WAKING UP IN VEGAS

An InCryptid Story
Waking Up in Vegas

by

Seanan McGuire
"In most regards, Alice Healy is an incredibly bright woman. This doesn't change the fact that I had to propose three times before she noticed. I suppose I should have covered myself in ichor or something first, just to get her attention."
--Thomas Price

*Heading into Las Vegas, Nevada*

*Now*

We arrived in Vegas accompanied by the cheers of the Aeslin mice and the dulcet tones of Johnny Cash. Dominic was glaring at the radio rather than at the mice, which I took as a personal victory. He had become so inured to the local level of weirdness that he no longer noticed it. That showed adaptability. (At least, that was how I was choosing to interpret it. Another, equally valid interpretation was that after spending months trapped in a U-Haul with me, the mice, and the radio, he had finally identified the radio as the safest thing to be annoyed at. Either way, he was learning. That said great things about his chances of survival.)

"Why would you shoot a man just to watch him die?" he demanded. "If you shoot a man, it should be because you want that man dead. Shooting him simply to see what happens is a waste of both bullets and a good opponent. It makes no sense."

"I can't tell whether you're messing with me right now, or whether the Covenant never allowed you to listen to popular music," I said, switching lanes to allow a convertible full of screaming college students to go blazing past. One of them was waving her bra around in the air. She was going to be sorry when it got caught on something and ripped out of her hands; that thing looked like it had probably been expensive. Then again, when kids that young were in a car that expensive, it was a fair bet that someone else was paying the credit card bills.

I shook my head, snorting in derision. Those "kids" were probably only a few years younger than I was. What right did I have to judge them?

Dominic gave me a wounded look. "I've heard plenty of music, thank you," he said. "I simply fail to see where shooting a man in Reno is a good way to spend an afternoon, unless he did something to deserve it, in which case you wouldn't be shooting him just to watch him die. You'd be shooting him to avenge your father, or restore your family honor, or whatever.""

"Sorry," I said. "I was snorting at that car that just passed us."

Dominic turned to look down the road. "Ah," he said, after a moment. "I believe the driver is already quite drunk. They're probably going to hit something. Hopefully they're all inebriated enough to go limp upon impact."

I laughed. I couldn't help it, even if I felt bad about it immediately afterward. "Yeah, probably," I said. "I was just thinking it must be nice to be that carefree. I don't think I ever have been, you know? Except for maybe when I was dancing." I forgot everything, when I danced. The world dropped away, and it was just me, the music, and whatever steps the choreographer had drilled into my thick skull. Responsibility was always there, though, waiting to crash back down on me the second the music stopped. None of my reprieves had ever been able to last.

"At least you had the dance," said Dominic gently. "I think that may be the greatest difference between us. We both served something greater than ourselves from the day that we were born. We might have been soldiers on opposite sides of the war, but we were still fighting on the same field. You had your dancing, and parents who cared that you have something more. I had the fight."
"And here I thought I felt bad for judging those kids for driving fast and having a good time." I sighed again. "I'm messing everything up today."

"Yet you didn't shoot a man just to watch him die, so you're doing better than the man on the radio." Johnny Cash had long since been replaced by Taylor Swift, who was belting out a song about fairy tale romances and white horses and all the other Disney trappings of her early career.

I leaned over and turned the radio off. The mice made a disappointed noise, but didn't argue. They had long since learned not to fight when I decided that it was time for a little peace and quiet. Arguments always seemed to end with them being banished to the back of the truck, where they couldn't hear the radio or whatever it was we happened to be talking about. Nothing was more dismaying to an Aeslin mouse than being cut off from their gods.

(Well. Being eaten by a snake or something would presumably be more dismaying, and also more fatal. But on average, they were usually dismayed by being put in another room, not having cheese, not having cake, or all of the above. Sometimes I really envied the Aeslin mice.)

"I guess I'm nervous," I said.

Dominic smiled a little. "I can't imagine why," he said, before turning to look at the city skyline ahead of us. "So this is Las Vegas."

"Yup."

"I have never actually wanted to go to Las Vegas."

"I can't imagine why." Las Vegas was the only city in North America known to have successfully repelled a Covenant purge. The Covenant had come in the way they always did, guns blazing, armored in misguided righteousness, and Las Vegas had sent them running home to their mommies. North America had a lot of desert-dwelling cryptid species, and they'd had a long time of watching the Covenant pick at the coasts. They had been prepared for what was coming.

Dominic grimaced. "Again, remember that you and I learned very different sides of history. You probably view the siege of Las Vegas as a great victory for good. Whereas I learned it as a tragic loss of life."

"The Covenant attacked the cryptid community of Las Vegas. They were only defending themselves."

"Believe me, I know," said Dominic. "I don't blame them for fighting back. Oddly, I didn't blame them even before I met you--that was one of the times when it was quite clear that we had overstepped our bounds."

