that had been gathering spilled over. William was giving her her freedom.

A sob exploded from her chest, bringing with them words from a place inside her so long buried, she’d forgotten it was there. “You should have come for me sooner.”

And he was on her, flattening her against the wall again as he ducked his head and took the tips of her aching breasts into his mouth, one, then the other.

She extended her claws and made quick work of his pants. Her breath coming desperate in her chest, she worked herself upward and wrapped her legs around his waist.

He dug his fingers into her ass and in one long thrust, he plunged into her to the hilt. She screamed, reaching up to wrap her fingers around an iron gaslight fixture over her head. She hung on, tilting her hips as he worked his cock in and out. Each thrust accompanied by a growl she felt vibrating all through her core.

Her clit found a sweet spot and she rode it higher and higher, her belly tightening with anticipation of the explosion she could feel running her down.

But just as she felt the first ripples begin, he abruptly pulled out of her, spun her around and bent her at the waist.

“*Damn* you!” she moaned.

“Brace your hands on the wall.” His voice was raspy with need.

He guided her hips to tilt back, and she bit her lip, willingly parting her legs.

“*William*,” she pleaded on a near-soundless whisper, her body shaking for the completion she knew in her very blood only he could give.

And he gave it. His sweat-sheened skin pressed against the back of her legs. He curved his body over her back as she felt him position his cock against her opening.

“Now it’s my turn to Choose.” She felt the timbre of his voice rumble from his chest to her spine.

“Y—” Her acceptance dissolved into a cry as he thrust into her at the same instant he swept her hair aside and bit down on the back of her neck. Not breaking the skin, just holding her still as he flexed his body to drive deep inside her.

He filled her, stretched her, broke her. Incoherent sounds emerged from her clenched teeth as she tilted her hips to take him deeper. But when he reached around to touch her clit, she found her voice.

His name became her chant, cried out over and over as her pleasure took her to a place of joy she’d never before known.

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William lay Zee’s limp form on the bed and tucked the blankets around her. She curled onto her side, stuck one arm out and snagged his hand.

He bent and kissed her ear. “Be right back, love.”



On the way to the fireplace to throw another block of peat on, he scooped up his mobile and punched a number on speed dial.

“Yes, master.”

William rolled his eyes at his cousin’s mocking tone. “Plans have changed. Sleep in as long as you want. The Council will just have to wait.”

“Excellent.”

William heard a throaty feminine giggle in the background a split second before Owen disconnected.

He moved back to the bed and slid under the covers behind her, gathering her close. She sighed and turned into his arms.

“When are we going home?” Her husky, satisfied-woman voice washed over the sore place on his shoulder where she’d bitten it. It was a spot that would be forever tender, forever treasured. He stroked her hair.

“Tomorrow, love. Rest now. We have all the time in the world.”

Zee turned and propped her elbows on his chest, resting her chin on her hands. Her silvery eyes studied him for a long moment, gradually turning from sleepy to mischievous. “So, you were saying about my not having learned the *finer skills*?” Her pupils slitted and her lip curled in a dangerous smile.

Then her head disappeared under the covers and headed south.

William grinned, but shifted warily. “Just watch the teeth, love. Watch the—”

Her mouth closed over him. His back arched involuntarily in almost violent pleasure as his mate went beyond simple Choosing and took him on a ride that claimed him as hers alone.

With every touch, every stroke, every lick, it was she who captured him, bound him.

William gave himself over to it, grabbed the ironwork headboard with both hands...

And held on for dear life.



[Click here to find out more about Carolán Ivey.](#)

# Never Too Late

By Xakara

The gothic glamour of the Dunvegas Hotel and Casino was lost on Gaelle as she headed toward the private elevator to meet Evan. It had been a long day and all she could think about was the fact that Joel was supposed to be with them. The three of them had planned the trip eighteen months earlier when they'd started their business together.

Vivify had been Joel's baby. Combining Gaelle's talents with plant life, Evan's business sense and immortal contacts, and Joel's love of adventure, the three had launched an entire line of herbal supplements used to increase preternatural pleasure. It touched on everything from drops to relieve depression, to oils that promoted blood flow to erogenous zones, to creams that when used right, would make even an incubus impressed.

Joel had built their first greenhouse with his own hands and talked about the day they'd need dozens of warehouses to keep up with the demand once they went national after breaking out at the ParaPleasure Expo. In the first six months, their online business and little boutique shop had boomed to his delight, and it seemed his plans would come to pass. Only Joel wouldn't live long enough to see it.

They'd all known he was on borrowed time. The heart defect he'd been born with was a product of his mixed human and daemon heritage. It was inoperable, and as an infant, medical science had given him a life expectancy of five years. Alternative medicine and a little preternatural science had added nearly thirty years to that in the end. But finally, at thirty-three, his too-human heart could no longer fuel a more-than-human body and he was gone. It had been a long year without him and she and Evan had finally learned to laugh and smile again, but it would never be the same without Joel. Every smile would be tinged with a touch of sadness.

It was supposed to be the three of them. It had always been the three of them. It should have always been so. They were confidants, and co-conspirators, and best friends, and they could have been even more if Joel had just lived a little longer.

Gaelle slowed and looked at the drooping ficus tree tucked into a corner nook beside the elevator. The one there at the start of the day had been proud and vivacious, but over the course of the day had been traded out for this more humble offering. It wasn't a bad tree. The braided trunk was healthy and the branches sturdy, but it seemed nearly as down and depressed as Gaelle herself. She walked over and ran a hand across the once-vibrant green leaves.

"Hey little guy, looks like neither one of us is quite in the right mindset for all of this. We should try to perk up for Joel's sake. I know he's watching."

She'd felt Joel's spirit for the last few weeks, his vibration getting stronger each time. It was like that the first year after a death if a soul stayed to linger. There'd be no way to know if he was sentient and remembered her until he could manifest. Not everyone stayed intact when they remained. He might be no more than a strong memory and until she knew, Gaelle wasn't getting her hopes up. But she would let the feel of him bring a smile as it always did. She passed that smile on to the ficus and watched as its branches lifted and new leaves emerged and unfurled. By the time it was as lush and lively as she could make it, Gaelle herself felt more alive and ready to take on the rest of the Expo.

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The elevator chimed and Evan stepped out as Gaelle turned to look at him.

"There you are." He smiled, looking past her. "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist making new friends with all of this foliage tucked everywhere."

"The little guy just needed a pick-me-up." She laughed.

He could see the flush of giddiness in her aura from the use of her power. It was also evident in the way her hand lovingly caressed the leaves. She didn't touch him that way. He pushed aside the small pang of envy and extended his sensory Psi until he could feel the caress on his own skin. The sensation pulled him toward her, growing stronger as he got closer, but he stopped cold just shy of arm's reach.

"Joel."

He could feel his best friend's fingers move along his neck in tandem with the psychic caress from Gaelle. The strong scent of vanilla and sawdust

assaulted him. That was Joel completely; if he wasn't building he was baking, enjoying anything that let him work with his hands. What he was working at the moment was Evan.

"Evan?" The psychic touch became a heavy, warm, physical one as Gaelle placed her hands on his face. "Are you all right?" Her fingers slid down the sides of his neck, overlapping the touch from Joel.

"I'm fine." He grinned, dizzied and swaying with the pleasure of it. "Joel's here. Stronger than he's been before."

He slid his arms around her and pulled her flush to his front as he felt Joel's ghostly form mold against his back. Giving in rather than fighting it, he let the press of Joel's will lead him right where he'd wanted to be for so long—locked in a kiss with Gaelle.

He could feel her surprise, yet she yielded rather than withdrew, soft, full lips parting beneath his own. The black Versace jacket and dove-gray silk shirt he wore may as well have been misted to nothingness along with Gaelle's scarlet silk halter dress and matching jacket, because each place they touched sent a thrill of skin-to-skin contact almost beyond nudity. It was as if they shared the first few layers of cells between them, the nerve endings reaching out and nuzzling against each other in a pleasure cascade reminiscent of Evan's Vampire heritage.

Each moan vibrated through them from head to toe, and for the first time since late adolescence Evan wanted to drink someone in the way he drank in the kiss. Dormant fangs ached but then no sooner than he acknowledged the desire then the pleasure of her life force flowing into him took them both.

The world consisted of shuddering moans, frictioning bodies, and intertwining minds for a space of minutes that lasted days. A rush of release hit them both and then all at once the connections were gone. They were separate beings again and Joel's presence evaporated. Unsupported by the burst of ghostly Psi energy, they fell against the wall with a heavy thud and Gaelle laughed out loud.

"Well, that was...unexpected. What happened?" she panted.

Evan shook his head and then laid it back against the wall, catching his breath before he spoke.

"Joel happened. I wasn't expecting him to be so..."

He could only shake his head again; there were no words. That had been Joel. Not a memory or a shadow of him, but Joel the way he'd been when alive. He'd lost the man he was in love with and now Joel was back just as Evan was reconciling his feelings for the woman in his arms. And then it had all exploded in one big Psi Sensate Orgy. How did you articulate something like that?

"I could feel him too, but it was through you primarily. You must have been wide open for him to sweep into you that way."

Heavy lids opened in time for him to see her turn toward the tree as if it held answers. Perhaps it did, for when she turned back, dark chocolate eyes stared up into his bright gray ones with suspicion and amusement.

"You were wide open, weren't you? You were doing the extending thing." She grinned.

He shrugged. What point was there in denying it? He'd just kissed her deep enough to tickle a rib with his tongue, too late to be embarrassed about a little vicarious caress action.

"I was doing the extending thing, yes. The tree looked so happy I thought I'd share. I guess I looked so happy, Joel thought he'd share."

He looked around as if he expected to see his best friend standing nearby, waiting for them to recover. There was only a thankfully empty cove, meaning they'd gotten away with their little public display without an audience.

"We should head up to the suite before he decides to share again. I don't want to end up making out on the lobby tiles. There was already one floor show for the day."

Gaelle stood back just far enough to cross her arms. "It wasn't that guy's fault. He didn't see her and it was an accident. And I'm sure he could have done without you laughing in the corner."

Evan put his arm around her waist and began to walk them to the elevator. "I'm sure that with her lying beneath him, he didn't even notice." He placed his key card in the slot and the lift doors slid apart. "But if it makes you feel better, I'll let him know that karma came my way in the south foyer should I find myself in conversation with him."

She seemed satisfied with the option and let him lead her out of the little cove into the spacious smoked glass and obsidian lift. He didn't think for a minute that she was really concerned about the unfortunate fellow from earlier in the day. It was just a way to avoid talking about the fact that Joel was there,

truly there with them, and what that might mean. A year of mourning, and weeks of wondering, and now here it was and he didn't blame her for stalling.

"I told Joel I was in love with him at his funeral," he blurted. One of them had to say something, and that worked just as well as anything.

"So did I," she replied.

He started to laugh, stepping over to the side of the elevator and placing his back against the cool glass. His head tilted back and his eyes slipped shut.

"So that's it, huh? He's finally strong enough to come back and wants to cash in on what we waited too late to say."

"Probably." She nodded, knowing he could still sense her movements. "Although, I think he specifically wants to cash in on number 17 on his list."

Ebon lashes lifted and he ran a pale hand through short raven locks as an entirely different kind of laugh took him.

"Ah, wonderful number 17, getting the three of us in bed together. I remember the list well. That was also number 23 and 41 if I recall correctly." The laughter died to a soft, sad smile. "He never pushed it because he was afraid you'd run away."

"I know." She sighed. "I told him at the hospital in those last days that I wouldn't have run. I love you both enough that the idea never frightened me. But he always saw me as too human to trust in that. With so little time left, he was too afraid to mess things up between us and then die without it being resolved. I couldn't blame him for that."

Evan just stared at her for a second. Then blinked and cleared his throat.

"I heard everything you said, and I'm sure I have something sage and compassionate to say in reply. But can we go back to the part where you love me enough that the idea never frightened you? I'd like to hone in on the love part until I'm clear."

It was Gaelle's turn to shrug. "You were there for the kiss and whatever else we're supposed to call that."

"I was going with meta-sex," he interrupted.

"Okay, you were there for the 'meta-sex'; you felt what I was feeling. You weren't projecting, that was me." She paused, her head tilting to the left. "Well, some of it was Joel, but the part that was me was definitely me."

He stared, a smile of disbelief taking him. "You're awfully forthcoming all of a sudden."

"I can afford to be." She grinned. "I felt you as well. I'm not putting anything on the line because I already know your feelings. It makes being forthcoming rather easy. Not to mention I'm still feeling no pain after all of that."

The elevator ride was so smooth that it took them a moment to realize it had come to a stop but the doors hadn't opened. Before either of them could speak, the scent of vanilla and sawdust assailed Evan and beneath it was something heady and sweet. The scent of blood. As a Dhamphir he was only part vampire and he didn't possess the bloodlust of his father's side. But the drug-like joy of the Drink was something that could still capture him, and he could taste Gaelle in the suddenly small-seeming space.

"Gaelle," he rasped. "Please, stay unafraid."

It was all he had time to say before he had her pressed against the side of the elevator. Overcome by the feel of Joel as well, she managed to turn her back to Evan and grip the handrail just before he got to her. He pressed his pelvis against the high, taut roundness of her and lifted heavy mahogany curls to place his lips to the galloping pulse in her throat. He sucked at the molasses-hued skin without breaking it, pulling tiny droplets through her pores.

The press of Joel's form at his back nearly paused him long enough to ask if they could at least make it to the suite rather than give security a private show via the cameras. But buried beneath the building sensations and enticing droplets of blood, he couldn't care long enough to form a coherent sentence.

Besides, part of him knew it wouldn't have done any good. Sex in a private elevator was number 34 on Joel's list of things he wanted to do before he died. It apparently was never too late to accomplish your goals.

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"Cameras."

It was all she said, all Evan figured she could say in the moment. It took him a moment to connect the word to the fact that he'd stripped her jacket from her and shed his own suit coat to feel the heat of her bare back through the thin silk of his shirt. At the rate he was going he'd have them naked before whatever Joel was doing took over.



“Corner.” He managed as a reply, lifting his right arm from her and placing it against the side of the elevator.

There was no need to explain further. The camera was a tennis ball sized globe in the northeast corner of the elevator nearest the doors. It could see the entire space but the closest thing it had to a shadowed zone would be its opposite southwest corner. Gaelle ducked under his arm and rushed to the corner in a burst of Psi-fed speed that was just fast enough to have her make it before Evan’s predatory instincts had him on her again.

Her back was still to him, for which he was grateful. It slowed him down, forced him to plan and think about where he’d place each kiss and how he’d suckle each drop to the surface. If she’d been facing him, he’d have bitten her already, the easy access too much to overcome. He didn’t believe he’d hurt her, but he was rusty at the mechanics of The Drink and had never done it without direct sex involved. That was more of a floor show than he wanted to give if he could help it.

He just wasn’t sure he could help it.

“Joel, a little help here,” he thought frantically as his hand slipped inside of the halter dress to cup Gaelle’s breast. It would take just a tiny movement to have the dress on the floor and he wanted her open to him more than anything.

And so it was. Just as thinking about her blood had brought the sensation and taste of drinking, Evan was now taken in by the feeling of her naked in his arms, pressed against his own nude body. He knew it wasn’t true. At least, he hoped it wasn’t. But he decided if they really were stitch-less in the elevator for all of security to see, there was no reason not to make the most of it.

He kissed the slope of her neck and down along her shoulder, his teeth capturing the dark skin in delicate, sensual bites that ended as soon as they began. His hands learned the curves of her body in a way their friendship had never given opportunity, but imagination had given ample exploration. His body fed on the sounds coming from her as much as the tiny beads of blood he nursed through skin.

She gripped the handrails and arched her pelvis to his touch as he reached for her slick sex. His fingers slipped between her folds and played the hard bud of flesh at the top expertly, teasing the mini-erection out of its clitoral hood to meet more of his gentle attentions.

Phantom lips brushed over his fingers and then heartbeats later became solid, warm, seeking. Evan's hand was nuzzled aside as the new mouth claimed its prize.

"Joel," Gaelle moaned and moved against him.

Evan caressed the face he'd missed over the last year, he brushed the thick sable curls he'd wanted to see spilled on his pillow, and he listened to the sighing moans caught in Joel's throat as his friend feasted upon Gaelle. For a moment the ache of the last year was so acute that Evan was nearly thrown out of the psychic weave of fantasy. The ache quickly melted under the press of Joel's naked body against his back. It was impossible, as Evan still had his fingers entwined in Joel's curls where his head was buried between Gaelle's thighs.

"There are benefits to life on this side of death," Joel whispered.

There was no time for response as the twin images maneuvered the bodies between them. Evan groaned as he was stroked along the length of his shaft in a sweet, torturous grip. The tight, straining head was brought to Gaelle's flooded opening and a tilt of his hips, and steady pressure from Joel at his back, sent Evan sinking into her.

Evan's mouth clamped to her neck and he held them both still, adapting to the tight wetness spasming around his length. His body tried to relax and tense at once as Joel pressed into him, sinking slowly into his body with the same ease Evan had joined himself to Gaelle. There was no pain, no discomfort, no sense of intrusion, merely the blessed, erotic fullness of being penetrated. Apparently there were indeed benefits to the other side of death when it came to the perfect seduction.

Joel's hands held Evan in place by the hips as his twin image did the same to Gaelle. The two of them stood locked between the languid push of Joel's pelvis and the lazy explorations of his tongue as his manifested will did double duty. The dedicated administrations caused Evan to move in shallow thrusts inside Gaelle's bent and braced body, moving him over the hardening, quarter-sized nerve bundle again and again in time to Joel's tongue on her clit. She spasmed around his length in a continuous wave, the contractions growing stronger as the mini-quakes of pleasure stacked up toward an earth-shaking release.

Evan clenched his jaw as he tried to hold back against the pleasure onslaught. Then all at once Gaelle became a velvet fist around him, milking conscious thought away, and he let go. His jaw sprung open, his mouth latched onto her throat and his teeth slipped free, bringing a ejaculatory rush of blood that matched the shuddering flush throughout his body as he spilled into her.

Joel's mirror images increased their efforts, tearing another orgasm from Gaelle before his own manifested form cried out. The release swept through the three of them in a continuous wave and they came to the floor of the elevator in a tangle of bodies.

Three bodies.

Three, flesh and blood, fully clothed bodies.

It took Evan a moment to process it all and then to cap the overwhelming encounter with the fact that Joel was truly there sans mental projection. He reached out with trembling fingers and touched the all-to-solid arm. An arm clad in the exact dove gray silk shirt Evan himself wore. In fact, Joel's attire was identical to Evan's in every way save the small skull and crossbones pin in place of the throat closer on the rounded collar. Assured the arm was real, Evan gave it a solid punch.

"We. Have. A. Room."

Joel's only response was a laugh as he rose with the grace of the bodily-challenged and pulled his friends with him. Immediately engulfed in their embrace he managed to kiss them both before replying.

"I thought I'd cross off two things at once. I've got a lot of time to make up for here. Besides, it's not like they saw what actually happened. Another one of those perks on this side of things."

The elevator chimed and they began to ascend again.

Joel looked up at the changing numbers. "Hmm, must be harder to hold the mechanism while holding form," he whispered. "I'll have to keep that in mind for next time."

The doors glided apart as Evan and Gaelle slipped back into their respective jackets and smoothed themselves back to presentable parameters. There was so much that Evan wanted to say, but he'd engaged in all the public intimacy he could take for the night, meta or otherwise. Still, as they followed Joel down

the short hall to the double doors of their suite, Evan couldn't help but ask the thought bouncing around his mind.

"What happens now?"

Joel grinned over his shoulder and turned to face them, walking backwards towards the doors. "A great many things happen now. This," he said, placing his hands on his chest, "is not just a vague shape formed out of memory. I needed your energy the way a ghost would to manifest, but I'm truly here now that I've crossed the veil-line. My Daemon half is paying off in spades finally. I can manifest as one of them instead of your average ghost.

"You know what this means, right?"

Evan looked to Gaelle as her entire being lit up.

"The possibilities are endless." She smiled.

Joel took their hands and pulled them along with him. "They are indeed, and I know just where to start." He laughed. "I made a list and everything."

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Curtis Ladd sat back from the security console and reset the elevator's surveillance feed. He pulled out the memory card containing the incident and turned it between his fingers, its contents the only record of the unauthorized manifestation. There was no threat of losing his job over the reset. No one cared about monitoring the general Psi Sensors enough to double check behind him. They couldn't even spare a second set of eyes for the night and Curtis spent his entire shift in the security cubical alone.

Most of the expensive Psi equipment, and eyes to watch it all, were tucked in the casino security cage, set up to catch cheaters trying to read the dealers' cards or nudge the roulette wheel in their favor. The hotel owner simply didn't feel threatened by Psi ability enough to make it a priority beyond protecting his money. Of course Mr. Fritz might change his mind on Psi in general if he knew of a couple that could feed a manifestation and pull it right past the hotel's shields to create a fully fleshed form, complete with clothing.

The hotel had Psi boosters to aid their ghostly employees and guests alike but there were alarms for unauthorized use. Not a single one of which went off during the entire elevator episode. That was a rare talent that could be deeply useful, and usefulness would definitely pique Fritz' interest. Curtis couldn't let that happen.

He knew Fritz through reputation only. All of it bad. So bad that Curtis had no intention of letting the pair—the trio now—come anywhere near the wizard's radar. It was selfish, in part. Curtis had his own uses for what he'd seen on the camera feed. But at least his uses were on the up and up. Mostly.

He sat back and closed his eyes, fondling the memory card between his fingers. The images began to replay through his mind in perfect detail. Not that they could do any less as his Cyber-Psi ability uploaded the recording directly to his optic nerves. He was aroused all over again, clearly seeing the third participant and the dual efforts of the phantom lover.

Curtis could almost feel what they were feeling, and then suddenly he got a load of feelings all his own. The sensation of a warm mouth forming around his straining erection popped his eyes open. He looked down to see the head of dark red curls becoming clearer, tangible, along with the rest of the curvaceous body. It took him a breath to collect himself before he stopped her wonderful intentions.

"I appreciate the thought, love, but I've got something to tell you. I think I found another component." He pulled her up and into his lap, ignoring the lack of proper weight. If he had his way, soon enough she'd be as solid as she once was. "It won't be long now. I think by next year this time, we'll be ready. Next year and it all changes."

He held up the memory card for her to see.

"But for now, I have some new friends I want you to meet."



[Click here to find out more about Xakara.](#)

## Things Are Popping Up In Dunvegas, Part 2

By S.J. Willing

Archibald Horatio Fritz recognized he wasn't particularly a man of patience. Maybe living for a mere seven-and-a-half thousand years had done that to him. But dammit, couldn't that clown Igor get this single task done in time? All he had to do was deliver Roger Ing as soon as the tradesman entered Dunvegas, before another woman could soil the magic Fritz had planted on the mortal.

What on Earth could be keeping them?

This was going to be one of those weeks, he could tell. It started when he'd arrived at his office this morning and noticed the Marfeld Granite had been stolen, again, from his fireplace. The pitch black hole in the hearth's stone surrounding stood out as a sullen marker to its absence.

Fritz wasn't too worried about it. The problem with owning a sentient magical stone was that, when it had the mind to, it vanished at regular intervals by persuading someone to steal it. It invariably found its way back eventually, probably a year or two down the road, having caused much havoc while it traveled. After the first time, when he'd spent six months chasing the damn thing on horseback across medieval Europe, he just let it do its own thing. It was a lot simpler.

Impatiently he glanced up at the door.

Where the Hell are they?

Irritated, Fritz shuffled the papers on his desk, then settled back to reading the report he'd ordered on Roger. The fool was perfect for the job, unfortunately. Fritz just hoped Roger was man enough to do it.

Finally, there was a knock on the door. Quickly checking the local aura, Fritz recognized Igor's cold blue chill and the fuzzy puce of Roger, along with the ghostly aura of Roger's parents.

Good! Now to get down to details.

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The concierge carefully stepped back to usher me, first, into the room of gloom and doom. My initial observation, other than the tall, silver haired man who was sitting behind a huge redwood desk staring angrily at me, were the two aquariums embedded into the wall behind him. Or, to be more precise, the dozen or so toads that croaked miserably inside the aquariums, and the brass plaque engraved with a dozen names.

“Sit down, Mr. Ing. We need to talk.”

Fritz, I assumed, pointed to a high-backed leather lounge chair in front of the desk.

“You're late,” he snapped at the concierge. To give him his due the concierge paled only a little at the reprimand.

“Well, talk about rude,” Mom huffed.

“My apologies, sir, but something happened—” the concierge began.

I blushed as the sour faced employee readied himself to expose the most embarrassing moment of my life.

“I haven't got time to listen to your flimsy apologies,” Fritz cut the man short.

“Now there's a man who knows how to lead.” Dad gave a knowing nod. I groaned inwardly. Why did they have to follow me here?

“Yes, sir.” The concierge said.

“Good, you may go.”

“Very well, sir, but I should ment—”

“Now!”

“Sir.”

“Now, why couldn't you be more like Mr. Fritz, son?”

“Hush, Dad, Chuppypoo always tries his best.”

Was I ever so glad no one could see my parents except me. Still, I sat there gritting my teeth as the concierge walked out of that room with more dignity than I felt. I tried sinking back far enough into the seat that Fritz couldn't see me. Sadly, it didn't work.



“My apologies for Igor's behavior, Mr. Ing. I'm afraid his previous employer only had a bits and pieces job for him—and some very shocking habits. He almost took Igor apart.”

Fritz took a twenty dollar cigar from the humidor on his desk and then offered me one.

“Don't you dare touch it!” Mom snapped

“A limited edition Hoyo de Monterrey, very nice,” Dad said. “You should try one, son, maybe three or four.”

“I don't smoke,” I said, gently tapping my chest. “Not good for the lungs.”

Fritz shrugged and put the humidor back on his desk. I relaxed a little. The interview seemed to be going well, all things considered—if you didn't include Mom and Dad, that is.

“Well, Mr. Ing,” Fritz continued. He cut the end off the cigar and lit it. “I'm afraid I have to kill you.”

“What!” Mom screamed.

“What!” I assumed the thing squeaking was me. “Why? What have I done?”

“Let me at him, Mother.” Dad started taking swipes at Fritz. It was rather comical watching Dad's wildly swinging fists pass through the wizard. “No son of a bitch is going to kill my son without my permission.”

I looked around the room, wondering if there was some way to escape. All I could see were the mahogany paneled walls and the heavy wooden door I'd come in. Not even a window I could crash myself through. Somehow I didn't think I'd have enough time to run for freedom anyway.

“Oh, do calm down. All of you.” Fritz flicked a hand towards me and a glittering ball of yellow webbing flashed out, separated into three. Each tiny ball headed towards one of us. The tiny ball-thing smacked into my chest and burst around me, the strands and threads literally sticking me to the chair. Had I been thinking about escape?

Mom and Dad, amazingly, hadn't fared any better. I was stunned.

“What? You think I haven't encountered ghosts before?” Fritz looked at Mom and Dad. “I was exorcising your kind when I was still in diapers.”

“Changed your own diapers, too, sweetling?” Mom added sarcastically.

“Of course,” Fritz agreed. “And to clear things up, Roger, it's not about what you have or haven't done. It's about what you have to do.”

"I'm gonna kill him, Mother, when I get out of this."

