



PARANORMALCY

OH, BITE ME

Wait— did you— You just yawned!” The vampire’s arms, raised over his head in the classic Dracula pose, dropped to his sides. He pulled his exaggerated white fangs back behind his lips. “What, imminent death isn’t exciting enough for you?”

“Oh, stop pouting. But, really, the widow’s peak? The pale skin? The black cape? Where did you even get that thing, a costume store?”

He raised himself to his full height and glared icily down at me. “I’m going to suck the life from your pretty white neck.”

I sighed. I hate the vamp jobs. They think they're so suave. It's not enough for them to slaughter and eat you like a zombie would. No, they want it to be all sexy, too. And, trust me: vampires? Not. Sexy. I mean, sure, their glamours can be pretty hot, but the dry-as-bone corpse bodies shimmering underneath? Nothing attractive there. Not that anyone else can see them, though.

He hissed. Just as he reached for my neck, I tased him. I was there to bag and tag, not to kill. Besides, if I had to carry separate weapons for every paranormal I took out, I'd be dragging around a full luggage set. Tasers are a one-size-fits-all paranormal butt-kicking option. Mine's pink with rhinestones. Tasey and I have had a lot of good times together.

The vamp twitched on the ground, unconscious. He looked kind of pathetic now; I almost felt bad for him. Imagine your grandpa. Now imagine your grandpa minus fifty pounds plus two hundred years. That's who I'd just electrified.

Tasey's work done, I reholstered her and pulled out the vamp-specific ankle bracelet. I placed my index finger in the middle of the smooth black surface. After a few seconds it glowed green. Grabbing the vamp's ankle, I pulled his pants leg up to reveal the skin. I hated looking at these guys and seeing their pure white, smooth skin at the same time as their shriveled corpse bodies. I clamped the tracker on, and it adjusted to the circumference of his ankle. Two soft hisses

sounded as the sensors activated and shot into his flesh. His eyes flew open.

“Ouch!” He grabbed at his ankle, and I backed up a few steps. “What is this?”

“You’re under arrest under statute three point seven of the International Paranormal Containment Agreement, Vampire Protocol. You are required to report to the nearest processing facility in Bucharest. If you fail to report within the next twelve hours, you will be—”

He lunged for me. Sidestepping, I let him trip over a low gravestone. “I’ll kill you!” he hissed, trying to pick himself up off the ground.

“Yeah, you really don’t want to do that. That shiny new piece of jewelry I gave you? It’s got two little sensors—think of them as needles—jammed into your ankle. And if your body temperature were to suddenly rise, say by the addition of human blood, the sensors would inject you with holy water.”

His eyes widened in horror as he tried to pull the bracelet off, scraping against its sides.

“Don’t do that, either. If the seal is broken, holy water, poof. Got it? And I activated the timer and beacon. So not only do they know exactly where you are, they also know your time limit to get to Bucharest. Miss it, and—do I really need to tell you?”

His shoulders slumped. “I could just snap your neck,” he said, but I could tell it was halfhearted.

“You could try. And I could tase you again so hard you wouldn’t wake up for six hours, giving you even less time to make it to Romania. So, can I keep reading you your rights?” He didn’t say anything, and I picked up where I left off. “If you fail to report within the next twelve hours, you will be terminated. If you attack any humans, you will be terminated. If you attempt to remove the tracking device, you will be terminated. We look forward to working with you.”

I always thought that last line was a nice touch.

The vamp looked dejected, sitting there on the ground and facing the end of his freedom. I held out a hand. “Need help up?” I asked. After a moment he reached out and took it. I pulled him up; vamps are surprisingly light. Having no internal fluids’ll do that to you. “I’m Evie.”

“Steve.” Thank heavens he wasn’t another Vlad. He looked uncomfortable. “Um, so, Bucharest? You wouldn’t happen to have money for a train ticket?”

Paranormals, honestly. I reached into my bag and handed him a bunch of euros. Getting from Italy to Romania wouldn’t be easy, and he needed to book it. “You’ll want a map and directions,” I called as he started to slink off through the graves. Poor guy. He was really embarrassed. I handed him the sheet of directions to the Bucharest Processing and Assignment building. “It’s okay to use mind-control tricks to get through borders.” I smiled encouragingly.

He nodded, still morose, and left.