I wanted to ask him how that case had been different from all the others, all the times the Covenant had swept in and murdered innocent people for the crime of not being human. I kept my mouth shut. Dominic was atoning for his past every day, and the crimes of the Covenant weren't his responsibility anymore. Only the crimes he'd committed with his own two hands. I wasn't going to go digging too hard at the things he'd buried in his past, and not only because I wasn't sure I'd like what I found there. I loved him. I knew what he was and where he'd come from, and I loved him. That had to be enough.

Not just for me. Most of our slow road trip across the United States had been designed to make sure that he knew what I was, where I had come from. A trip that should have taken days had taken months. Every time we'd come too close to committing ourselves to the final drive home to Portland, I had managed to come up with another excuse, another place we just had to visit. New Orleans, Chicago,
even Buckley Township, they were all monuments to the history of my family. They were the places that had constructed us, one brick at a time, and if Dominic was in it for the long haul, he needed to understand them.

We needed to understand each other. If we could do that, we could make this work.

"So where are we to stay this time?" he asked. "Another secret hotel, owned by cryptids and hidden from the rest of the world? Another family home you haven't told me about?"

"A place called the Golden Oasis Hotel and Casino, actually," I said. "It's about three blocks off the strip, you get free cable with your room, and almost no one has ever been murdered there, even when they probably deserved it."

Dominic gave me a sidelong look, clearly trying to figure out whether I was kidding. The mice started cheering again, and the head priest of my splinter colony sealed the deal by beginning to sing the praises of the Golden Oasis.

"Hail! Hail to the room service menu of wings and mozzarella sticks! Hail to the two hundred and thirty-seven channels! Oh, greatest of rejoicing, for this is the hotel of High-Wattage Exterior Lighting, attracting such delights from out the desert wastes! Hail!"

"HAIL!" agreed the rest of the mice.

"Last time we were there, the lights attracted so many bugs that the bugs attracted a Gila monster," I said, shifting over another lane. Our exit was approaching. "The mice made like, thirty little mouse suitcases out of the thing. It was impressive. And gross. Impressively gross. Be glad you didn't know me yet."

"We still possess the suitcases," squeaked the mouse priest proudly. "If another mighty lizard presents itself, we shall make more."

"How nice for you," said Dominic. He glanced at me. "Am I to assume that this is one of the establishments where renting a separate room for the mice would be frowned upon by the management?"

"Sadly, yes," I said. "We used to try it. But the maids would report the untouched room to the front desk in the morning, and we had an incident where they decided to double-dip, and rented the room the mice were in to a nice couple from Des Moines. I guess they figured they could get paid twice, and no one would know."

"Truly, there was much screaming upon that day," said the mouse priest philosophically.

"I can understand why," said Dominic. He looked a little pained. I leaned over and squeezed his knee.

"Don't worry," I said. "We'll have privacy soon, and we can always do the whole honeymoon thing after we've dropped the mice off at home."

"At home, with your mother and father and younger sister."

"Yes."

"Who will absolutely not have any issue whatsoever with your having run off to get married to a man they've never met, and will gladly take the mice and wave us on our way, rather than holding us there for extensive questioning."
"Y--wait." I gave him a sidelong look. "You're making fun of me now."

"A little bit, yes," said Dominic. He smiled. "I don't care if we have a honeymoon or a five-minute break before the next horrific adventure begins and we have to go back to running for our lives. I'm going to marry you. That's not something I ever thought I'd get to do."

"What, marry me? Honey, the writing was on the wall from the first time I stripped naked in front of you--which was what, the second time we met?"

"Marry anyone I was actually fond of," Dominic shook his head. "The Covenant has a very careful plan for marriages and reproduction. I'm the last of the De Lucas. I was going to be lucky if I met my wife before the wedding."

"Sometimes I wonder why it took you so long to run away."

"To be honest, sometimes, so do I."

Calling ahead was never necessary at the Golden Oasis. With Yelp reviews ranging from unfavorable to downright cruel and rooms that made the Motel 6 on the Strip look classy, they hadn't lit the "No Vacancy" sign in the last decade. I parked the U-Haul and left Dominic to watch the mice while I talked to the desk clerk.

Reservations might not have been necessary, but sometimes it was still possible to get lucky. I stepped outside fifteen minutes later, turning my face up toward the hot desert sun, and smiled. Then I sauntered over to where Dominic was wrestling our suitcases out of the truck, putting a little extra sway in my step, and purred, "Who likes privacy?"

"Everyone who isn't looking for an alibi," he replied, somewhat warily. Again, the boy was a fast learner. "Why?"

