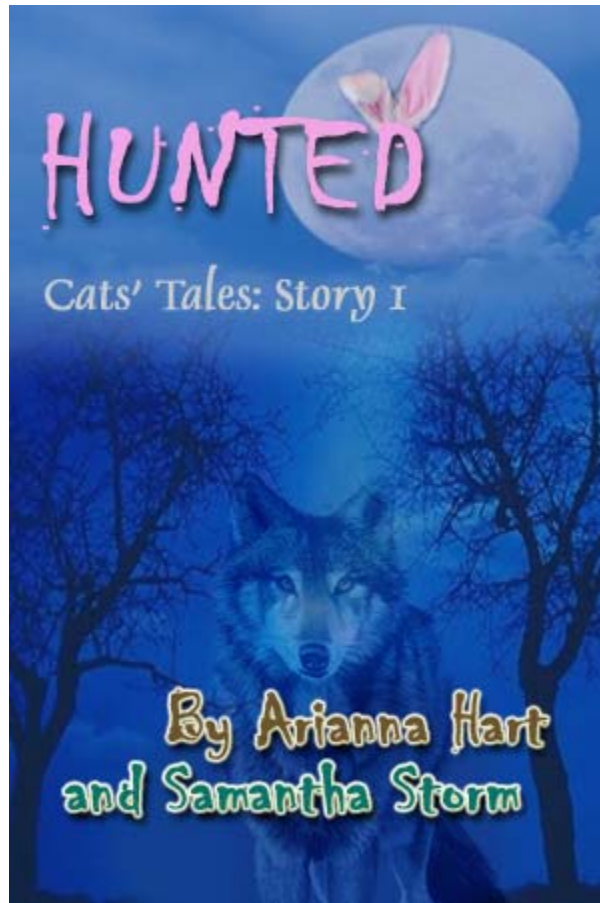


HUNTED  
A Free Read  
By Arianna Hart  
and Samantha Storm

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# Hunted

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## Chapter 1

How could the night get any worse? Her car broke down two miles back, her feet were killing her and she had spent the last hour and a half hobbling along the side of the road in pair of red high heels. So far the only car to pass her on the country road was full of young teenagers who ignored her frantic waving, and instead, hooted and hollered as they roared by. The hooting and hollering could have had something to do with the red playboy bunny outfit she was wearing. She reached back and realized somewhere along her hike she had lost her tail.

Figures. Halloween night and, instead of eating donuts, and drinking cider, she was limping along a creepy road with only the light of the full moon to guide her faltering steps.

What made her decide to dress up like a Playboy bunny anyway? It's not like Brad was going to notice her any more tonight than any other night.

Face it, if she really wanted to get the computer geek's attention, she should have dressed up like a brand new computer with a flat screen monitor and a T-1 line.

A howl in the distance sent shivers down her scantily clad back. . .

That would just be perfect. Her one night off, the one time she decides to leave her gear at home and play at being a normal, and she finds herself being stalked by a changeling. If she was lucky it would be a nomad, running along without the protection of his pack. A nomad, who hopefully, would show no interest. But the way her luck had been running tonight, it was more likely she was about to fall smack into the middle of a pack of Weres. Hungry Weres. And there she stood in the middle of an empty road, alone, dressed like lunch and completely unarmed. Where was a silver bullet when you needed one?

When she'd slipped on the black fishnet garters, she'd been focused on seducing Brad, not finding a hiding spot for her gun. *Great, just great.* Kicking off the ridiculous high heels, she held one high in her hand like a knife, the sharp heel pointing outward. Okay, so it wasn't much of a weapon, but it was better than nothing.

Another howl this time closer. If it hadn't picked up her trail yet, it would soon, which meant it was time to get off the damn road and look start looking for some

coverage. She cursed loudly as rocks dug into her feet. Clambering down the side of the hill and into the forest was not so easy in stocking feet. This was not what she had envisioned when she had decided to give herself a night off.

So much for having a little fun. *Fun! Ha! What was she thinking?* Guardians weren't allowed to have fun. A sharp rock dug into the arch of her foot, tearing her \$16.00 hose. Perfect. What next?

The bay of scented prey rent the night air.

Crap, someone caught her scent.

The pain of her feet and her wrecked stockings were forgotten as she turned and ran full out. She dodged between trees and scrambled over small boulders. If her sense of direction was still working she was less than a half mile from old man Wither's cabin. If she could make it to the cabin she would be safe. The old man religiously set protection spells every night around his property.

She stopped a moment, bending over at the waist, trying to catch her breath. Was that her labored breathing, or were they gaining on her? So wasn't about to stick around to find out. She started off again, running this

time until her side ached and her heart was pounding so hard in her chest she was afraid it would pop out.

Another stop and a quick check of direction. She looked up at the stars. She was a little off course. If she cut across the stream, bubbling to her left, she might be able to throw off whatever it was that was now obviously hunting her.

Ignoring the pain in her side, she forced herself to keep moving. *Move your ass woman*, she scolded herself as her pace began to drop off again. She could hear noises in the woods behind her. They were catching up. And it was a definitely now a THEY. She could hear at least a half a dozen distinct howls floating across the night air.