Finding Steve hadn't taken as long as I had worried it would. Excellent. It was dark, I was freezing, and my vamp-luring outfit of a wide-necked white blouse wasn't exactly helping. Plus I stuck out like a sore thumb in Latin countries, with my platinum blond hair in a braid trailing half-way down my back. I wanted out of here. I punched in the number of the Center on my communicator. (Think cell phone, without a camera. And they only come in white. *Lame.*) "Done. I need a ride home."

"Processing your request," a monotone voice said on the other end. I waited, sitting on the nearest gravestone. The communicator flashed five minutes later. "Sending transport now."

The trunk of a large, gnarled tree about fifteen feet in front of me shimmered, and the outline of a door appeared. A tall, slender man walked out. Well, not man, really. His figure was distinctly male, although it seemed stretched—a little too narrow. With delicate features and almond-shaped eyes straight out of an anime cartoon, his face was, simply put, beautiful. It made your heart ache with the desire to do nothing but stare at him for the rest of your life. He smiled at me.

"Shut up," I said, shaking my head. Did they have to send Reth? Sure, the Faerie Paths were the fastest way from here to there, but that meant going from here to there with him. And unlike the happy fantasy of faeries as delicate, tiny winged things who love nature—yeah, not so much.

Faeries are a *lot* more complicated than that. Complicated and dangerous. Walking briskly up, I held out my hand and clenched my jaw.

“Evelyn,” he purred. “It’s been too long.”

“I said shut up, didn’t I? Let’s go.”

He laughed, a silvery sound like bells, and traced one long, slender finger along my wrist before taking my hand in his. I tried not to shiver. He laughed again and we stepped through the oaken doorway.

I closed my eyes; this part always freaked me out. I knew what I would see if I looked—nothing. Absolutely nothing. Nothing under my feet, nothing above me, nothing around me. I put one foot in front of the other and held onto Reth’s hand as if my life depended on it. Since it did. No human could walk the Faerie Paths alone without being lost forever.

And then it was over. We stepped out into one of the cool, fluorescent-lit hallways of the Center. I yanked my hand away from Reth’s; his special brand of warmth had already spread through my arm and was creeping even farther.

“Not even a thanks?” he called after me as I stalked down the hall toward my unit. I didn’t look back. Suddenly he was right next to me. “We haven’t danced in so long.” His melodic voice was low and intimate. He reached for my hand again and I jumped back, pulling out Tasey.

“Back off,” I hissed. “And if you come out without your

glamour on again, I'll report you." His glamour wasn't much less good-looking than his real face, but it was regulation for faeries.

"What is the use? I could never hide anything from your eyes." He moved closer.

I shoved down the feelings bursting through me. Not again. Not ever again. Luckily we were interrupted by a shrieking alarm. Something was loose. A hairy little gremlin, mouth open wide and acidic saliva dripping from sharp teeth, was booking it on all fours toward us.

I watched it as if in slow motion. The gremlin made straight for me, a rabid gleam in its eyes. It leaped into the air and I kicked out hard, sending it sailing down the hall, right into the arms of the containment worker chasing it. "Goal!" I shouted. Dang, I was good.

"Thanks," the worker said, voice muffled through the mask.

"You betcha." Reth's hand had found the small of my back. I wanted to lean into him, let his arms wrap around me, let him take me away. . . . Then I remembered the time. "Oh, crap!" I ran down the hall past the worker and still-snarling gremlin. After a couple of turns, I put my palm on my door pad, bouncing impatiently until the door slid open. Reth hadn't followed me. I was glad. Okay, maybe a little disappointed. And then mad at myself for being disappointed.

I dashed inside, grateful that my settings kept the unit

at eighty-five degrees, and flopped onto the purple couch. Turning on the flat-screen TV that took up nearly the entire pink wall, I sighed in relief. My favorite high school drama, *Easton Heights*, was just starting. Tonight's episode promised to be spectacular—a masquerade ball in which tiny masks somehow hid identities enough for everyone to make out with the wrong person. Where did they come up with this stuff?

A POPULATION OF NIGHTMARES

The vid screen next to my couch buzzed again. It had been doing that off and on for the last thirty minutes. Finally, my show over, I hit the connect button. I was staring into a pair of green eyes, right in the middle of a green-tinged face. The image wavered, like always, since Alisha was underwater.