"Because while I can't rent two rooms with any reasonable expectation that the mice will be left alone, I was able to rent the only high-roller suite at the Golden Oasis, largely because they haven't had a high-roller since sometime in the mid-Seventies." I held up the not-so-coveted golden key with all the pride of an Olympic medalist. "Separate dining and sleeping areas in the same hotel room. The mice sleep in one, we celebrate our marriage in the other."

"You are a genius of lodging," said Dominic. He leaned over to press a kiss to my cheek. "Now let's get to the room before someone notices that our luggage is cheering."

I leaned back and beamed at him. "This is Vegas. If anyone hears it, they'll just assume it's the latest thing from Japan." I stepped away from and picked up my suitcase all the same. The case rewarded me with a fresh volley of cheering. There was no force in the world that could stop an Aeslin mouse from rejoicing when they felt the time was appropriate--and they always felt the time was appropriate.

The high-roller suite of the Golden Oasis was up on the third floor of the hotel. Barely off the ground for most of the big hotels in Vegas, but the tippy-top of ours. Our golden key unlocked the door of a room that looked like it hadn't been redecorated in thirty years, from the cream shag carpet to the gaudy orange and red diamond pattern of the wallpaper. The bedroom wasn't much better; while the bed was enormous, the ceiling above it was mirrored, and there was a Jacuzzi tub surrounded by poorly-grouted tile in one corner. I blinked at it, nonplussed.
"There's also a shower in the bathroom," reported Dominic.

"That's nice," I said, snapping back to life. I waded through the thick carpet to the couch, where I unzipped my suitcase. Mice came pouring out. "Okay, guys, ground rules for the new place. You may go hunting after dark, but try not to be seen. You may not visit the hotel kitchen. You may not visit the casino. It's so dark in there that nobody's going to notice you. You may not go any further outside the hotel. Two of you will be allowed to come and witness our marriage. Work it out amongst yourselves. If my parents call the hotel," which was always a risk; we generally stayed at the Golden Oasis when we were passing through Vegas, and my folks knew, roughly, where I was supposed to be right now, "you may not tell them that I'm getting married. Are there any questions?"

There were no questions. Just cheering. That was a relief.

I turned to Dominic. "Okay. I want to grab a shower and drag a brush through my hair. You should freshen up, but not too much. You want to look bad for your passport photo."

He raised an eyebrow. "Care to explain that statement?"

"I warned you. To get married, you're going to need ID. To do anything, you're going to need ID, because Dominic De Luca died in Manhattan. 'Price' is a common enough surname that I can use it on our marriage license, but if a Price happens to marry a De Luca..."

"Flags will be sent up, alarms will be triggered, and the Covenant will fall upon our heads like the avenging hand of God," said Dominic, a look of slow realization dawning on his face. "So we go today to make a new man of me?"

"Not too much of a new man. I'm pretty damn fond of the old one." I kissed his cheek. It wasn't enough to make up for the trauma of being told that he had to give up the only name he'd ever known, but it was what I had to offer. "Pick a shirt you don't mind being photographed in, and I'll see you in about twenty minutes."

Then I walked away. Giving him some space seemed like the best option. He'd been an exile from the Covenant since the moment he chose me over them: they thought he was dead, and we needed to keep it that way. But De Luca was his family name. It was the name his parents had taken with them to their graves. Losing it, even just on paper, was going to sting, and I needed to remember that. What's more, I needed to remember that if he balked, if he was unhappy, it wasn't because he regretted his choices: it was because every choice came with consequences, and sometimes those consequences hurt. That was all.

The water pressure in the shower was good. I took my time scrubbing every inch of myself clean, and shampooed my hair twice, washing away the last of the grime from our long drive. All I needed was a dance floor and a pounding beat, and I might start feeling like myself again.

I had to settle for glitter eyeliner and lip gloss. Not as good, but there's a time and a place for self-indulgence, and sadly, this was neither. By the time I walked out of the bathroom, Dominic was standing awkwardly next to the couch, his hair freshly combed, wearing a plain white button-up shirt that made him look like he was getting ready to audition for The Book of Mormon. His expression was somewhere between resignation and dismay. This was all really happening.

I walked toward him, holding out my hands. "Life sure does move fast sometimes, huh?" I asked, as gently as I could.

He took them. "Life, with you, moves like a roller coaster that has lost its brakes. We'll either careen off
a cliff or have the most amazing adventure imaginable, and I'm honestly not sure which."

"At least we're finding out together."

His smile was enough to reassure me, one more time, that we were doing the right thing. "Yes."

I looked over my shoulder. "Don't destroy anything while we're out," I called, to the seemingly empty room. "And if you do, try to make sure you don't get caught."

A mouse cheered from behind the dresser. I hooked my arm through Dominic's and led him out of our hotel room, back into the heat of the Las Vegas afternoon.