She looked up and a full honey color moon blazed back at her. Might as well just stop and paint the word dinner over her body. There was no way she was getting away from a pack of moon crazed Weres.

And then she heard it. A faint tickle of laughter to her left. And then another. Wood sprites! She changed her course and headed straight towards the music and laughter.

Depending on their mood, the sprites would either hide her or offer her up as the midnight buffet. A flash of

sparkles to her left helped guide her towards the mischievous little beings. She tripped over a root and fell face first into a pile of leaves and hummus.

More laughter trilled through the night air. Senica scrambled to her feet and lunged for the nearest tree. Climbing in bare feet and fishnets wasn't going to be easy, but it was better than stumbling around in the dark.

She pulled herself up onto the nearest limb and started to make her way upwards. If she got high enough she maybe able to spot the dancing circle of the sprites. See if they looked to be in a good mood. Nothing like hedging your bets when it came to woodland creatures.

She reached for the next limb and instead found herself clinging to a human leg.

"Let me help you," a masculine voice said, grabbing the back of her costume and pulling her up.

Not human. A Troll. "You scared the shit out of me!" she hissed settling herself on the limb next to him. She pulled a piece of beard out from under her leg. It was long and white and hung down to his knees. Most of his face was covered in white whiskers. He wore green overalls and a matching green baseball cap.

"Sorry."

"What the hell are you doing up here?" she asked.

"Hiding from sprites. You?"

"Hiding from Weres."

The troll chuckled. "Crowded forest tonight."

"I'll say. So what do sprites have against you?"

"I dated their leader for a while. Dumped her last week. She's pretty pissed about the whole thing. Told me if she saw my sorry ass anywhere near the forest she would fry it."

"So what the hell are you doing here?"

He laughed this time out loud. "I'm dating her sister."

Made perfect sense. Date the sister of the creature out to turn you into Troll-kebabs. "I didn't realize Trolls dated that many wood sprites?"

"Yeah, well, when you're a Troll you take what you can get. Most women don't go for hairy chests, but sprites seem to dig them."

The howling got louder, and Senica thought she could see flashes of silver down below. Maybe the Troll's scent would throw them off it was just about killing her.

"Are you by any chance armed?" she asked her companion.

"Let me see." He rummaged through his pockets and pulled out a set of tweezers, a box of matches and a half eaten butterfingers.

"Tweezers?"

"You would be surprised how many splinters you get when you spend half your life sitting in trees."

"I can imagine. Would you mind lending me the matches and the chocolate bar?"

"You think you can hold off a pack of Weres with candy and matches?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe, beats the hell out of No." The Troll handed her the matches and looked wistfully at the candy bar before finally passing it over.

Senica pushed her spoils down the front of her costume and started climbing down.

"Do you think that's a good idea, Lass?"

She looked up and laughed, "No, but I figure I need a lot of space around me when I call the dragon."

"Dragon! Dear lord!"

"Have you ever called a dragon?" she called up as she dropped to the ground and looked around for a sharp stick.

"Never. Are you sure this is a good idea?" the Troll asked.

"I think this is an insane idea," Senica said under her breath as she drew a pentacle in the dirt. Dropping the stick she took a deep breath and stepped into the middle of it. "Any last advice?"

The Troll climbed up a branch higher. "If it makes a lunge at you try punching it in the face. I've heard that occasionally works with wild bears and sharks."

Great. Buffet to a bunch of Weres or desert to a dragon. She took the wrapper off the Butterfingers and waved it in the air. Dragons had notorious sweet teeth.

Taking another deep breath she tried to ignore her surroundings and concentrated on her body. Her feet where planted squarely in the earth and she felt the power surge just below it, like a stream of water. Senica opened her eyes and struck the match, raising it high above her head.

Fire. Dragons were drawn to it like a moth to flame. Her pitiful fire was not enough to gain the attention of

such a majestic creature. Not in its current form. But she was about to change that.

She closed her eyes again and pulled from the ground, mentally drawing the power up into her body. It coursed thru her legs, streaming up into her belly. And with a mental shout and a loud grunt she sent it suddenly soaring towards the sky.

*I am fire. I am flame.* She chanted the words, visualizing herself become an orange blaze. Small flames ignited at her ankles and spiraled slowly up her legs. Her body warmed and then burned as the fire licked and flickered against her skin. She resisted the urge to extinguish it and instead forced the blaze higher, hotter, until she was completely engulfed in it. She had become a human bonfire.

As quickly as the inferno started it disappeared and Senica fell exhausted to her knees.

"That was impressive lassie. But you forgot the calling."

She nodded her head unable to speak for the moment while she composed herself. Forcing herself to her feet she raised her hands again and whispered into the

wind, "Ollie, Ollie, oxen free. Any Dragon close by, come to me."

Nothing happened and she thought for a moment she had failed. And then the wind picked up. Leaves lifted off the ground and began to dance around her body. The leaves settled and she realized the hand holding the Butterfingers was now empty and something warm and slimy licked her fingers. She looked down and into the face of a baby dragon.

She couldn't help but laugh. All that damn energy wasted, and all she got for it was a baby dragon. He was a cute little thing. His body was blue, his neck lined with yellow spikes. And on each foot, long, sharp deadly looking black claws. He wagged his tail, also covered in spikes, back and forth as his big round eyes watched her every move.

