

Siren's Call (A Rainshadow Novel)

By Jayne Castle

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Ella Morgan had once fallen hard and fast for Rafe, but then he disappeared for months…and he's not about to tell her why. Ella, too, has secrets that only her dust bunny knows. She's not just a music talent, she's a Siren: a paranormal singer capable of singing men to sleep—or to their deaths.

But once on Rainshadow, Rafe and Ella will learn that surrendering to passion doesn't come without risks—and fighting fire with fire only adds to the flame…

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Siren's Call (A Rainshadow Novel) By Jayne Castle Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #308605 in Books
- Published on: 2015-07-28
- Released on: 2015-07-28
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.75" h x 1.00" w x 4.25" l, .39 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 336 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

“Castle...expertly lures readers in with inventive plotting, wit-infused writing, and flawless characterization.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

“A pleasant pas de deux in which a liberated woman meets a dangerous hunk who lusts after both her curves and her cerebrum. Castle adroitly lets the sparks fly in this cozy escapist story.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Perennial favorite Castle continues to dish up stories that are jam-packed with mysterious adventure and—of course—epic romantic thrills. In this series, Castle has also been giving readers heroines whose talents make them the stuff of legends. How the protagonists come to accept each other and their unusual abilities is what makes these futuristic tales such genuinely fun and compelling reads. No one does it better than Castle!”—*RT Book Reviews*

About the Author
Jayne Castle is a pseudonym for Jayne Ann Krentz, the author of more than fifty *New York Times* bestsellers. She writes futuristic romance novels under the Castle name, contemporary romantic suspense novels under the Krentz name, and historical romance novels under the pseudonym Amanda Quick. There are more than 35 million copies of her books in print.

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A Note from Jayne

Welcome back to my other world—Harmony—and another adventure on Rainshadow Island, where everyone has a past. The local inhabitants are good at keeping secrets—their own and those of their neighbors. On Rainshadow you don’t ask too many personal questions. The island has long been a refuge for people who don’t fit in anywhere else.

Those who make their home on the island are also accustomed to dealing with the dangerous mysteries concealed in the ancient underground catacombs and inside the forbidden territory known as the Preserve. Rainshadow, it turns out, was once the site of ancient Alien bioengineering labs. (What could possibly go wrong, hmm?)

The tight-knit community on Rainshadow figures it can handle the monsters, the reverse-engineered dinosaurs, and the deadly legends that seethe just beneath the surface.

The real problems, as usual, are caused by humans.

Chapter 1

It was the wedding of the season and it went off flawlessly—right up until the moment when the bridesmaid announced to the bride, the pastor, and the crowd in the pews that the groom had murdered his first two

wives. . . .

“If anyone knows why this man and this woman should not be married, let him speak now or forever hold his peace,” the pastor intoned.

Ella’s cell phone rang. Everyone grumbled at the breach of good manners, although several people surreptitiously checked their own cell phones to make certain they were switched off.

But Ella dug hers out of the middle of the bouquet where she had concealed it and read the text, her pulse racing.

“Stop the wedding,” she shouted.

All three hundred guests, the bridal attendants, the best man, and the wedding singer stared at her. She focused on the message she had just received and then looked at the bride.

“Karen, you can’t marry him. His real name is Leo Bellamy and he’s wanted for the murder of his first two wives. He’s also wanted for questioning in the murder of another woman, a fiancée.”

Karen Leggett, a delicate blonde draped in yards of white tulle and silver satin, was nearly speechless with shock.

“Ella,” she finally managed. “What is wrong with you? Have you gone crazy?”

Ella moved to stand between Karen and the too-handsome, too-perfect groom. Her senses were heightened and she could see the cold, dark shadows in the dreamlight fields of Bellamy’s aura. She knew a monster when she saw one, and she had known Bellamy for what he was ever since Karen had introduced them a few weeks earlier.

“I sensed that there was something off about you the first time I met you,” she said. “I had a private-investigation agency take a closer look into your background.”

Violent energy spiked in the groom’s aura but his expression was one of calm, compassionate concern. He was a chameleon-talent, Ella reminded herself. He had a talent for deception.

“Karen, your friend is having some sort of nervous breakdown,” he said gently. “Someone should escort her to the emergency room at the nearest para-psych hospital. Perhaps one of our guests will volunteer to assist her.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Ella held up the phone displaying the text message she had just received. “This is from Jones and Jones, Karen. It says that the man you know as Charles Forbes is a chameleon-talent whose real name is Leo Bellamy. He lied to you from the start. Lied to the matchmaking agency, too.”