“Why haven’t you checked in yet?” a monotone voice asked. I always wondered what her real voice was like. All we got was the computer program translating what she said into something we could hear.

“Got done early—my show was on.”

Her eyes crinkled up into a smile. It was good that she had expressive eyes, since her mouth barely moved. “How was it?”

“You wouldn’t believe it. It was a costume party. First Landon? He totally made out with Katrina. Who’s dating Brett, right? But then Brett thought he was with Katrina, but really it was Cheyenne, her sister, who knew that he thought she was Katrina and tricked him into kissing her, then took off her mask and he was, like, what on earth? And *then* Halleryn filmed Landon kissing that tramp Carys.”

Alisha blinked her transparent eyelids slowly.

“Man, high school must be awesome.” I found myself wishing I could be part of normal drama for once. Paranormal drama didn’t have nearly as much kissing.

“You need to check in with Raquel,” Alisha prodded, her eyes still smiling.

“Fine, fine.” I adored Lish. She was my best friend. Once you got past the weirdness of her robo-voice, she had a great sense of humor for a paranormal. Of course, unlike most of them, she was grateful to be here. Her lagoon had become so polluted it was killing her. Now not only was she safe, but she had something to do. Apparently being a mermaid is dead dull. I watched *The Little Mermaid* with her once a few years ago—she thought it was freaking hilarious. She couldn’t stop laughing about the shell-bra thing, given that mermaids aren’t mammals. Plus, as she put it, Prince Eric was far too hairy and “peach colored” for her taste. I always

thought he was pretty hot, but then again, I *am* a mammal.

Leaving my unit, I walked down the cold, sterile halls to Raquel's office. We could have just done follow-up over the vid screens, but she always wants to see me in person after a job to make sure I'm okay. I kind of liked that.

I knocked once and the door slid open. The room was white—white walls, white floor, white furniture. Can you say boring? Raquel was a nice contrast. Her eyes were so brown they were nearly black, and her dark hair, pulled into a severe bun, was streaked with just enough gray to be distinguished without looking old. I sat, and she looked up from a stack of papers on her desk.

“You're late.” Her voice had a slight Spanish accent that I loved.

“Actually, I'm early. I said I'd need four hours; it only took me two.”

“Yes, but you got back almost an hour ago.”

“I figured I'd take a little personal time as a reward for a job well done.”

Raquel sighed. She was a professional sigher—the woman conveyed more emotions with a single exhalation than most people do with their entire faces. “You know how important follow-up is.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Sorry. My show was on.” One of her eyebrows rose ever so slightly. “You want a recap, too?” Most of the paranormals didn't care about my shows, but Raquel was human. She'd never admit it, but I was sure—

sure—that she liked television dramas as much as I did.

“No. I want you to debrief.”

“Fine. Walked through the cemetery. Froze my butt off. Saw the vampire. Vampire tried to attack me. Tased the vampire. Tagged the vampire. Read the vampire his rights. Sent the vampire along. His name was Steve, by the way.”

“Any trouble?”

“Nope. Oh, wait, yes. How many times have I asked to stop working with Reth? Do we need to go for an even hundred?”

“He was the only available faerie transport. And if we hadn’t sent him, you would have missed your show.” A small smile played at her lips.

“Fine, whatever.” She had a point, after all. “Just, could you send one of the girls next time?”

She nodded. “Thank you for reporting. You may return to your room.” She turned her attention back to the papers. I started to leave, then paused. She looked up. “Is there something else?”

I hesitated. But what did I have to lose? It’d been a couple of years. Might as well ask again. “I was wondering, you know, about maybe—I’d like to go to school. Normal school.”

Raquel sighed again. This was more of a sympathetic, *I know what it’s like to be a human wrapped up in all this nonsense, but if we didn’t do it, who would?* kind of a sigh. “Evie, honey, you know you can’t do that.”



“Why? It wouldn’t be too hard. You could just send for me whenever you need me. It’s not like I have to be here 24/7.” Truth was, here was kind of nowhere. The whole Center was underground. Not much of an issue when you have access to the Faerie Paths. It did, however, lend itself well to the occasional overwhelming bout of claustrophobia.

Raquel sat back in her chair. “It’s not about that. Do you remember what it was like before you came here?”