And hungry too. Sharp, needle-like teeth chewed on her fingers trying to get the last of the candy.

"I don't suppose you have anymore candy up there, do you?"

"Nope. I hate to mention this, but the Weres are getting closer. Your little torch routine wasn't exactly subtle."

"Didn't your mother ever teach you that if you had nothing nice to say to shut the hell up?"

"Nah, Troll mothers don't do maternal advice well."

Great, now she was getting a sociology lesson in the rearing habits of Trolls.

"Ouch!" The baby dragon actually drew blood this time!!

Crap. Senica couldn't do anything to stop the drop of blood from dropping onto the pentagram.

A pentagram that hadn't been closed yet.

"Ah, the Weres are almost here. . ."

"That's the least of our problems now! Hold on!" She wrapped her arms around the baby dragon and watched in horror as the drop of blood began spinning counter clockwise. The liquid splattered into the dirt and expanded, growing in size until it encompassed the pentagram. Suddenly the puddle disappeared, sucked down into the dirt.

Senica smiled and waved up at the Troll. "Close call."

The words were barely out of her mouth when the earth beneath her feet began to tremble.

"Take cover Lass! It's a star quake!"

A small crack appeared at the center of the pentagram and then another. She was thrown forward unable to keep her balance.

More cracks appeared, multiplying and merging until they became a larger fissure. The edge of the opening was now only inches from Senica's feet. She desperately pushed her body along the ground, horrified at the thought of being sucked down into the bottomless hole. But she couldn't move fast enough. The hole was expanding as fast as she was moving. She watched mortified as the earth around her began to crumble. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to escape.

And when all seemed lost, suddenly a stream of red stars exploded from below, pouring out golden red fireworks against the dark sky.

Senica was thrown through the air, her body coming to a sudden painful stop against a nearby tree. She lay against the tree, bruised and momentarily blinded.

## Chapter 2

"Holy shit women! Are you insane! You just let out a Night Shadow!"

She blinked trying to clear the vision and as the stars slowly faded she realized she was looking up into the face of an alpha Were. An extremely large pissed off Were.

There was no where to go. So she faced him and pushed her shoulders back trying to keep the fear from her voice.

"You gonna eat me?"

He gave her a lazy smile. "Looks like I'll be too busy running from the Night Shadow you've just set loose."

He was large even for a Were. She looked from his reddish coat into his very human blue eyes. "It's not like I did it on purpose! I was trying to get a dragon to get rid of you!"

His eyebrows raised in amusement as he took in her costume. "Great job, Thumper. And I wasn't chasing you. I was hunting alone, minding my own business when I saw the fireworks and decided to check out what was going on." His attention suddenly turned towards the night sky. His head

cocked to the side as if listening to the wind. "You've a pack of Weres on your ass."

"No kidding. If your brethren hadn't been chasing me I wouldn't be in this mess!" Even to her ears it sounded lame. Shit, what was she supposed to do now? She'd never fought off anything as big as a Night Shadow before. A Goblin, sure. Imps by the hundreds, even the occasional rabid Were, but a Night Shadow? She was defenseless, surrounded by enemies, and completely out classed.

And her damn Playboy Bunny costume was shot to hell. She'd never get the deposit back now.

"So lassie," the Troll chose that moment to come out of the tree. "What are you going to do?"

"Do? Ah. . ." Hell, she had no idea what she was going to do. Her brain spun in circles while she tried to find a way out of the latest cataclysmic turn her life had taken.

"Stop that!" She pushed the dragon's tiny snout away from her crotch where he was sniffing. "You're worse than my dog!"

She turned to the Were. "How long do you think until the Night Shadow starts feeding?"

"Two, three minutes tops. And since we seem to be the closest warm bodies, I suggest we stop talking and get the hell out of here."

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"So, a Troll, a Were, and a baby dragon walk into a bar. . ." Senica muttered to herself. Her feet had gone numb about half an hour ago and the stitch in her side was about to split her in two.

The Were, who went by the name Dimitri, carried the baby dragon while the Troll loped along next him. She was the slowest runner, but she was the only one who could get them through Old man Whithers' protections so they didn't leave her for shadow bait.

If they could make it to the cabin before the shadow got them they could hole up there until daylight. The shadow would be dormant come sunrise and Senica could call for reinforcements.

If they made it.

"How much farther to this cabin?" Dimitri gasped out.

"It should be just over that rise."

"That's what you said before the last hill. This sucker may only be a baby, but he weighs as much as a pony."

"I'm doing the best I can. It's not like I was expecting to be running from a night shadow tonight. I'm not exactly prepared."

"Then you shouldn't have been messing with magics you couldn't control."

"If you're friends hadn't been on my ass they I wouldn't have had to create a power circle."

"They're no friends of mine."

"Will the two of you shut up? I can't hear if anyone's following us and I don't want to get caught by surprise."  
The Troll hissed.

Senica saved her breath for running and prayed desperately for a hint of Whither's cabin. The baying of the Weres rang through the night somewhere off to her left. The occasional flash of utter darkness sucked the light out of the moonlit sky to her right.