It was the *Jones & Jones* name that finally penetrated Karen’s state of stunned shock and sparked a wave of low-voiced concern among the wedding guests. Like Ella, Karen and many of those present were members of the Arcane Society. Within Arcane, everyone was aware of the organization’s storied investigation firm.

Unfortunately, Leo Bellamy recognized the agency’s name, too.

“Shit,” he growled.

Before anyone realized that he was not going for the ring, he pulled a small mag-rez pistol out of the pocket

of his tuxedo and grabbed Ella. He put the barrel of the gun to her temple.

“If anyone moves half an inch, the bridesmaid dies,” he shouted to the crowd. “She and I are leaving now. If I see a cop in the rearview mirror, Miss Morgan is dead.”

He edged toward a side door, dragging Ella with him. The pistol never wavered from her head.

The crowd watched in horror.

Bellamy’s arm was around Ella’s throat. She put her fingertips on his bare hand. He ignored the light touch, intent on hauling her through the doorway and out into the parking lot.

Ella pulled hard on her talent. She had physical contact. That was all she needed. The delicate crystal chimes on her bracelet shivered. They weren’t absolutely necessary but they helped her focus.

She began to sing.

It was a silent, psychic song, audible only to Bellamy because he was the focus of her paranormal music. The crashing, soaring chords drew power from the far end of the spectrum. She wove ominous, compelling harmonies that ensnared Bellamy’s dreamlight and pulled him down into the depths.

No man could withstand such violent notes. All of Bellamy’s senses—normal and paranormal—foundered on the rocks of oblivion.

The pistol fell from his limp hand and clattered on the floor. He made a weak attempt to tighten his grip on Ella’s throat but she slipped effortlessly out of his grasp.

He stared at her with eyes that were glazed with the unnatural sleep that was swiftly dragging him under.

She thought she read belated comprehension and horror in his gaze. His mouth opened on a single word spoken so softly that only she could hear.

“Siren.”

In the next instant he crumpled to the floor in a deep coma.

She decided to play it safe and give him a small encore just to make sure that when he woke up—if he woke up—he would not have any clear memories of the bridesmaid he had attempted to use as a hostage.

She crouched beside him and touched his throat as though checking his pulse. The little bells on her bracelet shivered again.

She sang a few more bars, aiming the crushing waves of music at his aura.

Bellamy twitched a couple of times and then lay very still.

• • •

The dramatic ending to the wedding of the season got full media coverage and made the front pages of every newspaper in Crystal City. The police and the medical professionals concluded that Bellamy had suffered from a previously undiagnosed aneurism that had burst under the stress of the moment. The mainstream press focused on the story of the wealthy bride who had almost married a two-time wife-killer.

For the most part everyone forgot about the bridesmaid who had been held hostage for a short time at the altar. That turn of events was fine with the bridesmaid.

Bellamy eventually surfaced from the coma but his senses were severely scrambled. He was deemed incompetent to stand trial and was sent to an asylum for the criminally insane. The para-psych doctors noted in their reports that the patient was obsessed with painting. He worked on his pictures as though consumed by a fever.

All of the images featured the same subject—a woman sitting on rocks that jutted out of a wildly churning sea. In the paintings, the lady on the rocks played an ancient stringed instrument and sang to the drowning sailors who had been summoned to their deaths by her music.

Ella did not breathe a sigh of relief until the media frenzy died down. In the end only the *Curtain*—a notorious tabloid that catered to fans of conspiracy theories, scandals, and assorted exposés about women who claimed to be pregnant with Alien babies—came anywhere close to getting the story right.

WEDDING OF THE SEASON ENDS WITH ARREST OF GROOM

DID A SIREN SING KILLER INTO COMA?

Ella tossed the paper into the recycle bin. Fortunately, very few people took the *Curtain* seriously, and even fewer believed in the Sirens of myth and legend—women who could sing men to their deaths.

• • •

A month after the near-disaster, Karen took Ella out for drinks.

“I don’t know how to repay you, Ella.” Karen picked up her glass of white wine. “The matchmaking agency I used said he was a perfect match. If it hadn’t been for you I probably would have become Dead Wife Number Three. How did you figure out that Bellamy was a chameleon?”

“Jones and Jones came up with that information,” Ella said. “I just knew there was something off so I hired J and J to look into Bellamy’s past.”

“‘Something off’ is putting it mildly.” Karen shuddered. “Bellamy is one of the monsters—the kind of evil talent they write fairy tales about. And to think I nearly married him.”

“You didn’t marry Bellamy, that’s the important thing.”