"Oh, shut up." Fritz waved his hand again and suddenly we couldn't hear Dad at all, in spite of the fact he was obviously shouting. Damn, I wish I knew that trick. Somehow, though, this didn't seem the right time to ask.

"If I haven't done it," I hedged, "then all I have to do is not do it and you don't have to kill me, right?"

"That's so true, Chuppypoo."

Fritz sighed. Standing up, he began to walk around the room, his cigar ash gently wafting over to the nearest ash tray as he moved.

"I have a problem, Mr. Ing," he explained, sounding more like a chastising mother than a huge casino owner and evil wizard. "I am getting old, and my only heir is my daughter, who is extremely young and, so far, unbirthed in her magic. Do you follow me?"

"A daughter?" Uh-oh, I could almost see my mom's mind working. She'd somehow gotten past the "I Must Kill You!" bit.

"How old is she?" Mom asked.

"Uhm, yes, daughter, birthed, magic. Very clear, yes." My mind went blank. I was about to die and my mom was trying to get me a date with my killer's daughter.

Fritz gave me a pained look before continuing. Mom hummed to herself.

"This situation is unacceptable, as it would make her easy prey for anyone who wanted to take over my empire. Even dead, I cannot allow that to happen. So, I need her to come into her magic now so that I have time to train her before I die. Do you understand?"

"Unacceptable, prey, die." I nodded, my mind even blanker.

Fritz shook his head like a man in despair. Mom smiled.

"And in order to bring her magic out, she has to undergo an ancient ritual in which one specific man, which turns out to be you, makes the ultimate sacrifice and gifts her his 'vital fluid'. Then, and only then, will she be able to use the magic she was born to. Does that make sense?"

"Ritual, me, sacrifice. Yup, yup, all clear. May I go now? I have a plane to catch, somewhere in Antarctica I think, yep, my aunt lives there, you know. Very sick, very, very sick. I'm her favorite nephew, you know."

"Liar, you don't have an aunt," Mom said.

“Gee, thanks, Mom.” Which part of sacrifice, die and ritual didn't she hear? None of them sounded good on an empty stomach.

“Mr. Ing!” Fritz loomed over me like an archetypal Gandalf does to a hobbit. “You seem to misunderstand what I’m saying.”

“I got it, all right,” I stammered. “You’re going to kill me in a slow and painful ritual and use my blood to bring out your daughter’s magic.”

Fritz’s laughter echoed dully in his huge office.

“Not at all.” He smiled. “The vital fluids are of a seminal nature, Mr. Ing. I need you to seduce my daughter.”

Mom's smile grew to a grin. “Perfect!”

“Seduce?” God, this guy must be working in cahoots with my mother. I looked at Mom. Yep, definitely.

“Yes, Mr. Ing, my daughter needs to get laid to gain her magic, and your DNA, much to my shame, is the best match for awakening it thoroughly. Though, regardless of your name, I really have my doubts in your abilities to do the task.”

“But...how? I mean, I’ve never seduced anyone in my life. How could I seduce your daughter? I don’t even know her.” Not to mention I must be the only thirty year old male virgin in existence.

“I've given you a little help there,” Fritz admitted. “When you walked into Dunvegas, you probably didn't notice, but you were hit with a very powerful glamour lust spell. It will make you virtually irresistible to women.”

“Ooh.”

“Mooom!” Geesh, no escaping it. And that lust spell? I did feel something in the back of my neck as I walked in. Maybe it was more than just the normal edginess I get around paras—it would certainly explain that 'incident' on the foyer floor. “What's to guarantee I'll be able to get to your daughter first? That your spell won't just pull in the first woman I meet?”

Fritz stopped walking long enough to tap some ash off his cigar onto the top of my head.

“You,” he said. “If you so much as touch another woman it will taint the magic and I'll have to kill you.”

“Oh, dear.”

I glared at Mother and decided to keep the encounter in the foyer secret. Well, as secret as I could.

“And don’t worry about meeting my daughter. She will be far too busy for the next three days dealing with Expo business to meet you, but I’ll make sure she gets in touch with you on Tuesday. Then all you need to do is let the spell, and nature, take its course.”

“So I get to live for three more days, make love to your daughter and then die?”

“Oh, my, oh, my. A grandchild! I really shouldn’t be listening to this.” Mom again, pretending she’d come over with the pilgrims. I had a sneaky suspicion what she didn’t know about sex could be written on the heads of two pins. (I said pins, okay? It doesn’t have an e in it.)

“Precisely!” Fritz beamed.

“Why?” I asked. “Why do you have to kill me?”

“I would have thought it was pretty obvious.” Fritz looked at me, startled that I couldn’t understand. “You really don’t think I’d have you for a son-in-law, do you?”

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My first day at the Expo didn’t go well. I ended up driving off a sweet young were who’d had a massage booth next to me—trust George to leave all the scented packets unsealed. The other problem was the sales traffic. All the potential and actual buyers trooped religiously to Deathly Buzzing’s main rival, Turn Me On.

Six hours into the day, and aside from a few heated condoms for the ghosts—you know how chilly they can get—and a couple of catnip nipple rings, I’d sold virtually nothing. The only real highlight of my day was being terrorized by a rather oversized lesbian biker vampire. She did buy one of the Blow Up Bite Bods, though, and a year’s order of NearBlood, “the vampire’s closest alternative to the real thing.” The mental images of her and the doll left me enough material to keep my psychiatrist in business for year. Fortunately, by this time, Mom and Dad had become bored of hassling me and were somewhere in the hotel spying or playing tricks on the other patrons.

The day did turn out a little better, in a sad way, when Ms. Arnez, my rival at Turn Me On, was handcuffed and taken away by PMS. Goodness knows what for. The only crime she’d committed, from what I could see, was being

way too sexy. I'd be willing to bet a buck she wasn't human but couldn't even guess what she might be.

The net result of the arrest was good and bad. I got a lot more traffic. After all, what's the point of seeing good toys if there is no one there to sell them to you? Alas, I nearly had to run for my life when a giggly gang of middle-aged ladies attempted to strip and ravish me just before supper. It was Amanda Bast's arrival that saved my skin when she put the ladies to rights regarding convention etiquette and sent them packing. The damage was done, though. What with that small incident in the foyer and now here in the Count's ballroom, I was getting a reputation I really didn't want.

A reputation Ms. Bast seemed determine to try out.

My encounter with Ms. Bast can only be described in the terms of interesting. Her hand did fascinating things beneath the table as I attempted to demonstrate to a rather shy and giggly younger zombie the latest in vibrolube technology. I'd just gotten to the part where I expounded the virtues of sonic moisturizers on dry, cracked and decomposing skin, when I felt my zipper being pulled open.

I made a polite, panicked dash to the restroom and locked myself in a cubicle for a good half hour. You know, if I could bottle what Fritz had done to me I'd be able to open my own marital aids company and be a millionaire in days.

When I did peek out again, Ms. Bast had vanished and the area around the booth was empty of people. I'd had enough for one day and decided to call it a night. Hopefully I'd get some peace and quiet before Mom and Dad came back to the room. I knew they'd missed arguing about me and what a failure their only son had been.

In spite of the crowds moving around the convention, I had the good fortune of having an elevator to myself, which was just as well. I couldn't imagine what being trapped in here with a glamour lust-affected woman would be like. I tried to pull myself together. I should be enjoying these last few days of my life, not laying on the bed listening to my parents fight as we watched reruns of "I Love Lucy."

Up on the twelfth floor, I stepped out of the elevator, distracted by a lot of thoughts, mainly by the unfair death sentence Fritz had put over me. The babbling couple who got off the elevator next to mine took even more of my

attention. What was so amusing about spouting numbers like “17,” “25” at each other?

Then again, it had to be amusing enough to prevent me seeing the third guy who'd come with them. I'd barely had time to step around him when...

“Oomph!”

I landed face down on top of a rather familiar woman. Rather than stammer my way out of this repeated and highly embarrassing position, I decided to let my suave and sophisticated side deal with it.

“Oh. Hi.” I smiled.

Blonde and frizzy said nothing. Instead she wriggled her hips in a rather delightful manner. Her smile grew as a certain part of my anatomy did as well.

“Now I know you're pleased to see me,” she said, giving me a peck on the nose that was somehow more intimate than the long kiss she'd given me downstairs. “But if you don't want me to succumb to your charms and do even more of what I did downstairs, I suggest we stand up.”

“Oh. Right. Yes.” Hey, I can be as sophisticated as the next guy.

Levering myself off the floor I managed to stand and, holding out a hand, helped her to stand too.

“Since we, er, keep bumping into each other, may I know your name?” I helped her brush the dust bunnies off the back of her shoulders and back. She wriggled with a quiet “Hmmm” when I went accidentally too low and stroked her buttocks. Just to make sure her pants were dust free, I stroked them again.

“Uhndame,” she answered as she shivered, giving me a damn sexy look. She was having a very hard time fighting the glamour lust spell. Guiltily I took my hand off her. She shuddered as I did. “Amanda Uhndame.”

“I'm, well, Roger In... Ah, just call me Roger.” I held out my hand and she took it and shook it firmly.

“I recall Igor telling me your name, Mr. Ing. And please call me Amanda.”

“Hi, Amanda. I'm sorry about all the...tumbling and stuff. It's not normally me.”

“It's not usually what I do, either,” she said. “Though it hasn't been all that unpleasant, has it?”

I blushed. It had been far from unpleasant. “It has been nice. A little,” I finally admitted.

Amanda laughed, a sound that tickled in my ears and made its way towards the throbbing in my groin. This woman was doing things to me than none of my teenaged dates could have even dreamed of.

“I tell you what,” Amanda said, slapping my rather, ah, lustful thoughts back into hiding. “I was just on my way out from work. Let me take you to dinner, as a kind of apology.”

“Oh, no, no apology needed.”

“So you'd rather stay in your room all night?” She cocked her head to one side with a look so disarming it should have been illegal.

All night in my room, with Mom and Dad's ectoplasmic verbal jabbering. Suddenly dinner with this woman—even with Fritz's death threat hanging over my head—seemed perfectly wonderful. Although if she kept looking at me that way, I'd find it hard to keep my hands off her, and she didn't have a glamour lust spell hanging around her head.

“No, you're right, I need to go out, but please. I'm the one who's been walking into you. Let me pay.”

“Don't be stupid,” she said, linking her arm with mine as if it was the most natural thing in the world. I tried to ignore the burning hunger such a simple contact shouldn't make me feel. “Where I'm taking us, we get to eat for free.”

“Free sounds good to me.” I grinned. “But I thought it was just the two of us?”

No one had ever laughed at my jokes before...I was grinning all the way down to the foyer.

Free supper turned out to be in one of the hotel restaurants, in this case The Abyss. Not a place I would have come alone, mainly because it was so dim, with artfully placed atmospheric lighting and no outside windows. Also it seemed to be set up almost entirely for the paras.

Food for the humans consisted of two appetizers, one of which was the aforementioned Rat on a Stick, and the other was equally unmentionable.

“You sure you don't want any of the Eyeball Toasties?” Amanda asked as she popped another of the battered and deep fried morsels in her mouth.

“No, I’m sure. I want to save room for the oysters and the surf and turf you’ve ordered.” It was a lie, but having seen the size of the appetizer, it could very well turn out to be the truth.

Instead, whenever I could turn my eyes away from the vision of beauty stuffing fried eyeballs into her mouth, I looked into the huge aquarium of the hotel. The Abyss, a feat of amazing engineering, had been built two floors beneath ground level, and one whole side of the restaurant consisted of thick glass. Just beyond the glass was the aquarium, lit up now with colored spotlights that left nothing to the imagination.

Trust me, seeing a kraken mate with four mermaids and three mermen at the same time left nothing to the imagination.

There was also a dreamlike quality to the room caused by the ever-changing light patterns as they sifted through the eddying water and into the restaurant. If I hadn’t been so worried about the food soon to arrive—and whether I could eat it—I’d have appreciated the atmospherics a little more.

“So you work here then?” Yeah, all right, it was a dumb question but I had to start somewhere.

“Well, not specifically.” Amanda sat back, wiping those gorgeous lips with her napkin. “You could call me more of a district manager, I guess. I look after the southern United States interests for Morgan Hotels. We have a dozen or so hotels scattered below the Mason-Dixon line. I’ve just come as an extra hand for the weekend. The ParaPleasures Expo really pulls on our local resources.”

I couldn’t help giving her the once-over, thinking there were certainly a few things I could pull on. Amanda laughed, and I blushed, realizing how rude I’d just been.

“So, if you’re human why do you work with...” I couldn’t quite bring myself to name them.

“Paras,” Amanda prompted, forcing me to nod. “Probably the same reason you do,” she answered. “I’m just a little bit not-human.”

“I’m fully human. Why do you think I’m not?” I refused to pout. Pouting didn’t look good on a man.

“Well, for example, I’m glad you didn’t bring your parents along with you for dinner.” Amanda slipped the remark in casually, as a plate of oysters, almost as big as the table, was brought to us.



"I couldn't; they're dead." The words come out of my mouth like a cracked record. Then I stopped and looked at her. "Oh, my God! You could see them?"

"Clearer than I could see how pleased you were to meet me."

"This is so embarrassing. I'm so sorry. I mean, what my Dad said..."

"Don't worry about it. You're not the only one with ectoparental issues."

Then it struck me—all that spinning she did to talk to nobody in the foyer. "Your parents?"

"I guess you didn't see them, huh? My mother was choosing names for her grandchild before Igor managed to drag you off me."

"But how come you can see my folks, and I can't see yours?" I swallowed dryly. Were her parents here?

I peeked around the room, checking to see if anything looked slightly paler than normal. Or something moved by itself. I thought there might be a shadow on the back of a Sumo wrestler sitting just behind Amanda. He was probably here as part of the entertainment, though why he wasn't dressed beat me.

"They're not here, you'll be relieved to know." Amanda interrupted my search. "They're off spying on any unfortunate couple they can find. And give it time. By the end of the weekend hanging around this lot—" she indicated the paras sitting around us "—you'll be able to see a lot more than just our parents. The skill seems to be one that people like us absorb from being in proximity to paras."

"Not just us," I said bitterly. "Mr. Fritz can see them too."

"What are you messing around with Mr. Fritz for?" she asked, sounding suddenly very concerned.

I shrugged. "He made me an offer I can't refuse." No point dwelling on it.

"Oh." Amanda's tone was as leaden as a coffin lid slamming shut. "One of those offers." Her mood shifted a little and her eyes changed. She was a lot less open and far more difficult to read.

Knowing that I'd probably just ruined what had been a good evening, I picked up an oyster in the shell and, following Amanda's example, let it slide into my mouth, trying to figure out how to eat it from there.

"Don't you worry about Mr. Fritz," she said eventually, patting my hand and sending spikes of lust through me. "Just eat your food. Then we'll go back to my place and have the best hot monkey sex we've ever had."

The Sumo guy didn't seem too happy to have my half-masticated oyster plastered on his back.

*To be continued...*



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# I Dream of Desi

by Jenna Leigh

Desdemona Arnez hurried under the long white fangs poised in perpetual bite that marked the entrance to the Fifth Annual ParaPleasure Expo. She skirted a group of people who seemed to be watching a couple writhing on the floor. She wasn't sure but she thought they might be attempting to demonstrate how to have sex with their clothes on. It wasn't an easy feat, but it wasn't impossible either; she'd done it before. She heard someone say, "Mom!" and winced. She'd never done it with her parents watching, though.

Sparing a smile for Amanda Bast, the well-dressed hostess of the Dunvegas Hotel's casino, she kept walking. She didn't have time to stop and gab with the other woman about who had gotten more catcalls that week. Bast always won because she whistled at herself.

She spotted her booth, which was unfortunately still in sight of the fanged entryway, but there was no help for that because she'd picked this spot. Thinking of what she'd done to snag such a plum location made her right eyelid twitch. Even more annoying was that she now had a new number one fan, who was gazing at her from across the crowded room.

Andre gave her his best randy goat grin while smoothing his hands down his long, black coat and her eyes involuntary followed the same path. Unfortunately, the coat wasn't quite long enough to hide the fact that he was indeed a horny little satyr, in more ways than one.

She jerked her gaze away and concentrated on lining up her stock according to size, color, speed, and flexibility, hoping that if she didn't look up again, he'd get the picture and leave her alone. She couldn't get that lucky.

Sure enough, the clatter of his shiny black hooves on the floor warned her that he wasn't going to give up that easily. "Desi, how long will you make me suffer?" When he whined, his voice sounded like the bleating of a goat.

With an irritated sigh, she tossed her long, black hair over her shoulder and gave him a glare designed to wither even the most stalwart of men.

However, Andre was made of sterner stuff and simply stared back out of a pair of bright golden eyes that reminded her of a goat. He'd lived up to the randy part the night before. "But Desi, I love you."

She slapped a whip down on the counter and he flinched. "Look, Andre, I told you, I don't do love, I do sex. That's it."

"I could live with that."

With a low growl, she came out from behind the counter, standing toe to hoof with him. "Go away before I hurt you."

Instead of running away, Andre took her hands in his and took a deep breath, his eyes bright with lust. "Ooh, really?"

Sighing, her anger cooled and her shoulders slumped. "No."

"Aw."

"Is there a problem?" A sexy rumble vibrated along her spine, heading straight into the crotch of her panties with unerring precision. Desi went on her toes to see over Andre's shoulder and locked gazes with one of the handsomest men she'd ever seen. Her stomach clenched and her knees went weak. Andre mistook her reaction and tightened his hold, but she was glad for it, because she needed help standing up right then.

A pair of green eyes stood out in stark contrast against dark lashes so thick they gave her a pang of envy. His hair reminded her of autumn leaves, in every color of red, brown and gold together in a longish, shaggy cut that almost reached his shoulders. His mouth was a shade too full, and the lower half of his jaw covered in stubble. Combined with the long, lean body packed into the untucked black t-shirt and faded Levi's, he looked like he'd just rolled out of bed. She wouldn't mind rolling him right into hers.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" Mr. Sex on a Stick asked and her hormones, which had been on full alert, came to a screeching halt. Even as handsome as he was, that line wasn't going to cut it with her.

With as icy a tone as she could muster, she replied, "I doubt it," and shook free of Andre's hold. It was the truth; she'd have remembered this man. Unless... Frantically, she searched her memory. Talk about an awkward moment. Well, only for her. After all, none of her victims knew her real identity.

As a succubus, Desi invaded men's dreams, granting their wildest fantasies. In return, she fed off the energy they generated. She'd survived for three centuries because, unlike some of her greedier sisters, she didn't take too much, which meant she'd visited a whole bunch of men.

However, when she was in the waking world, she preferred to wear the face she'd had as a mortal. So, while it was possible that she'd made a sex pit stop at Sir Studly's, she wasn't too worried about him recognizing her, because she'd bet anything that he'd chosen blonde and brainless to be his dream girl. Though she'd never had any complaints in the breast department, she wasn't blonde and she definitely wasn't brainless.

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Lucian stared at the woman standing beside the counter and wondered why he'd gotten a tip about her. Those toys on the counter, some he didn't even know the use for, didn't really look very dangerous and she couldn't be hiding anything in that red leather halter, because there simply wasn't room for anything else.

He knew he shouldn't have asked about seeing her somewhere before, because the moment the words left his mouth, her dark eyes went flat and hard. Damn, she thought he was trying to pick her up. Not that he'd mind if she said yes.

Her hair was pulled up in a ponytail, leaving it to fall in a shiny ribbon of inky, black silk, long enough to bounce off her ass when she turned and hurried back to her booth. As he stared, a grin stretched across his mouth. He remembered that ass. Round, soft and firm, he'd had his hands on that, using it to hold her in place as he'd thrust inside...

"Who are you?" The angry question jerked him back to the present.

He blinked at the sight before him. The creature had furred legs and hooves and tiny horns, so it had to be a satyr. He wore a long, black coat, and on that coat was a tag that read Andre. More importantly it said he was an employee of the Expo.

Lucian jerked his head to one side and Andre followed. Thankfully, the woman was distracted. Off to their left, a vampire emerged from the private tent of Zee Kirkland's Magic Touch Massage booth, transformed into a bat and took off. Apparently frightened, a tourist squeaked and ducked beneath the counter,

watching as the bat flapped off into the night sky. “My name’s Lucian Ballantine. I work for Paranormal and Magical Security.”

“PMS?” Andre laughed so hard he could barely speak.

“That’s Paranormal and Magical Security,” Lucian gritted out, trying to keep his voice down.

“Yeah, but we call it PMS because everyone who works there is so bitchy.” Andre smirked.

“Whatever.” He shrugged, acting as though he didn’t hate the initials. “Look, maybe you can help me.” Lucian nodded in the woman’s direction. “Who is she?”

Andre narrowed his eyes. “Why do you want to know?”

“Someone sent me a note, said I was supposed to watch this booth and the person in it.”

All traces of amusement fled the satyr’s face. “Is she contagious?” He leaned forward, gasping for breath, his naturally golden skin ashen. “We, uh, you know.” Andre bit his lip and danced around on his hooves.

“What’s her name?” Lucian asked.

“Desi. At least that’s what she told me.” He glanced back at Desi, who seemed to be unaware that they were talking about her, then back at Lucian. “Look, just give it to me straight. How long do I got?”

Lucian had been staring at Desi too, taking in the way the light turned her skin the color of caramels. It made him hungry.

“Hey! Will you answer me? I’m dyin’ here and you’re communing with Richard and his two brothers down in Pantsville!” Andre snapped his fingers in front of Lucian’s face.

“What in the hell are you talking about?”

“I know you’re dazed by the way she looks. She’s hot, but watch it or you’ll get burned!” Andre paused for a breath, but before Lucian could correct him, he was off again. “I was once like you until I woke up.” The satyr gave him a piteous look that lasted a split second before changing to fear once more. “Now, tell me what’s wrong with her or I’ll—” As if a suddenly thought occurred to him, he stopped in mid-sentence and gagged. Lucian obligingly slapped him on the back until he held up a hand for him to stop. Swallowing hard, Andre took

a deep breath and started babbling. “She is a she, right? I haven’t suddenly started playin’ for the other team without knowing it, have I?”

Lucian let him suffer before he answered, “Naw, she’s a she.” Then, just because the other man pissed him off, he added, “As far as I know.”

Andre scuttled off with a quick, “See you later, Desi!” over his shoulder.

“Not if I see you first,” she muttered, then gave Lucian another glare.

He wondered if she had another expression and found out a second later, when her eyes lit with a smile. For the first time, he noticed that they weren’t really black, but a deep blue, like the sky right before dawn. She also had a dimple in each cheek, not something he thought dangerous creatures had.

Her smile got wider and his dick stood up straight and took notice. Tingles slid along his skin, starting at the top of his head, getting very friendly at all the good spots on the way to his toes. Her smile wasn’t for him, though.

“Hello, welcome to the ParaPleasure Expo. Oh, wait.” She stopped and pulled a lanyard out from under the counter, looping it over her head. “Sorry, I forgot my nametag. I’m Desdemona, but you can call me Desi. How can I help you?”

She touched her customer’s arm and an arc of blue fire visible only to Lucian slid from her hand onto the man’s fingers. Almost immediately, red came from his hand and melded with the blue, tinting it a deep violet shade. Ah, shit, his tip was good. But it didn’t seem to bother the old dude. On the contrary, he looked mighty happy to be there, so Lucian got just close enough to watch and listen.

The little bald man stared up at Desi in adoration. “I’m looking for something for my um...”

She fluttered her lashes at him. “Let me guess, your wife?”

“Oh, ah, how did you know?”

Lucian rolled his eyes. *How about that ring on your finger, you old fool?*

“I can spot a satisfied man a mile off.” Desi leaned on the counter and the man’s eyes almost popped out of his head at the view. So did Lucian’s. “You have this glow about you,” she cooed.

“I do?” Beads of sweat popped on baldy’s head, so she was half right. “I mean, I do! Yes, of course I do.”

“What’s your name?”

“Fred.”

“Well, Fred, I think you and your wife need this.” She picked up a small purple vibrator with a little rabbit on the end. “And this and oh, yes, this. Now here’s what you do.” She leaned close and whispered in his ear.

Fred jerked back and stared at her with wide eyes. “I don’t think Jackie would like that.”

“Trust me, Fred. I’m a woman and I like that, a lot.” Desi smothered a giggle behind her hand. Lucian wanted to gag at her little act, but he wasn’t too surprised when Fred walked away with a black bag with pink hearts and the words Turn Me On written in bright pink.

With the men, she got them to buy a toy for themselves or their partners. Most single men, she sold a DVD.

With the women, she was either a confidant, a co-conspirator against a man who didn’t understand their needs, or just a girlfriend who knew they didn’t need a man if they had batteries. However, almost every customer walked away with a bag, and more importantly, they left a tiny bit of their aura behind with Desi. Each time her aura flared, he smelled something that made him crazy.

He’d been struck by lightening at the age of twelve, and since then, he’d been able to hear people’s thoughts and see the occasional vision of the past or the future. However, he’d never had smells involved before. Yet when Desi started using her magic, the teasing smell of roses and some indefinable sweet scent wafted past his nose. It made him feel hungry, horny and pissed off all at the same time. It also made his psi-senses go haywire.

Desi laughed with one of her female customers and he inhaled sharply. The smell was so strong it fogged his senses, breaking down his shields, triggering a vision that was more vivid than he’d ever had before.

He lay on a bed in a strange room with plain white walls. He thought he was alone until he noticed a woman standing in the shadows. The light was dim, but her blonde hair and bright blue eyes seemed to glow, as did the long red robe she wore. “Did you call me?”

“Yes.”

Apparently, this was the right answer, because she let the robe fall to reveal soft white flesh and crawled up his body. Once astraddle him, she braced her arms on either side of his head, leaning down to kiss him softly on the mouth.



He shivered when her long, silky hair tickled his bare skin. She laughed and shook her head, her lips curving into a mysterious smile. "Don't you recognize me?" Her blonde hair darkened until it was raven black, and her eyes turned a familiar midnight shade. Desi!

It took effort, but he thrust himself out of the vision. She'd been inside his head before, and from the familiar way she acted, it hadn't been the first time either. Cold rage filled him, killing every bit of lust he'd been feeling for her.

He'd seen enough, so he pushed away from the wall and walked over to her in case she decided to run. "You're good."

"What can I say?" With a weary sigh, she leaned against the counter. "Sex sells."

"Too bad I'm going to have to haul you in for magical mischief."

"What?" Her eyes went wide when he pulled out a pair of magically enforced cuffs. "I did no such thing! How dare you!" She stopped talking when he snapped the first one in place and pulled her other arm behind her back, securing them in place.

"What gives you the right to arrest me?"

"Paranormal and Magical Security." He flashed his badge before hooking his fingers in the cuffs. He ignored her pleading look, sure it was just another of her little tricks.

She proved him right when in the next second her eyes turned blood red. Then, surprisingly, she smiled, or not so surprisingly, when he heard her question. "Para what? PMS, are you joking?"

"Unfortunately I'm not." She tugged at the restraints, and he tightened his grip, knowing the spell in the cuffs would keep her from getting loose. Without magical aid, she could overpower him and take off to parts unknown, never to be seen again.

He was only a human after all; he didn't possess any extra strength. All he had on his side was a psychic ability to sense magic. He leaned in and sniffed. Desi smelled like roses but she was full of shit.

Once the elevator door closed, the scent got suddenly stronger and Lucian gave her a predatory smile as he walked towards her. She frowned, backing away, but he kept coming until she was trapped between him and the wall.