Wonderful. Talk about the proverbial rock and hard place.

"There it is." Senica pointed to a soft blue light glowing against the dark sky. That's the edge of the protection circle and once over it we should be safe."

Dimitri suddenly stopped. The baby dragon started squirming. He lowered the dragon onto the ground.

"What's wrong? We're almost home free."

"You're forgetting something." Dimitri pulled at the dark reddish fur covering his body. "I'm a Were in full form and that's a full moon which means no way in hell I can cross into that circle without frying my ass."

"Shit." Senica had been so focused on getting the hell away from the night shadow she had forgotten who she was running with. She had to do something to get him into the circle. She couldn't leave him to die. Especially since she was the one that had unleashed the Night Shadow. But how? What spell could she work that would let a Were inside. The answer was none. There was no way he could cross over in Were form. There was a spell she could use, but it was not going to be pleasant for her or Dimitri. Senica took a deep breath and turned to face him. "I have an idea."

"I'm listening."

"I could do a spell to turn you back."

"No."

"Okay, then you come up with an idea, because that's the only one I have."

He stood arms crossed, a frown on his forehead. "If I take human form I'd be unarmed during a full moon. It makes me a sitting duck."

She nodded her head in agreement. "Yes, but we would be within the circle and if we stayed there until morning we'd be safe."

The sound of howls filled the air.

The Troll spoke up, "Come on laddie, piss or get off the pot. You're running out of time."

Dimitri growled out the words, "Fine."

Senica had only read about the spell, it was not one she had ever worked. She closed her eyes and tried to focus. One wrong word and the growly Were in front of her could be transformed into a pile of ash.

"I need flowers."

"Here's some lassie." The Troll bent over and picked a handful of yellow wild flowers.

Senica took them from the Troll and warned, "You better take cover. Just in case." She began to lay the flowers in a circle around the obviously pissed off Were.

The Troll picked up the dragon and found shelter behind a large tree.

Senica grabbed a handful of dirt and began walking slowly around Dimitri. As she walked she chanted, "Ring around the rosies. Pocket full of posies. Ashes, ashes we all fall down." She repeated the song over and over and each time she voiced the words 'we all fall down' she sprinkled dirt into the air. Three, four times she sang the song and circled the Were and nothing happened.

Dimitri eyebrows raised in amusement. "Great spell."

"Shut up. I must be forgetting something." What was she missing? The dirt. It needed to go on him, not around him and she should be singing the lyrics not chanting them. Her voice rang out, "Ring around the rosies. Pocket full of posies. Ashes, ashes we all fall down," and she threw all the dirt she had left in her hand straight at Dimitri's face.

"What the hell..." He sputtered, wiping dirt from his mouth. The words turned into a growl and then a howl.

Dimitri's head rose towards the moon and his body began to quiver. He howled, but this one was laced with pain. The quivering turned into a full seizure as he fell hard to the ground.

Senica watched in horror as he writhed, howling and then screaming in agony as his body slowly morphed from Were back into human.

A wave of nausea washed over her. Her knees began to buckle. Too many spells in a too short a time span. Every spell she took a great deal of power and strength. But there was one more spell to work before they would be safe. And there was no time, any moment the night shadow or the pack would be barreling down on them. Senica forced the weakness back, she turned and gathered as much energy as she could around her and threw it all with a small prayer towards the circle of protection.

"Hurry lassie!" The Troll yelled picking up the baby dragon and sprinting towards the circle.

Senica bent down and offered Dimitri her hand. "We have to get inside. Now!" His eyes were open and very human. He grabbed her hand and she used every ounce of

strength she had left to pull him to his feet. The two of them stumbled together over the circle and onto the ground.

"That was a barrel of laughs." His voice came out a harsh whisper.

"I need to sleep..." the words floated out of her mouth as she closed her eyes and sank into unconsciousness.

### Chapter 3

She wasn't sure how long she had been asleep but when she woke it was still pitch black out. Dimitri had made a fire and had moved her so she was lying beside it.

Dimitri settled himself onto a log next to her. "Now what?"

She forced herself up onto the log and stretched her hands out to warm them in front of the flames. "We wait it out until morning."

"And just wait it out while the Night Shadow consumes anything living it comes across in the forest."

"I didn't do it on purpose." Her voice sounded whiny even to her own ears. There was no one else to blame. By accident or not she had unleashed the evil.

"I know you didn't, but the fact is its still out there feeding."

"Hey, I'm open for suggestions."

"What do you know about shadows?"

"Not much. They are the black hole of the magic world. Without conscious, without emotion. A feeding machine capable of consuming everything in its path. Once awoken they have a cycle of destruction until banned."

"And how do you ban one?"

Senica shrugged her shoulders. "I don't have a clue, but Whither's has a huge library. There has to be something in one of those old books that could help us. One problem."

"Just one?"

"Whither's a hermit, a recluse. It's one thing breaking into his protection circle. It's a whole other thing getting him to answer the door."

"Leave the old man to me. I can be very charming when I want to be." Dimitri's grin suddenly took on a very wolfish look that sent shivers down Senica's spine.

"I won't let you hurt him!"