Karen raised her glass. “Here’s to the next Mr. Right.”

“To Mr. Right.”

“It’s your turn, pal. When are you going to register with a matchmaking agency?”

“Someday.”

“I’m surprised your family isn’t pushing you hard to register.”

“They understand that I’m trying to get a career going first,” Ella said.

“Let’s face it, you’ll never get anywhere if you stay with the Wilson Parsons Talent Agency. Parsons won’t

let you establish a name for yourself. No matter how good you are at dream counseling or how many clients you attract to his firm, he'll always take all the credit."

"Between you and me, I've been thinking about going out on my own. The problem is that the dream counseling business is very competitive, especially at the low end of the market. A lot of people, including a lot of frauds and con artists, think they can analyze dreams. The secret to success is to project an upmarket image and that's expensive, what with rent and advertising costs."

"You can do it," Karen said. "You're good. And as soon as you get established you'll register with a matchmaking agency, right?"

"I'll think about it," Ella said.

And she would think about it—she would think about it a lot. But she would never register.

Registering with a matchmaking agency would mean having to lie on the questionnaires. It would mean lying to the marriage counselors. It would mean lying to a prospective husband. And if she ever did marry, it would mean that she would have to live a lie for the rest of her life.

The last thing she wanted was a marriage based on a lie. She wanted a real marriage, one founded on love and intimacy and passion and all the other things that she would probably never experience up close and personal.

"Thank goodness your intuition was better than mine," Karen said. "More acute than the matchmaking agency's programs, for that matter."

"Just a lucky hunch on my part," Ella said.

She could not tell Karen or anyone else outside her own family the truth—she had recognized the monster for what he was because he had touched her on a few occasions in an effort to charm her. The contact had been fleeting and casual—the light brush of his fingers when he handed her a glass of champagne; his hand under her arm when he assisted her out of a car. But that was all she needed.

No, she would not be registering with a matchmaking agency. There were no fairy-tale endings for women like her. When it came to identifying the monsters, the old saying held true. *It takes one to know one*.

Chapter 2

The Alien music locked in the green quartz walls sang to her senses. Gorgeous notes floated in the paranormal currents. Haunting bells chimed their ethereal harmonies at both ends of the spectrum. The dark thunder and lightning of crashing chords reverberated in the atmosphere.

Ella did her best to ignore the thrilling music in the tunnel walls so that she could concentrate on her driving.

"You know," she said to the dust bunny clinging to the utility sled dashboard, "I'd assumed my first client would be human."

The dust bunny responded with a low, rumbling growl. Not so much a warning or a threat, Ella concluded; more like an urgent plea for speed. Then again, what did she know about dust bunnies? The one perched on the sled's dashboard like a hood ornament was the first one she had ever encountered outside of picture

books and cartoons. Every kid on Harmony had read the tales of *Little Amberina and the Dust Bunny*.

Dust bunnies had a cute mode—hence their popularity in children's literature. When fully fluffed they looked like oversized wads of dryer lint with six little paws and two big, innocent blue eyes. The one on the dashboard of the sled, however, was not even trying to look adorable. She was fully sleeked out and her second set of eyes—the fierce amber ones that were designed for night hunting—were open.

"I'm sorry," Ella said. "I've got the sled rezzed to the max. I can't drive any faster."

They were whipping through the maze of ancient Alien tunnels at a speed that was only a little faster than the average person could run. The sled looked a lot like a golf cart and it moved like one, too. It was powered by a sturdy, but simple, old-fashioned amber-based engine. Low-tech was the only option in the heavy psi-environment that permeated the catacombs and the great subterranean Rainforest. The Underworld had been engineered by the long-vanished Aliens, who had relied on as-yet little understood forms of paranormal energy. Sophisticated human technology such as high-powered engines, computers, and guns either exploded in your hands or simply flatlined in the eerie realms the vanished civilization had created below the surface.

"I really hope you know what we're doing," Ella said. "Because I'm going to owe Pete a big favor once he finds out that I borrowed his sled."

Pete Grimshaw was the proprietor of Pete's Underworld Artifacts, the shop next to her new office in the Old Quarter. A retired ghost hunter, he had closed early that afternoon in order to have a few beers with some old hunter pals.

Ella had opened her little one-person consulting firm—Morgan Dream Counseling—less than a week earlier, but she had already discovered that short workdays and long nights in the local bars was business as usual for Pete. There had been no time to find him and ask permission to take his prospecting sled. The dust bunny that had scampered through her doorway a short time ago had been frantic. You didn't have to be psychic to know when an animal was anxious and desperate.