"Desi, you've got some explaining to do."

Desi wet her lips nervously and gave her best innocent eyes to the man who'd made it his mission to ruin her night. "What's your name?" When he didn't answer, just continued to stare down at her, she tried another tack. "I can't breathe, you know." She wiggled.

He blinked once and shook his head as if clearing the fog from his brain. "What? Oh, yeah, I'm Lucian Ballantine, I work for..."

"PMS, yes, I heard you." She rolled her eyes. "I'm not surprised. You've been a pain in my ass since I first laid eyes on you."

"You smell..." He buried his face against her neck and inhaled.

Cuffed as she was, she could only shove at him with her chest. It wasn't very effective, and it made her nipples stand up and try to see what was going on. It was safer for her to glare and seethe. "I beg your pardon."

He frowned and stepped back, but she noticed that it seemed like he had to force himself to do so. "Um...you smell really, really good." He drawled out the last word and grinned, aiming a kiss at her mouth, missing and hitting her cheek.

"Oh, pooh!"

"Pooh? You said pooh? Don't you curse?" He seemed to find that hilariously funny, doubling over with laughter.

"Forgive me for not being foulmouthed enough for you!" She frowned when he slid down to sit on the floor. "Idiot."

"I like your accent when you get angry." He curled his fingers right below her knee, squeezing slightly, and she jerked. Heat gathered low in her stomach and the muscles quivered in anticipation.

"I don't have an accent." She stomped her foot and his hand fell away.

"Yes, you do." He simply placed his hand a little higher on her thigh, sliding his fingers up and down in little circles. "Where are you from?"

"Hell." At that, the doors opened and she stalked out, leaving him on the floor.

Desi scurried down the hall, looking for someone to trick into taking off her cuffs. Just as she reached the next set of elevators, one of them lit up and the

doors began to open. She ran for the cover of a dusty fake palm by the ice machine.

A whistling man dressed in a tatty rocker tee and faded jeans came out carrying a covered tray. While he didn't look like her idea of a waiter, he was a man and that was all that mattered. She blinked her eyes so tears would form and then called out, "Sir!"

He turned and stared down at her but didn't seem moved by her distress, just stood twirling the tray on one finger like a basketball player. "Where did you come from?" He looked over her shoulder as if expecting someone to be with her.

"I'm running from a very bad man. Will you please help me?" she asked in her best helpless female voice.

"No, and you best not try and make me, either." He actually stepped back.

What? She didn't look dangerous. Men were idiots! "Grr!"

"Grr to you, too." He growled at her and then smiled to show off some very sharp teeth.

"You're a were!" It was her turn to step back.

Footsteps thudded down the hall behind her, and though she knew it had to be Lucian, she was sort of glad not to be alone with this weird man anymore.

"Did you lose something?" The man smirked.

"I'm being kidnapped and you won't even help me!" Unable to give it up, she let a few of the tears fall.

He laughed. "Does that ever work?"

She stopped crying instantly and snarled, "Shut up, flea-magnet! If I'd known you were a werewolf, I'd have offered you raw steak as a bribe." Without looking, she twisted and kicked backwards, hitting Lucian in the shin, and took off running.

In two steps, Lucian grabbed her around the waist, hauling off her feet. He turned and faced the other man. "Hi, Harry, thanks for stalling her until I uh..."

"Took a whiz, ate lunch. What, Lucky?" Harry raised one brow and waited for him to explain why his prisoner had been running loose, but Lucian didn't know. All he remembered was the elevator door closing and then feeling really happy and there was no other word for it. Horny.

He was saved from answering because the little bundle of anger who'd been content spitting curses at him chose to up the ante and sink her teeth into his leg, so he howled instead. "Christ, Desi, stop that!" When he finally pried her teeth out of his leg, then off his fingers, Lupin was laughing. "What's so damned funny?"

"Lucian and Desi?" Lupin grinned at him.

"Yeah, and?"

"Oh, come on! Lucky and Desi," Harry snickered.

"Ha ha, so damn funny. How many times have I told you not to call me Lucky?"

"You have no sense of humor."

"Maybe you just can't tell a joke."

"I'm going to throw up," Desi warned.

Lucian rolled his eyes. "I'm taking her to my room for questioning."

"Big bed in that room."

"Piss off." Lucian started to walk away and then remembered something. "Hey, wait, tell me something." He lifted Desi up a little, so her head was closer to Lupin's face. "Does she smell to you?"

Harry stayed well out of reach of her mouth. Seeing how she'd just tried to take a chunk out of Lucian, he couldn't really blame the other man. Lucian inhaled and then frowned. "Smells like any girl. Just wet."

"Wet?"

"Tears." Harry sniffled, and with one last smirk at Desi, who sneered back at him, he sauntered off.

"Tears? Did he make you cry?" Lucian let her slide down, holding her arm just above the elbow, so he could lead her to the blue room.

"No, but I'll make you cry if you don't let me go."

"Blah blah yadda yadda."

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Harry Lupin peered around the corner to make sure they were gone before taking out his cell phone. He punched in a number and started walking. "Just lettin' you know, they're together, bye." He paused, listening. "No, no and no. Hey! You said all I'd have to do was give him the paper with her name on it and

the rest would take care of itself. From what I could tell, he's already had one of those episodes you talked about."

When the other person kept talking, he sighed in exasperation. "Look, lady, I have things going on that I have to take care of, too, you know, so those two are on their own. But she's mean." He stopped again and looked back the way he'd come. "She won't hurt him, will she?" Lupin curled his lip. "Ugh! I didn't need to know all of that! Just a simple yes or no will do. Fine. Well, yes ma'am." He hung up and rolled his eyes. "Some people think they're god's gift or somethin'." He hefted the tray in his hand and started down the hall.

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Lucian held onto Desi's elbow until he got to his room. He slid his keycard through the slot and opened the door, automatically letting out a long sigh as he walked into the room that Dunvegas provided for him. Everything was in blues, from the palest shade that was almost white to a dark midnight of the bedspread. Some wizard with a decorating bent said these colors suited his psyche best and helped him relax.

Desi's breath tickled his ear. "If you'll promise to let me go, I'll make your wildest fantasies come true." How in the hell did she get so close so fast? Well, there went relaxing.

Once he had Desi's hands safely cuffed to the sturdiest chair in the room, he sat as far away from her as possible, which unfortunately was on the bed "Ms..." He paused. "What is your last name?"

"Arnez."

He put his hand over his mouth. "Your last name is Arnez?" He snickered.

She frowned. "What is so funny about my name? That wereperson laughed at my name and yours as well."

Lucian stopped laughing. "My name's Lucian Ballantine. Harry has always called me Lucky."

"Desi Arnez and Lucky Ballantine." Her pouty red lips thinned. "I don't find anything funny about that at all."

He coughed. "Neither do I. Look, Ms. Arnez, when you said my wildest fantasies, were you offering me sex or what?"

Desi's eyes widened. "I most certainly did not! What do you take me for?"

"I'm trying to figure that out. You took something from your customers tonight." He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. "But you also gave them a little bit of your aura." He held up his hand when she opened her mouth. "I can see these things, so don't even try and deny it."

She sucked in her breath, which had an interesting effect on her cleavage, but he refused to let that sway him. Much. Lucian decided it might be best if he looked somewhere else.

"I'm a succubus, it's what I do." Her voice was soft. He thought she was frightened, so he was surprised when he caught the angry expression on her face.

"How old are you?"

"Older than you." She managed to look down her nose at him even though he'd stood and begun to pace. "You're not supposed to ask a lady that question."

He stopped in front of her and rocked back and forth on his heels. "Okay, then, why did you mark those people?"

"For future visits, of course."

"What?" His mouth fell open in shock.

"I haven't hurt anyone since the Civil War." She wiggled her shoulders. "That soldier recovered completely, and more importantly, he didn't hurt any more innocent women after he woke up."

"I umm... what?" He stared at her. She appeared younger than his own thirty years but had just stated calmly that she'd been alive over a hundred years ago. He concentrated on something else. "What do you do, exactly?"

Desi peered at him from beneath her lashes. "I can't explain it. I'd have to show you."

Lucian's skin prickled and his dick woke up, pointing in her direction like a divining rod that had found a well. "I don't think that's a good idea." He shifted in his chair. *Down boy.*

"That's the only way you'll be able to prove that I'm not a danger to everyone around me." She smiled at him, and he swallowed thickly past the sudden lump in his throat. "Close your eyes." Her voice reverberated in his head.

His eyes grew heavy but he forced them open. "Wait." He shook his head. "How do I know you won't kill me?"

Her smile widened. "You'll just have to trust me."

Desi thought she'd have a chance to escape when Lucian took off the cuffs. He must have been able to read her intentions, however, because he'd only unfastened one so she could get out of the chair, immediately placing the other on his wrist.

He pulled her along behind him, turning when she balked and dug in her heels. "What's wrong?"

"We don't actually do um..." She pointed at the big bed looming in front of them.

"I figured that out, but I'd rather be comfortable for this little experiment in idiocy." With that, he lay down and tugged on her hand. "I won't hurt you either, you know," he whispered when she just stood staring at him.

She forced a smile and lay down on her back as far away as the length of chain would allow.

"Now what?"

She jumped at his question, but he grabbed her so she wouldn't fall off the bed.

"Just close your eyes and relax." Since they were already holding hands, she simply used that to make a connection. She didn't have to be touching someone to do it, but this was the easiest way. She wound a small tendril of her power out, frowning when it immediately latched onto his aura. It shouldn't have been that easy unless...

"Lucian, have we met before?" As she asked the question, she turned her head. Immediately, she realized her mistake, because even though he was asleep, his eyes were wide open. She gazed into the green depths and was helplessly sucked into the dark abyss of Lucian's dreams.

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Lucian realized two things almost immediately. One, a dream blowjob is almost as good as the reality. Two, he didn't like it. "Lady, get off me."

The blonde who'd just been deep throating him pulled away and frowned up at him. "Why?"

"I don't know you." He pushed her away, zipping up his jeans. "Where is..." He paused, trying to remember something.

The blonde with no name giggled and pressed a kiss to his thigh. He barely suppressed a scream.

She sighed and sank back down to her knees. "Where is what? Would you like different hair?"

"Your hair's fine."

She raked her hands through the mass of curls and they turned red. He stared at her with his mouth hanging open. She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "Fine, then, about bigger breasts." She closed her eyes and her brows dipped down in concentrations. She took a deep breath, or he thought that's what she'd done, but he noticed that her chest didn't go back down.

"Holy shit, three sizes at least. They're Grinch boobs!"

She laughed huskily, then clapped her hand over her mouth. With another snort of laughter, she stood and paced away from him, tossing her long, red hair over her shoulder so that it tumbled down her back. "Lucian, what do you want?"

He liked her laugh, but the ass was even better. Something clicked, and the scent of roses filled the room. "I'd like Desi, please."

All traces of laughter fled her voice with her next comment. "What did you say?"

"It's my dream." He stared at the strange redhead. "You're pretty, but you're not her." *Well, he thought, you are her, but I'd rather see the real you.* However, he wasn't fool enough to say it aloud.

"I...uh." She swallowed hard.

"Fine, just give me a Desi clone." He leaned back on the bed that matched his in the waking world and smiled. He'd just flummoxed a succubus. It wasn't as if she could hide it, because right now she had a pale complexion. Or she would if she weren't blushing so hard she matched that red hair.

"All right." Her hair darkened as did her skin and eyes until she looked just like Desi down to the tiny mole beside her lower lip. He'd noticed that when they got on the elevator and had wanted to lick it. Now, he could.



She'd also put on a short red nightgown that shimmered with each breath she took. "Lucian." She stepped forward only to stop. "I don't know how to explain this, but I've tasted your energy before."

"I know." And he didn't care.

"You don't mind?" Desi was suddenly in front of him, her expression sad, but also hungry.

Warning bells sounded deep within. He ignored them because he was getting sex with this woman, dream sex but still sex. "Not a bit."

"Good." Her tone made him look at her again, or it could have been her fingers sliding up and down the zipper of his jeans. "I've waiting too long between real feedings. It makes me a little bit—" She let her voice trail off at the same time as she undid the button.

"Oh, damn." He sucked in his breath and watched as she slowly unzipped his fly and pushed it open. She skimmed the nail of her index finger up and down the trail of hair that ran from his belly button to the top of his briefs before sliding beneath the waistband. He was hot, hard and ready, leaping at her fingertips.

"Do you want me to stop?" When he didn't answer, she pulled his briefs down and licked him once. "Honey, do you want me to stop?"

"Are you insane?" He ground out, lifting up towards her mouth. She took him in her mouth, her eyes never leaving his. It was the hottest thing she could have done.

She laughed and her hand gripped him tighter. "Trying to get away from me?" Her voice vibrated along the length of his shaft and he groaned, gritting his teeth to hold back the tingling at the base of his spine. "Tell me, Lucian."

"I'll tell you anything you wanna know, just..." He bit back a yelp when she raked her teeth up and down the length of him, tugging on his balls at the same time. Hell, she was trying to kill him. She was a little Nazi; surely that's where she'd learned her torture techniques.

"Do you like this?" She laughed, low in her throat, and moved faster, her cheeks drawing in with the force of the suction. She gripped the base of his cock with her fingers, skimming her teeth and tongue over the underside of the head right where he was the most sensitive. How the hell did she know that? Oh, wait, maybe it was the groaning and thrashing around.

“Yes,” he managed before she swirled her tongue in the opening at the head of his cock. She opened her mouth and took another long suck. He yelled her name and felt fire race down his spine. Almost. Dear God, please.

He tunneled his fingers in her hair, pulling her close. His body tightened as he plunged back and forth, a little too roughly, forgetting to be gentle.

She pressed her lips together and fucked him with her mouth, sucking and pulling back. He said her name with a gasp, his hips pistoning back and forth. She made a sexy little noise, somewhere between a whimper and a hum, tickling him. He knew then that he was going to lose it. His cock jerked in her mouth, and he tried to push her back.

Desi was having none of it, though. Her fingers curled over his wrists, holding on with surprising strength. She sucked and licked; then, with a low growl, she nipped him. With a yell, he exploded and fell back onto the bed gasping for breath.

She followed him down, her mouth on him, still making that hungry little noise that wasn't sexy anymore. Now it was terrifying.

Lucian felt like he'd been run over by a truck. More correctly, like he'd been sucked dry by a succubus. He opened his eyes and saw nothing but blackness. He couldn't move, either, and panic set in, so he did the intelligent thing and screamed bloody murder.

He heard a crash and cursing. Then someone shined a bright white light in his eyes and intoned, “Go toward the light.”

Wait a damn minute. That voice was familiar. More importantly, it didn't belong to a dead person. Well, not yet. Once he felt better, he planned to fix that little detail.

“Shut up, Andre,” Another, voice, female and sultry, said. “And turn off that light.” He was plunged in darkness again.

“Well, pooh!” the female huffed. Wait, Desi said that, too. “Let there be light. However, let it be ambient and flattering.” The lamp by his head his head flickered on. “That's much better.” He blinked to clear his eyes and stared at his guests. A tall woman with long, blonde hair and bright blue eyes smiled at the lamp as if it had preformed a trick. Seeing how it had somehow exchanged

its plain 60-watt bulb for a dim, pinkish one when he wasn't looking, he guessed it had.

She wore a dark green dress that plunged down in the front, exposing an awful lot of white skin. In fact, a blue jewel winked at him from her navel. With a sigh, she smoothed her skirts and held out her hand. "Come along, Lucian, you've got to straighten out this mess."

Lucian sat up and the room immediately spun. He held his head and groaned. "What happened to me? I feel like shit."

"Crybaby." Andre smirked at him.

"Andre," the woman said in a tone of warning.

"Who are you?" Lucian asked, ignoring the woman's tapping foot.

When he didn't move, she made an impatient noise. "If you'll come along, you'll find out."

He stood up slowly and the dizziness hit him again, but after a second, it passed. "Okay, fine. But let me get a shirt."

"No time!" She grabbed his hand and Andre's and his room simply disappeared.

They reappeared inside the offices of Paranormal and Magical Security. Lucian's stomach was now in his left foot and his heart was under his right knee. He swallowed thickly. No, it was behind his tonsils and the two of them were about to make an escape attempt.

"Who in the hell are you?" he gurgled at the woman who'd just tried to kill him.

"Aphrodite, darling, how nice of you to visit." His boss, Dana Morelli, strode from her office with her teeth bared in the scariest excuse for a smile he'd ever seen in his entire life.

Aphrodite? The Aphrodite? No! It couldn't be. He stared at the woman who'd just moved him through space without so much as batting a long, lush eyelash. She smiled serenely at the werewolf charging across the office at them, her fangs and teeth growing by the minute. Oh shit, he was holding hands with the goddess of love. Lucian's heart decided to retreat, and his tonsils tried to follow.

“Dana!” Aphrodite released him and Andre, gliding forward, her hands held out in front of her. “You look...” She paused. “Well, frankly, darling, you like you could use a trip to the salon. I can recommend someone if you’d like.”

“Fuck you,” Dana growled.

Aphrodite threw back her head, let loose a tinkling laugh and then shook her head sadly. “Ooh, sweetie, if I leaned in that direction, you’d be my first choice. But I am, as they say, strictly dickly. Besides, the moon is your mistress, right?”

Dana pulled at her hair and her eyes started to glow. She looked around the room for a likely target for her rage. Unfortunately her golden gaze landed on him. “Lucian!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After a deep breath, her hair stopped growing, but her eyes stayed yellow. Not a good sign. “We have your attacker in a line up and would like you to identify her.”

He stiffened. “My what?”

“Your attacker.”

“I don’t have an attacker.”

She reached out and he couldn’t contain his flinch, but she just patted his shoulder. “It’s okay. We’re here for you.” With that, she led the way into a room that contained a two-sided mirror. On this side were three chairs and a table, and on the other side was Desi wearing only his shirt. The other occupant was a large, red-skinned demon with long, black horns.

“What the hell is going on?” This seemed to be Lucian’s song choice for the night.

“Hell is about right.”

“Tattletale,” Andre muttered, giving him a dark look.

“I didn’t tell anyone,” Lucian snarled at Andre.

Aphrodite pursed her lips and stared hard at the mirror. “He doesn’t know what he did, son of Pan, so be quiet.”

“Yes, Aunt Aphrodite.”

Lucian walked to the mirror and put his fingers on the glass, watching as the monster circled Desi like a shark. She just stared ahead, a hopeless

expression in her eyes. He turned back to the others in the room. "What did I do?"

Dana leaned against the table with her arms folded. "You sent out a psychic alarm so loud that two of our lesser talented psis fainted at their desks. One of the stronger ones was able to stay conscious long enough to write a note." She shrugged. "We went and got the demon out of your room and brought her here."

"That monster was in my room?" He shivered. "How did it get there?"

Dana gave him a sad smile. "Lonely men will invite things like that into their rooms, you know."

He turned and looked just in time to see the demon run his hand down Desi's arm. Lucian banged his hand on the mirror and both of them jerked towards the sound. "Hey!"

The demon was at the glass instantly, moving so fast that Lucian was unable to track it. His eyes were black and soulless. They had to be the scariest thing in the entire world. Lucian rethought that when the demon opened his mouth and out came a voice horrible and beautiful at the same time. "Meat broke the rules, meat is mine."

"Meat?" Lucian turned. "She's not meat." *And she's mine*, he added silently.

Andre had moved to the glass. "Then why tell?"

"I didn't tell anyone. At least, I don't think so." Lucian frowned as he rethought what had happened. "It was pretty intense at the end and I lost control, so maybe I sent out something." He turned to Dana. "What did the note say?"

She pointed to a folder and he walked to the table. Inside was a copy of a scrawled note.

*Oh God. Stop! I don't think I can hold on.*

His mouth quirked and he bit his lip. "Who wrote this?"

"Sister Madeline."

"The nun?"

"She's one of our strongest psychics. Stronger than you. She said the feeling she got from you was of desperation and this needy, breathless sensation, like you wanted to escape but had to stay. She said it was wonderful and terrible at the same time. She thought you'd been drugged."

“Why did you leave me in my room and just take Desi?”

“You looked so peaceful, and the team doctor said you were physically fine.” Dana paused, tapping her fingers together. “I know it’s hard for you to get a good night’s rest, so we just let you sleep.” With a small smile that let him know she was aware of the psi’s problems, she continued. “One of the tech wizards undid the cuffs. She fought until she figured out that you were all right.”

“I see.” He didn’t but it sounded good to him. “So, what’s up with Big Red?”

“He’s come to take her back to Hell.” This from Aphrodite, who paced back and forth in front of the mirror, with the demon making every step she did on the other side.

“Why?” Lucian asked.

“Because you’re a big baby.” Andre threw his hands in the air. “And to top it off, you squealed to the paranormal po po that she tried to kill you!”

“That’s not what this note says.” He pointed to the paper. “I was,” Lucian’s face heated, “having a moment.”

Aphrodite grinned. “A moment?”

“Yeah, a nice moment.” He refused to elaborate.

Dana snorted and started for the door. “God save me from idiots.”

“That doesn’t get rid of the monster.”

“You said it was a nice moment.” Dana stopped in her tracks.

Lucian pointed. “I meant that big scary guy.”

“Oh.” She paused. “Well, since she’s a succubus, he was summoned automatically once we put her in the room. He’s like a cop.”

Aphrodite cleared her throat. “Desdemona Arnez is under my protection.”

“She’s a succubus. That’s not your jurisdiction,” Dana insisted with a snort.

The sex queen took a deep breath using up most of the oxygen in the room and gifted the werewolf with a bright smile. “She was given to me after a particularly wild party.”

Dana curled her lip. “Ew!”

“Yes, well, I was bored.” Aphrodite shrugged. “His parties are to die for because the bar is open.” She turned to stare at the mirror. “She was one of the

servers. I couldn't help but notice her. She was as beautiful then as she is now and as sad. So, after our little," she smiled and wiggled her brows, "fun time, he offered me a gift. I asked for Desi. She's been working for me at various jobs since. Turn Me On is the latest and one of our most lucrative joint ventures."

Dana shook her head and laughed. "Only you'd ask the devil for a succubus as a parting gift."

Aphrodite giggled and flicked her hair over her shoulder. "Only I'd get one." The smile fell off her face and the goddess of love became something very different. "The point is that Desi is mine, and what's mine, I protect."

With that, Aphrodite simply walked through the mirror. Lucian refused to be left out, but he had to do it the hard way. He picked up one of the chairs and threw it at the glass with a satisfying, shattering crash. As he leapt over the sill and landed at the demon's big, shiny black hooves, he remembered something. Unlike Aphrodite, he was all too mortal.

"Um, hi." He wiggled his fingers at Big Red.

"Human, dare you to interfere?" The demon leaned down and picked him up like he weighed nothing.

Ah, crap, this was gonna hurt so bad. "Yeah, I guess."

"No!" Desi leapt on the demon's back, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Don't you hurt him!"

The demon laughed before ramming Lucian into the wall. Where in the hell was the goddess? She needed to do some divine damage and she needed to do it quick.

"Kick his ass!" Andre yelled from the safety of the interrogation room. Lucian had a second to wonder if Andre was talking to him or the demon before he hurtled through the air and crashed into the wall. He slid to the floor in a heap of pain. Maybe if he just lay there, he'd be ignored.

Desi screeched, vetoing that idea, so he pushed himself up and staggered back towards the fight. The demon's massive red fist came at him. He ducked. Demon boy's knuckles grazed his temple and everything went gray and wavy. Dammit, he couldn't beat this big freak with brawn, so he needed to use his brains.

Lucian concentrated, not an easy feat when there was a heavy metal concert going on in his frontal lobe. However, the spark of weird that had been with him for almost twenty years grew into a flame that burned cold. His lips stretched into a smile as the power flowed to the tips of his fingers.

The demon plucked Desi off his back and threw her toward the broken window. Shards of mirrored glass still edged the opening like so many teeth. Lucian pushed with his mind. The pulse of energy nudged her just enough so wasn't impaled on the glass, instead flying over the edge to land safely on the other side.

However, while he was distracted, the demon was on him, his hands on his throat. His breath smelled of sulfur and rotted meat. His eyes now glowed red and sparks of yellow pulsed in them. "Since you're wanting her so much, I'll take you both back with me."

Lucian kicked at him futilely. He only had a small reserve of power left. He narrowed it down to a small point, shaping it in his mind to a razor sharpness. Then, he grinned. "Yo, Big Red!" The demon leaned closer, baring his fangs and the inside of his black mouth.

At that moment, he shoved the mental spear into the roof of the demon's mouth up into his brain, visualizing it going out the top of his head. With a roar, the demon released him, grabbing his head.

Lucian scrambled away on his hands and knees, choking at the mist of blood and sulfur that came out of the demon.

The room shook and thunder boomed all around him. He curled up into a ball in the corner, waiting for it to be over. After what seemed to be an eternity, it died down except for the applause.

Wait. Applause? He lifted his head and stared at Aphrodite slowly fading into sight.

"Well done, Lucian."

He growled in frustration. "Where in the hell were you?"

She smiled and winked. "Good guess."

Dana leaned over the sill of the broken mirror, taking in the smoke-filled room and the dead demon on the floor. "Who's going to pay for all this?"



“Oh pish. You’re such a spoilsport.” Aphrodite, from whom Desi had apparently learned to curse, snapped her fingers and everything was back the way it was. The mess, including the mirror and Desi, simply disappeared. Then the goddess turned to Lucian and handed him a card with her name and number on it. “You’ve been a wonderful hero so far. Call me when you’re alone.” With that, she vanished.

Lucian stood and brushed himself off and waited for Dana to let him out of the line up room. When she did, he limped out of the office, ignoring the stares of his coworkers.

By the time he reached the elevators, he was running. He hit the button and patted his jeans pockets. “Thank God!” He pulled his phone out and called the number on the card. “Hello, this is Lucian Ballantine from Paranormal...” With a long sigh he gave in. “Yeah, I’m with PMS. Look, what do I need to do?” He listened then leaned against the wall and sighed.

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Desi, packed methodically, laying her clothes neatly in her bag. If she concentrated hard enough, she’d be able to block out the humiliation of her stupidity. Out of all the men in the world, she’d visited a psychic, and not just once.

She hadn’t recognized him because Lucian shielded himself even in his dreams. All she’d seen was a dark shadow of a man who’d been very lonely. She’d been drawn to the energy he’d offered, and of course, he’d been drawn to the dream sex she’d given him.

Everything had been fine until he’d sent that psychic blast shoving her out of his head and knocking her out. She’d been unconscious long enough for his associates at PMS to get inside the room and grab her. She’d been so scared that she’d hurt Lucian until the doctor had muttered he was fine, just in a deep sleep. He’d said that no psychic got to that point of sleep. He’d then looked at Lucian with something like envy and gave her a once over that made her feel naked despite the fact that Lucian’s shirt covered her to the knees.

He’d told those people she’d tried to kill him. She hadn’t; she’d just been so hungry. Desi paused with a pair of boots in her hand, remembering his fingers in her hair as he pulled her close. His voice calling her name. He’d needed her as desperately as she’d needed him.

She dropped the boots and sat down on the bed. He had come to save her, along with her boss Aphrodite and Andre, another of her oh so willing victims. Although she'd cheated and started him up before leaving the satyr to his own devices. He'd done fine on his own. She'd been doing that more often over the years, siphoning off only the energy she needed to get by with the least amount of contact.