We did not take the U-Haul. Walking in Vegas might suck--sure, it was a dry heat, but dry heat can still leave your desiccated corpse to mummify gently in the gutter--and yet it was still better than rolling up to a pawn shop-slash-forgery depot in a truck that had been basically designed to be a rolling advertisement. Besides, it was only a mile. We needed to stretch our legs.

By the time we were halfway there, we no longer needed to stretch our legs. I was grateful that I hadn't bothered blow-drying my hair: as it was, I was probably going to need a deep conditioner to replace all the moisture that the desert air had stolen. I ran a hand through it. It fell limply back to lie against my scalp, too dried out to even frizz.

"I've never been to...where your family lives," said Dominic. I noticed how carefully he avoided saying the word "Portland," as if we might be under surveillance. That was a good habit to be in. It was nice to know that for once, I was bringing home a boy my parents wouldn't need to teach about basic security.

Really, it was nice to know that I was bringing home a boy at all. Everything else was sort of secondary.

"True," I said. "You haven't."

"Please, for the love of all that is holy, tell me that the weather is not like this."

He sounded so petulant that it was all I could do not to laugh at him. Instead, I patted his arm, only wincing a little from the need to touch another human heat source when I didn't even want to be touching myself, and said, "No, not even remotely. It rains most of the time. People move away because they don't want to get moldy. Your beloved leather duster will be the very height of pretentious fashion. Hipsters may follow you down the street, cooing and asking where you got it."

Dominic snorted, but he didn't look displeased by my answer. We kept walking.

Right about when I decided we were taking a taxi back to the Golden Oasis, we turned a corner and found ourselves facing Big Al's Pawn Shop, Slots, and Notary Services. I relaxed a little. "We're here."

"Here?" Dominic eyed the pawn shop. "Is 'here' strictly sanitary?"

"Nope." I started for the door. "Not sanitary, not safe, and totally awesome." The front window was full of knives, some practical, some so ornate that they wouldn't be appropriate anywhere outside of a science fiction convention. A few of them would definitely be accompanying me back to the hotel. I could call it a wedding present to myself, and besides, it wasn't like it was possible to have too many knives.
Dominic followed my gaze and shook his head fondly before pushing open the pawn shop door. A small bell rang somewhere in the blessedly air-conditioned gloom. There were no other customers. There weren't even visible staffers; the space behind the counter was empty of clerk, although it was packed full of shoeboxes and mannequins and leaning sports equipment. Someone had even pawned what looked like a full-sized horseman's glaive, which made my fingers itch with acquisitive lust. The fact that I had nowhere to put it seemed somehow much less important than the idea of having it.

The rest of the shop was equally cluttered, packed with statuary, old appliances, racks of fur coats and leather jackets, and anything else that could reasonably be expected to pawn for a decent price. Some of the things were new, recent arrivals, their owners no doubt still in Vegas, pumping quarters into a one-armed bandit and trusting their fortunes to turn around at any moment. Others were old enough to have acquired a thin patina of dust, slowly sinking into the background noise of the pawn shop. The air smelled of a thousand warring perfumes, none of them expensive, all of them flavored with cigarette smoke and stale beer.

"Charming," said Dominic.

"It's not much, but it pays the bills, and hey, I provide an important public service." Al emerged from the beaded curtain behind the counter, setting the plastic strands dancing. He was a mountain of a man, with the build of a former wrestler and the belly of a championship eater. Both impressions were accurate. For all that he hadn't seen the inside of a ring since before I was born, he was still light on his feet, and he moved along the narrow channel through the clutter like it had been made for him.

I grinned. "Hi, Al."

"Wait. Wait-wait-wait. Senility has finally come crashing down on this old man like a flying piledriver, because I could have sworn I just heard little Verity's voice coming out of this blonde chick in front of me, and that's not possible, because little Verity is still in elementary school."

My grin widened. "Hi, Uncle Al."

"Very!" He spread his arms, lumbering forward to sweep me into an embrace. Dominic had the good sense to get out of the way, which was probably the only thing that saved him from being swept up. Al's hugs were all-encompassing, and had won him several title bouts back when he still wrestled. "I knew you wouldn't forget me until the reading of the will! Not like your ungrateful siblings, feh, see if they inherit anything worth having when I'm gone."

"You're never going to die. You're going to live forever, and when Death shows up to collect you, you're going to convince him to pawn his scythe." I squirmed a little. He let me go. I stepped back, out of easy hugging range, and took Dominic's hand. "I need papers. I have money."

Al raised an eyebrow, looking from our joined hands to Dominic's face. Then he crossed his arms, and said, "Speak, boy."

"Woof," said Dominic dryly. "A pleasure to meet you, sir."

"What are you, Sicilian?"

"Italian, originally," said Dominic. "I was raised there until I was ten, and then moved to England for the remainder of my education and upbringing."