Ella drove the sled into a large circular chamber and stopped. There were more than half a dozen intersecting tunnels, each glowing with the acid-green energy infused in the quartz that the Aliens had used to construct their underground world. She looked at the dust bunny.

"Which way?" she asked.

She knew the small creature could not comprehend what she was saying, but under the circumstances, she figured her meaning was clear.

The dust bunny faced toward one of the vaulted entrances and bounced up and down, making urgent little noises.

"Got it."

Ella rezzed the sled and drove into the indicated tunnel. The dust bunny did not protest, so she concluded she'd made the right choice.

It had been like this from the moment they had descended into the Underworld and commandeered the sled. Every time they reached an intersection in the maze, the dust bunny chose the tunnel.

Ella glanced at the handful of simple instruments on the dashboard. The signal from the tuned-amber locator was still strong. Her route was clearly charted so she could find her way back. The tunnels were impossible

to navigate without good amber, and Pete, being an old Guild man, was obsessive about keeping the sled's amber tuned. In addition, she had plenty of personal tuned amber on her. There were nuggets in her stud earrings and a nicely carved piece on the pendant that she wore around her neck. She also had another chunk stashed in the heel of her shoe.

Unlike Pete, who often searched for relics in the maze of the Underworld, her day job rarely took her into the catacombs. But the Alien music that sang in green quartz often proved irresistible.

She had learned that she could find a kind of peace in the strange harmonies. On the nights when she knew that she was dwelling too much on the lonely future that awaited her—a future in which she was fated to be always a bridesmaid and never a bride—she sometimes descended into the Underworld and gave herself over to the ethereal music until dawn.

Bright yellow warning lights flickered on one of the locator screens. The sled was nearing an uncharted sector. She wasn't lost yet but she was in danger of driving out of the mapped zone. Even with good amber, that was a dangerous place to be. There were a lot of hazards in the uncleared regions of the underground, most of them fairly lethal.

Now that the initial rush of adrenaline had started to wear off, common sense was flooding back. What was she doing, allowing a dust bunny to lead her deeper and deeper into the tunnels?

Her first thought—the one she had leaned on to rationalize the daring escapade—was that someone was in trouble down below. Children's books were replete with stories of heroic dust bunnies that saved little kids who had been foolish enough to go into the Underworld alone.

Right, she thought. *That would be children's books, as in pure fantasy. Get real.*

But the dust bunny on the dashboard was real.

The yellow lights on the locator screen turned red. That was not good. Ella was on the brink of making the decision to turn around and go back when the hood ornament froze and uttered a forbidding growl.

Ella brought the sled to a halt and looked down a seemingly endless hallway. Vaulted entrances to rooms and chambers loomed on either side of the corridor.

"Okay," she said. "Now what, pal?"

The dust bunny leaped from the dashboard to her shoulder, startling her. The creatures were predators, she reminded herself. There was a saying about dust bunnies: *By the time you see the teeth, it's too late*. Panic flickered through her. If the thing went for her throat she was doomed. . . .

But the dust bunny didn't attack. It made more anxious noises, bounded down off her shoulder, and dashed through the entrance of the nearest chamber.

Ella double-checked her personal amber. Satisfied that she could retreat if necessary, she followed the dust bunny. At the doorway she paused to glance back over her shoulder, making certain that she could still see the sled. The invisible rivers of paranormal energy that flowed through the Underworld played tricks on human senses. Losing visual contact with your transport was not smart.

She went through the opening and stopped short. She was not certain what she had expected to find at the end of the frantic race through the tunnels—an injured prospector or a lost child, perhaps.

The reality was a long workbench, two strange crystal devices that did not look as though they had been designed for human hands, and a row of small steel-and-glass cages. The locks on the cages were old-fashioned padlocks that required keys. High-tech security devices would not function in the paranormal environment.

Each cage contained a sleeked-out, mad-as-green-hell dust bunny. There were six in all. Rage and fear radiated from the trapped creatures. They watched her with suspicious eyes, not certain if she was friend or tormentor.

She took in the situation at once. Outrage flashed through her. The crystal relics on the workbench were the telling clues. Someone had discovered a couple of Alien weapons and was planning to run a few field tests using the dust bunnies as targets.

“Bastard,” she whispered.

The dust bunny that had come to her for help dashed frantically back and forth across the room, chattering anxiously.

“I’ll do my best,” Ella said. “There’s probably a hammer in the sled’s tool kit but I don’t think it will work. That glass looks like the kind they use in banks and shark tanks. But lucky for your buddies, it’s still just glass. People like me are good with glass.”