With Lucian, it had been different from the first time she'd happened upon his lonely sleeping call. She'd broken her rule and come back, not once but three different times. Meeting him in reality had been, ironically enough, a dream come true. When he'd asked for Desi and not the blonde or redheaded women that were part of her usual stable of fantasy faces, she'd been pleasantly shocked.

Who was she kidding? He knew exactly what she was now. She'd heard him call her a monster, and that had been with a gigantic enforcer demon in the room. "Damn."

She had to leave before she saw him again and did something stupid like cry. With that in mind, she started packing again, this time just throwing her things into the bag.

With one last look to make sure she had everything, she grabbed her bags and walked out the door, wishing she could leave behind the bad memories.

The plane was on time for once, for which Desi was thankful. At least she'd get some rest on the way home to New York. She closed her eyes and let out a weary sigh, falling asleep almost instantly, waking only when the plane landed. She waited for five minutes longer than eternity before she was able to claim her luggage. After that, she took a taxi to her small apartment that seemed less like home than ever.

She changed into a long, straight dress that always reminded her of Greece with its soft flowing lines and the dark blue material that whispered against her bare legs as she walked. Humming, she went into her kitchen to make some tea. Just as she put the kettle on, the doorbell rang.

Thinking it was Aphrodite come to check on her, or at least fuss about her leaving the rest of Turn Me On's stock back in Vegas, she opened the door and started back to the kitchen. "Come on in. If you're hear to bitch, I'd rather have

a drink first, if you don't mind." When her boss didn't say anything, she turned and almost fell down at the sight of Lucian.

He looked too damn good, shirtless, wearing just his jeans. He stood in the doorway with one hand in his pocket and the other behind his back. When she just kept staring at him, he smiled and brought out a bouquet of dark red roses.

She reached out and automatically took them, still staring at him. "Do you like them?" She managed a nod. "They remind me of your perfume."

"Oh." Oh? What was wrong with her?

"Can I come in, Desi?"

She managed another nod and stepped back, allowing him inside. He looked around the room, his gaze homing in on the suitcases. "Why did you leave? The Expo isn't over for another few days."

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. "I thought it best that I just go quietly."

"I didn't." He walked in and took the flowers out of her hands, laying them on the little table by the door.

She had trouble following his words when he kept staring at her like someone on a diet looking at a piece of chocolate cake. It didn't help matters that he put his hands on her shoulders, stroking the skin of her neck. He made matters worse when he leaned down and brushed his mouth across hers, barely touching her lips. Before she could respond, he pulled back.

She put her fingers to his lips, running them across his jaw, the stubble of his whiskers tickling her. "Why did you come here?"

He kissed her palm before she could move her hand, and she closed her eyes and shuddered. "To convince you come back." His voice vibrated up her arm straight to her heart.

"You said I was a monster." She tried to get her hand free of his but he refused to let go.

He looked shocked. "I said the demon was a monster. Desi, I was so scared when I saw you in there with that thing. If anything had happened to you, I would have never forgiven myself."

She wanted to believe him, but there were other things that didn't add up. "Why did you call for help?"

The tips of his ears turned red. "Well, you know when you were sucking my um..." He stopped and ran his hand through his hair, messing it up. "It happened when you and I were together and I promise I didn't mean to let anyone hear me."

She clapped her hands over her mouth to smother her laugh, but it burst free anyway. "Oh, no! Do you mean all your psycho friends heard us having sex?"

He gritted his teeth. "That's psychic, Desi, and *we* didn't have sex, *I* did."

Waving her hand around airily, she walked into the kitchen to turn off the kettle. "Same thing."

"No, it's not," he grumbled, following her into the kitchen. "That's part of the reason I'm here. We've got unfinished business."

"You want me to come back to Vegas for that?" She turned away from the stove and put her hand on her hip.

With an apologetic smile, he answered, "Actually, honey, you're still in Vegas."

Panic clawed up Desi's throat, threatening to choke her. It must have shown on her face, because he stepped towards her. "It's okay. I just needed to stall you so I could have time to catch up. I couldn't let you leave." He put his hands up when she backed away. "Don't be scared of me."

"How are you doing this?" She gazed at her surroundings for a clue that hinted they weren't real, but they were flawless. It looked exactly like her tiny apartment in New York.

"Friends in high places?" His mouth twisted. "Well, I don't have any, but you do."

She narrowed her eyes, her thoughts running around in her head; finally, it dawned on her who he meant. "Aphrodite."

"Smart and beautiful." He gave her a heart-stopping grin. "Yeah, your boss set the whole thing up, from the tip that got me to watch you, sent through Harry, the snotty werewolf, down to this little dream episode."

She refused to listen to any more. Instead she ran past him to the door, pulling on it. Of course, it wouldn't open. "What do I have to do to get out of here?"

He spread his arms wide and grinned. "Me."

“Ooh!” When she screeched, he grabbed her arms, turning her around to face him. “Desi, I’m joking. I just wanted you to listen.”

“To what? You just want sex, like all the others.”

“Well, yeah. But I want something else.”

“What’s that?”

“I want you, the real you. Not some fantasy fix or even some Desi clone that you throw at me to keep me at a distance.” His words hit her and she stopped struggling to get away. “What did you want from me those times you visited?”

“Energy.”

“Why me and not some other lucky dreamer?”

“You were,” she may as well admit it, “lonely, like me.”

“Well, there you go.” He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. “Wake up, Desi.”

She opened her eyes and found herself back in her hotel room, with Lucian lying beside her on the bed. His lashes fluttered open and he pinned her with that bright green gaze. “I like dreaming, but this will be better.”

She took a deep, shuddering breath and let it out. “I haven’t been with a real person in a long time.”

“Me either. It’s hard to when you can read her mind.” He shrugged as if it didn’t bother him, but she knew it did so she snuggled close.

For a few long seconds, he just lay there looking at her. “Close your eyes.” She did and he swirled his fingers around on her forehead her cheeks, and finally her lips. She opened her mouth, nipped his fingers, and he laughed.

His hands skimmed over her body until he reached the hem of the dress she’d chosen to wear on the plane. Inch by inch he pulled it up. She wiggled around, helping him get it over her head. His fast intake of breath made her grin.

Wherever his hands went, fire followed until her body burned with it, ached. She opened her thighs, cradling him against her and her legs moved restlessly and she pulled his head down to hers, urging him to either take action or let her lead.

He stroked once, twice between her legs, his fingers burning her through her panties. Desi shuddered against his hand, a cry escaping her lips. She opened her eyes to meet his amused ones. "I wanted you to keep your eyes closed." But she couldn't tear her gaze away as he cupped first one breast, then the other.

She caught her breath when his palms slid back and forth over her nipples making them harden almost painfully. Finally, he took them in his hands, squeezing them, and she moaned, arching her back. He licked one hard peak with his tongue, then sucked it into his mouth, swirling and nibbling.

Suddenly, he stopped and pressed a kiss on her chest, his breath harsh and fast against her skin. When he looked up, she arched one brow impatiently. "What are you waiting for, an engraved invitation?"

He seemed to change into something darker then. With a growl, he pulled his shirt over his head and undid the buttons on his jeans. He didn't speak, just moved to lie beside her on the bed. He skimmed his hand down her bare stomach and just that contact that made her pussy clench.

"Nah, just wondering where to start." His smile became predatory, and the heat of his eyes burned her.

She bit back a gasp when he slid down. The hair on his chest moved over her skin with a delicious friction. She wiggled, stilling when his mouth covered the tip of her breast. Her fingers drifted into his hair, scratching his scalp lightly.

He sucked her nipple into his mouth and then released it with an audible pop. His tongue felt deliciously rough and scratchy and she groaned when he repeated the process on her other breast. "Lucian."

He licked the underside, nipping the soft flesh there. She moved up towards his mouth, but he began biting and licking his way downward. He cupped her through her panties and smiled when she jerked up against his hand. "You're wet, Desi." She got even wetter at the deep, rough voice of his telling her so.

He pushed her legs open, sliding his fingers up and down before pressing against her behind the barrier of lace. She wiggled but he held her still. His fingers slid under the sides, barely brushing her sex. She moaned and opened her legs a little wider.

Desi watched him as he lay between her legs, staring down at her as if she were a feast and he didn't know just where to start. "These have to go." He slid his thumb up and touched her clit.

Her whole body tensed as he pressed against it, moving in minute circles designed to torment her. She grabbed his wrist, thrusting her hips against his hand. She heard a ripping sound and, "Ah, hot damn." And then his mouth was on her.

Lucian plunged his fingers inside her, reveling at the sensation of her muscles pulling at them. She let her legs open further. He looked up at her and saw that she watched him, her eyes hungry. He grinned and pulled his fingers out, sucking them into his mouth. "Nice." Before thrusting them home again.

When he stopped, she made a small, protesting sound that became a shriek at the end. He spread her open and sucked her clit into his mouth, alternately sliding his teeth across it or sucking. Her legs jerked in time with each lick or nibble. She tasted and smelled like cinnamon. He trust his fingers inside again, reaching far enough to flick against that little spot that many couldn't find if they had a map, a flashlight and a damn compass. But he knew right were it was.

He fastened his mouth on her clit at the same time. She shuddered at the first lick; at the second pass, her eyes widened and she gasped. When he nudged the spot with his fingers again, her juices sluiced in a hot, wet flood that made him growl and suckle her a little harder. His tongue danced over her clit, drawing her response out even longer.

Her hands twisted in his hair and she rocked her pelvis against him. Her mouth opened and she began to writhe. She screamed, finally, a long drawn-out wail followed by another shuddering climax.

"Wow." Her voice was faint and breathless, making him grin.

"You ain't seen nothing yet, sweetheart." He kissed her hard, sliding his tongue inside her mouth. He tangled his fingers in that long, dark hair, jerking her even closer.

She moaned and wrapped her arms around his neck, hauling him as close to her as possible. He allowed it for a moment and then pulled her away. She blinked up at him dazedly until he turned her around to face the headboard.

He gripped her hips and slowly slid inside her. At the feel of her tightening around him, his balls ached to plunge in as fast and hard as possible. But he

wanted it to last, so he gritted his teeth and savored each inch of her covering his cock like a hot, wet glove. When he was halfway inside, he gave in and thrust so fast and far that his balls slapped against her clit.

She gave a muffled cry and moved back against him. With each thrust, she cried out, her hands gripping the headboard so hard that her nails dented the wood.

Every move they made was a battle. She began to rock her pelvis, rotating it with each inward thrust of his cock. He gripped the soft globes of her ass with his hands and held her still, grinding against her. She hissed in a breath, sobbing. "Please don't stop, harder."

He was happy to oblige her. His thrusts became even more frenzied, but she kept up with him. The sound of their flesh moving together was loud in the room, underscored by his growls and her whimpers. His pulse began to thunder, and he felt his balls tightening, spiraling out of control. His movements became more frenzied. "Baby, hold on." He lifted her up higher and felt his control slipping away.

She muffled her scream against the pillows and he echoed it with one of his own. He pulled her close, holding her against him until their breaths slowed and their skin cooled.

He turned her around and brushed her hair out of her face, kissing her on the nose. "So, you understand right? Dreaming of Desi is fine, but the reality is much better."

"I do." She grinned up at him. "Do you understand that with me, you get both?"

"I'm getting very sleepy." Lucian yawned and she pinched him. He wrapped his arms around her, and for the first time in a long while, Desi took the night off, falling asleep with a smile on her face.



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# NightMare in Dunvegas

By Sela Carsen

What in Hera's name was a ParaPleasure Expo? And why was it happening in his favorite casino?

Nicolas Hippotakis strolled through the dungeon-like atmosphere that pervaded the Dunvegas resort, eyeing the conference attendees askance. They were easy to spot, actually. Aside from the leather and chain lanyards holding their conference badges, they were draped with lengths of condom packets and gleefully carting around boxes featuring plastic penises in varying sizes and colors.

Then there was the couple copulating on the floor of the lobby. That was a big clue.

ParaPleasure? It was a sex convention!

He snorted. Just what he needed. All he wanted to do was close the deal and get the hell back home.

"Mr. Hippotakis." The voice was a sultry purr. Not surprising, considering that the speaker was his casino hostess, Amanda Bast. Her feline heritage was obvious in the tip-tilted eyes and erotically languorous walk. She glided closer and placed her claw-tipped fingers on his arm. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea you were coming in today. I'll arrange a suite for you immediately. Perhaps you'd like a private table for Blackjack?"

"Sorry I didn't give you any advance warning, Amanda. This business trip came up suddenly. I don't think I'll have time to play."

"Mr. Hippotakis, there's always time to play." Aphrodite's apples. If that voice didn't get his engine running, nothing would.

Nope. Not a single piston fired.

And damn if that wasn't annoying. He was surrounded by people with sex on the brain. He had a black book full of women who would just love to service his needs. But lately, those needs had been seriously flagging. He was pretty sure he could perform if he really wanted to — he just hadn't wanted to lately. With any of them. Blonde, brunette, redhead. Tall and lean or small and curvy. None of his usual ladies intrigued him anymore.

Thank Hera that business was occupying his time at the moment. The letter he'd received from Mr. Fritz, the mysterious owner of Dunvegas, had catapulted him from his Colorado mountain ranch to this parched cityscape in hours. In fact, he still had no clear idea what exactly Mr. Fritz was offering for sale.

All he had gleaned from the note was that this item was something he'd been seeking for a very, very long time.

"Not this time. I need to find the stables, though." He looked at his watch. "Now."

The gold suit she wore shimmered as she led him through the lobby. The elevator doors closed and the noise of the casino was abruptly silenced. Amanda slid her employee card into the panel and they descended. For a very long time.

Suddenly, the unmistakable refrain of "What's New, Pussycat?" jangled from Amanda's cell phone. Nic eyed the suit that fit her like a second skin. Where did she have room for it?

She drew the slim phone from what had to be her bra. If she wore one. Damn. She raised an eyebrow as she answered, but Nic just shook his head.

"Yes? Hello, Will. A package delivered? Certainly. I'll meet you at your suite. Ten minutes? I'll be there."

As she hung up, the elevator dinged. The doors opened to the suffocating scent of rot and death. The last time he'd smelled something like this, he'd been on a pig farm where all the creatures had been poisoned with anthrax.

Nic and Amanda both recoiled at the stench, the elegant hostess pressing a manicured hand over her nose. Her large eyes widened, the pupils thinning to vertical slits as she arched her back and hissed.

Nic's head went up and he snorted — trying to get the reek of filth and flesh out of his head. "Stay in the elevator, Amanda. Go back up and do *not* return. You're out of this now, you hear?"

She hesitated. “Mr. Fritz will be very upset if I lose one of his high rollers. Do you need me to send security?”

“No. I can handle this.” At least he was fairly sure he could handle it — as soon as he figured out what *it* was. “Go back. Be safe.”

This time, Amanda nodded and punched a button on the panel. The door slid shut, leaving him in hell.

The unmistakable sound of a horse’s scream short circuited most of his brain and he fought to retain reason. An urbane voice reached through the chaos.

“Mr. Hippotakis, I presume?” A dapper, elderly gentleman in a designer suit stepped out of the shadows.

Nic’s nostrils flared. Evil. It wasn’t dead, rotting meat he smelled. It was evil.

“Are you Mr. Fritz?” He needed to know his opponent, but he had never met the reclusive and mysterious owner of the casino.

“In a manner of speaking. It’s one of several names that I’ve found useful. I’m very pleased with your prompt response to my note.”

“You implied I didn’t have much choice if I wanted to obtain the...item.”

“An accurate assumption. Would you like to see it?”

Nic’s entire body was on fire with the effort not to charge the man. If he was right about Mr. Fritz’s true identity, it wouldn’t do any good anyway.

He allowed the older man to lead the way. Dim light flickered, barely penetrating the murky darkness. Had the place been cleansed of filth on several planes, it would have been an ideal place for horses. The stalls were large and well-equipped. It occurred to Nic that the disgusting state of the stables might be an illusion, designed to drive him to fear and fury.

Mr. Fritz laughed abruptly. “You’re smarter than I gave you credit for, Mr. Hippotakis.” He waved a hand and the dungeon brightened. The scent of fresh hay and clean water replaced the reek of evil, although not entirely.

They reached the last stall. Inside stood one of the most beautiful mares Nic had ever seen. Sleek and lean with a heavy chest and masses of mane and tail, the golden bay held her finely sculpted head with pointed delicacy, nostrils flaring to show the bright red lining of panic. Her dark eyes rolled and she danced back as far as she was able.

At her movement, the metal clanged. She was chained to a bronze manger by a manacle around one slender ankle.

“What the hell is this, Fritz?” He stepped into the stall and turned on the man, who smiled back with a mouthful of teeth.

“It’s your destiny calling you, Mr. Hippotakis. I mean to take you back to your roots and recreate your ancestors.” As he spoke, his gnarled hands made swift signs in the air, each stroke of his fingers leaving a fiery trail.

Nic reached out to knock him back, get him out of the way so he could lead the terrified mare out of this stable of the damned, but he couldn’t. A wall of invisible power had slammed into place between him and the wizard, locking him in the stall with the horse.

Fritz laced his hands behind his back now that the task was done and nodded, apparently satisfied with his work. “Alcippe here is a very, very distant cousin of yours. A descendant of one of the four wild mares of Diomedes, just as you are. Gifted by Hera with the ability to shift from horse to human.”

“And Hera would be beyond pissed off if she discovered what you were doing here.” So where was she, he wondered.

“She would be...if she found out. Hera does not see what happens down here. Her power is limited under the Earth's surface. And since Alcippe has been in my care below ground since she was a mere foal, she's not even on Hera's radar.”

“What do you want with us?”

“Ultimately, my goal is to breed a few more like you. Rebuild a herd of vicious, man-eating horses. Untamable and savage. It appeals to me.”

“It would, you freak. We no longer eat the flesh of men.” The mare whinnied in agreement.

“Then I suppose you’ll be here for a very long time. At least until...” Fritz let the words die off and Nic followed through.

“Until what?”

“Until one of two things happens. Either you provide me with a foal I can mold to my wishes. Or until Alcippe learns to talk.” With that, he spun on his heel and walked away, humming the tune to *Mr. Ed*.

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A string of expletives escaped Nic as he heard the elevator door slide closed after the old demon. He banged his fist against the solid air that trapped him in the stall.

Trapped. He was trapped. No clean air, no room to run. He might as well be chained. The reminder of chains brought him out of his panic spiral. He wasn't alone in this prison.

The mare was backed into a corner, her ears flat against her head. She stamped her front hoof against the stone floor of the stable, striking sparks. Her lips were curled back from her teeth — teeth that didn't look normal. Several of them were pointed.

"Shit," he muttered, spreading his hands at his side. Trapped in a stall with a man-eating mare. A mare who should be able to shift, but didn't...or couldn't. And he had to teach her to shift because he sure as hell wasn't going to play stud. Not for that freakshow, Fritz.

"Steady, Alcippe. Steady, girl." He took a few steps to the side, circling until he reached the stone manger to which she was shackled. The chain was sunk deep into the rock. No help there. Alcippe had retreated from him, pulling the tether until her leg stood out, leaving her off balance.

The only way to get the chain off was for her to shift. A slender human foot would slide right through the cuff.

Easy. He snorted.

"All right, girl." The mare tossed her head.

"Sorry. Alcippe. Not girl." He put his hands down. "Let's start over. My name is Nic Hippotakis. I'm like you."

A faint voice touched his mind. "Not like me. Never like me."

He smiled. There she was.

"I'm just like you, Alcippe. Do you know what you are?"

"I know what I was. I was not born here. I know that I was free."

"What happened? Do you remember?"

"Not well. I was only a foal. Wolves. I think there were wolves."

Nic ground his teeth. The bastard had stolen someone's baby. And if he'd used dogs or wolves, the dam was probably dead.

"Do you remember when this happened? Do you know how old you are?" From the looks of her, she was in her prime. Age was relative with his breed.

They were born as horses and lived their youth running wild. They had to have reached sexual maturity to begin their two-legged lives, and when they shifted for the first time, they emerged as adult humans.

“That man tells me that years have passed. But I can’t trust what he says.” She shoved her head forward, knocking his shoulder back. “I still don’t know if I can trust you.”

Nic sighed and looked around. “I only know one way to prove to you that I’m as you are. Stay back.”

It had been so long since he’d let this side of him rule. Too many obligations in the human world kept him on two legs. He always meant to find time to shift and run free, but time never seemed to find him.

A shock of electricity ran through his body, suspending him as he changed. The buzzing wore away and he shook his head. His forelock fell into his eyes and he shook his head again.

Alcippe stood shivering, but not screaming. Slowly, she reached out her nose, ears pricked forward.

“You...you...”

“I told you. I’m like you.”

She blew through her lips. “No. Not like me. You’re still different.”

“A different breed. I’m Andravida. You look like a Spanish horse. Andalusian, perhaps.”

“What’s Andravida?”

“The mares who were our dams were all different breeds. We looked different, with different characteristics. When we were freed by Hercules, we moved across the world. My dam stayed in Greece and we became a breed known as the Andravida. I’m descended in a direct line from her.”

“I know nothing of descent or of my line.”

“When we escape, it won’t be difficult to find out who you are.”

“And how are we going to escape? I’ve tried everything. This chain keeps me here.”

“The chain can’t hold you if you become human.”

“Human? Like you? Like that man?”

“Fritz is no man. He’s evil. A wizard who works black magic.” Nic snapped his jaws together, finding satisfaction in the one feature that differentiated him

from other horses. His teeth. “When we get out, I’m going to tear that man limb from limb.”

“I thought you said we didn’t eat the flesh of men.”

“For him, I’ll make an exception.”

Alcippe whinnied and he joined her.

“First, you need to shift.”

She backed away from him. “I don’t know how. I’m afraid. What do I know about being human?”

“I’ll help you, Alcippe. But I won’t lie. The first time is painful. Even though I was warned, it still took me by surprise. Have you ever been stung by a bee or a wasp?”

“Never. At least not that I remember.”

“You’d remember this. Your first shifting will feel like a hundred bee stings. I wish I could tell you different, but you have to keep moving through the pain.”

She shuffled her legs restlessly, the chain clanking an ominous toll.

“Keep an image of being human in your mind. Two legs, two arms, standing upright. I’m going to change at the same time. Are you ready?”

Alcippe nodded. Nic was sweating. He remembered his first change and he’d have done anything to take the pain for her. But she had to get through it on her own. As a horse, she lived only half her life. The rite of passage would make her wholly Diomedan, the best of both species.

And so it began. He waited for the waves of power to recede, then changed. When he opened his eyes again, they were both human. And both nude.

Alcippe the woman was stunning. It didn’t surprise Nic because every woman in his family was stunning. They weren’t always gorgeous, but every one of them was eye catching.

But this woman had it all. Long, lean legs, slender hips, trim waist. Her breasts were high and firm. Not large, but definitely there. Her entire body was that of an athlete. Well-defined with muscle, and just enough body fat to make her feminine. Atalanta reborn.

Her face reflected the delicacy found in the beautiful Andalusian mare she’d been. Carved out cheeks and a straight nose complemented her almond shaped eyes. Waves of golden hair cushioned her shoulders. Her full lips were slightly parted and he gathered her close.

“Alcippe, wake up.”

She opened her eyes. She smiled. And Nic’s heart flipped over in his chest.

Alcippe moved her legs and the rattle of the chain broke the spell. She propped herself up on her elbows and Nic moved to kneel at her feet. The manacle slipped right off.

“We’re out of here,” he said, offering her a hand. Wobbly as a newborn foal, Alcippe leaned on his shoulder, learning how to operate her new legs as they made their way to the elevator.

The doors dinged just before they parted and Nic pushed her back into the shadows.

Fritz stepped out, bringing the scent of evil back to the stables.

“Stay back,” Nic whispered. He had to keep her away from Fritz at all costs. She deserved the freedom that had been taken from her and he meant to see her run with the wind in her mane. If the gods were kind, he meant to run beside her.

Fritz muttered to himself as he charged past the niche where the two hid. Something about his ungrateful daughter. Nic’s lip curled. He had a daughter? Hera help him if she was the vicious counterpart to her father. But one problem at a time.

The wizard pulled up short outside the now-empty stall, his shoulder rising in tension, though his voice was smooth.

“Well, well, Mr. Hippotakis. I see you managed to teach Alcippe to speak. Where is she? I’d like to see her...in the flesh, as it were.” Fritz eyed Nic up and down. “Didn’t you have clothes on the last time I saw you?”

Nic grinned, unashamed of his nudity.

“Hey, we’re all naked under our clothes, Fritz. But I think the lady and I would rather leave now.”

He stepped forward and the wizard moved back, his eyes shifting uneasily to the black space beyond Nic.

“I’m afraid that’s out of the question. This day hasn’t gone quite as I’d hoped and I simply can’t let my favorite breeding program slip away without a fight.”



Nic knew that if it came down to a fight, he'd lose. In this human body, he had no real power against a wizard. But he could at least keep Fritz occupied while Alcippe made a run for the elevator.

Fritz was reaching for something in his jacket pocket when Nic felt the air crackle with familiar electricity. From out of the night, a golden equine bolt of light shot forward, knocking the wizard off his feet. Alcippe pawed the air in righteous fury.

"You wanted to hear me speak, old man, so listen closely. I am Alcippe. Descended from the wild mares of Diomedes. My fore-dams ate the flesh and drank the blood of the man who enslaved them. What makes you think you'll escape his fate?"

The midnight chill of her voice reached into Nic's heart and drew out the hot thrill of victory. She was a goddess in her own right. The dank closeness of the stables fell away and Nic smelled only her heat. And the wizard's blood.

Her teeth flashed in the darkness and Fritz screamed, his fear adding to the delicious scent of prey. Nicolas Hippotakis was as the gods had made him. He and his mate. Together, they visited the doom of Diomedes on the man who had tried to bend them to his puny will.

Nic trumpeted his victory to the world as Alcippe screamed her own cry in the night. They were covered in blood and Fritz was no more. As the wizard's life drained away, the stones themselves heaved under their hooves, giving up the ghosts of those who had been imprisoned here before.

The sound of the elevator door brought them back to themselves and Nic watched with pride as Alcippe effortlessly reclaimed her human form.

A voice reached into the darkness.

"Mr. Hippotakis?" Amanda Bast's pupils were widened to make use of all the light available. Alcippe retreated behind Nic and the feel of her breasts pressing into his shoulder blades caused an involuntary reaction below his waist.

"Right here, Amanda."

She looked around. "Mr. Fritz?"

"No more Mr. Fritz," he answered.

"No big loss. Business will be better without him." She shrugged, a lithe movement, as insouciant as her namesake goddess.

“Amanda, you’re the best casino hostess I’ve ever known. But you need to work on your timing.”

“Seems to me I got here at exactly the right moment. The words ‘hung like a horse’ seem appropriate. I think the Deathly Buzzings Marital Aid company might like to talk to you about modeling for one of their products. I think it would be a best-seller.”

Nic flushed. There had been a time in his life when he’d have taken her up on the invitation in her eyes, but Alcippe pressed her teeth into the top of his shoulder. He grinned.

“I don’t think so, Amanda. We’d like to get out of here, though.” He covered Alcippe firm flanks with his hands as the elevator rose to the Lobby level. “How’d that ParaPleasures Expo go for you guys?”

“Huge hit. I think we’ll definitely be doing it again next year. After all, even the Dunvegas crowd can use some shaking up every now and again.”