Dimitri's grin disappeared and anger filled his eyes. "I'll try to resist my primal urges."

Senica placed her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

He pulled his arm away. "It must be hard for you to be so close to me without trying to fill me full of silver."

"You know I'm not armed."

"Yeah, why is that? Why is someone like you running around unprotected in the forest, dressed like a bunny? Is

this some kind of new Guardian initiation I haven't heard of? I'm assuming you're a guardian?"

"I am. But I wasn't working tonight, I was on a date."

Dimitri laughed. "Okay, I give up where are you hiding lover boy? Or did he getting eaten by the pack?"

"I broke down before I got to the party."

"And lover boy didn't come and save you? Not very gallant."

"He has no clue where I am." Not that he would care. She wondered how long it would take Brad to notice she was missing from the party. She wondered if he would even notice. Not for the first time she asked herself why she was wasting her time on a guy that was consumed with work. "Not that he would care." The words were out before she could stop them.

"That is a problem with Human males. Now someone like myself, if I'm in the company of an attractive woman, I pay attention."

"What do you think your doing?"

His hand skimmed across the skin of her bare shoulder. "Just passing the time."

She realized she was now sitting next to a very naked human male. She felt her eyes begin to lower and blushed, trying to keep them on anything, but the muscular naked body only inches from her. "The Troll..."

"Is asleep over by that log. Can't you hear his snoring."

Senica looked over at the Troll who nestled next to the baby dragon. Both were sound asleep.

Dimitri's fingers ran down her arms.

"Whit...Whither." Senica stammered out the old man's name. "We have to go check out Whither's library."

"Sure we do. But you know I'm suddenly finding it extremely hard resisting my primary urges."

Oh great. Now she had to worry about a pack of Weres, a Night Shadow, and a horny, lone Werewolf. She so did not need this right now.

"Listen, Dimitri, it's not that I don't think you're a nice guy and all. . ."

"But you don't do hairy." He yanked his hand back. "Don't worry, I'll keep my paws to myself." He pushed himself to his feet in one lithe movement.

"I'm sorry, it's not that. Really."

"Whatever."

Goddess, what did she do to deserve this? Did other Guardians go through this much crap on their nights off?

While she debated the merits of going after a pissed off Were and apologizing, the circle of protection sizzled and crackled. "What the--"

"It's the Weres, they've been slamming against the shield for the last hour." The Troll stood and scratched his armpit. "They'll fry their keisters on the protection and then back off for a while until they work up the courage to try again."

"Great. What about the Night Shadow? Any sign of him/her/it?" She asked.

"No, but I think it might be picking off some of the Weres after they get scorched. There seems to be fewer of them than before." The Troll answered.

Senica put her face in her hands and tried to come up with a plan of action. Nothing. She had no idea what to do next. She sighed and got to her feet. "I'm surprised it hasn't taken off to the city to eat. All those people out and about for Halloween would be like an all-you-can-eat buffet for a night shadow."

Dimitri stared into the dark woods. "Nah, they like to stick to the shadows, hence the name. The Weres are too strong as a group, but when one of them wanders off to lick his wounds he becomes easy pickings."

"Then maybe we'll be okay. The Night Shadow will devour the Weres and when daylight comes. . ." Hell, she didn't know what they'd do when daylight came.

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Senica raised her hand and pounded on the wooden door.

"So the plan is what again?" Dimitri asked leaning against the wall.

She found it disconcerting every time she turned around he seemed inches from her. She was not the type of woman who liked people in her personal space. She resisted the urge to take a step back. Somehow she felt Dimitri was doing it to get on her nerves and the last thing she wanted to do was let him know it was working.

"We wake the old man and ask to see his library."

"You think he's just going to let you waltz right into his house?"

"After I explain the circumstances..."

"That you let a Were into his precious protection circle? How do you think he'll take the news?"

"He won't know you're a Were. Unless you tell him."

Dimitri waved his hand down across his body. "And I explain the fact I am running around the woods naked, how?"

"You're a nudist?"

"Okay I'm a nudist. A nutty nudist that likes to jog in the woods in the dead of night. He might go for it, but you are forgetting our companions. Last I heard it was illegal to own a dragon."

"I don't own him!"

"He seems to think you do."

Withers was a hermit and not much on any company let alone a party barging in on him in the middle of the night. "Maybe your right." She turned to the Troll. "You and the dragon should stay hidden."

The Troll puffed out his chest and growled, "Second class citizens. Everyone always treating my kind like we have cooties or something." The Troll picked up the dragon and headed for a nearby clump of bushes.

She gave the Were a hard stare. "Great, now his feelings are hurt."

"Don't look at me. This is YOUR plan."

"And so far everything's going honky dory, yeah right." She muttered under her breath as she pounded both fist this time against the wooden door. "Come on old man, wakie, wakie."

What she wasn't expecting was for the door to suddenly swing wide open. In hindsight leaning her full body against it as she banged wildly against it was probably not the best idea. For when the door opened, she went with it-- through the air and then hard onto the floor. Her face now rested inches from a pair of worn blue slippers.

A voice boomed down at her. "What's this? What this? Company? Come in. Come in."