The dust bunny chittered and dashed around her ankles.

“Okay, okay, give me a minute.”

She went to the first cage in the row and flattened one hand on the front panel. Gently she rezzed her talent, searching for the right frequency. The tiny bells on her bracelet shivered.

“Got it,” she said to the dust bunny.

She focused on the cage.

You had to be careful working with glass. It was a unique substance in terms of para-physics because it possessed the properties of both a solid and a liquid.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I know what I’m doing. I broke a lot of Mom’s best crystal stemware when I first came into my talent.”

The dust bunny stood on its hind paws and quivered. All four eyes were open very wide.

“And just how did you know that I could help?” Ella asked softly. “What are you? Psychic?”

The faint tinkling of the bracelet’s bells grew louder and more resonant.

For a moment there was no visual evidence of the effects of the destabilizing energy, but Ella sensed that the internal structure of the glass panel was weakening.

A couple of seconds later the entire front of the cage dissolved into a pool of liquid crystals.

“Just like melting a Popsicle,” Ella said. “Easy-peasy. But I’m a professional. Don’t try this at home.”

Great. Now she was talking to animals.

The freed dust bunny chittered madly and bounded down to the floor. Ella moved on to the next cage. Now that she had the frequency it was easy to melt the glass. The process went smoothly and swiftly.

A couple of minutes later the last of the dust bunnies was free. They chortled at each other and at Ella. She got the impression they were grateful, but they did not show any inclination to hang around. All but one dashed to the doorway and promptly vanished out into the tunnels.

Ella recognized the one remaining dust bunny as her client.

“Don’t worry about my fee,” she said. “It’s probably good karma to open a new business with a little pro-bono work. Now, you’ll have to excuse me. I need to get back to the surface to make a phone call. The Guild and the FBPI will be interested in whatever is going on here. Looks like you and your pals got caught up in some black market Alien-tech dealing. The authorities frown on that sort of thing.”

The dust bunny chortled cheerfully and dashed away through the door. Ella crossed to the workbench and considered her next move. The question that confronted her was whether she should collect the two crystal weapons and take them back to the surface or leave them where they were.

The relics constituted evidence, but if she left them at the scene there was a real risk that the arms dealer would return before either the Guild or the Federal Bureau of Psi Investigation arrived. As soon as the dealer spotted the melted cages he would know his lair had been discovered. He would grab the artifacts and run.

On the other hand, if she showed up on the surface with two Alien weapons worth a fortune in the illicit underground market, there would be a lot of questions to answer. Somehow, she did not think either the Guild or the FBPI would buy a story involving a bunch of imprisoned dust bunnies. She could easily come off looking delusional at best. If things really went down the dust bunny hole, she might get arrested for possession of illegal Alien tech.

As the proprietor of a new dream counseling business, the last thing she needed was a lot of unpleasant publicity. Bad press would lead potential clients to conclude that they should take their business elsewhere—say, the Wilson Parsons Talent Agency, for example.

Discretion was a prime virtue in her profession. Dreams were intensely personal matters and those who sought her services would want to keep them that way—personal. No one wanted an analyst who was known to report stuff to law enforcement.

Just having her name linked to the FBPI could prove disastrous. She had caught a break at Karen’s wedding when the authorities concluded that Leo Bellamy had suffered a burst aneurism. She might not be so lucky in a second encounter with the forces of law and order.

She studied the devices. Each was gracefully curved and about the size of a man’s hand. Like a lot of Alien relics, they looked like works of abstract art. The crystal was faintly green in color and utterly transparent. There was no chamber for bullets or any other sort of projectile, but she was certain that the artifacts were weapons. She could hear the music locked inside. Amid the harmonies that emanated from the green quartz chamber she could discern the darker notes that spoke of power and destruction.

Dread mingled with fascination. She had been able to detect Alien music since she had first come into her talent in her early teens, but she had never heard songs like these—songs of senses-dazzling chaos.

The thing about Alien machines was that very few people, including her, could activate them. She could *hear* the music in artifacts and she could generate counterpoint melodies, but she could not focus the power in the relics.

As Pete often said, it was a damn good thing that only a small number of highly specialized talents could channel Alien tech. There was no telling what sort of destructive forces might be unleashed accidentally or intentionally if an Alien weapon fell into the hands of someone who could unlock and focus the energy inside.

That fact, however, did not lessen the value of the relics on the black market. According to Pete, it actually made the artifacts all the more attractive to a certain category of obsessive collectors that included dangerous eccentrics, cult leaders, and mob bosses—not to mention the government.