“Forgive us if we don’t show up for it. I think we’ve shaken up Las Vegas enough for one year. Anyway,” he said, turning to give Alcippe a hug, “I feel the need to get out in the fresh air.”

The doors opened and Nic let the rush of magic overtake him. Beside him, Alcippe tossed her mane and trotted out through the crowd of humans and not-quite-humans alike.

The desert called as he and his mate turned east toward Colorado. Time to let his NightMare live out her dreams.



[Click here to find out more about Sela Carsen.](#)

## Vegas Magic

By Ember Case

Rain was pouring from clouds every bit as dark as her mood when Mia Tarone dashed through the heavy doors into Dunvegas. Bright flashes of lightning were answered with snarls of thunder. The storm had sprung to life in an otherwise clear Vegas night sky when she was only feet from the entrance, triggered by any one of the many paranormal battles being waged for fun and sport inside the resort.

With demons and druids, witches and warlocks, shifters and succubi all sharing the convention grounds, there was no way for her young mage senses to tell what forces from this world or any other had triggered the meteorological outburst. She would have to take down her meta shields to tell, an act akin to bathing in blood before dining with a vampire. Going unshielded into the ParaPleasures convention would be literal suicide for her.

Mia was many things — desperate, unschooled, furious, and at times over the past year she'd flirted closely with the idea she might not be totally sane. Suicidal had not yet appeared on her radar.

Shaking the water from long, black hair dampened by the downpour, Mia paused by the matched pair of shockingly green hell hounds frozen statue-like by spell lock at the front door. They looked pissed, a natural state for a hell hound even if he weren't currently decorating a lobby. Their irate expressions were probably due to the unsophisticated attempt at Emerald City humor someone had forced upon them. She bit back a grimace and murmured a phrase in the ancient tongue. *Letta heluta.*

The hounds' skin shimmered faintly, and the green color bled to deepest black. Mia saw a glow of what she hoped was gratitude in their crimson eyes. Briefly she considered freeing them from their stone-like prisons.

“You were always a soft touch. Kept you from being the top baccarat dealer that your hands could have made you.” There was both affection and scorn in Amanda Bast’s voice. The curvy blonde had snuck behind her on quiet cat feet.

“I was the top dealer on the Dunvegas staff for two years. I’d still be here if—”

“Still thinking in if’s and could-have-been’s? I thought you’d had that scared out of you months ago. I never would have called you to let you know Xin Li had checked in if you hadn’t convinced me you were past that kind of thinking, Mia.”

“No worries, Amanda. Momentary lapse.” Mia forced herself to hold the unblinking gaze of the suddenly doubtful hostess, hoping that she was managing to look more sincere than pissed. And that the smell of her lie wasn’t even now being picked up by Amanda’s sensitive shifter senses.

An uncomfortably long moment later, Amanda nodded. “All right, then. But don’t let your anger rule your actions, little one. Mr. Li was not in a peaceful mood when he checked in this evening. He’s not a man I’d like to see the bad side of.”

“I’ll be careful. I don’t have nine lives to try to get this right.”

She was rewarded for her attempt at a joke with a sultry chuckle. “You only need one life if you play your cards right. Xin was entranced with you a year ago. I’ve never known him to look twice at a woman when he’s here on a trip, before he laid eyes on you. He’s shut me down more than once.”

Even knowing the hostess could no more help her sensual nature than she could avoid an attraction to catnip, the very thought of the passionate, demanding lover she’d known so briefly passing a night with her very sensual friend brought a snarl to Mia’s lips.

Amanda gave her an unapologetically seductive smile. “I’m just saying. Deal him a straight hand, with no deceptions, and there’s no reason to think he won’t be able to answer your questions, Mia.”

Mia bit back a snort of disgust. If there was anything she had learned in the last year, it was that mages never played anything straight. She was putting an awful lot of trust in what had been a one night stand with the powerful fifth level mage. “I have no doubts about exactly what Xin Li is. What I need to know is what I am, what I’ve become. And I know with complete

certainty that I won't last another year if I don't get some answers from Xin Li before he disappears again."

If she didn't get on the good side of Lady Luck soon, she'd be lucky to last another week.

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The employee access card Amanda slipped her, along with a spell of distraction, allowed Mia to slip unnoticed into the staff corridor. Quickly she followed familiar halls to the elevator bank, careful to use a repetition loop to disguise her presence on the security cameras. Her magic might still be mostly wild and dangerously unpredictable, but she had learned the basics of defense and deception the hard way—do or die. So far she'd kept death at bay.

Minutes later, she stepped off the elevator onto the thirty fourth floor and stopped in front of the oversized closed door. Xin had been given the Jade Suite, one of the half dozen high roller accommodations the resort kept for its most preferred guests. Her stomach clenched at the memory of her only other visit to the room.

One year ago, during the Fourth Annual ParaPleasures Convention, she had done the unthinkable and allowed herself to be seduced by one of the guests. Or maybe she'd been the one doing the seducing. Either way, her life as she'd known it had ended. One truly earth-shaking night had changed her forever.

When she'd walked away from the baccarat table after her shift a year ago, she had thought nothing of her future. Caught up in the power of the moment, she had thrown every personal principle and Dunvegas employee rule to the winds and jumped for what she'd thought would be a fleeting taste of paradise.

Instead, she had landed in a hellish world she'd never dreamed she would be a part of. A world where she was hunted for her power, where only her wits and a bit of luck had kept her ahead of the mages who would drain her of both life force and magic force and think nothing of it after the act was done.

Now Xin Li was back in Vegas. She had every intention of making sure he tasted a bit of her personal hell before this night was through. He had been her ticket down to the depths; because of him, she'd spent weeks walking the edge between sanity and dementia, afraid of every shadow. If Amanda hadn't found her cowering in the Dunvegas maze one desperate night, she'd likely have ended up dead long ago.

Amanda had been hiding her from the power hungry mages who'd flocked to the city for months now. Slowly Mia had learned to hide her powers, even if she couldn't quite master their use. Now Xin Li was going to give her back her life or give her a damn good reason why he couldn't.

Whatever Xin had done to change her, there had to be a way to fix it and make her normal again. Human again. Damn it, she couldn't even get close enough to another mage to ask a basic question such as, "Is it possible to get rid of these powers besides dying?" without ending up running for her life. She'd never met such a greedy, grasping, murderous bunch before—and that was saying something, considering the vamps and death demons that used to literally haunt her table in the card room.

With one last check of her mental shields, she straightened her shoulders and took a deep, centering breath. Hand raised in the air to knock, Mia felt the brush of power as the double doors swung open before she could make the first touch.

Xin Li. He stood framed by the open doors. Tall and slender, his body was a lean mass of muscled perfection.

Gorgeous. Mia's breath froze in her chest. For an instant, the memory of how that skin had tasted rushed through her senses, a haunting symphony of mouthwatering spice flavored by the slightly bitter tang of salt. Nothing had ever tasted so sweet on her tongue.

He was built like a runner, with not an ounce of fat to mar the sculpted lines of strength. Dressed in nothing more than a pair of black trousers that rested low on his hips, it was all too easy to picture the body beneath. The taunt skin of his abdomen teased Mia with its smooth hollows, and her fingers itched with the hunger to trace delicate lines across the silky surface.

She barely had the impression of shocked gray eyes before she heard the spell he had whispered. *Ganla draumela*.

It hit the walls of her shields and passed through with the ease of a sword cutting through a silken veil. In the space of a heartbeat the world faded to black, leaving nothing but the taste of defeat and the fear of death to follow Mia into the darkness.

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Xin Li sat at the foot of the oversized bed, waiting.

It was a skill he had perfected in the past half millennium. Rising to fifth level, the apex of mage power, had taken centuries of study and practice, as well as a strong desire to live. More than one rival had died simply because Xin Li had out-waited him in the spell circle, finding victory through self-control.

Now his patience was gone. Evaporated into the stormy night and replaced with an eagerness that he'd never felt before.

"Mia. Come back to me, *elgri*. I've been looking for you for so long."

The beauty in his bed didn't answer. Her long, black hair stayed still against the snowy pillows, the tangled strands inviting his fingers to straighten them. Her eyelashes were heavy shadows on the pale cream flesh of her cheeks, hiding the brilliant blue depths he remembered every night in his dreams. The twin arches of her lips were a pale pink bow, the perfect fit for his own.

He tried not to notice how still her body lay in comparison to how he'd last seen her. His hands itched to touch her, to reassure himself that her slender, firm body still surged with life.

The passing of a single year might seem only a drop in a bucket to one who had lived 544 of them, but every day that had passed since he'd been ripped away from her had seemed to last a decade. How many times had he cast the foreshadow spell, searching for the woman he'd been torn apart from? Never seeing more than a shadow in the crystal, enough to let him know that she lived, but not enough to even sense what part of the world—or on which world—she had disappeared into.

Those shadows when he searched for her made more sense now. A year ago, she'd been human. Breathtaking, sensual, unforgettable, and human. Not the slightest flavor of magic had clung to her skin last year. He would know; he had tasted every delicate inch of it. Her mind had been as innocent of deception and beguilement as only one who had never experienced the allurements of sorcery could be.

The Mia who had stood outside his door tonight had been a whirlwind of power, hidden behind an almost perfect shield. It was that near perfect ward that had given her away. His defenses had sensed a void where there should have been none, an astral gap that had set him on alert. The spell had been on his lips even as he opened the door. How close he had come to casting the spell

of draining, instead of a spell of sleep. Only by shifting the subtleties of tone and syllabics had he kept from taking her life.

Who the hell was playing him? Humans did not just “become” mage. Not in a night, and not in a year. A mage was born, not made. He came to his feet, fingers ruthlessly combing his hair as he paced the length of the bed.

And snarled as the revelation struck.

“Father! Damn you, you meddling old man.”

*Raiji.* With the simple spell, a wide wall of windows that had opened on the expansive view of the Vegas Strip became a mirror to the great library in Xiayang. The province had been his family’s seat of power for generations. As he expected, his father was transcribing one of the many parchments that covered his desk, taking on the time-consuming work of transcribing ancient scroll to modern bytes.

“Father.”

“Xin Li.” The men studied each other, neither giving away his thoughts. Xin had learned his patience at the foot of a master.

Unlike his father, Xin didn’t have all night to sit in silence. “Is there something you’d like to tell me about Mia Tarone?”

“There are many things I could tell you about Miss Tarone. Is there something in particular you wish to know, or shall I start with her birth? It is an especially interesting birth,” his father told him calmly.

Xin turned to check on the woman still sleeping behind him. “Explain.”

His father chuckled. “Mia was born in a little Texas town nearly twenty-five years ago. Her very human mother had run off to Vegas, sure she could be one of the best showgirls on the Strip.”

He tensed as his father paused expectantly. He could read his father well enough to know that he was enjoying telling this tale.

“Mia’s mother was a beautiful woman, and a talented dancer. Unfortunately for her, she fell in love with the wrong man—or should I say, the wrong mage.”

“Who was he?” It wasn’t unknown for a mage to father a child with a human. It was unheard of for that child to be left to be raised as human.

“Beniamino Carlesi.”

“Damn. Carlesi was the last mage in his family. And he was killed—”



“Killed before he even knew that Mia’s mother was pregnant.” His father paused a moment, letting that sink in.

“So no one in the council knew he had fathered a child?”

“And there was no family to step in and raise her.”

“Mia’s mother?”

“Seems not to have known anything about who the man she loved really was. Mia lived with her mother in Texas until her mother died three years ago. Soon after, she moved to Vegas, and the fates landed her at Dunvegas within weeks.”

“The fates or The Fates, Father?”

The older mage shook his head slowly. “I’m not sure myself. I sent you to Dunvegas last year based on a rumor, nothing more. But since your visit to Dunvegas last year, word about a new rogue mage in Vegas has spread like wildfire. She’s got a fiercely defensive natural ability, stronger than her dad’s was—it is all that’s kept her alive.”

A self-mocking laugh escaped from Xin Li. “So somehow I brought her mage powers out last year when I met her?”

A whisper of power along his back was the only warning he had before his body was encased in a sheath of heavy metal, immobilizing his body and making even breathing a bit difficult.

“Met me? Ruined me, you mean. You asshole. You’re the one that did this to me. What the hell are you going to do to fix it?”

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Mia had the mother of all headaches. Every hair on her head felt like it was weighted with iron, making the simple act of getting out of bed a major accomplishment.

As happened more and more frequently lately, a spell had sprung to her lips and been uttered without her even knowing what the words meant. Now she stared at Xin Li, equal parts appalled at what she had done and pleased she had managed to catch one of the world’s most feared mages unawares.

“You did catch him when he was more worried about you than he was about his own safety, my dear. You had him at a bit of a disadvantage.” The voice came from the windows on the other side of Xin.

Mia froze, instinctively doubling her shields in response to the unexpected voice. She could sense no one else in the room.

“I’m not there, Mia. Although I wouldn’t mind it a bit. I have a feeling it would be quite a pleasure to meet the woman who can catch my son off guard.”

A jagged, choking sound came from Xin in response. Mia stalked closer, moving in a wide circle to make sure he was truly confined by her spell.

“I’m in the window. And you may want to consider releasing him. I do think you’re smothering him inside the spell of entrapment. Nicely done, by the way—using a heavy metal spell like so. Most mages are more likely to attack with a weather spell, or a physical deter—”

“Enough!” The phrase to ripple the window glass slid from her lips, and as simple as that the man was gone.

Now what was she going to do?

Reaching the far point of the circle she’d begun, Mia could see Xin Li’s face. He was looking a bit pale, his lips white around the edges as he tried to suck in air. Mia tried to fight back the wave of panic at the thought that she might actually kill him with her magic and desperately tried to think of a spell that would hold him without smothering him. But now that she wasn’t in danger her mind stayed mercilessly blank. The only spell that came to mind was the one of release.

“Ah, hell. I can’t get any answers out of you if you’re dead.”

*Letta heluta.*

The metal barrier shimmered and was gone. Xin drew in a gasping breath, but otherwise made no moves, Mia was glad to see. She was never sure what was going to pop out of her mouth when she was threatened these days.

“Why did you do this to me?” Mia demanded.

It was harder than she would have liked to ignore the way his smoothly muscled chest moved as he gasped for breath, momentarily unable to answer. Mia trembled at the realization that she was caught in a dangerous situation here. She wanted answers, but her instincts of self-preservation were going to get one of them killed if they couldn’t stop her dangerous pattern of act first, talk later. Her magic was wildly uncontrollable; the only thing it seemed to be good for was killing the people who tried to hurt her.

Xin Li was the only one who could give her the answers she needed. She couldn't get any answers from him if he tried to kill her first.

Coming here was seeming like a bad, bad idea.

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"Can we have a truce? No magic while we talk this out?" His voice was still raspy as he panted for breath, but at least he didn't make any sudden movements.

Mia hoped that might mean he realized just how bad an idea it would be to startle her. The image of what the Irish mage had looked like after he'd popped out of a dark parking garage and startled her was something that still turned her stomach. She didn't want to see what Xin looked like from the inside out. But — "Why should I trust you? You flattened me at the door before I could even get a word out."

"You surprised me, Mia. Or more accurately, a mage surprised me. Your shields are good. They aren't perfect. They left just enough of a void that I knew someone was out there who was trying very hard not to be noticed."

"So you were protecting yourself?" She studied him, finally deciding she had to trust him on this once. With a small nod, she perched on the edge of a chair, rolling her neck from side to side to try and relax the tense muscles. "What happened to me? Why am I...not like I was before?"

He met her gaze from across the room and then eased into the other chair. "What do you know about your father?"

"Nothing. Mother would not even say his name. He was an Italian she met in Vegas, and he died without even knowing she was pregnant. And...I think she loved him very much. She would always get sad when I tried to ask about him. After a while, I stopped asking."

"I think—no, I'm sure now—that your father was a mage. The last of his family, and a fairly powerful one, although not strong enough. How much do you know of mage power and the children of mages?"

Mia tried to take it all in. Her father had been a mage. "Not much of either. I mean, I worked here at Dunvegas, so I know some of what they can do. The children, not so much."

"Half mages, which is what you would be called, aren't that common to begin with. How strong their powers are, how much they are mage-like and how much human, varies from one to another. Usually the mage's family will

claim and protect the child, raise them until their power awakens. If those powers are strong enough to pass in the mage world, they are welcome to do so; if their powers are too weak, they usually live in the human world as a psychic or even try to pass as completely normal.”

“Why did my powers awaken?”

Xin looked reluctant but answered. “Mage powers in a human don’t usually awaken until they are in their 50’s. Which is quite young for a mage, barely out of puberty, really. Yours were probably triggered by a combination of what we shared, the strong magic already around us here, and...”

“And?”

“And the emotion of what we shared.”

Mia bolted from her chair. “There was no emotion there. Pleasure, ok. Anger—where the hell did you go the next morning? Ok, I had a lot of anger.”

“I’ve been kicking myself for that for a year.”

Mia looked up warily as he rose and crossed to her, but her defensive instincts stayed quiet. She stayed still, letting him come closer. “Where did you go? Breakfast meeting you couldn’t get out of?”

“Something like that. Look, Dad says you’ve seen for yourself how aggressive the mages can be about gathering power.”

“If by aggressive you mean murderous, yes. Up close and personal, even.”

“One of the first defenses is to set a callback spell. Especially when you go into unfamiliar territory, you set a spell that calls you back at a certain time. Foils kidnappings, ransoms, and attempts to coerce alliances if you can poof out even when your power pool has been nullified. Think of it as a get out of jail free card.”

Mia nodded and wondered how she could learn that one. “Hey, how come spells are just popping into my head? And how can I make sure the right spell pops into my head when I want it, not just when I’m desperate?”

“You sound like you’re an Instinctive. Really an uncommon talent, and not something that half mages usually have at all. Your magic comes to you instinctively, in flashes of knowledge that you don’t really control.” He crouched down by her chair, his hand resting warmly on her own. She clung to it, relishing the feel of his skin against her own. There was an odd vibration where their flesh met, a barely-there buzz like the build up of static when she drug

her feet across carpet. It was oddly arousing, leaving her senses heightened and making her wish he'd touch her with more than just a hand. The longer he touched her, the better she was feeling; within a moment her headache had all but disappeared.

"Xin Li." Everything he'd told her was spinning around in her mind, in a jumbled mess of confused clarity. To have names and logical explanations had a surprisingly calming affect on her. For the first time in a year, she felt that she was totally sane, not losing her head to some alternate reality that would end with her spending her days staring at rubber walls and making spider pets.

"Ask me anything, Mia."

It had been her one wish when she arrived, the burning question that had driven her to seek him out. Now Mia was afraid to ask the last question. "How do I get rid of—this. All of it. I never wanted to be a mage. I don't think I'm going to be a very good one. So far, all it's done is get me very nearly dead a dozen times and make some other mages very much dead instead."

"Ah, Mia. I'm afraid there isn't a way to take your powers away. They aren't something that were added to you last year; they were always there, just waiting to be awoken. And it would have happened, later if not sooner." He was trying to look comforting Mia could tell, but his hand had begun moving in small circles across her arm. And that touch was far from comforting. It was stimulating, arousing, and very near driving her to forget why she wanted to have her powers removed in the first place.

"So I'm going to have to keep hiding from the other mages, keep killing the ones that find me, and very likely eventually end up dead for my troubles?" Mia tried to get upset at the thought. Hard to do when all she could think about was his arms, moving now to pull her up to stand beside him.

Xin lowered his head until his lips were a mere breath from hers. "No more hiding. My family is one of four that hold permanent seats on the high court. You'll be under our protection; no one will try to take your life again for a very long while."

More excited by his lips so close to hers than by his words, it took a moment for what he said to sink in. "Wait. Why will they try to take my life at all?"

He groaned and pulled back. “It’s a complicated thing. You’ve got years of training ahead—you won’t always be an Instinctive. And if your schooled powers are as strong as your instinctive ones, you’re going to hold power of your own, independent of your foster status.”

“I don’t want power. I don’t want to have to battle anyone. I just want...”

His lips, on hers. Hot and demanding, their touch set her on fire, driving every thought of power, magic, and killers out of her mind. His tongue was there to sweep away the doubts, driving her to cling tighter to him and begin the battle of desire.

Strong, hard hands settled on her back, one hand molding itself to her ass and pulling her into his strength. And then she was lost, his mouth devouring hers, conquering her. Mia knew she was right where she wanted to be. She had a feeling this Vegas Magic was going to keep her busy for a long, long time.



[Click here to find out more about Ember Case.](#)

# The Big Bad Wolf

By Bianca D'Arc

Sherry had come to Las Vegas to get married, but nothing was going as planned. Her dreams of happily ever after ended the same day they'd arrived when she found her fiancé *in flagrante* with a cheap hooker. He'd said it was nothing but a last hurrah, but Sherry's eyes had been opened. Jeff was not the man she'd thought if he could do something like that.

So she'd stumbled out of the Honeymoon Suite with only her purse and the clothes on her back and started walking up and down the famous Strip, past the pirate ship and onward toward the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, the Sphinx and back. She saw none of it.

Finally around sunset, she found herself in front of a dark castle. She was cold with the sun was setting, and hungry too. This casino looked as good as any to find some warmth and a bite to eat. It didn't look quite as busy as some of the others, but that was probably a good thing. Sherry was in no mood for boisterous crowds.

Entering under a large doorway she barely saw, Sherry was surprised to find the interior of the castle matched what she'd glimpsed of the exterior. It was built on a grand scale and darker than most of the other casinos on the Strip. The clientele were also a little different, though she couldn't put her finger on exactly why she thought that. Sure, they were better looking than your average group of people—no flabby midsections, only toned muscles shown off in form-fitting clothing. There was marked preference for leather. The women were slinky, tall, lithe and almost scary looking and the men were fierce.

A few gave her quick glances as she walked around looking for a gift shop, but for the most part they ignored her. She couldn't help but notice them though. It was as if she'd landed in the midst of a modeling convention.

Everyone was so good looking, she felt like a bit of a frump. Especially in the white cotton sundress she'd worn on the plane early that morning. It was a lot worse for wear now, almost twelve hours later. She felt curious eyes on her, but Sherry was too numb to really care. Her world had come crashing down and her future looked bleak.

Rather than give in to tears, Sherry decided to get a room for the night and hit the gift shops to see if she could at least buy a change of clothes. She had her credit cards with her, so aside from the hefty price tags on the items she'd need, she was set. It was hard for her—frugal as she was—to pay boutique prices, but her most serious relationship had just ended in a horrible way. What was money after that?

Sherry walked around in a fog, not really seeing the dark stone halls or the strange characters. The casino seemed to be much busier now that night had fallen and she could hear music from the larger function rooms, but her focus was on the gift shop and row of boutiques along one corridor. She needed things like a toothbrush and other toiletries, in addition to something to sleep in and an outfit for tomorrow. Finding something to eat would come next. Tomorrow she'd face Jeff and get her luggage back. Then she'd book a flight for home and leave Vegas—and Jeff—behind forever.

The gift shop had what she needed, though they also carried a bunch of rather odd supplies she had no idea gift shops even stocked. What was fish scale conditioner for? And why would a casino gift shop stock equine mane and tail shampoo? Hoof picks? The list went on, but Sherry didn't let it bother her. She had weightier problems on her mind than the eclectic tastes of a hotel gift shop owner.

The boutiques were also troublesome. The first one she entered seemed to be a fetish store. Leather everywhere and things that looked like bondage clothing, though she'd never seen any up close before. Sherry admitted to being intrigued and even fingered some of the slinky outfits in admiration before she left the store, feeling worse than she had before. If Jeff hadn't been such a skunk, she could've worn one of those outfits for him, but now, she had no one to wear it for and it didn't look likely she ever would. She was a shy creature and Jeff had been her first serious relationship, though she was in her early thirties. She doubted she'd find anyone else anytime soon, which only depressed her more.



With tears in her eyes that she refused to let fall, Sherry left the fetish store. She hadn't gone three feet out the door when her way was blocked by a tall man. He'd stepped in front of her so fast, she barely had time to avoid a collision, though she raised her hands and encountered the warmth of him through his white shirt as she used his chest to stop her momentum.

"I'm sorry," she said, raising her head to look up to meet the most hypnotic gaze she'd ever seen. Her words stilled in her throat as her senses were captured.

"Not to worry, my dear." The silken voice mesmerized her, dulling her senses. "Are you with anybody? A girl as lovely as yourself shouldn't wander here alone."

Stunned, she could only shake her head, unable to tear her gaze away from his dark eyes.

"Such a shame." He made a rueful pout. "Allow me to—"

A large, male hand appeared on the man's shoulder, tugging him back, away from Sherry.

"Leave her alone, Dimitri."

The voice was deep, masculine, and rough in a way the other man's hadn't been. It freed Sherry from the spell that had kept her immobile and she stepped back, away from the man called Dimitri. She looked over his shoulder to see an even taller man stepping forward. He had brown hair and the warmest, chocolate-brown eyes she'd ever seen. Where Dimitri was slick and suave, this man was all rough edges. He seemed more genuine to Sherry, and much more likable, though he looked every bit as dangerous.

"You dare challenge me, pup?" The first man turned on the newcomer.

"She's not part of the entertainment, old friend. It's obvious she doesn't know what she's stumbled into. I've been watching her since she stopped in front of the moat."

"Moat?" Sherry asked with a puzzled frown.

"See?" the new man said with a raised eyebrow.

Dimitri shook his head, frowning, but moved off. But now the second man was facing her, a forbidding frown on his face.

"You just had a close call, little lamb."

"My name is Sherry." She didn't know why she felt compelled to tell him that, but the words were out before she could censor her thoughts. "Thanks for your help, but I'll be fine now."

"What are you doing in Dunvegas, Sherry? This is no place for someone like you."

She took exception to his tone, preparing to stalk off, but she'd give him a piece of her mind first. "I'll go where I damned well please. I'm sick of being told where to go, what to do, how to dress, and how to speak, so don't you even try. Who the hell are you, anyway?"

The man reached into his pocket and flipped open a badge. "Chet Davis, head of Dunvegas Security, ma'am. Like I said, I've been watching you since you stopped outside the moat."

"I didn't see any moat." The badge seemed legit and the man was big enough to be a professional football player—or a cop. He was tall and muscular, like many of the other men she'd seen in the casino, but he seemed a cut above the rest. A little taller, a little broader, a little sharper-eyed.

His smile almost stole her breath. "Why don't I escort you to the front door and you can see what I mean?"

"Are you throwing me out?" Something about him riled her, though she was usually a quiet kind of person, not given to confrontation. But this man dared her to say no, just for the fun of it.

Strange, she'd never thought of confrontation as fun before, but the sparkle in his dark brown eyes made her shiver, and it wasn't from cold. No, this was a shiver of awareness of her own fragility next to this giant man's strength. He could crush her, or weigh her down in the most delicious way possible.

Where were these scandalous thoughts coming from? She was a librarian, for goodness sake! She wasn't one to ogle strange men, even if they did look good enough to eat. She did her best not to blush, but she could feel the heat of a flush rise to her fair cheeks. Chet smiled in a way she could only term wolfish.

"On the contrary, I wouldn't throw out a pretty little thing like you, Red."

Suddenly, Sherry was glad of her dark red hair that refused to be tamed. Normally it was the bane of her existence, but this man seemed to like it, if the searing appreciation in his gaze was any indication.

"But we've got a convention going on here and you stick out like a sore thumb," he continued. "I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't keep an eye on you. So tell me, why did you come in here of all the casinos on the Strip?"