## Chapter 4

For a recluse Whithers seemed very jovial and downright social able. They now all sat at a large kitchen table, except for the baby dragon who had found a comfortable spot next to the fire.

On the table's surface was an assortment of food and drink. The troll was busy stuffing his face with something that looked like a large mass of squirming purple worms.

Whithers spoke up from behind her. "Troll's favorite snack. Manchoos. Ever had them? They are an acquired taste."

"No, I've never had them. Though they look delicious." She lied.

"More ale?" Whithers asked, not waiting for her to answer as he filled her wooden mug to the brim.

If the dude wasn't so ancient Senica might have thought he was hitting on her and trying to get her drunk. The old man was being far too attentive. Every time she turned around he was filling her cup and urging her to drink more.

Dimitri was watching her from across the table over the rim of his cup. His eyes twinkled in amusement as the old man fussed over her again.

She took a sip of the strong ale. It was time to bring the conversation around to more serious matters. "As I was saying, this night shadow is loose and out there devouring everything in its path."

Whithers plunked down next to her. "Hmm, most interesting."

The way he was looking at her made her uncomfortable. She needed to play nice she reminded herself. Without his help they screwed. She took a deep breath and cleared her throat and tried to keep her annoyance from showing, "We were hoping you could help us figure out a way to ban it."

"Yes, Yes, of course my dear."

His hand patted hers and she resisted the urge to pull back.

She looked up and this time Dimitri didn't even try to hide his amusement. Dimitri lifted his glass high and blew her a kiss.

She did her best to ignore him. She turned back to the old man and plastered a smile on her face. "Do you have any ideas how we can get rid of that thing?"

"Of course. Of course, my dear. The best thing to do is for you and the young man to have sex."

She was really losing it. She could have sworn the old man said they had to have...

She turned and looked over at Dimitri. His expression was one of pure glee. No she had to have misunderstood. She turned back to the old man and asked loudly, "I'm sorry? What was that again?"

His crinkled face broke into a huge grin. "You have to consummate your relationship." He lifted a silver cane and pointed to the middle of the room where a large purple pentagram had been drawn on the floor. "You have to do it there in the protection circle."

She watched Dimitri as he suddenly lowered his head and concentrated on his drink.

Dimitri voice was laced with amusement when he spoke again. "Hey, if the old man says we have to have sex, what can we do but have sex. How you want to do it?" He looked up and smiled widely, "Doggie style?"

She scowled at him. "You're hilarious." She turned back to the old man and demanded. "There has to be another way."

"No. No. I'm sorry my dear, if you want the night shadow banished you will have to do the deed." He looked over at the clock. "And there's no time to waste."

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It was her fault that damnable thing had escaped. And where the hell she was now. According to the old man she had to have nookie to save the world. God, she didn't want to believe him. She clung instead to the desperately hope he was some kinky ancient dude who was trying to get a free peep show. But as she watched he walked over to the bookshelf and pulled out a thick blue book. He opened it and smiled wide as his wrinkled hands pointed out large spidery text.

Senica moved next to him and forced herself to read the words. Damn it all there it was in bold letters. The old bastard was telling the truth. It was all there in black and white --incantation and a notation about how they had to be uttered during the final moments of a union between a man and women in a circle of candlelight. There

was even an illustration of a coupling. She looked at horror at the drawing--the woman's head throw back in ecstasy as the words from the spell where torn from her lips.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. What choice did she have but to do this? And unless she wanted to get it on with the old wizard or the troll what other choice did she have but to do this with the Were?

She gave the Were a glare from across the room. She had to admit he was not hard on the eyes. Muscles ripped down large shoulders and across a broad chest. His stomach was cut and his thighs--his thighs deserved their own prose. He leaned against the wall, as though totally unaffected by the fact he was stark naked. Her glance moved slowly up and down his body again. She was just as capable of appreciating a fine looking man as anyone else. Not a man she reminded herself again, a Were. And she was not some normal chick--her kind was trained to kill his. And yet for the first time in her life she was having a hard time keeping that concept in the foremost of her mind.

She realized that although the Were was thumbing through a book he was at the moment completely aware of the fact she was checking him out.

He didn't bother looking at her when he asked, "Like what you see?"

"Actually I was wondering if you would be up to the challenge?"

"And that challenge would be?"

At her words he turned and she realized that he didn't just have big biceps. He was BIG all over.

She tried to ignore the sudden desire that raced through her and forced herself to turn towards the window and say in the most nonchalant tone she could muster, "You realize in the book the woman was having a big O?"

"So?"

She turned back, but this time, made a point of keeping her eyes focused only on his face. Dimistri's eyes were an incredible dark blue with a hint of green around the edges. The Were's eyes, she corrected herself. She had decided it was best not to use his Christian name. Looking at him she was having a hard enough time remembering he was her sworn enemy.

"So, you think you're up to it?" She asked.

His gave her a wolfish grin. "I've never had any complaints in that department before."

"Maybe all your past nookie mates were great actresses," She said under her breath.

But he was a Were, which meant his hearing was better than human.

Suddenly he was beside her. His finger trailed down the back of her neck. "That's your challenge? Whether or not I can satisfy you?"

