

*Tempe*

*1-900-Psycho*

I felt eyes on me, lots of them, but figured it was because everyone who came through the door was announced, and I was on the arm of a physically imposing Jack Lang, who was a head taller than everyone else. In his Navy dress uniform he oozed sex appeal without even trying.

With the mask hiding my face, it was easier to display a cool facade, any facade, I couldn't usually pull that off. Mark one up for masks.

Jack chuckled beside me. "Don't get used to that thing. You'll have to take it off eventually. The suspension of the law only applies to the hours before the Court is revealed and Fat Tuesday."

"What law?"

"There's a law against concealing your face with a mask. But it's suspended on Fat Tuesday and unofficially waved during the Grand Ball."

"Oh."

"Hey." Montana strode up next to me, her face half covered with a mask of deep blue feathers and gems. Warrior types never sidle, slouch or stroll. She looked me over and shook her head. "Jack, how the hell did you get her into a dress? Don't bristle, Temp, you look amazing."

My charming date said, "I could say the same about you, Montana. That's a stunning costume. What are you, anyway?"

Montana's long blue-black hair was braided with ribbons and piled loosely on her head with a comb. The woman who cared little for "female trappings" had turned into a seductress. Her dress had a deep royal fitted bodice with spaghetti straps that draped off her shoulders, exposing the circular symbol under the skin of her shoulder blade, and dove to a point below her waist. The skirt's long feather-light layers danced with each move.

Her eyes flared, turning a brilliant cobalt and her smile was sly when she answered, looking at Jack. "Why, a Dinnschencha, of course."

I laughed.

Jack's mouth quirked, "You make a good one. Whatever that is."

Montana laughed. "One of these days, Jack..." She turned back to me, "Tempe, you'd better hang close. I've seen some hungry female predators locked on the handsome Commander." Jack went off to get us a drink and I asked Montana if she'd seen Aurora.

"She's over there. Sitting next to Jane."

Across the room, dressed in the gaudiest multicolored outfit I'd ever seen, was Jane. It was styled strictly to grab attention.

"That getup came straight out of the circus."

Aurora sat at the other end, plain midnight cloth stretched over the table. She was dressed in her usual understated elegance. For the ball it was a shimmering pearlescent shift, two matching crystals dangling from her ears to touch her shoulder blades, her long black and silver hair loose and flowing, and only the amulet as decoration. The contrast between the two "fortune tellers" couldn't have been more stark.

Aurora sent me a smile, the corner of her mouth turned up as if to say, I can't believe I'm doing this. We knew that if not for a great cause, one near and dear to Montana's heart, she wouldn't have been caught dead this close to Jane Fortune. To her left in front of a backdrop of glittering stars, crescent moons and happy suns was Jane, two hundred and thirty pounds squished into a five-foot frame.

Jane's dark hair was covered in a purple velvet and gold paisley turban with a green stone pasted in the center of her forehead. She'd used eyeliner from her bottom lids nearly to her eyebrows making her eyes appear to be empty black holes. Her caftan was cheap purple taffeta and Jane had pulled the crisscrossed ties until the fleshy mounds of her chest threatened to tear the fabric. She had honed her craft, and was armed with all of her standard psychic paraphernalia on hand—oversized tarot cards, a tray of candles, a green "gazing ball" identical to one I'd seen in the garden section at Wal-Mart.

Her throat, ears and fingers were adorned with so much jewelry it was a wonder she could sit upright. Besides her name, two other obvious "tells"

spoke of her charlatan status, the most visible, the line of mismatched fan bulbs encircling the poster of sun, moon and stars on the panel behind her. Most telling, the tiny red flame flickering from within the gazing ball, in the silhouette of a Christmas candle, complete with an electric cord that ran from the ball to the wall.

Yeah. Very mystical.

I looked down at the nameplate in front of Jane. “Look.” I pointed to the table label. Montana snickered.

Jane’s hand-printed card read: Have your Fortune told by a real Psycho.