"Which gives you a messed-up accent and gives me a problem," said Al. "Nobody's going to buy your boy as American-born, Very. He even stands foreign. With his coloring, I could pass him off as
Mexican if he were from Spain, but that's not going to work here. What kind of papers do you need?"

"Full set," I said. "Passport, birth certificate, green card, all the way down the line to citizenship."

Al snorted. "You fucking him? No offense, boy, I'm sure she's an excellent lay."

"Some taken, I think," said Dominic. There was a dangerous note in his voice. I found myself suddenly glad that I hadn't told Al about his background yet. "Should we really be conducting this conversation in public?"

"This isn't public," said Al. "This is my shop. Nobody here but us chickens."

"Bucawk," I said blandly. "Yes, I'm sleeping with him. I'm actually planning on marrying him as soon as we have his papers sorted, so if you could do me a solid and get this started, and maybe throw in a Nevada marriage license, that would be swell."

"Why do you need a new ID for your boy?" asked Al.

"Am I not a part of this conversation?" asked Dominic. "I'm right here."

"No, you're not." Al finally turned to focus on him. "You're the stranger Verity Price brought into my house. She knows the rules around here. If I decide you're a threat, you're going to have trouble walking back out those doors. This is a Las Vegas establishment, which means the house always wins. Now be quiet and let her negotiate for your life."

"You're not scaring anyone, Al," I said. "Did you miss the part where I just called him my fiancé? You're not threatening some rube I'm trying to relocate. You're threatening a member of the family."

"Not yet," said Al. He folded his arms. "What's he running from?"

I glanced at Dominic. He nodded minutely. I looked back to Al, and said, "Dominic is running from the Covenant of St. George."

"They believe me to be deceased, which should help somewhat," said Dominic.

Al stared at the two of us for a moment before throwing up his hands. "Oh, only the Covenant, she says! Like this shouldn't be the end of the world. Were you followed?"

"No," I said. "I drove a very circuitous route, and checked in several times with the road ghosts to be sure. No one tailed me here."

"You fucking kids, I swear." Al shook his head. "Twenty-five thousand."

Now we were getting down to business. "Fifteen is your usual price."

"Fifteen doesn't account for the Covenant of St. George and needing to cook a full background for a foreigner," said Al. "Fifteen is fake IDs that can get you into bars and onto planes. This is 'keep a man from being deported' territory. You marrying him will help with that, but I'm assuming you asked for citizenship because you don't want too many eyes on that wedding ring of yours."

"You're assuming correctly," I said. "Twenty thousand, and we get it tonight."

"Twenty-five thousand, you get it tomorrow morning, and you count yourselves lucky that I didn't throw you out of my shop the second you said the word 'Covenant.'"
Twenty-five thousand, you throw in the marriage license, and I get to take whatever I want from the knife case." Haggling was part of the routine when purchasing from Al. He didn't believe in prices that couldn't be moved one way or the other, and he usually saw material goods and favors as on a level with cash. It was all about the value of the thing, and showing that you understood what you were getting.

Al looked at me thoughtfully for a moment before he nodded, once, and walked past us to flip the sign on the door to "closed." He turned the lock at the same time, the deadbolt clicking home with ominous finality.

"You are your father's daughter," he said. "Both of you, come with me. It's time for Dr. Al to make a new man out of you." He gave a wild mad scientist's laugh which devolved into a hacking cough as he made his way back to the door behind the counter.

Still hand-in-hand, Dominic and I followed him.

Al's workroom spanned a space almost as large as the main pawn shop. Three photo stalls had been set up along the back wall, each with a differently painted background. One mirrored the DMV; one matched the blank background of a cheap passport picture machine; one allowed him to take mugshots. Dominic blinked at the last.

Al grinned toothily. "Some people, you look at them and you just know they've done time, right? So when we're setting them up as somebody new, we maybe fake a few minor arrests, slide them into deep background, if they ever get checked out, they look more believable. And sure, they serve more time if they get arrested, since now they have a record, but the important thing is that they serve that time under their new ID. The old one is gone."

"Artie set up the online stuff and basic paperwork for my Valerie ID, but Al was the one who made sure her paperwork went all the way back to conception," I said, taking a seat next to his computer. "He's the best there is."

"Flattery won't take a penny off your bill, sweetheart," said Al. He looked Dominic assessingly up and down. "All right. First things first: let's take some pictures."

I sat and filed my nails for the next hour while Dominic posed in front of the DMV and passport backgrounds--giving the mugshot lines a wide berth--and filling out form after form. Faking an identity took a surprising amount of work. Al, meanwhile, was opening programs and digging through filing cabinets, muttering to himself all the while.

"I got a Michael D. Delgado," he said, pulling a folder out. "Spanish last name, but this is America: most people won't even notice. Better yet, there's nothing in the paperwork says what the 'D' was short for, so you can still go by 'Dominic'. I can even doctor up the birth certificate a little. That way it's a believable nickname, and you don't have to get used to people calling you 'Mike' all the time."