Mere rumors of the discovery of an artifact that might be an example of Alien technology intrigued conspiracy theorists and others who lived paranoid lives on the fringe. Many were convinced that the government and its corporate contractors had already discovered some truly bizarre Alien machines and were busily conducting experiments on them in secret labs. The *Curtain* was filled with such stories every week.

Not that she read the *Curtain*—at least not in public.

She decided to leave the weapons where they were. Better that they disappear than that she be caught with them. She would go back to the surface and make a couple of discreet, anonymous phone calls to the FBPI.

“Well, isn’t this interesting. Who are you and how the hell did you find my little workshop?”

Chapter 3

The sharp masculine voice came from the entrance of the chamber. Panic flashed through her. She whirled around so quickly that she nearly lost her balance. Reflexively, she grabbed the edge of the workbench to steady herself.

A tall, distinguished man walked a few steps into the chamber and stopped. He assessed her with cold gray eyes. Everything about him, from his elegantly cut hair to his designer trousers, was smooth, polished, and sophisticated—everything except the flamer in his hand.

Her first irrational thought was that he didn’t look like a man who dealt illegal Alien tech. But with her talent flaring she could see the dreamlight energy in his aura and it told her the truth. The man was prepared to commit cold-blooded murder if necessary. Selling hot tech on the side would not be a problem for him.

“Who are you?” she asked, trying to establish some control.

“Allow me to introduce myself. Thomas Vickary.” He gave a short, mocking inclination of his head. “Maybe you’ve heard of me?”

“No. Why would I . . .” A belated jolt of disbelief shot through her. “Wait. You’re not going to tell me you’re Vickary of the Vickary Gallery.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Good grief. You’re one of the most respected antiquities dealers in the city-state.”

He raised his brows. “And you are?”

“Why should I give you my name?”

“One reason that comes to mind is that I’ll send you on a walkabout of the catacombs minus your amber if you don’t answer my questions.”

He had as much as told her that he would kill her if she did not give him answers. But she was very certain that he had no intention of allowing her to return to the surface alive under any circumstances. A man who was dealing dangerous relics like those on the workbench could not afford to let her live. She knew who he was and she knew his secrets. Those secrets could get him locked up for years in a federal prison.

She folded her arms and tried to appear calm and in command. “You were planning to test these devices on a bunch of innocent little dust bunnies. How many did you kill before I got here?”

“None, actually.” Vickary grimaced. “The little rats are damned hard to catch and even harder to keep inside a cage. The first batch escaped. I finally had to go with the glass reptile cages and some serious, old-fashioned padlocks, the kind that require a key.” He studied the cages. “What did you use on the glass, by the way? It was supposed to be shatterproof.”

She ignored the question. “How did you catch the dust bunnies?”

“That part wasn’t so hard. I put out some pizza laced with a heavy-duty sleeping drug in the tunnels beneath my shop.”

“Why did you choose dust bunnies for your horrible experiments?”

“Isn’t it obvious? They can survive in the catacombs. The animals from the Rainforest don’t last long outside that ecosphere, and the energy down here makes surface animals act in highly unpredictable ways. Even rats don’t venture down into the Underworld.” Vickary smiled a thin, humorless smile. “But I’m sure you know that. Common knowledge.”

“I’ll bet the FBPI is closing in on you as we speak. I made a phone call before I came here. You’d better run while you can.”

It sounded weak, even to her.

“No.” Vickary shook his head with grave certainty. “You didn’t call anyone. If you had, the FBPI or the Guild would have arrived by now. They sure as hell wouldn’t have allowed you to come here on your own. Which brings me back to my questions. How did you find this chamber and what the hell did you do to my glass cages?”

“You’re going to kill me regardless. I can see it in your—” She stopped herself before she blurted out the word *aura*. “In your eyes.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic. I just want answers.”

“Liar,” Ella said. But she said it very quietly because she was focusing her talent, getting ready to sing, and that required concentration.

Normally, she needed physical contact to manipulate the dream currents in a person’s aura with psychic music, but down in the psi-hot tunnels almost anything could serve as a conductor of paranormal energy,

including the glowing quartz walls and the floor on which she and Vickary stood.

“You want to know how I melted the glass cages?” she asked softly. “I’ll show you.”

A sudden chittering sounded from the doorway, breaking her concentration. Her dust bunny client had returned. It sleeked out, showing all four eyes, six paws, and a lot of teeth, and leaped at Vickary’s trouser leg, scampering up toward his throat.