*Tempe*

*“Mother of all the Gods, who is that!”*

After I stopped laughing I asked, “Has anyone asked Jane for a reading?” Montana looked irritated.

“Only flower man.”

I swiveled toward her. “Dickhead?”

“Mm-hmm. They are an item.”

“Eeuw!” I said. “On second thought... maybe that works. What about Aurora?”

“She’s bringing in the cheese for the shelter,” Montana said. “This is the first break she’s had. Jane keeps trying to get Montana’s customers to give her a try but no takers. I think they only take her card to keep from being seen standing near her for too long.”

“It’s a lovely costume,” I teased.

“If you care for overweight charlatan floozies. You’d think she worked for 1-900–Sex instead of 1-900–Psycho,” Montana said. “Maybe when the circus comes through this summer, they’ll take her with them.”

“I know one sheriff that would be happy to see her go.”

A deep voice over my shoulder said, “I hope I’m the only sheriff you’re familiar with, that intimately. Whose behind would he be happy to see on their way out of town?”

The inflection he put on the word “intimately” made me warm in the most private places, and I lost my train of thought. The promise of becoming his lover tonight hung in the wind, and *menori* shivered her reaction; odd that.

Montana bumped me back to the present laughing, and said to Jack, “Ms. Gaudy Fortune.”

Jack said, “Sometimes... and yet she has her uses. I would never have known about your mother’s ‘protectors’ if it hadn’t been for Jane, not that quickly.”

Montana said, “Why don’t you go donate to the cause?”

“With Jane?” I raised my eyebrows and waited for her to snicker, but she said seriously, “No, fool. With Aurora. Get real value for your contribution.”

“Hmm. I don’t know if I can stand to hear any more news of my future right now.” I looked at Jack, who gave me a crooked grin. “I have my own ideas of what’s going to happen in my immediate future.”

Jack’s eyes flared with heat. Good. He had the same idea. Hadn’t he said when he saw me in this dress the first time he wanted to peel it off one layer at a time? I’d intentionally added a few layers this evening, just in case, which had taken some creativity the way this gown was made.

“Be brave, sweetheart. We weathered the storms,” he winked, “of the last two weeks. What could be worse?”

“Clever play on words, Jack,” Montana said as our gazes met, hers with that sharp angled brow. It didn’t take a mindlink to understand her thoughts—he doesn’t know about Chaos? I caught myself before I answered aloud. I returned a look that meant, Please don’t open that can of worms tonight.

“I guess I can do it for your cause.”

“What is the charity?” Jack asked.

I turned to him. “Oh, I figured you knew being in law enforcement.”

Montana interrupted. “You can blame that one on me. I’m very protective

of my people.”

Jack scratched his head, “Your people? Is that like, different than Paramortals?” His voice sounded dubious.

“I’m—how would you put this?—the director, CEO, COO etc. etc. of a battered women’s shelter. My ‘people’ are the female victims of abuse. I personally respond and ‘tend to’ any instances of neglect, violence or need for my women and their children. I neither need nor want law enforcement... interference.”

Jack bristled. “I think we’re going to have to have a meeting or something—”

“I will, now that I know you, fill you in on the shelter’s mission and maybe it’s whereabouts...” She looked at me, then back at Jack, “Soon.” I suspected she meant after the Chaos. After that, it could be a moot point. Things might be radically different in Destiny. I didn’t know how, but it could certainly be missing some citizens and minus a sheriff.

Jack opened his mouth to say something and changed his mind, his demeanor relaxing as if realizing where we were once again. “All right. Let’s table this discussion for another time. You’re not breaking any laws are you?”

Montana stood a little straighter, her features becoming sharper, her eyes going cobalt again. She wouldn’t change right here would she? Jack’s eyes narrowed, but he stood his ground. “I protect women and children from predators, abusers, those who would harm them. I don’t hunt them down, as a rule, unless there are no other options.”