"What happened to the original Mr. Delgado?" I asked.

"He was a Bigfoot hunter." Al's smile was short, sharp, and full of teeth. "He caught one."

"Ah." My family generally tried to run the ragged edge of civility between the human and cryptid communities. Part of that was discouraging cryptids from killing humans, even when their family traditions or natural dietary needs meant that it was tempting. (Ghouls, for example. They had mostly
There was no amount of discouragement in the world that would keep a Bigfoot from staving in the skull of a human hunter who had managed to get too close. Not even my family could argue with that. There was "don't be an asshole and eat people who don't deserve it," but that didn't take self-defense off the table.

"As I was saying," Al walked back to his computer and dropped the folder next to the keyboard. "No family, no close friends--Bigfoot hunters don't usually go in for those things, they're all glory-hounds at heart--and he's been missing for thirty years, so it'll be pretty simple to close down any old files and update all his timestamps. Tomorrow morning's no trouble, as long as I get my money."

"And you'll be careful?"

"Sweetheart, I'll be so careful God himself couldn't catch me. Consider it my wedding gift to you." Al smiled at me. There was genuine affection in the expression. "Your boy's going to be clean as a whistle, and nobody's ever going to tell you different. The Covenant won't find him."

"If I may, sir, how do you know so much about the Covenant of St. George?" Dominic's tone was carefully polite. I tensed. If Al figured out where he'd come from…

"They killed most of my family," said Al. He looked flatly at Dominic. "You know what a jink is?"

"Luck-manipulators, yes?"

"You got a smart one, Very," said Al. He nodded. "Yeah, luck-manipulators. Jinks make luck dance. But we can't create it, you got that? We take good from one place and leave bad behind. Most of the time, we're careful. We just twist things a little. Better parking, better housing, milk that doesn't go bad quite so fast, we got it all. But that wasn't harmless enough for the Covenant. They say that we're parasites on the back of humanity, taking things that were never meant for us."

Dominic didn't say anything.

"So they hunt us down, when they can. Me, I was living with my folks and the extended family in Toronto when a purge hit. The elder members of the family bent the luck until it snapped to make sure us kids got out clean. For five years, everything that could go right did, for all of us. You know the price of yanking that much good luck out of the world? There was nothing left for any of our parents, for any of the adults we left behind. The Covenant slaughtered them like dogs for the crime of being a little different. The rest of us…we used those five years to learn how to hide. I decided I wanted to make people disappear, and the best instructors in the world just happened to fall into my path. They taught me what to do. They taught me how to do it. I make a decent living, but especially, if someone needs to disappear from the Covenant, they disappear. That is how I honor my mother and father. That is how I say 'fuck you' to the people who would wipe me and mine from the face of the Earth. And that's how I know so much." Al picked up the folder that contained the seeds of Dominic's new identity, knocking it briskly against the desk. "I'll see you both tomorrow morning, along with my twenty-five thousand dollars. Enjoy the last night of your old life, Mr. Dominic. Tomorrow, you'll be a new man."

I flashed Al a winsome smile as I stood. "Now, about those knives…?"

"You kids, why I'm such a pushover for you, I'll never know," said Al--but he was laughing as he led us back out to the main room, and the pointy, pointy shopping spree of my dreams.
He gave me the glaive as an early wedding present. We called a taxi to get us back to the Golden Oasis. One nice thing about Las Vegas: nobody batted an eye at the fact that I was carrying a polearm longer than I was tall, even when getting it into the cab required rolling down both back windows and letting it stick out to either side. The clerk at the front counter of the hotel was equally unimpressed, and barely glanced up from her magazine as we walked through on our way to the room.

"Sometimes I wonder why I was ever so concerned about betraying the existence of the monstrous world to humanity," said Dominic. "It seems like no one believes the evidence of their own eyes."

"Pretty much," I said cheerfully. I unlocked the door to our suite. The door swung open to reveal the mice having a dance party on the sofa, while the VH1 Video Countdown blared from the television. A few of them greeted us with cheers and quick obeisances, but most were more interested in trying to match Taylor Swift's dance moves. We took advantage of their distraction and ducked into the bedroom, closing the door between us.

Dominic went straight to the bathroom. A few splashing sounds later, he reemerged with his shirt unbuttoned and his wet hair plastered to his scalp. "No more deserts for me," he said.

"Trust me, Portland is about as far from a desert as we can get," I said.

"Excellent. But Verity…" His expression sobered. "We've discussed your money troubles before. Where are you going to get that much money?"

"From the bank." I sat down on the edge of the bed. "This counts as a valid use of emergency discretionary funds. We keep a certain amount fluid at all times, for situations like this one--and yes, this would be a valid use of the funds even if I wasn't planning to marry you tomorrow. Sometimes we need to help people disappear."