“Shit,” Vickary yelled. Caught off guard, he instinctively jumped back, swiping wildly at the dust bunny with the flamer.

The dust bunny narrowly avoided the weapon and vaulted nimbly to the floor. Vickary aimed the flamer at it and rezzed the trigger.

“No,” Ella shouted, horrified.

The dust bunny made it safely out through the doorway just before a volt of fire seared the atmosphere over its head.

Ella pulled hard on her talent and focused again on Vickary’s aura. The bells on her bracelet shivered with the dark music of endless sleep. Energy burned between her and her target, traveling through the psi-infused quartz floor like electricity through water or a wire.

Vickary jerked violently when the full force of her song slashed through his aura, overwhelming the dreamlight currents in powerful waves of darkness.

His mouth opened. He stared at her with shocked eyes. “What the hell are you doing?”

He could barely get the words out. His eyes started to roll back in his head.

He tried to retreat, staggering backward, but as long as his feet were in contact with the floor there was no escape. The thin leather soles of his designer shoes blunted some of the hot energy she was directing into his aura but they were not a significant barrier.

Infuriated by the attack on the dust bunny, Ella hurled wave after wave of fierce energy at her target, drowning Vickary’s dreamlight in irresistible songs of oblivion.

The results were devastating. Dreamlight was, after all, the conduit between the normal and the paranormal. Any assault on those currents had serious repercussions on all of the senses.

Vickary tried to rez the flamer but he could not summon the energy. The weapon fell from his nerveless hand. He crumpled to his knees.

“No,” he whispered. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you a private concert,” Ella said.

He managed to lift his head one last time. He stared at her, horror and comprehension sparking briefly in his dazed eyes.

“Siren,” he whispered.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Impossible.” Vickary folded up and collapsed on the floor. His eyes closed. “You don’t exist.”

He sprawled on the green stone, unconscious.

Ella abruptly cut her talent. She stared at the stricken figure on the floor.

“I get that a lot,” she said.

That was not, strictly speaking, true. The exact nature of her talent was a deep, dark family secret, the kind of secret that could destroy her career as a dream consultant and put her on an FBPI watch list.

But she had just sung a very powerful song and she was buzzed. Her voice was shivering and so was she. It wasn’t panic or fear that was causing the reaction now—her inner Siren was flying. Using her talent at full power had that effect. It unleashed a volatile cocktail of bio-psi chemicals. Later she would pay a price for such a heavy expenditure of psychic energy, but for now she was definitely in high-rez mode.

The dust bunny reappeared in the doorway, still sleeked out. Ella laughed. “Are we a great team or what?”

The dust bunny fluffed up and chortled.

“Right.” Ella took a deep breath and pulled her dazzled senses together. “Okay, I need to act like a responsible citizen now.”

She crouched beside Vickary to check for a pulse, more than a little afraid of what she would discover. She was not certain of her control when she was pulling the darker harmonies. The problem was that it was impossible to practice without putting someone at risk. She had nearly killed Leo Bellamy, and a few weeks ago she’d put a Wilson Parsons client into a deep sleep that had lasted nearly two days. The client had survived and recovered with no clear memory of the events leading up to his unexpectedly long nap, but if she accidentally murdered a leading antiquities dealer, her life might get very complicated, very fast.

It occurred to her that this was the third time she had used her talent to such devastating effect in the past few months.

“Getting to be a bad habit,” she said to the dust bunny.

She breathed a small sigh of relief when she discovered Vickary’s pulse. It was slow, indicating a state of deep unconsciousness, but it was detectable. The depth of his dreamstate was a good thing, she told herself. The odds were excellent that he would not remember her, at least not with any clarity. She would become a fragment of a dream to him.

She rose, stepped back quickly, and looked at the dust bunny.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m getting out of here,” she said. “The last thing I need is to get caught in a room full of Alien tech with this guy.”

“Too late.” The voice from the doorway was male and freighted with the kind of power and authority that usually was accompanied by a badge and a mag-rez gun. “It looks like you do have a room full of Alien tech and a body to explain.”

Chapter 4

She stared at the man in the doorway, stunned. His collar-length, night-dark hair was brushed straight back from a sharp widow's peak on his high forehead. He had a hard profile, a lean, tough, broad-shouldered build, and a raptor's eyes. But it was the invisible shock wave of dark energy that infused the atmosphere around him that riveted her senses. It was as if he had brought an invisible thunderstorm into the chamber.

The sound of bells clashing discordantly made her realize that her talent was still sparking and flaring, no doubt intensifying the impact the newcomer was making on her overheated senses.