Something told her he really wanted to know. She shrugged. "I was walking. It got dark and I realized I was hungry, so I stopped and I was outside the castle. I didn't really look at the place before I came in. I was just seeking some warmth, a change of clothes and a meal."

"Clothes? That's why you were in the Bondage Boutique?"

She blushed again. "I didn't realize what kind of store it was 'til I saw what was inside."

"But some of those outfits intrigued you." He didn't phrase it as a question and the dancing light in his eyes told her he really had been watching her finger a few of those outfits longingly.

A lump formed in her throat despite his warm expression. "I guess so, but I have nobody to wear them for now."

"That sounds like a story I need to hear." He crossed his arms, shifting his weight back to regard her. "How about you tell me over dinner?"

Chet silently prodded her to accept. He'd scented her the moment she'd passed the casino on her lonely walk. He'd left it to fate as to whether she'd come in, but when she had, he'd known fate was on his side. Destiny had finally brought his mate to him.

To say he was surprised by the little red-haired mortal would be an understatement, but he was infatuated with her every move and her scent was ripe and luscious. Ambrosia. She would be his and he wouldn't hear anything against it. The trick was getting her to agree. He wasn't a vampire like Dimitri, able to spin veils of enticement over his prey. What he was, was an alpha werewolf, with only natural pheromones to call on and the certainty that this fragile little creature was his destined mate.

He could tell by her scent. She probably smelled just like any other female to the rest of the were population, but to him, she was the finest of aphrodisiacs, the rarest of vintages. She was his. Plain and simple. She smiled at him and his heart skipped a beat.

"I am kind of hungry," she admitted.

“Well, we can fix that easily enough. I’m off duty for the night, so we can order up a feast. Why don’t you finish your shopping while I make the arrangements?” He pointed her toward a more vanilla clothing boutique while he tapped the small headset that connected him to his team and the rest of the hotel. The first thing he did was put his beta in charge for the night, and then he contacted room service and ordered a meal sent up to his suite.

He also contacted Sadie, who ran the Bondage Boutique, and had the outfits Sherry had lingered over gift wrapped and sent up. Those would be gifts for later—after they’d had a chance to get to know one another and he’d put his mark on her. He’d enjoy seeing her in those skimpy leather numbers, knowing they’d reveal his bite marks once he got the chance to put them on her shoulder. That would come...later tonight if he had any say in the matter.

Little Red Riding Hood didn’t know it yet, but she was definitely on the menu. Chet couldn’t wait for desert.

Sherry splurged on a red dress that made her feel sexy and daring. She put it on in the dressing room of the small store and wore it out. No way was she going to dinner with this handsome man dressed like a ragamuffin. She took a minute to fix her hair and makeup as best she could with the items she had in her purse before walking out to face the head of security, only he wasn’t alone.

A tall, sandy haired man stood with an equally statuesque blonde woman at his side. Both wore the headsets of hotel security and these also had discrete pins on their chests with the logo of the casino. A niggling little question was answered in Sherry’s mind. This guy really was who he claimed. It was certain he was giving these two orders. She heard the tail end of his instructions for “guarding the perimeter” as she approached.

He sniffed, then turned his head. The smile that lit his handsome face was worth every exorbitant penny she’d spent on the most daring dress she’d ever owned. She heard a wolf whistle from the other man, but it cut off abruptly as Chet elbowed him in the ribs.

“Sherry, this is my sister, Cara, and my second in command, Tony. Guys, this is Sherry.”

The woman towered over Sherry, but her eyes were the same chocolate brown as Chet’s and they were welcoming, as was her smile. “Welcome to Dunvegas, Sherry. I’m sure my brother will take good care of you, but if you

have any questions, feel free to call me.” So saying, she handed Sherry a business card with the casino logo and her name, number and title—Security, Chief Communications Officer. Sherry was impressed. She thanked Cara for the odd offer and the woman took her leave, breezing through the casino as men stopped to stare. She was gorgeous, after all.

Sherry tried not to feel inferior, but the tall blonde was so far out of Sherry’s league looks-wise, she felt like a wallflower. One look in Chet’s eyes, though, cleared that right up. He gazed at her as if he wanted to lick her all over, though where that thought came from, she had no idea. Heat flooded her cheeks again as she stared into his warm chocolate eyes.

“I’ll just leave you two alone,” Tony said, utterly forgotten for the moment, though he stood at Chet’s side.

“Sorry, T.” Chet shrugged as he broke the stare and turned to his friend. “You know how it is.”

“Not yet,” Tony said with something like regret, “but I hope one day, I will.” He slapped Chet on the back and smiled at Sherry, moving away. “Lucky dog.” Tony gave a little laughing howl as he headed out across the crowded casino, but nobody seemed to think anything of it. Then again, this was Las Vegas, Sherry reasoned as she turned back to Chet. He was staring at her again, his eyes lit with what she thought was desire.

It was unreasonable, after what she’d been through that day, but she felt an answering fire in her own blood. No way could she be so attracted to a stranger so soon after breaking up with Jeff, but apparently logic had little to do with her response to Chet. She wanted him and she was honest enough with herself to admit it—if only in the privacy of her own mind. Jeff didn’t even feel like a blip on her radar at the moment. She was focused solely on Chet.

“You’re gorgeous,” he said in a low, rumbling voice that set her insides on fire.

“I’m glad you think so. I had to get out of that sundress. It was looking kind of bedraggled.”

“You looked enchanting in white, but you’re even sexier in red, Red.”

“It clashes with my hair a little.” She fingered a tendril of her curly hair.

Chet touched her hair, stroking her like a puppy. “Not at all. Red is a good color for you. The hotter, the better.”

"Thanks." They stared into each other's until a howl of joy from a nearby slot machine broke them apart as someone struck the jackpot.

Chet seemed to come back to himself. "Come on, I've got dinner waiting. I hope you like filet mignon."

The perfect gentleman, he took her arm, escorting her to a private elevator. Sherry was surprised. She thought they'd be heading for one of the restaurants, but he was the head of hotel security. Perhaps they had a private dining room for employees.

When he hit the button for the top floor, Sherry was surprised but willing to see where this magical evening—and man—would lead. She'd never done anything so daring in her entire life, but for once, she felt like taking a chance.

The elevator stopped at the top and he led her to a penthouse suite that overlooked the Las Vegas Strip. The view from the crenellated stone parapet was breathtaking and the table just inside the glass doors was set for two. Candles flickered in the dim light and savory aromas wafted from the serving dishes that had been left on an electric warming cart. She looked around for whoever had laid the feast and prepared the table, but they were alone. Intimacy surrounded them and Sherry's mouth dried with sudden nerves.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, her gaze glued on the view.

Chet padded to her side and offered a crystal glass filled with champagne. She took it and turned to face him. He smiled and raised a matching glass.

"*You're* beautiful."

For the first time in her life, Sherry truly felt beautiful. This special man made her feel that way. It was completely crazy. They'd only just met and she was on the rebound, but somehow, it all made perfect sense.

They ate a sumptuous dinner accompanied by one of the most expensive bottles of champagne Sherry had ever seen, much less drunk. The bubbles tickled her nose as the delicate flavor burst on her tongue. The wine, as well as the man, were pure magic.

"And now for desert." Chet licked his lips, staring hotly at the woman who would be his mate. Any minute now, the mating fever would kick into high gear...if he was right. It wasn't the usual course of business for his kind, but Chet was something special among werewolf. He'd gone to work for Mr. Fritz, the wizard who owned Dunvegas, because of a prophecy and certain promises.

Chet had agreed to let Mr. Fritz cast a spell, to draw his mate to here, to Dunvegas, so Chet could focus the energy he would have ordinarily put into a mate hunt on securing the premises. Chet had waited for the woman to come, but he hadn't expected her to show up during the busiest time of the year, smack dab in the middle of the ParaPleasure Convention. Sure, they'd brought on extra security to deal with the convention itself, but the casino still needed guarding—more so with the increased activity and fully booked hotel. Vamps, weres and other supernaturals didn't always play well together. It was Chet's job—and that of his pack—to make sure not too much blood was spilled.

And now here she was. Fritz had told him his destined mate would be human. Chet had prepared himself to accept a weaker female into his life. But Fritz hadn't said how unutterably beautiful she'd be, or how alluring.

He stood and went around the table, taking her hand and urging her gently to her feet.

"I thought we were going to have desert." Her voice was sultry and low, skating along Chet's spine like fingernails scratching sensually through his pelt.

"We are," he all but growled, though he tried to keep a lid on his libido, but it was hard. Hell, *he* was hard.

Chet lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. When she didn't object, he flipped it over and ran his lips over her palm, holding her gaze all the while. Her nostrils flared slightly in pleasure and he moved to nibble on her fingers, sucking here and there as her breath started to speed. A minute later she was panting as he lifted her hand to his chest and wrapped one hand around her waist.

He reeled her in and she came willingly. Her skin was hot, just as Fritz had said would happen when the mating fever hit, but there was one true test still left to perform. With great deliberation, Chet lowered his lips to hers, inch by inch. He drew the moment out, wanting to remember these next few minutes for the rest of their lives together, but she would have none of it.

With surprising strength for such a tiny woman, she pulled him closer and, reaching up, dragged his mouth even closer to hers, locking them together in a deep, sensual kiss. She tasted like heaven itself. The feel of her hands petting his back, his shoulders, and running up into his hair was more than he ever could have imagined.

He tore at the slinky straps of her stretchy red dress, glad there weren't any buttons or zippers to deal with. Right now, his inner wolf needed her naked just as much as the man did.

"I don't understand any of this," she gasped, coming up for air as he drew her dress off over her head. Her little fingers went to work on the buttons of his shirt the moment her hands were free. He liked that.

"Don't ever try to understand magic, my love. This was meant to be. I accept that. Now all you have to do is accept me."

She stilled. "I don't even know you." For a moment it looked like sanity was going to slow her down, but then her palms rubbed over his chest under the open shirt. Chet took it as a good sign, but he knew he had to get her full involvement and cooperation. Just seducing her senses wasn't enough.

"You're right, but you know my soul, Sherry. Just as I know yours. I recognized you the moment I caught your scent. Didn't you recognize me, too?"

Her eyes turned dreamy. "I felt something when I saw you. You're different, Chet. I realized that right away, but I don't know what it is."

Chet took a deep breath. Should he reveal his inner nature now or later? She would find out sooner or later, of course, but how to tell her? She was only human. He had to tread lightly.

He stroked her hair as she rested in his arms. "I'm an alpha, sweetheart, and you're my mate. Can't you feel it? The mating heat has you in its grip, just as Fritz said would happen. His magic drew you here. To me. And once we join, we will never be apart."

"You want to marry me?" Confusion made her cute.

"I do." He placed nibbling kisses on her cheeks and mouth. "Don't you want to be mine? Forever?"

"I do. God help me, I do." She lifted into his kiss once more as he unhooked her bra and slid her panties down curvy legs. She was so soft and pliant, so delectable in every way. He rid himself of his pants and shorts as quickly as possible, kicking shoes and socks in every direction until they were both naked, rubbing, yearning, together. When they broke apart for a moment, she whispered, "What's an alpha?"

Chet had to laugh, just once. She knew so little about the real world, but she would soon learn. "I'm the leader of my pack, the alpha wolf. And you'll be my mate, Sherry. Tonight. I'm going to make love to you and bite your beautiful



neck to place my mark. It will let every were in this town know you belong to me. And then I want you to wear one of the outfits I bought for you.” He cupped her breasts and squeezed, watching her eyes dilate in pleasure.

“Outfits?” She seemed adorably confounded by his words, but she wasn’t objecting. The mating fever ran true, allowing her to accept—for now—things she didn’t fully understand yet. But she would. Soon. As soon as he got inside her.

“While you were buying that little red number, I had the Bondage Boutique send up the things you looked at.” He smiled at the flush that rose on her soft cheeks. “There’s an even better selection in the convention hall. I’ll take you there tomorrow.” He liked the idea of showing her off to the whole para world and letting them see her, wearing his mark.

The very idea made his inner wolf stand up and howl in joy. His mate was finally here, in his arms, naked and willing. She didn’t understand everything yet, but she would in time. The important part was to make her his in the most basic way.

Chet swung her up into his arms and headed for the bedroom. He couldn’t wait any longer. He had to be inside her. Now.

He laid her on the bed and spread her legs, noting with pleasure the dark red of her curls. She was a natural redhead, which pleased him greatly. Chet bent over her, licking her straining nipples and sucking on her skin as she writhed beneath him.

“I can’t wait, Sherry. It has to be fast this time.”

“It’s okay. Don’t make me wait.”

The dreamy expression on her face coupled with the elevated heat of her skin let him know she was more than ready, but he had to be sure. He didn’t want to start their life together by hurting her. Reaching down, he stroked his fingers through her curls, then tested her readiness. She was slick and wet, ready for him and writhing in pleasure as he pushed inside, just a short way.

“I’m going to make this good for you, sweetheart. Tell me you want it.” He moved closer, lining himself up to stake his claim. She whimpered when he removed his fingers.

“I want it. I want *you*. Please!”

The last word was a sobbing cry as he pushed home within her.

Sherry felt so full, so gloriously complete in a way she'd never felt before. Jeff hadn't given her this much pleasure at his best, and Chet hadn't even really started yet. True, there'd been little foreplay, but her blood was humming so hot, she didn't need it. She'd never been this ready before. Not for anyone. And never this fast.

"Yes," he growled, his eyes glowing as he began to move. "You're mine, Sherry. Say it!"

A whimper left her lips as her excitement rose another notch. Any more and she was going to come right out of her skin. She'd never known such pleasure.

"Yes! I'm yours. Yours!"

His grunts became growls as he drove her higher. Sherry flew over the edge before she was even aware of how high he'd pushed her. He felt so right within her, as if that's where he always should be. She cried out as she came, hard and fast.

But Chet wasn't done. Muscles rippling, he flipped her onto her stomach and lifted her up until she was on all fours. He entered from behind, pushing deep while the heat rose another notch. She'd never had multiple orgasms before, but Chet was pushing her higher, and for the first time in her life, it seemed like more than a possibility. She was panting with every thrust as he deepened his possession.

"Now, Sherry. Now you become mine." His breath tickled her ear as he covered her back with his hard body. A moment later, she felt his teeth grazing down her neck, spiking her excitement. When he bit into her shoulder, she screamed, coming so hard, she blacked out for a minute.

When she came to, she was lying on her back with Chet leaning over her. One hand stroked her hair, while he gazed at her with loving concern. Slick wetness between her thighs told her he'd come just as hard as she had.

"Are you okay?" His voice was gruff, a low growl that fired her senses.

She nodded. "I've never felt like this before."

He grinned. "We have years to explore all the ways to make love, sweetheart, now that we're together."

"You were really serious about that?" Hope filled her heart.

"You doubted me?" His surprise was almost comical.

Sherry reached up to stroke his stubbly cheek, giving him a soft smile. "I had a rough day."

He captured her hand and kissed it, nibbling on her fingers. "Tomorrow starts the rest of our lives together. I meant every word, Sherry, my love. I've been waiting for you and now that you're here, I'll never let you go."

"Now that I've had a taste of you, I don't think I'll ever want to go anywhere."

He growled and rolled so that he lay on top of her, letting her feel a little of his intimidating weight. "Good thing you said that, but I'm still going to have to punish you for doubting my sincerity." The devilish smile in his eyes stilled any worries she might've had about a guy his size wanting to 'punish' her."

"Tomorrow," he punctuated his words with nibbling kisses along her throat and down to the fresh marks on her shoulder, "you can wear the red leather number and I'll paddle your pretty ass 'til it matches. What do you think?"

Her breath caught and her imagination took flame. "I think I'm going to like my punishment a little too much."

"That's okay. I can always punish you for that later." With a wink, he slid inside her and together they rocked the world until morning. Between love bites and shattering completions, he told her a fantastical story about being a *werewolf* and leading a pack of his kin. She didn't believe a word of it, but late the next day, he proved it to her, then made love to her again. And again. And again.

And they lived happily ever after...Red and her big bad wolf.



[Click here to find out more about Bianca D'Arc.](#)

## Dunvegas: Alien Attack!

By Jody Wallace

“If I were an alien who’d escaped Area 51, where would I go?” Miranda Mellons raised the binoculars to her sweaty face and inspected the military base from atop Tikaboo Peak, the closest legal vantage point to the Groom Lake facility. All she could see was a cluster of white warehouses encircled by the thin, tan lines of desert roads. Nothing else but twenty-six miles of sand, bushes, and mountain ranges. No signs of life, much less the military masses searching for alien life.

But there’d been no mistaking the signal she’d picked up with her dad’s old radio less than twenty-four hours ago. Her father, an ex-military survivalist, had taught her well, and she knew what the coded message meant.

Loose foo.

An alien had escaped.

It was the day they’d all been waiting for. She was determined to be the one to locate the ET, to prove herself to the other Dream Team members who humored her out of respect for her father’s memory.

She had to decide on a plan of action. Others might be hiking up Tikaboo even now, at least the ones spry enough to handle the terrain. She’d beaten them here because she’d neglected to relay the message until she’d been en route. Hey, they’d pawned off the shit Nevada outpost job on her while they handled the exciting aspects of extraterrestrial hunting—anything besides monitoring a radio. She should benefit at least a little. After all, it was her father who’d started the Dream Team, a faction of ET hunters and conspiracy theorists that had spanned the globe since before the Internet.

They’d all thought Area 51 was a dead zone. No way would the government hide anything or anyone here since it was so well known.

They’d been wrong.

What to do, what to do. Miranda buzzed with excitement, and also the several energy drinks she'd consumed on the trip. The others had more contacts than she did, more resources. But she had two things they didn't have—the first and most relevant being proximity.

Not that it was doing her any good. She didn't see anything unusual. Didn't smell anything. Didn't hear anything. She'd been up Tikaboo enough to know what was usual, too.

Her second ace in the hole hadn't helped yet, either—her souped-up gamma wave scanner. The others had scanners, but not like hers. She didn't plan to tell them about the modifications until she confirmed they worked. Unfortunately, the main unit was too heavy to carry up the mountain, and she hadn't detected anything on the handheld.

Hell, if she were an alien who'd escaped Area 51, the first thing she'd do would be blow the place. Barring that, she'd hightail it as fast as she could towards the closest human establishment where she could blend in. Might that be Rachel? No way. Only 100 people lived there and half of them were crazy. Alamo? Nope, still too small.

Well, of course. By hook, teleportation, pick-up truck or crook, the alien would head for Las Vegas. Let the other Dreamers scour the desert around the ET Highway. Miranda was going straight to Sin City to extend the hand of human friendship to their stellar kin.

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What the heck was going on at Dunvegas? Miranda dragged her heavy luggage behind her through the parking garage, dodging a pile of horse crap. Horse crap? In Vegas? It was one thing for the garage to be full, but it was another for it to be full of such a freaky assortment of vehicles. Everything from Jeeps to chariots filled the spaces.

Ahead of her, two winged women squealed and glittered as they raced to catch the elevator, one practically flying into the air in her haste. They noticed Miranda trudging behind them and held the doors.

"Nice costumes," Miranda said. With her interest in electronics and extraterrestrials, she'd never worried much about her appearance, but suddenly she felt conspicuous in her dusty hiking gear. She set the hard case of scanning equipment on its end and leaned the suitcase, also full of equipment, against the wall.

“Oh, yah, sure,” one of the women said. She had a distinct Wisconsin accent and lavender wings. “Costumes.”

“Is there a comic book show here?” Miranda asked. A small contingent of Dreamers routinely monitored anime and other conventions for evidence of alien life.

“ParaPleasure,” the other woman cooed. She glanced at her companion and they both giggled. Again. “You’re not here for Pleasure, are you, hon?”

“Business.” How sad that random costumed strangers could tell she, Miranda Mellons, had little or no pleasure in her life.

Well, that would end as soon as she and her revolutionary scanner located the ET. She’d have the pleasure of the Dreamers’ respect. She’d have the pleasure of guiding first contact with the world outside the military. She’d be famous, no longer a joke to everyone outside the Dream Team, where she was a joke anyway.

Imagine, being a joke among the people everyone else laughs at.

The elevators opened into the back of Dunvegas’s huge casino, and she dragged herself and her suitcases through the glitzy hustle and bustle to the front desk. Apparently this ParaPleasure thing attracted an even weirder crowd than anime conventions, because everywhere she looked, Miranda saw features, appendages and skin tones not found in nature. Earth’s nature. The Dream Team had proof ETs looked as human as the next human, being their distant ancestors and all, so maybe not found in alien nature, either.

“I called about a room,” she said to a harried man at the desk once he’d finished checking in a guy dressed all in black and wearing shades. And a cape.

“Name?” He started tapping away at his computer keyboard and didn’t meet her eyes.

“Miranda Mellons. M-E-L-L-O-N-S. I’ve stayed here before, and I have a DV Discount Card. Like a VIP card, only for Dunvegas.”

“Yes, I know what the DV cards are.” The man tip-tapped some more.

The Dreamers always stayed at Dunvegas. Its location was geographically compatible with their equipment, with less interference than the Excalibur, MGM Grand or Luxor, the other prime locations. The air conditioning was cranked to arctic, but they got affordable rates and two bucks off at the buffet. The owner, Mr. Fritz, was rumored to be a backer of their society.

“Miss Mellons, I’m afraid we don’t have any rooms available.” The man glanced up, and Miranda was disconcerted to see the skin around his eyes and nose was as wrinkled as a raisin, even though he appeared to be young. Freaky. “The Luxor across the street would be happy to honor your DV card.”

“When I called, I was told you had space.” She couldn’t conduct the field test of her new equipment at the Luxor! The pyramid would deflect the gamma waves and ruin everything.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the clerk repeated.

Beside Miranda, a tall, good-looking man wearing a ratty black T-shirt barked something at another desk clerk about his room smelling of cat and demanded to be comped a suite on the executive level.

The other clerk bobbed her head. “Of course, Mr. Lupin. We’ve several openings on the executive level. So sorry for the inconvenience.”

*Why did he get the helpful clerk?* Miranda wondered.

“It’s going to take a full moon for my nose to recover.” The man leaned on the counter and intimidated the small employee. “Putting cats on the wolf floor. Are you new at your job or did you not manifest until you were brain-dead?”

Miranda glared at the hateful man. The poor girl he berated looked as transparent as wax paper. “It’s better than being an asshole,” Miranda muttered.

Mr. Mean didn’t turn to her, but he muttered back. “I have excellent hearing, lady. Mind your own business.”

Miranda dragged her attention back to her own clerk. More waspishly than she’d intended, she snapped, “I know you have rooms. He got one on the executive level and gave up one on another level.”

“Madam, your DV card means we can only offer you accommodations on certain dates.”

“Is there a problem here?” A tall woman with long fingernails and hair as golden as, well, gold strode from the far end of the desk and placed her hand on the clerk’s shoulder. She pinned Miranda in place with a sultry, heavy-lidded gaze.

“No, Ms. Bast,” the clerk said. He appeared to shrink next to the statuesque woman. “Ms. Mellons has a DV card and it’s ParaPleasure this weekend. I’m not supposed to—”

"I'd advise you to make an exception. Ms. Mellons is expected." The woman smiled at Miranda and licked her lips. Her tongue was pale pink. "Mr. Fritz asked that we accommodate Ms. Mellons and any of her friends. Call him and ask if you like."

She winked at Miranda, as if they knew something nobody else did. Was this woman a Dream Teamer? Did she know about the loose foo? Ms. Bast gave a shimmy and stroked her hair behind her rather pointed ears.

The clerk shrank some more. "A room on the wolf...ah, floor thirty just opened up."

"Will you be having it cleaned first?" Miranda lowered her voice. "That guy said it smelled like cat."

Ms. Bast's eyes narrowed, flashing as green as a fluorescent T-shirt. "What have you got against cats?" she asked, her voice a purr of anger.

Miranda stepped back. "Nothing. Really. I like cats, but if the room smells like pee, I'd rather not sleep in it."

The jerky man who'd complained about the room butted in on the conversation. "I doubt someone with your nose could detect the stench. Though unfortunately it's all over the hotel. Cat. Wonder why?"

"Misssster Lupin," Ms. Bast said, her voice an odd hiss, "did you not enjoy the little treat I put on the pillow?"

"You're the one who put that there? You crazy bitch!" Lupin threw his head back and howled. Miranda thought it was a laugh. The clerk beside Ms. Bast deflated further, his face actually seeming to become more wrinkled. His head barely reached the top of the desk now.

"You're confusing me with your mother," Ms. Bast said. She rubbed the heel of her hand across her lips and then her ear, again smoothing back her shiny hair. "Oh, Martin, quit shrinking. Nobody's going to get in a catfight. I swear, goblins make terrible coworkers."

Jeez, the clerk wasn't attractive, but calling him a goblin was nasty. Ms. Bast was a piece of work herself, what with the lip licking and winking and rudeness. What had been on Lupin's pillow? Cat turds? Miranda hoped it would be gone when she got to the room. She didn't have time for hotel politics; she had sensitive equipment to set up and an ET to find.

The clerk's wrinkled face turned red and he swelled back to his full height. He accepted Miranda's credit card without another word.



“That time of the month, huh?” Lupin asked Ms. Bast. He loomed too close to Miranda for comfort, invading her personal space and bumping her precious equipment case.

“Better me than you, Rover,” the blonde retorted.

Both of them laughed. Miranda took a deep breath and said, “Sir, you’re touching my stuff.”

“So?” He eyed Miranda up and down in a way that made her wonder what the hell he was thinking. How could a man in an ancient Pink Floyd shirt look like he owned the world?

“You’re safe unless he lifts a leg,” Ms. Bast advised.

Lupin scowled.

“You’re really a jerk,” Miranda added. Men like Lupin bugged the crap out of her. Aggressive butt holes who thought they could push others around because they were bigger. Or had more money. Or whatever made them think they were so hot. She’d run into her fill of them in tech school amidst the other gizmo nerds like her. “You shouldn’t eavesdrop.”

“You think?” The man leaned forward and took a deep whiff of her hair. “Wow. Very nice. Too bad you don’t belong here. You need to leave, little girl.”

This close, Miranda could see his eyes were a very light blue and the pupils had dilated. His cheekbones and nose were prominent, angular, with tanned skin, and his hair was an unusual shade of iron grey. His lower jaw dropped open slightly, and he smiled, revealing somewhat pointed teeth.

“Excuse me,” she said, jabbing an elbow into his middle. He barely budged, but his smile widened. “You’re making me very uncomfortable. Ms. Bast, can you please call hotel security?”

“Lupin, back off,” Ms. Bast said. “Don’t make me call PMS on your ass. Mr. Fritz has his reasons for including a DV this weekend. Maybe if you’d read your email instead of leading with your nose, you’d realize what they were. This is Miranda Mellons, bonehead.”

Like she was somebody important. Unless...she was? Because of the Dream Team?

“Melllllllons,” the man drawled, making it sound like a dirty word. “Hard to believe, but oh so convenient.”

If he was making a crack about her small chest, she might have to shoot him in the head with her taser. Miranda felt an angry blush color her face and neck, hard to hide when one was as fair-skinned as she was.

Ms. Bast seemed to sense Miranda's irritation and said to Lupin, "Go to your executive suite like a good dog and check your mail."