"Ah." He settled next to me. After a moment's pause, he reached for my hand. "So my situation is not so unique, then. I suppose I should feel disappointed. Everyone wants to be special."

"You're plenty special to me." I laced my fingers with his, leaning over to prop my head on his shoulder. It was wet. I didn't mind. "I wish you didn't have to give up everything to be with me. It seems like such a waste."

"I don't think so," he said. "I'll miss my family name, I suppose, but as I never had the family to go with it, it's more an academic regret than anything more serious. I expected to spend another ten years in the field before being recalled to one of our strongholds to be married to a woman I barely knew, assuming I'd met her at all, but would nonetheless be expected to get with child."

I raised an eyebrow, tilting my head back until I could look up at him. "So you know, if you ever use the phrase 'get with child' while we're trying to get busy, you're going to find yourself with negative access to my reproductive organs."

"You say things like that, but you pretend I'm the one who talks funny." He pressed a kiss to my temple, and said, "If we have children, we'll have children. We'll both be involved, every step of the way, not just at the beginning. We'll argue over rules and whether they're allowed to have cookies before bedtime, and watch them grow up. If I had married as part of the Covenant breeding program, I would have been getting a woman with child. I would have been lucky to meet my descendants, much less be allowed to have a hand in raising them."
"I really am the best possible outcome," I said.

Dominic laughed. "In more ways than I can possibly list. I know you think I've given up a great deal to be here, but really, I think I'm gaining more than I've lost. The Covenant was no home."

"I will be," I promised, and sat up, and kissed him with all the slow sincerity I could muster. Somewhere in the middle, I wound up straddling his legs, with his hands pressed together at the small of my back, steadying and anchoring me. He wouldn't let me fall. That was one thing I was absolutely certain of: no matter what happened, he wouldn't let me fall. I could let go completely, and know that I was still anchored.

So I did.

An hour later, tangled in the blankets and mercifully free of clothing, we stared up at the ceiling and just breathed. Our fingers were still tangled together, our joined hands resting on his chest, and that was perfectly right: that was exactly as it was supposed to be. Everything ached pleasantly, like the aftermath of a particularly vigorous training session. The image appealed. I smiled up at the mirrored ceiling, and my reflection smiled back.

Dominic raised an eyebrow. "Something funny?" he asked.

"Just thinking about how great it is to live in an unpredictable universe." I squeezed his hand before letting go and sitting up. "Also how much I want dinner. Have you ever experienced the wonderful world of Las Vegas dining?"

Dominic pushed himself up onto his elbows. "This is my first time in Las Vegas for any reason."

"That's a no, then. Get your clothes on. We'll find someplace that serves steaks the size of your head and cocktails that glow in the dark. Call it a combo bachelor and bachelorette party. Play your cards right, and we'll even get to strip each other at the end of the evening." I leered at him.

He laughed and grabbed for me as I slid off the bed and danced away. "Or we could stay here, not put our clothing back on, and do away with the need for strippers."

"Now where's the fun in that? Come on, De Luca. Live a little."

"Oh, believe me," he said. "I intend to."

We made it back to the hotel eight hours and several bottles of champagne later, laughing as we tried to keep ourselves from toppling over. My knees gave out halfway up the stairs. Dominic scooped me up, slung me over his shoulder, and carried me the rest of the way. I unlocked the door while dangling upside down and giggling incessantly. The mice cheered when we entered the room.

"HAIL! HAIL THE RETURN OF THE ARBOREAL PRIESTESS!"

"Shhh," I said. My shushing was somewhat undermined by my giggles, and by the hiccups I was starting to develop. "Gotta be quiet, mice. No pets allowed."

"Verity is very, very drunk," said Dominic proudly. "I am slightly less drunk."

"Because you're bigger than me, you jerk," I said, doing my best to punch him in the knee. It would
have been easier if his knees hadn't insisted on moving when I tried to hit them. It wasn't fair. I crossed my arms and sulked. "Stupid mass."

"I also drank more water," said Dominic. He waved a hand at the mice. "Stay out here, you splendidly irrational examples of the genus Rodentia. I am going to defile your priestess like…like…"

"The Normans defiled Lindesfarne?" I suggested.

"Yes," said Dominic. "That." He raised his chin and carted me into the bedroom. I remembered to shove the door shut at the last second. I might be drunk, but there was no such thing as "drunk enough to forget that the mice were watching." That was a level of inebriation that implied liver failure and death. Which might still be better than having sex while the mice were in the room.

Morning dawned bright and early and impossible to ignore, due to the fact that we had both been too drunk the night before to think about closing the curtains. I rolled out of bed, bounced to my feet, and trotted toward the bathroom to begin my ablutions. Behind me, Dominic groaned.