She moved away from him. "There is no challenge. All that matters is the spell. All our focus has to be on getting rid of night shadow."

"And in the process we can't have a little fun?"

She ignored the joking tone of his voice and instead asked the question that had been turning in her mind. "Have you ever had relations with a human before?"

"I suspect you know our doctrine almost as well as I do, Guardian." The way he spit out the last word left no doubt the way she felt about her kind.

"It's forbidden for a Were to couple with a human.

But we both know rules were made to be broken. Have I broken the rules and coupled with a human? Let's just say I've been tempted a few times."

She raised an eyebrow at his answer and he laughed. "No Guardian, I've never gone against my sworn Sovereign."

But there were rumors others of his kind had and she wondered if the tales of their punishments for treason was true. "If we do this and it's found out what would they do to you?"

His grinned, but this time the smile didn't reach his eyes. "Torture for sure. Death, a possibility."

"Torture? Death? Is five minutes of sex worth that?"

"Five minutes? Not a chance. Besides, you're forgetting, we're doing this to banish the Night Shadow. I'm willing to sacrifice myself for the good of the magical and human world. Are you?"

Her heart raced as she caught a whiff of his spicy scent and the heat coming off him in waves.

"If I must." The quiver in her voice had nothing to do with reluctance and had a whole lot to do with the bolts of need pounding through her core.

Old man Whithers cackled as he set out candles and incense. That reminded her of something else.

"I may be willing to get down and dirty with a Were, but I'm not putting on a show. We do this ourselves without the audience. Agreed?"

"That's fine with me. I don't know squat about spellwork, but I'd rather not have the troll and the old man watching me and critiquing my style."

The smile on Whithers' face sank into a pout—which looked ridiculous amongst his whiskers and wrinkles. "But how are you going to recite the spell at just the right time?"

"I'll manage. Trust me, I have amazing powers of concentration. Let me see the book so I can memorize the spell."

It looked simple enough. Just two lines:

With the pleasure in my veins

I banish the shadow to the demon plains

The trick would be to recite the words while her pleasure was at its peak and before she came down or the spell wouldn't be strong enough.

Damn, she wished she'd paid more attention to sex magic when she was in training, but she'd foolishly thought she was powerful enough not to need it. Ha! Her power was so depleted now she'd need the all the energy she could steal from Dimitri's pleasure just to work up enough strength for the final casting.

"Time's a-wasting girlie. Better get out of that bunny outfit and into the circle."

"Just as soon as I have a little privacy." Her hands shook as she thought about stripping down in front of Dimitri.

Sure, she was attracted to him, but still, she usually had at least a date and dinner before she got naked with a guy.

"And make sure you shut the door all the way," Dimitri called as the troll and Whithers shuffled out of the room with the dragon trailing happily in their wake.

The snick of the lock was a death knell. She had no more excuses and time was running out fast. The full moon had sunk inches in the sky since they'd entered the cabin. If she didn't hurry, the moon would set before she could do anything about the Shadow.

There was no choice but to get on with it. She tossed her bunny ears far away from the pentagram and slid the zipper down her back. Her nipples pebbled up as the chill in the room crossed her naked chest. The lacy thong didn't offer much protection from Dimitri's burning gaze, but it was still the hardest thing she'd ever done to strip it off.

"Look, I know you're doing this under duress, but I'll try to make it as enjoyable for you as I can. Think of me as a living, breathing, vibrator."

Senica burst out in laughter and said before she could stop herself, "my BOB is purple and has three speeds, you've got a lot to live up to."

"Oh, I think I can come up with a few more tricks, and I don't need batteries." Gently, he pulled her into the prepared circle and drew her up to his hard, hot chest.

"I-I need time. . ." she trailed off, unable to come up with a reason to delay.

"No rush, just enjoy." He angled her chin and lowered his mouth to hers.

Softer than she could believe, his lips caressed, teased, and completely devastated her. Warm bubbles of

pleasure sparkled through her system, igniting fires in every cell of her body. Her thighs were damp and her breasts full and heavy, and he hadn't done more than kiss her yet.

Remembering the words to the spell might be harder than she thought.

"You taste like sweet wine. I want to lick every inch of you and see if your other lips are as delicious."

Her knees buckled as every last one of her bones turned to water. Dimitri trailed moist kisses down her throat and over her collarbone. His supple fingers danced over her breasts, teasing little touches that set brush fires in her belly and lower.

She threw back her head and let the desire course through her. Sparks of energy crackled around them and the candle flames flared as high as her need for him. She could feel her power growing with every touch of his lips.

When he parted her curls and stroked her clit, she thought light would burst from her head. A sob tore from her throat and she had to fight back a moan.

"Wait for it. Let it build. Let the power grow."

Dimitri slid his tongue down her thigh and stroked the back of her knee with flickering touches.

He stood to his full height, and his solid erection pressed into her stomach. Seneca grasped his length and held his pulsing heat in the palm of her hand.

"I want to taste you too." She began to sink down but he pulled her closer instead.

"No time."

He lifted her into his arms and her heart fluttered in her chest. As a Guardian she was usually the aggressor, this gentle dominance undid her.

Dimitri lowered her to the floor, being careful to keep her entire body inside the circle.