"I'll see you around, Miranda Mellons." Lupin backed away from Miranda, his gaze never leaving her. She tensed, her stomach fluttering. Her taser was packed with her equipment, and it wouldn't be kosher to use it in a crowded lobby, anyway. When he finally disappeared into the casino, she turned back to Ms. Bast and the hotel clerk.

"As a guest I have rights. I don't appreciate being...smelled and stuff. You should kick him out. That man is offensive."

"You're correct about that," Ms. Bast said, "but he's doing a favor for the owner. Goddess only knows why. Besides, sweetie, this is Vegas. Half the people you meet are offensive." Then she strutted away, her body swiveling like a runway model. "Enjoy your stay, Ms. Mellons," she called over her shoulder. "Don't believe everything your machines tell you."

She *had* to be a fellow Dreamer. All the hints and signs and who else would realize Miranda's luggage was full of equipment? Had the Dreamers set her up to sabotage Miranda? Did she know about the loose foo? God, did that bastard Lupin know something? If either of them made first contact with the ET before Miranda, it would just...suck.

Las Vegas might be an adult playground, but it was time for Miranda to get to work.

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Miranda didn't see or smell anything that resembled cat feces in her room, so she took a quick shower to wash off the desert. Slipping into an old robe, she twisted her hair into a thin hotel towel and ordered room service. No time to get her own food.

While she waited, she set up her equipment on the desk, calibrating the machinery to filter out human gamma waves. Dreamers knew there were aliens on Earth—even the original gamma machines picked up traces of non-human brain patterns. The prevailing theory was most of the blips had been times when the military was transporting an ET from base to base since no Dreamer had met an ET yet.

Miranda's youthful interest in what her dad had always called E&E had led to a four-year program at a tech institute and, ah, independent studies in electroencephalography since she couldn't afford med school. To supplement her tiny outpost stipend, she'd taken a second job delivering pizzas. That's how she'd been able to swing the new scanner design without alerting any Dreamers, who'd snag any research, and credit, away for the "good" of the organization.

She'd perfected, or hoped she'd perfected, her scanner upgrades only a few weeks ago. Now her hard work and newfound hatred for pepperoni were going to pay off with the field test to end all field tests.

Miranda manipulated the dials and knobs on the scanner until she was satisfied with the baseline readout. The machine was picking up activity on all gamma levels. Vegas was densely populated, so that was to be expected. Slowly, she calibrated the sensitive antenna to disregard the human wavelength, which she'd tuned using herself and the residents of Alamo, where she lived. No ETs there, that was for sure. Her, and their, reading hit the charts midrange, except when dreaming. An ET, with a more active gamma pattern, would hit the charts above and below human expectations. The handheld, if close to the subject, could determine whether the discrepancy was dreamstate or alien.

So far, both in the past and with her upgrade, blips had always been dreams, but she had to be sure now that she was working with new equipment. Too bad she couldn't go room to room and ask all the occupants if she could test their brains with the handheld. She had to standardize the primary unit for the number of approximate humans sleeping in the surrounding two miles, filter out interference like radio waves and cell phones, and....

*Voila!*

Miranda stared at the long, narrow display of the scanner. That couldn't be right. It was lit almost completely red, as if the whole block was full of....

No, her machine must be broken. She entered a stream of data at the keyboard, but nothing changed, so she rebooted the hard drive. Readjusted dials. Wiggled the antenna, the plug in the wall. Maybe that asshole at the front desk had damaged it when he'd butted into her conversation. Either that or everyone in the building was deep in dreams.

Because according to her scanner, Miranda was surrounded by extraterrestrials.

As she stared at the readout, a knock sounded at the door. The scanner's proximity sensor flared.

Her stomach as knotted as her hair in the drying towel, Miranda jumped up and grabbed her taser.

Had the Dreamers found out about her machine? Were they ruining her test somehow? They pretended to be all in this together, but it was a facade, and they wouldn't appreciate her hiding her technological advances from them. Or heading to Vegas to look for the ET without running her plan by them. Or getting permission to scratch her butt.

"Who's there?" she called out.

A voice she could swear she recognized called out, "Room service."

Right, right, she'd ordered dinner. Miranda's stomach unknotted and rumbled.

"Just a sec!" She folded up the antenna and tossed the comforter from the bed over her desk unit to forestall questions. Then she hid the taser, grabbed her wallet and trotted to the door, opening it with a smile.

"Boy, that took a long time. Hey! What the hell are you doing here?"

Outside her room holding a silver tray stood Lupin, the asshole from the front desk.

"Delivering your ham sandwich. I expect a big tip." Although he'd stared at her downstairs to the exclusion of everything else, now he peered past her into the room.

"You're a waiter?" She eyed the silver tray and noticed the bucket of champagne in his other hand. "I didn't order booze."

"Compliments of the house." He shoved past her into the room—pushy bastard—and walked over to the small table, covered by an assortment of the tools she used to affect repairs on her machines. He inspected them, and then the blanket-covered mound on the desk. "Where should I put the food?"

"On top of the television." It was the only part of the room not covered by her junk. What could he be thinking about the electronic gizmos and burners and spools of wire everywhere? She held out a couple bills. "Here's your money. I'm so sorry you had to deliver my dinner to the cat pee room. Please leave."

“Doesn’t stink any more. Huh.”

“I think it never did. You just said that to get a free upgrade.” And why a member of the wait staff was staying at the hotel—and dressed in a ratty T-shirt—she had no idea. The many times she’d been to Dunvegas, the staff hadn’t been so peculiar.

“No, it definitely smelled earlier.” He set the tray on the TV and the champagne bucket on the floor. Then he picked up her handheld scanner and clicked it on. It whined almost silently as it powered up, and he winced, rubbing his ear quickly on his shoulder.

“Put that down,” she said.

He ignored her. “What are you doing in here, Miranda Mellons? Making bombs?”

“No, and none of your business! Give me that.” She snatched the scanner away from him but stopped short when she noticed it was flaring as red as a cherry tomato. And it was pointed straight at Lupin.

Lupin was the extraterrestrial? But...but he didn’t seem like a poor, tortured escapee. He wasn’t wonderful and fascinating. And he certainly wasn’t the answer to all her questions.

He was an asshole!

“I can’t believe you’re the alien,” she said, and the enormity of it overwhelmed her as her vision blurred and she sank to the floor in a faint.

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Harry’s target, Miranda Mellons, passed out, which made his job easier. Assess the alleged gamma wave scanner and report back to PMS and Mr. Fritz. Why they couldn’t have sent him straight to Alamo, Nevada, when the precog on staff sensed Miranda’s invention, he had no idea. For whatever reason, the geeks in PMS—the Paranormal and Magical Security company—insisted that the inspection of the equipment’s functionality had to be in the hotel and in the presence of its creator. They’d gone to great and deceptive lengths to get her here, and now he had to evaluate the risk.

She was a tasty little thing. He wouldn’t have minded assessing more than her technology, but Fritz and PMS hadn’t hired him to seduce the human’s body, just her brain.

The towel had fallen off her head, revealing a rat's nest of brown frizz. Harry lifted her off the floor and arranged her comfortably on her bed. If her robe sort of came open in the transfer, was it his fault? Her tits were small but succulent, all pink and white. Resisting the urge to see if they felt as soft as they looked, he closed the gaping neckline of her robe and debated trying to wake her. She looked younger than her reported twenty-nine years with the annoyance lines between her eyebrows smoothed out in sleep.

He was an expert in annoyance wrinkles. He could annoy a precog, and they could even see it coming.

Better tie her up first. He took the cloth restraint out of the serving tray and roped the little brunette to the bedpost. Not in a pervy way, just secured her wrists so she couldn't go for that taser he'd smelled earlier. Or the phone. Or his balls. If she stayed konked, he could get his initial assessment of the machine out of the way before the Q&A portion.

Luckily there was no need to muffle her; the rooms on the wolf floor, among others, were quite soundproof.

Harry then directed his attention to the device beneath the comforter. It looked like an airplane dashboard minus the stick. Dials and screens everywhere, all with tiny needles bouncing back and forth. Printer off to the side with a long roll of paper. Folded up antennae of several types on the top. There was a long, thin screen that displayed jagged waves—must be the gamma readout. It was lit up like a Christmas tree.

Well, of course. Silly woman walked into a hotbed of paranormal activity with her infernal machine and threatened to bring everyone from the ghosts to the goblins out of the closet. Nobody—paranormals or humans—was ready for that yet.

Harry rubbed his hands together, inhaled the delightful scents of machine and woman—his two favorite things in the world—and got to work.

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When Miranda woke, she realized she was tied to her hotel bed, and that alien asshole was entranced by her scanner. He bent over, his tight ass jutting into the air like an invitation to kick it. His black t-shirt pulled up in back, revealing a slice of tan skin.

Tamping down panic, she wriggled her legs. They weren't tied, and only her head ached from having her hair wadded in that towel for so long. No other discomfort. She stretched slowly, carefully, to see how far her reach extended.

Not far enough.

She scooted around a little more. The man appeared to be oblivious. Something clanked, and he tossed one of the expensive vacuum tubes to one side with no regard for the pizzas she'd delivered in order to afford it.

What the hell was he doing to her scanner?? He was going to trash it!

Her first instinct was to yell at him not to hurt her baby.

Her second instinct was to struggle wildly until the headboard broke loose and attack him with the splintered pieces. Some way to initiate first contact.

Only, he couldn't be an alien. No fricking way. He was a garden-variety jerk with a superiority complex, and her scanners must be duds.

Therefore, she went with her third instinct: scream as loud as she could.

"Fiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiire!"

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Harry jumped into the air like a cat had landed on his back. Even when the cat in question was a she-cat in heat, that was not a pleasant experience.

"What the hell?" He landed on all fours, ready to transform and attack. Or run. He was not above running if the situation warranted.

Miranda Mellons sat halfway up in bed and screeched some more. "Fire! Rape! Help, help, help!"

His sensitive ears couldn't take the noise. Harry threw back his head and howled.

After a long, torturous moment, she drew in another breath to scream more.

"Please," he said. "No more. I'm not going to hurt you."

She apparently didn't believe him. Who could blame her? She started in again, this time going with "Fiiiiiiire!" instead of the insulting "Rape!" she'd tried before.

Like he'd ever rape somebody. Jesus, he wasn't a satyr, he was a shifter.

Harry crawled across the room, the horrible sound threatening to burst his eardrums. Throwing himself across the bed, he clapped a hand over her mouth.

"I am begging you," he said, his voice a half-growl. "Don't. Scream. Any. More. These rooms are soundproof. Nobody can hear you anyway."

She stopped. Her eyes, a mossy brown color, shot daggers at him like the most expert of knife throwers.

"Mmmfer fmmfer," she said. He had the feeling it hadn't been a nice phrase.

Then she bit him.

He snatched his hand back. She yelled. He cursed and put his hand over her mouth again. She bit.

"Dammit, stop! I've been sent to talk to you about the technology you've invented. I have not been sent to put up with you biting me and screaming my head off!"

She quit biting. "Are you part of the Dream Team?"

The movement of her lips tickled his palm. He removed it because the sensation was getting him kind of excited.

"No," he said. "I'm a freelance technology expert."

"Did the Dream Team hire you?"

"Mr. Fritz hired me. Are you going to be calm now?"

In response, she twisted her lower half into a semicircle. Her knee pounded him hard in the side of the head. He jerked away, his ear smarting, but unfortunately that put his neck in the vicinity of her thighs. She promptly wrapped them around his head, arched her body like a bow, and tried to strangle him.

With her thighs.

He'd had his face buried in a woman's crotch many times in his life, but never when the woman intended to kill him. Well, maybe a few who'd been sort of pissed, but they got over it. Wolf shifters weren't referred to as golden tongued because of the color of their mouths.

Her scent blossomed around him as he pawed at her legs, trying to separate them. There wasn't much danger she could do permanent damage since he was pretty hardy, but that didn't mean he felt no pain. Although he



was beginning to feel something else in his lower half, something responding to the presence of a female who smelled way too good to be so homicidal.

Finally he wrenched her thighs apart and pinned her in place with his body. He was larger than her and now all she could do was glare.

Until her head shot forward and her skull caught him on the bottom lip.

“That hurt!” He licked his lip and noticed her glare softened as she watched. For a second. He put his hands on either side of her head and anchored it in place before she could nail him again. “Miranda, would you listen to me?”

“Get off.” She tried to arc her body to toss him aside. All it did was rub their privates together.

And of course the little wolf responded, well, wolfishly.

“Oh, God,” she said. “This turns you on? You’re sick.”

“No,” he lied. Her hostility didn’t turn him on, but the rest of her did. “You just shoved my face in your crotch and now you’re rubbing my dick like you’re in heat. I’m a man. These things happen. What do you expect my dick to do?”

“Mind its own business,” she snapped. “Get off me.”

“Not until you promise to listen.” This was getting more and more uncomfortable by the second. Untrue. It was getting more and more comfortable by the second, the warmth from her plush little body creeping through his shirt and jeans. She panted, her breasts rising and falling. Her robe had opened again, and manfully he didn’t look.

But he did sniff. Hot damn! She wasn’t as furious as she’d been when this whole thing started.

Angry sex could be fun. For a moment he considered a little Elvis style hip swivel to see how she responded but mentally smacked himself. Bad dog.

“Miranda, I need to know about your scanner,” he said. “How it works and what you’ve found out so far. Most of all, I need to know if anyone else knows about it or how to make it.”

“I don’t have to tell you anything,” she said. Her pulse quickened. “Why do you want to know?”

“If the scanner falls into the wrong hands, it can hurt a lot of people. My people.”

“Your people, huh?” She relaxed beneath him, softened like her lovely breasts which he hadn’t gotten to touch. Yet.

Since she seemed to be listening, he dropped the next carrot. “I’ve been authorized to give you fifty thousand dollars if you cooperate.”

“Fifty thousand...” Her eyes widened and her lips parted. It almost looked like she wanted to be kissed. “Are you kidding?”

“Nope.” She’d probably try to strangle him again if he kissed her. The question was, would it be worth it?

“I have a question,” she said. “How long have you lived on planet Earth?”

“Uh.” That wasn’t the question he’d been considering. “Since I was born?”

“Are you of extraterrestrial origin?”

Oh, right, right. The file. She was one of those humans. “No, sorry.”

“Do you know any aliens?”

“Aliens,” he said, drawing out the word, “don’t exist.”

“Your gamma waves are off the chart. The human chart. The hotel is full of gamma waves that are off the chart, and I hardly believe everyone’s in deep sleep.”

“Maybe it’s a faulty design,” he suggested.

Her protesting shriek made him recoil. “It’s not a faulty design! There’s no reason in *this* world why the gamma indicators skew. You think I haven’t tested it? I know my baseline. This is the biggest crowd I’ve scanned, but there’s no reason it would give readings like that. Unless you’re all aliens or you broke my machine when you kicked it in the lobby. I will sue your ass if you did.”

“I can explain the gamma readings.” As she was bound to figure it out soon enough, he’d been authorized to bring her into the loop about the paranormal world that existed under the nose of the human race. Unlike aliens, which did not exist. “I don’t think it’s broken.”

“You took my baby apart. You’re going to break it if you haven’t already.” She shifted beneath him, her body language exuding belligerence. And hotness.

“I haven’t undone anything that can’t be fixed.” Her wriggling distracted him, and his little wolf surged. They both pretended it hadn’t. “I know what I’m doing.”

"I saw no evidence of that." Her gaze cut to the scanner on the table, but her leg curled around his calf. "Do you know how much those vacuum tubes cost? You tossed one aside like it was a free AOL disk."

"I understand from your file you're good with tech, but I'm not an idiot. I have a degree from MIT," he argued, a little stung. "Think of the vacuum tubes you could buy with fifty thousand dollars."

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking." She sighed, her breath warm on his face, her crotch warm against his crotch. Damn, he had to put a stop to this, but she felt so good. And she wasn't fighting him anymore. And she smelled willing.

"You should get up," she said, her hands gripping her restraints. Muscles bunched in her arms as she tugged lightly.

"Are you going to be good?"

"Are you?" she asked, licking her lips.

Oh, she wanted him to make a move. He could tell, and he was too much a wolf to pass up the chance. He dipped his head and their eyes met. He gave her a minute to anticipate the kiss before he pressed his lips to hers.

Ah, sweetness! She opened for him almost immediately. Their tongues met and tangled. He nipped, tasted, and his hands went from holding her head down to caressing her skin. Before long, they were both panting, and her thighs gripped his body in an entirely different way than before. The scent of her desire made his hips twitch, and when his pelvis rubbed against hers, she moaned.

His clothes started to itch and bind. Not because he was shifting but because he was crazy to be naked and pressed against her. Pressed into her. Steam only a shifter could sense flowed from her pores, so thick he could swim in it.

She was willing. He was able. He reached for her breast and....

She turned her face aside. "No," she said. "That's enough."

"That's all you wanted?" he asked. He knew better. She wanted him. Her body pulsed against his; her feet rubbed up and down his legs.

"That's all you're getting," she corrected. "I realize I'm at your mercy and I let you kiss me, which might seem like a yes, but I'm saying no. No, no and no. Now let me up so I can put my scanner back together."

With a hiss of pain, he rolled off her and closed her robe.

“Thanks.” She snapped her legs closed like a wolf trap and blushed.

“Welcome.” He stood and adjusted his jeans, hoping his erection subsided soon. He was never at his most intelligent when his boner was doing his thinking for him, which was obvious, considering he’d nearly screwed Miranda Mellons—and his assignment.

She watched him, her eyes round. He hoped she liked the view. He’d be willing to give her the panorama if she asked.

“You’ll have to untie me,” she said, licking her lips nervously.

“Just a sec.” Sniffing his way around the room, he located the taser and locked it inside her hard suitcase, along with her cell. Then he unplugged the phone. He didn’t smell a gun.

“What are you doing?”

“Saving myself some pain,” he answered. “If you run, I’ll be forced to tie you up again and play with your...machine.” Then he leaned across the bed and unfastened her hands.

She shot up like a spring. For a minute he thought she was going to attack him. Instead, she hastened to her gamma wave scanner and started muttering to herself, wiggling wires and stroking it like a metal pet.

Might be nice to have her stroke him that way. Maybe now that her hands were untied, they could....

But she was lost in the tech. He recognized the zone; he entered it himself on occasion. It was fascinating to watch her, her robe hiked up her strong, pale thighs, her fingers slim and nimble and seemingly possessed by magical powers. Usually magic fingers only existed after the hand had been severed from the person.

Suddenly her concentration, and his concentration on her, was broken by a rumble in her tummy. “Did you actually bring me a ham sandwich?” she asked.

“And free booze.” He handed the sandwich to her along with champagne in a plastic hotel cup. She ate as she worked, careful to keep all crumbs out of the vicinity of the scanner. In ten more minutes, she had reassembled the machine and plugged it in.

“All right.” She dusted her hands and sipped her second glass of champagne. She was so businesslike, their make-out session might as well never have occurred. “I want to see the money first.”

He pulled a wad of bills out of the side of the champagne bucket. “Here’s some of it.”

She thumbed through the money, silently counting.

He waited until she was finished before adding, “I need you to sign a nondisclosure agreement.” It was in a folder taped to the bottom of the serving tray.

She put the money in one of her many satchels. “Nondisclosure about what?”

“About your technology and about what I’m going to tell you after you show me how the scanner works.”

“I think you’re the one who needs to sign a nondisclosure.” She tossed the pickle from her sandwich into the trash with an angry flick. “How do I know you and Mr. Fritz—if that’s who you really work for—aren’t going to steal my ideas?”

“Oh, we are,” he said, “but we hope we get you along with them.”

Boy, did he ever hope he got her along with them.

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Miranda considered her options. A large and virile man had trapped her in a soundproof room, and he wanted her to sign a nondisclosure agreement about keeping her own technology a secret. He also wanted to screw her brains out, if she was any judge of male behavior.

What was wrong with this picture?

She accepted the packet of documents with a frown and leaned on the television counter. After attempting to decipher the legalese—words were not her forte—she glanced up from the documents and, unfortunately, into a mirror.

“Holy hell!” Her hair had frazzed out as big as a lampshade, and her gnarly robe exposed her personal assets to anyone who cared to look, namely Lupin. And he’d looked, all right. She’d been so deep in salvaging the atrocities he’d committed on her precious scanner she hadn’t spared a thought for her state of undress.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “I read over the documents. They’re pretty standard aside from the technology stuff. We all sign them at some point.”

She wondered who “we” was—the amateur inventors Mr. Fritz ripped off or the imaginary “we” in Lupin’s brain? Though what her gamma scanner was worth to anyone besides an alien hunter, she had no idea.

“It’s not the documents.” She clutched her robe at her neck. “I need to get dressed.”

“If you insist.” He shot her a wolfish leer. “I like the robe. Easy on, easy off.”

His words were smutty, but he made no move to follow up. All talk.

“Pervert.” She dragged some clothing out of a satchel.

“Beg to differ. Technically a pervert is somebody who gets off on unnatural things, and there’s nothing unnatural about admiring a beautiful female form.”

Her, beautiful? She rolled her eyes. He must still be hoping to get laid. “Uh-huh. I’m going to the bathroom.”

He followed and leaned against the jamb, blocking her from shutting him out. “Don’t lock the door, or I’ll break the doorknob off. And I need to warn you. If you don’t cooperate with me, Mr. Fritz wants to convince you himself, and he’s nowhere near as nice as I am.”

“You’re not nice,” she said, and slammed the door on his foot.

He gave an almost canine yelp, and she locked the door with great satisfaction.

“Two minutes,” he said. She yanked on a pair of shorts, khaki of course, and wriggled into a bra. Her nipples, she noticed, felt unusually sensitive. No surprise—she’d gotten very aroused when he’d had her pinned to the bed.

Shit, she’d forgotten about that when she’d been repairing her scanner. How humiliating! She’d kissed a near-perfect stranger while tied up in a bed—and she’d loved it. It gave her a zing to know he’d been highly aroused, too, so at least she wasn’t alone in her weird horniness. Miranda was no stranger to sex, but this was neither the time nor the place.

She had a job to do, dammit. Lupin, his hotness, and his insistence she explain her scanner were interfering. She needed to find out why her tech had gone haywire so she could locate the ET before the other Dreamers broadened their search to Vegas. Nobody had contacted her cell phone yet, but it wouldn’t

be long. They'd need her to fetch coffee for the team or something stupid like that.

"You have ten more seconds," he called, "before I open the door."

Whatever. Hotel doors were strong. Regardless, she pulled her green T-shirt over her head and reached for the knob.

And froze because, though she'd locked it, it was turning anyway. It gave a metallic pop before falling to the floor. Lupin jerked the door open, the other half of the knob in his hand.

He smirked. "Warned you."

"You destroyed hotel property." Good Lord, the man was strong. Or the hotel was cheap. She grabbed a brush, struggling with the madness that was her hair. "You'd better tell Mr. Fritz I don't have to pay for that."

"You're the one with fifty grand, not me." He put the half knob on the counter and watched her detangle her hair and braid it. Did the man ever blink?

He'd confirmed that they planned to steal her machine, but he'd said it so casually, she hadn't believed it. Plus, that line about hoping to get her along with the scanner...how could she take that seriously? "What are you getting paid to harass me about my technology?"

"Not that much." He gestured toward the main part of the hotel room. "Shall we?" Only he didn't step out of the way and she had to brush against him to get past.

Unless she was mistaken, the man still had an erection. Christ! Knowing he was thinking about sex made her think about sex. How was she supposed to concentrate?

He didn't make it easy. He stood way too close when she showed him how to calibrate the unit, and his questions, his hot breath on her neck, sent shivers down her spine. When she tested his science with geek speak, he confirmed he knew his tech and even knew something about gamma, theta, mu and other brain waves.

God, techie men were hot. Especially ones who kissed like Lupin.

She finished calibrating the scanner and re-tuned it to a two-mile radius. Again, the scanner indicated high and low gamma waves were present, concentrated in the area that would be the Dunvegas hotel and casino. "So you

see,” she finished, “either you broke my machine or everyone in Dunvegas is asleep. But I don’t think this is Sleeping Beauty’s castle.”

“It’s not broken.” He, blessedly, moved out of her space. “Where’d you put the handheld?”

She gave it to him and he clicked it on. “We’ve examined these before, but they didn’t work like yours,” he observed. “You rebuilt these yourself?”

“I did indeed,” she said with pride. “Nobody knows yet. My organization is a little...competitive. It’s my discovery, and this was the field test.” She didn’t tell Lupin she hoped her test was going to result in first contact between an ET and the civilian population of the Earth. He didn’t believe, and she wasn’t about to explain about her dad and his teachings and the Dream Team and twenty-nine years of obsession, all leading up to the radio signals she’d picked up thirty-six hours ago from Area 51.

“Impressive.” He flipped open the battery pack of the handheld. “How much range?”

“The big one, several miles. Little one, a couple feet. But the damned thing has got to be broken.” She thumped the top of the main unit, fiddled with some dials. How could she have been so wrong about the settings and filters? Years of investment and study, down the stupid, expensive vacuum tubes. The whole chart should be blank except for sleepers and the blip of the ET, if it was in range. “Gimme that handheld.”

She pointed it at herself. Sure enough, it registered blank. Baseline. Human. Gamma normal.

Slowly, she turned it on Lupin, who grinned.

It registered full gamma. The tomato red alert glimmered on his very white teeth.

“I won’t be phoning home, sweetheart.” He took the scanner out of her suddenly nerveless hands. “Like I said, I was born here. As were all the other people on your screen.”

“You’re all...” She gulped. “Extraterrestrials? Among us?”

“We’re as Earthly as you, and we call ourselves paranormals. But you can call me a werewolf.” He leaned a little closer. “Just as long as you call me.”

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It was always fun to introduce a female para-virgin to the idea that the world wasn't what she thought it was.

First, she'd argue.

Then she'd want him to prove it—to change.

Then she'd look for hidden candid camera devices. Well, at least Miranda Mellons looked for hidden camera devices, eyeing first his wolf form, and then the room, in a very suspicious manner.

If she handled that without him having to call in a healer to chill her out, it meant she accepted, and she'd want to know about everyone. Everywhere. Everything about paranormals. Certainly Miranda followed that part of the pattern, asking him questions that had never occurred to him, and he was the one who could turn into a wolf.

Sometimes, and with some women, he could nudge her curiosity about paranormals into curiosity about sex with paranormals, but not until she signed the magically binding nondisclosure agreement.

He was looking forward to the curiosity about sex part with Miranda. She was already attracted to him, and who knows where her eagerness to learn might take them? If things went as Mr. Fritz hoped, she'd be around for a while, and he found himself very happy about the prospect of some extended time with Ms. Miranda Mellons.

But the scanner technology was a liability. He understood enough to manipulate the work she's done but not enough to develop it. Electroencephalography had not been part of his studies at MIT.

He handed her the pen. "We have to be able to trust you before I can tell you anything else," he said, his voice still husky after the transformation of his vocal cords from man to wolf to man again. Her hands had felt so good in his ruff, on his ears, when she'd caressed him in wolf form. He'd allowed himself a hearty sniff of her crotch.

Right before she smacked him on the snout.

However, she was more intelligent than most humans. "Is this pen enchanted?" she asked as she held it poised over the dotted line.

Should he tell the truth or the whole truth? "It's just a Sharpie."

It was the parchment that was enchanted.

She dropped her hand and began to write.