Deliberately, she reined in her talent. Not much changed. The man in the doorway remained a force of nature with the power to dazzle her senses.

Get a grip. You're still riding the rush. You need to settle down and think clearly. He might be working for the good guys, but that did not make him any less dangerous.

Ella heard a small chortle. She glanced down just in time to see the dust bunny vanish out into the hall. She was on her own.

She looked at the man in the doorway.

He held a flamer somewhat too casually in his right hand. It was the easy, sure grip of someone who'd had a lot of experience with the weapon.

She finally managed to breathe. "Let me guess—you're Vickary's client?"

"Not exactly." He flashed a badge with his free hand. "Rafe Coppersmith, consultant for the FBPI and Guild task force that has been planning to take down Vickary's operation for the past five months."

So much for making a couple of discreet, anonymous phone calls to the authorities.

She cleared her throat. "I can explain this situation."

"That will be interesting. Who are you?"

"Ella Morgan. I'm just a dream counselor. I'm not running Alien tech. I'm not involved in this operation, I swear it."

"You can explain the rest later. One thing I do know, you're not the client Vickary was expecting today, so we need to get you out of here before he arrives. Go. Now."

He glided into the room and moved the flamer in a small arc, urging her toward the corridor.

As a rule she was not big on taking orders, but in this instance there did not seem to be any reason to refuse. She started toward the door.

But it was too late. Three men barred her path. One was dressed in an expensively tailored business suit. He would have looked like any other high-powered executive if it were not for the two men at his side. They were built like bulldozers and their eyes were pitiless.

Enforcers, Ella thought. The one in the business suit was no doubt the boss.

“Trent,” Rafe said. “Fancy meeting you here. I’m afraid there’s been a change of plans.”

Trent glanced down at Vickary and then looked at Rafe. “Who the hell are you?”

“Let’s just say that I’m taking Vickary’s place. Are you still in the market for Alien tech?”

Ella realized that Rafe was improvising. He was literally making up the script on the fly.

“Depends.” Trent looked at Ella. “Who is she?”

“My assistant,” Rafe said without missing a beat.

“Yeah?” Trent looked amused. “What kind of assistant would she be?”

“She does odd jobs for me,” Rafe said. He smiled a knife-sharp smile. “Like taking care of Vickary, for example.”

Ella froze. Rafe had just told a mob boss that she was his personal hit woman. Visions of her future as a top-flight dream counselor were going to go up in smoke if the situation did not improve.

Trent raised his brows and gave Ella an appraising look, one that held a measure of curiosity as well as a hint of respect. “You’re that good at assisting?”

Ella shot Rafe a veiled glance. She had no idea where the script was going, but it was clear he had just given her a part to play.

“I’m very, very good,” she said with what she hoped was the right degree of professional-hit-woman cool. After all, she reminded herself, it wasn’t as if she didn’t have a talent that would have taken her far in that particular field—assuming she had been a total sociopath.

In spite of her best efforts, she knew she hadn’t done a terrific acting job because one of the enforcers snorted in disbelief. But the other one contemplated Vickary’s prone body with a thoughtful expression. When he turned back she thought she saw a little wariness in his eyes.

“You want to go through with the buy or not, Trent?” Rafe asked. “Because if you’re no longer interested, I’ve got a long list of clients who will be happy to take your place.”

“I definitely want the artifacts,” Trent said. He gave Rafe a considering look. “I was hoping to establish a long-term business arrangement with Vickary but it looks like he’s out of the picture. And as it happens, I’m not in the mood to negotiate.” He spoke to the enforcers without looking at either of them. “Burn ’em and dump ’em in the tunnels.”

The thugs responded immediately. Two violent balls of green energy coalesced in the chamber, charging the atmosphere. Ella’s hair was suddenly standing on end.

Ghost fire. The small storms of lethal energy that drifted randomly through the catacombs were one of the many hazards underground. There was nothing supernatural about them. They weren’t real ghosts. But the early settlers had bestowed the nickname on them two hundred years before and it had stuck.

The technical name was UDEM: Unstable Dissonance Energy Manifestation. Only those with a unique talent could summon a ghost or control it. Flamers were useless against a UDEM.

Ella watched Rafe, hoping for direction. He looked bored.

“You’re an idiot, Trent,” he said. “We both know you can’t work those relics.”

Something akin to lust flashed in Trent’s eyes. “Maybe not, but I’ve got the kind of money and connections that will allow me to buy the talent I need.” He moved one hand in a slicing motion. “Burn ’em. Now.”

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