"I promise I'll be gentle with you." He moved between her thighs and brushed the head of his cock against her moist nether lips.

"Don't be." She arched up and opened herself completely to his possession.

He slid home with a rightness that she'd never felt with anyone else before. Every rasp of his skin against her channel set off explosions of pleasure deep into her womb.

Magic and pressure built inside her with blinding intensity. Dimitri grasped her hips and slammed into her. She dug her nails into his back and tried to remember the words to the spell. An overwhelming crescendo of sensation grew so big and encompassing inside her she could barely hold onto reality.

"The spell! Say it now, before I come," Dimitri ordered.

Her head swam, her mind was mush and she couldn't remember her own name, forget a spell.

"Seneca! The spell! Now!"

Sweat dripped down his forehead and she licked it off his face. The salty taste of him on her tongue created a flash of power and she had a brief moment of clarity.

"With the pleasure in my veins, I banish the shadow to the demon plains!" Her orgasm hit as soon as she released the last syllable. Spasms rocked her hips and power flew from every pore of her body.

Dimitri's shout echoed through her head. She didn't know if it was from the force of his completion or from the blast of power that swept through the both of them.

The room glowed with spell light and a sudden flare blinded her. She collapsed against the hard wood floor, not even feeling the roughness of the boards against her back.

"Did it work?" she asked, her voice thick and throaty.

"I don't know if it killed the Shadow, but it damn near did me in."

## Chapter 5

Dimitri came outside and joined her on the porch swing. He was now wearing a dark blue silk robe. Because he was quite a bit taller than Whithers the robe rode high on his thighs. She caught herself staring and looked away.

She was back in her bunny costume. There was no way she was going to be able to take the thing back now. It was streaked with dirt and torn beyond repair. The night had taken on a crazy life of its own. And she was happy at this point to have just survived it.

"Where's Whithers?" She asked.

"The old man said something about making breakfast. You realize he's quite disappointed he missed the show last night."

She laughed. "I bet."

"You realize that spell went out and any magical creature within a couple mile would have felt its power."

"So?"

"So the pack now knows I did the nasty with a guardian." His fingers moved up against her bare shoulder and slid along the back of her neck. "Don't get me wrong I

totally enjoyed every minute of it. But when I leave this place they'll come looking for me."

"Not something you can talk your way out of?" She asked trying to ignore the delicious shivers running down her back at his touch.

"Doubtful. They will be out for blood. Mine."

"That's a problem." Her mind raced trying to come up with a game plan. There was no easy way out of this situation. And a bigger problem the more she thought about it the more she realized she didn't want any harm to come to Dimitri. The truth of it was the more she was with him the more she wanted him. The damn guy was like a potato chip, one taste and you wanted more.

There was no real solution to this problem. He was a Were. She was a guardian. She could not start seeing a Were. It wasn't done. And yet her mind kept going back to the way his lips trailed across her body. The way she felt as he plunged into her. And when she came, it was a mind blowing orgasm. She should be concentrating on a way out of this mess and instead she was having a hard time purging the mental image of him naked, against her.

She was damn tired of fighting her base desires. With a loud sigh, she gave in and slid her body next to his.

His arms came up and encompassed her. She rested her head against his chest. God it felt good just sitting there in the warmth and strength of his body.

They sat in silence for a long while watching the night and the stars. It would be sunrise soon.

"Do you like cats?" Senica asked.

"Most definitely. Especially if they are roasted and seasoned with a bit of hot curry."

She raised her head and looked into his face. "That's not funny."

He gave her a wolfish grin.

"You need a place to hide out. And really a lot of this mess is my fault," He raised an eyebrow and she continued, "Okay most of this mess is my fault. Look you don't have to stay long. Just until the pack finds something better to do then string your ass up and set you on fire."

"Don't worry about me. The pack has a short memory. Something else will come along to rile them up and chances are they will forget my...small indiscretion."

"I want you to stay with me."

"And what will your friends think of this arrangement?"

"We won't tell them you're a Were. At least not at first. Not until they get to know you. And definitely not until I have time to work on them. Last thing we need is one of them chasing you down the street trying to pump silver into your ass."

"Gee, how can I pass up such an inviting offer?"

"I'm serious. We'll work it out. And by then maybe you can find a way to deal with your people. I just don't want you to get hurt."

"And I don't want to bring more trouble to your door."

She lifted her hands and caressed his lips. "Stay with me."

He motioned towards the woods. "And how do you propose we get past my brethren?"

"We wait until sunrise when they're all human. How hard can it be to get past a group of tired, naked guys?"

He gave her a hard look. "You sure you want to do this?"

She gave him a reassuring smile. "Yes."

"Okay, Count me in."

She leaned against him again.

"What about the dragon?" He asked.

"No way the home owners association would go for it.  
Maybe I can talk the troll into taking him."

"Trolls don't own pets."

"And Guardians don't date Weres."

He chuckled and drew her close.

Whatever happened next they would work it out. They lived through a night shadow. How hard could it be to sneak past his pack and set up home under the eyes of a coven of guardians. Easy as can be. At least she hoped so.

And as she finished the thought a dozen angry howls floated across the night air.

**THE END**

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