“Wait.” He put his hand on hers. Her skin was silky, warm, and he had to force himself not to stroke his way up her arm. “The parchment is charmed. When you sign it, it’s binding. You won’t be able to clue in anyone who doesn’t know about the paranormal world, and you won’t be able to use your technology to reveal us without the consent of the wizard who created the spell.”

“Can I still use my technology to hunt for ETs?” she asked.

“There are no aliens,” he said. She pouted. “This whole time, your Dream Team has been hunting paranormals, only they didn’t realize it. PMS apparently keeps an eye on your group and others like it. We’re the blips on your gamma wave radar.”

“I still think there’s life on other planets. Maybe paranormals came from other planets.” She glanced up at him, her mossy brown eyes hopeful, but he just shook his head no.

With a sigh, she put the pen to the paper but lifted it again, hesitant. “What if I don’t sign?”

“A wizard will wipe your memory of this experience and your technology. We can’t afford for humans to control the Big Reveal,” he said. He really hoped she didn’t go that route, because it would wipe her memory of him, too. “When we’re ready, we’ll be in charge of it, not scrambling in reaction. Otherwise, can you imagine the chaos?”

She shook her head. “I guess I understand that.”

She seemed so sad, it made him want to howl. “Of course you do.”

With a dejected slump, she finished signing and clipped the pen on the outside of the document folder. “I guess I have no choice.”

He’d never initiated a para-virgin and had her respond like this. Sure, they weren’t always thrilled, but the poor woman seemed like he’d crushed her life’s dreams. Which he had. What was he supposed to do now?

ParaPleasure was in full swing downstairs. Surely there was something there that would cheer her up. “Do you want to meet a vampire? Try some magical chocolates? We’ve even got succubi and incubi on the premises for ParaPleasure. And all sorts of things. Electronic things.” He waggled his eyebrows, but she didn’t smile.

"No thanks," she said. "I need to get back to Alamo and start looking for a real job. I can't accept my stipend from the Dream Team now that I know the truth."

"It's not the end of the world," he said. "It's the beginning. Your machine is an incredible innovation. PMS is really anxious about it." Maybe he needed to call the healer after all. Miranda even smelled sad.

"I don't have PMS." She shrugged. "I'm depressed."

"PMS is a company called Paranormal and Magical Security. I'm on retainer."

"All my life," she said with a hitch in her voice, "I believed. I believed in the existence of extraterrestrials and the knowledge we'd gain as a race once we connected with our stellar ancestors. Instead, I find out we've been chasing fairies. Fairies! Do you think the government has your people imprisoned in Area 51?"

Oh shit, was she going to cry? "One of the sergeants there is a shifter, but that's as close as it gets," he said. "Fritz, uh, apparently had him leak the radio message you intercepted so you'd bring your invention to Dunvegas."

"I can't believe it." Liquid gathered in the corners of her eyes and she swiped at them. "Nothing is what I thought it was. Dad was wrong. The Dream Team is wrong." She sniffled and repeated herself, in a stronger voice. "The Dream Team is wrong, and they don't know what I know."

Harry patted her shoulder awkwardly. He was much, much better at the sexing than the comforting. "I bet PMS would love to get a techie like you on staff. I'll put in a good word."

"You would?" she asked. "That might be interesting. And I do need a job."

He'd love to work with her at PMS. Or in bed, whichever came first. "Least I could do. Then you can invent gamma wave scanners to your heart's content."

"Maybe," she said. "Lupin, did you really go to MIT?"

"My first name's Harry," he said. "And yes, I did. And no, we don't turn into ravening wolves when there's a full moon. And no, you won't turn into a wolf if I bite you."

She clapped a hand over her mouth and stifled a cackle.

"What?" he said.

"A werewolf named Harry?"

“Family name.” He grinned. “Shall we contact the director of PMS and find out about that job?”

Miranda eyed him, considering. Her lashes were damp from tears, but her eyes twinkled like the stars on a forest pond. The smell of sadness had disappeared, replaced by something warmer. Steamier.

She reached out her magic fingers and trailed them down his chest. “Harry, I meant to ask you before. How else are paranormals different from humans?”

Harry was very, very happy to show her, and Miranda was very, very interested to learn.



[Click here to find out more about Jody Wallace.](#)

## Things Are Popping Up In Dunvegas, Part 3

By S.J. Willing

Sumo guy had turned out to be a Hittar Demon from the Seventh Depth.

Amanda's quick thinking and fast talking, along with some fancy foot and spellwork by one of the PMS security guys, meant I'd gotten off lightly—I was unconscious by the third punch.

A black eye, several bruises and a host of aches and pains greeted me when I woke up in the morning. That wasn't the only thing, either. A message, hand written in a perfectly metered manuscript, was pinned to my pillow.

"Thanks for the fun night, hope you slept well. I'll catch up with you tomorrow, after work." It was signed Amanda.

"Oh God!"

I groaned into the pillow since it seemed much easier than trying to recollect last night. I don't think anything happened. God, I hope it didn't. But I did recall the odd vision of Amanda helping me strip...

I pulled up the covers and checked.

Phew, I still had my boxer shorts on. Thank heavens I'd had the foresight to buy a new pack for this trip so they looked decently, well, decent.

Trying to ignore the thudding headache and the grating sounds of my bones and muscles, I stripped off my boxers and creaked my way to the bathroom. A hot shower, a cup of the in-room coffee, and Tylenol were on the agenda.

"Really chuppypoo, you shouldn't leave your underwear lying around on the floor. You never know when a pretty girl is going to visit."

"Disgusting habit," Dad agreed.

"Mom, Dad! Do you mind? I'm trying to take a shower here."

"Well," Mom humphed. "Talk about ungrateful."

“Selfish, Mother, he grew up selfish.”

“Whatever.” Tired of arguing, and hurting too much to stand around, naked, in front of my parents while they criticized me, I went into the bathroom and locked the door.

Not that locking the door would keep them out, it just made me feel better.

After a few minutes in the shower the muscles started easing and I felt a lot better. Though, for some odd reason, I felt uneasy. As if something had changed but I couldn't tell what.

“Hello? Roger?”

I froze mid-suds. The husky female voice sounded way too close and much too much aroused.

“Roger?”

I screamed as the shower curtain was pulled back and a naked, young and absolutely beautiful woman stepped into the tub with me. “I’m so glad I found you like this.”

“Who are you?” I stammered, clambering out of the tub and wrapping one of the towels around my waist. “What are you doing here?”

“Erinimia,” she whispered, running a finger through the soap on my chest. “Daddy forced me to work as a maid here as a punishment for having sex with our gardener. But I’m glad he did now, or I wouldn’t have come across you.”

“But the door was locked.” I checked the door. It was wide open. Mom was standing outside grinning. “Mooom! How could you?”

“It wasn’t me, chuppypoo, and you look so happy together.”

Involuntarily I stuck a hand over the towel over my erection. This damn weekend was turning into the convention from Hell.

“You don’t need that,” Erinimia purred, then winked. My towel vanished.

Then I noticed the water from the shower splitting around her, forming little hearts and flowers that floated to the tub before dispersing and vanishing down the drain.

“A water nymph.” I was doomed. If a minor deity wanted to ravish me, I was doomed.

“Ooh, a clever mortal.” Erinimia stepped out of the shower already dry. “Or should I say morsel? A delicious, I-must-have-him, morsel.”

I backed out of the doorway, stumbling over one of my suitcases. Falling backwards, I ending up lying in a tumble of dildos and vibrators as my apocalypse stepped closer.

“You are just so perfect.” Lust oozed out of every word Erinimia said. “Even if this kills me, it will be divine.”

“It will kill me,” I squeaked. Throwing my hand out sideways, it connected with one of my latex devices, which I grabbed and held it in front of me—a very ineffectual weapon of defense. I’d somehow managed to pick up the Poseidon’s Trident model. How is it my life is full of such ironies?

“I’d have at her, son,” Dad encouraged me. “You could do a lot worse.”

“I want a granddaughter first,” Mom added. “So make sure she’s on top.”

“Mom! Dad!”

Erinimia stepped closer and then spotted the pink, three-pronged vibrator in my hand. Her eyes widened and her breath seemed to come in little gasps.

“Oh, my gosh,” she said softly. “Does that thing work?”

“Uhm, yes, yes, of course it does,” I told her, grasping any lifeline I could and pushed the switch. All three prongs buzzed loudly. I fumbled with my free hand amongst the spilled debris. I found the ‘Oh Hell, Yes!’ lubrication oil and passed it over to Erinimia, along with Poseidon’s Trident. “Special super lube effects for immortals,” I said. “With advanced clitoral enhancing qualities. Fit for a goddess. Why don’t you try them? Free samples.”

Erinimia licked her lips, looked at me, looked at her presents, and then looked at me.

“Just wait there a moment,” she said. “This won’t take long.”

As she nimbly leaped onto the bed and began her self-ministrations, I quickly stood up, grabbed my clothes, and got out of Dodge. I got a few odd looks from some of the paras as I dressed in the corridor, but it was certainly a lot safer than staying in the room with a lusty water nymph.

Even from out here I could tell religion was getting the better of her. That was the fifth time she’d called on Zeus. Turning quickly, I hurried to the elevator.

Things progressed even more badly. Around midmorning security had placed two permanent guards on my booth after I’d nearly been: 1. ripped to

pieces by a gorgeous blonde werewolf; 2. drained dry by a Vampirella look-alike; 3. sucked to death by a succubus.

By the time lunch came around and Fritz found me, I was practically pleading to die.

“What in Gorgon’s tail is going on?” Fritz demanded, squaring off on me like I was some kind of lice he was about to squash. “First I hear you’ve been fighting a demon last night over a girl, and now you’re driving all the women in the hotel crazy.”

“Don’t blame me,” I sulked. “You’re the one who threw this stupid spell on me.”

“The spell...” Fritz squinted, looking like a baby about to poop. Then he stopped and threw up his hands in disgust. “What on Earth did you have to go fight with a demon for?” he demanded. “The demon’s magic has magnified the glamour lust twenty-fold. Every woman in town is going to come hunting you down.”

“Well, take the damn spell off,” I snapped. “I don’t want anything to do with women.”

“It’s a glamour lust spell, stupid,” Fritz explained none too patiently. “The only way to remove it is to have sex. It’s no good. You’re going to have to see Vegas sooner than I’d planned.”

“But I don’t want to see Vegas, I don’t even like Vegas. I want to go home and forget all this happened.”

“Mr. Ing,” Fritz said in a tone of voice that hinted of me being turned into a frog. “I don’t care if you like my daughter or not, you are going to meet her and seduce her. Do you understand?”

Vegas was his daughter's name? I felt it wiser to say nothing.

“Good.” He nodded. “Remain here and I will send her to meet you. Do not fail me.”

As he walked off, I began to rehearse a few thousand other plans that I could have had for this weekend. Unfortunately I was stuck with this one. Fritz had barely left the ballroom, and I noticed everyone relax as he did, when Amanda appeared in the doorway. She smiled, waved and headed directly for me.

If I’d never considered suicide before, this dilemma did.



“Hello, Roger.” Amanda smiled, and somehow that simple act from her was more comfort than I’d ever need. “I hear you’re having a few problems with our female guests and staff.”

“Well, in a nutshell, yes.”

She gave a small, carefree laugh that drove away the last chills the meeting with Fritz had given me and held out her hand. Unthinkingly I took it, then stood and walked out from behind the booth, following her.

“I know a place where you can stay for a while where you will be, shall we say, female free. Then we can try and get this problem sorted out.”

“Thank you.”

My heartfelt relief was probably not as great as the sense of belonging I felt. Somehow, my walking through the hotel while holding Amanda’s hand seemed perfectly normal. It felt right, in a sense that it was supposed to be so. So much so that Fritz’s command to stay where I was couldn’t hold me back. It was yet another of this weekend’s cruel ironies. I’d finally found someone I’d like to date and woo, hours before I was to have sex with a stranger and die.

“We have a small suite on the roof that is open to executive members of staff,” Amanda explained, taking me to a staff elevator and pressing the topmost button. She placed a keycard against a reader when the machine beeped a complaint. Finally satisfied, the elevator began moving. “I’ve put a notice out that it’s undergoing repairs and is out of use. You’ll be left alone there for a week or so.”

“It will all be resolved by then,” I said mournfully.

“Really?”

I looked up at Amanda’s empathetic tone and felt her finger stroke my cheek. Instantly my erection flared up as her touch launched a thousand synapses. I looked at her face, her lips, her eyes. It took all my willpower not to lean forward and kiss her. From the look in her eyes I sensed she wanted it too, but for her sake—her life—I didn’t dare.

The bittersweet awkwardness was broken as the elevator stopped and the doors opened.

My jaw dropped.

The small exec suite was an opulent oasis. Glass windows formed most of the walls and a thirty foot pool took up one small corner of the room. Fully

stocked bars, TV, pool table, even bedrooms, sauna and hot tubs. I could vacation here for a month and still not get bored. Amanda led me over to the pool and rummaged in a small chest for a moment.

“Here, you’ll need these.” I caught the ball of cloth just before it hit my face. The aqua blue unraveled into a pair of swim shorts. “Changing rooms are over there.” Amanda pointed to a small row of cubicles. “I’ll make us a drink while you dress.”

I took my time in the changing cubicle. Partly because I was a bit embarrassed by the hard-on that wouldn’t die and there was no way this flimsy bit of material was going to hide my aroused condition. Secondly, hell, the way Amanda had me feeling, I felt vulnerable enough. To go out dressed with barely anything on was almost impossible. Inevitably I had to move, so, biting the bullet, I left the cubicle.

And things immediately got worse.

“I’m, I’m...”

“Sit down, relax.”

Amanda waved me over to the pair of recliners she’d set up beside the pool close enough to the water to be within touching distance. Small glass tables beside the recliners held our drinks. Mine was a deep purple and looked like it would cost more than my suite for the night. Hers was a deep burgundy red, like her fingernails and lipstick—and the tiny scraps of fabric that were pretending to be a bikini.

She stood up and walked towards me, somehow managing to keep her nipples and, erhm, other things covered. Thank God Mom wasn’t here. Amanda stopped in front of me, the light reflecting off the pool beside us and casting glowing wrinkles over her skin.

I reached out to touch her cheek, and her lips parted slightly, making mine ache for her kiss. I leaned closer, heart thumping and head spinning. She reached up, holding my shoulders.

“Roger,” she whispered, moments before our lips met. I paused, waiting for her to finish. “You smell of soap.”

Plummeting into the cool water of the pond snapped me back to my senses. At first I felt angry; then I began to laugh. Amanda had pushed me in and saved us both from my weakness. When I laughed, she began laughing, too. It was a healing salve between us.

“Come get your drink,” she said, “before it gets too warm.”

“Okay, I’ll swim down and meet you at the other end.”

With that I beat a quick crawl, trying to work out my sexual frustration in a battle with the water. It didn’t really work.

Several cocktails, a delicious tray of sushi, and a lot of swimming and chatting later, I was feeling a lot calmer. We’d watched the sun set and shared stories of our childhood, and I still wanted this woman like I’ve never wanted a woman before. I felt she had the same trouble I did, but that was probably the glamour lust spell. Every time we accidentally touched, which was often, it was an extreme form of torture. I would give my life for this woman, and I barely knew her.

“So what’s the problem?” Amanda asked, looking me straight in the eye and startling me out of my meanderings. “What trouble are you in with Mr. Fritz?”

Sighing, I sat up, pulling the recliner to a chair position. “How much do you know about Fritz?” I asked.

“I know he’s evil, conceited, cruel. We all do. Everyone who works for him.”

“Everyone says that about their employer, though.” I grinned. “Doesn’t mean you really know him.”

Amanda’s expression darkened.

“I know he’s the world’s most powerful, most evil wizard, and I hate him because he killed my mother.”

That got my attention.

“What? Why?”

“Breeding program.” Amanda hid her face, almost as if she were ashamed of her heritage. “Fritz is always breeding something with something. He thinks he can make a perfect race of slaves, or soldiers, or hunters. He forces them to breed and kills the parents, then tries to make the offspring believe it’s his own. None of us ever do, though. We all find out sooner or later.”

“God dammit!” I smacked my fist against the chair. “So that’s what he’s using me for! I thought this sacrificial seduction business sounded weird.”

“Mr. Fritz has got you on his breeding program?” Amanda looked horrified. “Why would he do that? And with whom?”

“He ordered me to seduce his daughter, Vegas,” I explained, my rage beginning to burn. “Then he told me he was going to kill me.”

“He was planning to kill Vegas?” Amanda’s expression went from dark to icy cold. “He’s going too far. We have to stop him.”

“How?” I asked. “What can I do against someone that powerful?”

“So you’re just going to go have sex with...Vegas and let him kill you both?”

“No!” I snapped, sensing Amanda’s jealousy. “I could never, not...” I paused, daring myself with my intended audacity. Amanda watched me, her eyes bright with a glimmer of hope. “I could never make love to anyone, not now. Not unless it was you.”

We looked at each other for a moment, both shocked to silence by the enormity of those words. Amanda was the first to move. She took my hand with hers and squeezed. Her unshed tears made her eyes glisten in the semi-dark of the suite.

“We can spoil with his plans very easily,” she said, smiling a sweet smile that instantly hit me in the groin. I wondered if I’d ever go soft again. “And in a very pleasurable way.”

“If we did that,” I told her, “he’d kill us both.”

She pulled me out of the chair and down to the ground, rolling me on my back.

“Well, we’d have to stop him doing that, too,” she admitted, sliding her hands up my thighs, pulling my swim shorts down and off. “We’ll have to think about that while we work.”

I couldn’t resist her touch, her voice. I wanted this even more than she did. She sat astride me, the rough fabric of her bikini bottom rubbing against me, inflaming me more. She moved her fingers and hands over my chest. With each touch, each new sensation, it became harder to breathe and think.

I reached up, brushing my hands over her breasts, toying with her nipples. She gasped, took short hopping breaths in time with my stroking. Her moisture now eased through the fabric of the bikini, warming me and making her movements feel smoother. I didn’t want smoother.

Grasping her gently around the neck I pulled her head down, crushing her lips against mine in a kiss filled with two days of frustrated hunger. We fought lip to lip for domination of a kiss that robbed all sane thoughts from my mind. Reaching around her ass, I grabbed the thong of her bikini bottom, yanking it to one side, and forced her down.

Her scream of delight as I entered her was smothered by our rampant kiss. Breathless, she pushed away from me and sat. Rocking hard, eyes closed, she hummed and moved. Hands free, I squeezed her breasts, held and pinched her nipples, stroked and touched a woman's body in ways I'd only dreamed of. The sensations in my groin built to overpowering.

"I, can't hold..." I tried to warn her.

"Me, too—" her words cut short as she screamed. Bucking and jerking against me, forcing me over the edge. I screamed.

Then screamed.

And screamed as a searing white light burst from Amanda eyes, mouth, ears, vagina.

She sat impaled in neon-bright ecstasy.

Then I screamed again as my muscles locked, my mouth burst open, and light, a warm, pulsing light, burst open within me and shot in fluid streams from any exit in my body it could find.

The magics, Amanda's, mine. They speared upwards to the sky, piercing the roof and mingling with the clouds, twisting the once-clear sky into a maelstrom. A storm to mother all storms.

When it had grown silent, except for the drumming of the rain on the windows, Amanda looked down at me with a sleepy smile.

"Wow," was all she said.

"I didn't think you had it in you," a horribly familiar voice said. "Congratulations, boy."

I think I broke the speed record for standing at that moment. Amanda and I found ourselves facing our worse nemesis, naked.

"Fritz!" I said.

"Dad!"

"Vegas."

"Vegas?" I asked.

"Roger."

"Fritz?"

"Oh, Dad!"

“Hehe.” Fritz rubbed his hands together. “Well, it worked, didn’t it, Vegas? Now if you’ll just step aside so I can kill him.”

“Amanda? Vegas?”

“Wizards always have a choice of names, Roger. It's part of our disguise. Now if you would stand over here and quietly die—”

“No, Dad, I’m not letting you kill him. I love him.”

“Don’t be stupid, Vegas. You know that’s just the magic binding you. It always binds you to your first lover. It’s why I had to kill my first wife, awful nag that she was.”

“Fritz? Dad?”

“But I do love him, Dad. And he loves me. He was prepared to die instead of doing what you made him do. Besides he’s a wizard, too. He’ll be bound by the same binding.”

“Wizard! Binding!”

“Enough, Vegas, he has to go.”

Fritz cast his hand out at me. Thunder crashed and lightning flashed against the roof. There was a sort of friiitz sound and Fritz’s spell fell from his fingers and wriggled itself to death on the floor.

“It’s why he’s nicknamed Fritz,” Amanda/Vegas whispered to me. “He can’t cast magic in a thunderstorm.”

“I’m a wizard?” I asked, dumbfounded. Of course, that could explain why I’d felt so different all my life.

“Die! Die! Die!”

Friiitz, friiitz, friiitz.

“Not tonight,” I told him, waving him away. “I’m too tired to die.”

A bright blue bolt shot from my hand, throwing Fritz across the floor to the elevator.

“No!” Amanda grabbed my arm. “You can’t kill him. He’s my dad!”

“But all I did was—”

Amanda grabbed my hand as I tried to flick it again.

“I have a much better idea.” She placed my hand against her breast. “Why don’t we go talk about this in my bedroom?”

My little cock robin answered for her.

\*\*\*

Left alone in the room, Fritz didn't notice the two shadowy figures who watched him stand up and dust himself off.

"Daughters are best off half-beaten to death," he muttered, and turned towards the elevator. "I'll come back," he called out, "once I've dealt with some stupid, dumb horses."

The two ghosts watched him go.

"Well, Dad." Mother turned to her beloved. "Looks like we finally managed to bring our chuppypoo out of the closet. And find him a nice wife, too."

"That we did." Dad put his arms around his wife to comfort her as she cried quietly. "He picked well, bless him."

"Will we ever see him again?"

"All the time, Mother, though he'll never see us again. With all the ironies in his life, how could it be different?"

"What do you mean, Dad?"

"Well." Dad gave a small shrug. "He came to visit Dunvegas, didn't he? And, well, what did he do?"

"Find a girlfriend."

"Nah," Dad grinned. "He's done Vegas."



[Click here to find out more about S.J. Willing.](#)

## About the Authors

Journey with Samhain Publishing's paranormal authors to otherworlds of romance. Nervous? Don't be. The ghosts and vampires that live here are friendly. Most of the time. **The Beyond the Veil blog is for age 18 and over only.** Visit [Beyond the Veil](http://www.beyondtheveil.com).

### Sela Carsen

<http://selacarsen.com>

Sela Carsen is just your ordinary, average, everyday stay at home mom.

Really. Ignore the two Monkey Children. And the disaster area she calls home. And the Darn-Near Perfect husband who patiently puts up with the chaos. And did she mention the Boxer?

If you see her talking to herself while she's going down the produce aisle at the grocery store with her travel mug of coffee welded to her hand, well, doesn't everyone do that?

No?

Oops.

Despite the caffeine-induced jitters, she has managed to write comic romances featuring smart, funny, mostly alive, occasionally dead (and undead), and not always entirely human characters. Her writing runs the gamut from paranormal to historical, with several rabbit trails in between.

She lives in the Midwest now after a gypsy life that allowed her to live in places from Idaho to South Carolina and from Egypt to England.

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### Ember Case

<http://www.embercase.com>

Ember Case was born in Louisville, Kentucky, the second of five children. After a dozen years in the Blue Grass State, and another dozen in Alabama, she settled on the east coast of Florida. There she met her husband, the great love of her life.



After two children and 12 years of marriage, she decided it was time to start the adventure she'd been dreaming about her whole life - writing down the stories that play out in her imagination. You can read about that journey in her [journal](#).

### **Bianca D'Arc**

<http://www.biancadarc.com/>

A life-long martial arts enthusiast, Bianca enjoys a number of hobbies and interests that keep her busy and entertained such as playing the guitar, shopping, painting, shopping, skiing, shopping, road trips, and did we say... um... shopping? A bargain hunter through and through, Bianca loves the thrill of the hunt for that excellent price on quality items, though she's hardly a fashionista. She likes nothing better than curling up by the fire with a good book, or better yet, by the computer, writing a good book.

Join Bianca's discussion group by sending a blank email to:

[BiancaDArc-subscribe@yahogroups.com](mailto:BiancaDArc-subscribe@yahogroups.com)

Read Bianca's blog at: <http://biancadarc.blogspot.com>

#### Recent Releases

Prince of Spies – Dragon Knights 4

Wings of Change – Dragon Knights

#### Coming Soon

December 2007: Solstice Dreams

December 2007: Sweeter Than Wine – Tales of the Were 2

### **Carolan Ivey**

<http://www.carolanivey.com>

Carolan Ivey is a North Carolina native living in Ohio with her family and two highly opinionated dachshunds. One year ago she left the corporate rat race to become a full-time, working writer and has never regretted it. She writes paranormal and Celtic-flavored fantasy romance.

Blog: <http://carolanivey.blogspot.com/>

MySpace: <http://myspace.com/carolanivey>

Buy List: [Abhainn's Kiss](#), ISBN 1-59998-488-1

Wildish Things, ISBN 1-59998-678-7, Nov. 1, 2007

Beaudry's Ghost, ISBN 1-59998-852-6, January 4, 2008

**Jenna Leigh**

<http://www.jennaleighzone.com>

Jenna Leigh lives Louisiana with her husband, teenaged daughter, and a cat and dog who are constantly at war. During the peace treaty aka nap time, she writes romances filled with laughter as well as love. She blames her weird sense of humor on the humidity.

Buy List: [The Wolf's Heart](#), ISBN 1-59998-515-2

**Jody Wallace**

<http://www.jodywallace.com>

Jody Wallace grew up in the rural South and then went to school for far too long. Her resume includes English teacher, web designer, market analyst, slave to Meankitty, author, and general all around pain in the butt. Jody writes fantasy romance under her name and erotic romance under the penname Ellie Marvel.

Blog: <http://meankittybox.blogspot.com>

Meankitty's World Famous Website: <http://www.meankitty.com>

**S.J. Willing**

[www.sjwilling.com](http://www.sjwilling.com)

When I was young I wanted to grow up—instead, I became a writer! Born in the historic university town of Cambridge, England, in 1962, S.J. Willing is fully armed with pen, paper, and two cats. Thus is the life as a fiction writer. He is the creator of the P.I.A.C.T. undercover agent romance series and the esteemed Agent Double D.3 reports.

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Forum : <http://www.sjwillingforum.com>

**Xakara**

<http://www.xakara.com/>

Xakara lives in wonderful Southeast Wisconsin overlooking Lake Michigan with her long time sweetie and a handful of friends that are like family. Never

found anywhere without a book to read or a notebook to write in, she knew she'd be an author at nine years old when someone missed one of the daily installments of the stories she told on the playground and told her to write them down.

Equally splitting her time between the world in her head and the world around her, she manages to find her way through life with a smile and zen-vibe that carries her and her heroines through the tough times. She smiles every time she tells someone she knows that she writes erotic urban fantasies and they reply "I always knew you would".

Becoming a paranormal romance author was a happy accident when she chose to write a short novella to clear her mind of edits on her first urban fantasy novel, BLOODSPRITE. Now she finds she enjoys the focus on the relations and loves traversing the two genres, and finding new ways to define both.

She always loves to talk to fans and new friends and is happy to receive emails from new readers and new friends alike. You can contact her at [Xakara@Xakara.com](mailto:Xakara@Xakara.com)