This time I was the one who sighed. I remembered. I had been bounced through the foster care system my whole life, until that fateful day when I was eight. I’d gotten tired of waiting for my newest foster mom to take me to the library, so I decided to go by myself. I was cutting through a cemetery when a nice-looking man approached me. He asked if I needed help, and it was like he was two people at once—the nice-looking man and a withered corpse, both there in the same place, the same body. I screamed bloody murder. Lucky for me, APCA (the American Paranormal Containment Agency) had been tracking him and stepped in before he could do anything. When I started babbling about what he looked like, they took me in.

Turns out my ability to see through paranormals’ glammers to what they are underneath is unique. As in, no other human on Earth can do what I do. That’s where things got really complicated. When other countries got wind of what the APCA had, they freaked out. The UK especially—you

wouldn't believe the level of paranormal activity they deal with there. They hammered out a new treaty, forming IPCA (the International Paranormal Containment Agency), the key items in the treaty being international paranormal control cooperation and, oh yeah, yours truly.

So I had to admit Raquel was probably right. My life of containment sometimes sucked, but at least I had a home. One where I was wanted.

I shrugged, pretending I didn't care about school anyway. "Yeah, cool, whatever. I'll talk to you later."

I felt her eyes on me as I walked out. It's not that I'm not grateful to IPCA. I am. They're the only family I have, and things are better here than they had been in the foster system. But I've been working full-time since I was eight, and sometimes I get tired. Sometimes I get bored. And sometimes all I want, more than anything else in the world, is to go on a freaking date.

I went back to my unit. I had a pretty nice setup. A small kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, and the main room with my awesome TV. The white walls in my bedroom had long since been covered. One was dedicated to posters of bands and movies I liked. Another was draped with an awesome hot pink and black leopard-spotted curtain. A third wall was my canvas. I wouldn't call myself an artist, but I had fun painting whatever came to mind—sometimes nothing more than just splashes of color—and changing it when I got bored. The paint was probably two inches thicker now



than when I moved in.

I pulled on my favorite pair of pajamas and undid my thick braid. Somehow microwaving dinner and watching a movie won out over doing homework. I must have drifted off to sleep at some point, or maybe I was half asleep, I don't know. But I'm sure I was dreaming, because I kept hearing a strange voice, almost singing. "Eyes like streams of melting snow, cold with the things she does not know." Over and over again, that line, in the most haunting way. It was as if the voice was pulling me, calling to me. I wanted to answer. Just as I was ready to call out, another alarm jarred me awake.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and reached over to check my vid screen for an announcement of what was going on. I pulled the screen up, but all it showed was a flashing red WARNING. Lots of help there. I pulled on my robe, grabbed Tasey, and poked my head outside. I knew alarm procedure called for me to stay in, but I wanted to figure out what was going on, and now.

I ran down the empty hallways; strobe lights were going off to warn any paranormals that couldn't hear the alarm, although you could *feel* the dang thing it was so loud. Reaching Raquel's door, I palmed it. That's the nice thing about being me—all access, all the time. I ducked inside; she was at her desk, calmly rifling through some folders.

"Raquel," I panted. "What's up?"

"Oh, don't worry about it." She looked up at me and

smiled. Or rather, the thing wearing Raquel's face looked up at me and smiled. Raquel's face shimmered over— What? I couldn't describe it. It was somehow featureless, with eyes the color of water. If it hadn't been wearing Raquel's face, it would be like it wasn't there at all.

I forced a smile to mask my terror. "Woke me up from the freakiest dream."

"I'm sorry. I've got some work to do. Why don't you scoot along?" It went back to the files.

"Sure, as long as you don't need me." Turning toward the door, I casually walked closer to the desk. "Oh, Raquel?"

"Hmm?"

I flicked Tasey onto her highest level. "You dropped this." The thing wearing Raquel's face looked up as I lunged forward and jabbed it in the chest with the Taser. Its water eyes opened briefly in shock before it collapsed to the ground.

Horrified, I made my way around the desk. I had heard of things that could eat a person alive and wear her skin. The idea gave even me nightmares sometimes, and my life was populated by nightmares. "Please, not Raquel," I whispered, trying not to throw up. Raquel melted away, leaving the strangest thing I had ever seen. Which, given my job, is saying a lot.