They stood eye to eye in a battle of wills, Montana seeming larger and taller than Jack momentarily. I wondered if that was some kind of trick like a glamour or if it was part of her nature, one that threw up a flag of warning to back off before the threat could be born. I knew Montana was not one to back down once she was in protective mode, but this was different—I hoped. I was right. In a blink she was two inches shorter than Jack and looking up at him she said easily, “I’ll give you some local references you can check out, Jack.” Smiling at me she asked, “Tempe, are you going to go see Aurora or not?”

Jack tilted his head and nodded. “I’ll go get us a refill. Still soda?” he asked me. I nodded. “What about you, Montana?”

“I’m fine, thanks. Come on, Temp.” She grabbed me by the arm and marched the five or six steps to Aurora’s end of the table.

“Tempe, Montana, you know Jane, I presume.” Aurora graciously included the other woman in her greeting.

Montana spoke first, “I want to thank you, Jane. I appreciate you offering your, er, expertise for the charity.”

“I’m always happy to give back, especially for a food bank, Montana.” I hiked my brows over Jane’s shoulder at my friend. Good thinking. Jane looked toward the crowd, “Oh, it looks like I’ve got a live one.” She lowered those black painted eyes to the ball and slid her hand down to the front of the globe, passing it over its inner light as if divining some celestial wisdom. “Please have a seat. How can the Sultress of Fortune help you, my dear? Palm reading, cards, your navel chart?”

The Sultress of Fortune. When a portly little man seated himself in front of Jane, Montana and I shifted to Aurora’s end of the table. “Food bank?” I whispered.

“Six letters—G-O-S-S-I-P. Wonder if he’s going to let her look at his navel?”

All three of us chuckled. “Aurora, Montana talked me into letting you do a...”

“An astral seeding?” Aurora asked. “Lovely. Have a seat, Tempe.” Montana stood, taking in the growing crowd and making sure Jane wasn’t listening in on our conversation.

Aurora took a large shallow shell from her lap and a flask of clear liquid. Pouring about half an inch into the shell, she removed one of her earrings and held it suspended above the surface. Light reflected through its facets sending sparkles across the water but oddly they didn’t extend to the table or any of our surroundings. The lights were contained within the bowl.

“You might be interested as well, Montana...” Imitating an actress with a Transylvanian accent, she said, “You vill meet a dark, dangerrous strangah...”

Montana and I laughed. Aurora merely shrugged. “That was freebie. Here’s another one. It looks like the Chaos is going to hit by Monday. You

should remind the good sheriff, Tempe. He'll need some warning to prepare."

I nodded. "You can't get any closer than that?" I dreaded that conversation, but she was right. I'd have to figure out how to fit that explanation in between the ball and our other plans.

"I wish I could. This isn't like science where each time we learn to forecast it better. As far as I can tell Cache's orbit simply can't be predicted... anticipated, guessed at... but not predicted with any accuracy. And now, for you." She reached across the table and snatched some hair from my scalp.

"Ow!" I complained as she draped the teal and coppery strands across the bowl allowing it to touch the water. She tilted her head as the light flickered across it.

"You will encounter evil or... trouble from your lover's past very soon." She frowned. "I'm not clear on the details unfortunately, Tempe. I think the coincidence is messing with my readings."

"Obviously," said Montana remembering Aurora's earlier jest.

Why would I care about trouble from Dylan's past? Unless, it had something to do with Phoebe. I remembered what Marty'd said, that he knew why Dylan and Dutch had looked at each other the way they had at the Forge before the attempted mindlink.

Aurora shrugged. "I'd better go back to reading palms. Thank you, Jack," she said as Jack arrived and set three glasses of wine down on the table and handed me a soda. I'd decided after the trouble the small amounts of alcohol had caused me I would nix it from my drink list. Last night had been an added case in point. One drink handed to me from Kat and I'd gone to bed, not budging until daylight.

"The court is about to be presented," Aurora said. She looked back at the entrance. "They don't even announce the identity of the king until the parade but I can usually figure it out—"

The chatter around us quieted suddenly. Montana and Jack looked over my shoulder.

Montana hissed behind me, a sound I'd never heard from her. "Mother of all the gods! Who is that?"