"How are you so alert?" he asked. "My head feels like it was used as a football by Manchester United all night long."

"Before or after the chorus girls took turns kicking you?" I asked, squirting a healthy dollop of toothpaste onto my brush. It smelled of mint. That was better than the things I currently smelled like. Open seafood buffets and champagne cocktails do not a sweet day-after perfume make. "And I wake up this well because I've never been in a position to sleep much. Try doing dance camp and monitoring the local woods for cryptid activity without ever slipping so much that the instructors catch on. You get real, real good at shrugging things off." That didn't even go into college, where the usual parties had taken me away from both my studies and my duties, if only temporarily. The classes had to be passed and the duties had to be done, and so I'd figured out how to do it all.

My grandmother liked to tell me that I wouldn't be in my twenties and capable of bouncing back from anything forever, which might have been more believable if she hadn't been in her twenties for the past forty years. Sometimes being a member of my family made sensible advice difficult to take.

Dominic groaned again. I heard him moving around in the bedroom as I brushed my teeth, and then moving around in the bathroom once I had hopped into the shower. I stuck my head out of the gap in the curtain and observed him shaving, meticulously scraping away both the stubble and the remarkable encrusting of glitter that he had somehow acquired during the night. I grinned and flicked a handful of suds at him before withdrawing back to the safety of the shower.

"Are you going to be up for getting married tonight? Because we can postpone, if you're too hung-over to deal with an Elvis impersonator."

"Are we really getting married by an Elvis impersonator?"

"Assuming we can find one, why not? You only have one chance to elope to Vegas and have a ridiculous theme wedding." I rinsed the shampoo out of my hair. "Besides, that way the minister will be wearing more sequins than I am."

I could hear the smile in his voice as he said, "That is something I would very much like to see. I'm a little dehydrated, and I could use another eight hours of sleep, but if you think I'm delaying our marriage one minute longer than is absolutely necessary, you must have had more to drink than I thought."
"You say the sweetest things." I turned off the water, wrapping a towel around myself as I stepped out of the shower. "Get cleaned up. Al's going to expect us to be there soon, and it's never a good idea to keep him waiting."

"As you wish," said Dominic.

I laughed while I was toweling off my hair and getting into my robe. I was still laughing when I stepped out into the front room of the suite. About half the mice were on the couch, still watching television—a *Law and Order* marathon, from the looks of things. Someone knocked on the door. I stopped where I was, giving the mice a hard look.

"Okay, fess up," I said. "Did you order room service without permission?" It was entirely possible that they *had* permission, of course. I mean, we had been *really* drunk the night before.

"No, Priestess," squeaked one of the mice.

The knock came again.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to chase away the last of my hangover. It worked about as well as I had expected it to, which was to say, not at all. "Okay, get out of sight," I said. "I'll see what's up."

The mice scattered, vanishing under the furniture in an instant. I walked toward the door, leaning up onto my toes to look out the peephole. There was no one there.

"Huh," I said, dropping back to the flats of my feet. "Must've had the wrong room." I started to turn away.

The knock came a third time.

This time I whirled, grabbed the doorknob, and opened the door before whoever had been knocking could duck out of sight. I was expecting to find a group of kids who thought that they were being funny, or maybe a hotel busboy with a breakfast tray. Instead, I found myself looking down the barrel of a sawed-off shotgun. It was in the hands of a man who looked like he ate bricks for breakfast. He was flanked by two equally rough-looking companions, one male and one female, both dressed in leather, denim, and a substantial helping of dust.

"Hi," said the man in the middle.

"Wrong room," I said brightly, and slammed the door on him.

As I'd been expecting, it didn't actually close: one of the trio had managed to get his foot in the opening before the door could latch. That was breaking into a hotel room 101, and I would have been disappointed if they hadn't managed it. Relieved, but disappointed. What it did was buy me some time—almost nine whole seconds, between the slam, the bewildered "did she just slam the door on a man with a gun" pause, and the door banging open again.

Nine seconds was all I needed. There wasn't time to get to my own guns, which were still under the pillows on the bed, but there was time to get to my wedding present. When the door opened, the three goons from the hall found me braced in a defensive stance, holding a full-sized horseman's glaive in front of me. As expected, all three of them stopped and stared. Eight-foot long polearms had that effect on people.

"I am tired, I am hung-over, and I did not order room service," I snarled, hitting the butt of the glaive
against the wall. Hopefully Dominic would hear the commotion, and would pause to grab a gun or six before he came out to see what was going on. "Get the hell out of my hotel room."

"What the hell is that thing?" demanded Goon #2. He was shorter than his male companion and about the same height as his female companion, with an impressive mullet that blended seamlessly into his equally impressive muttonchops. If I'd been looking for a man to stand in front of a biker bar and nod silently to people, he would have been my first choice.

"It's a can opener on a stick," said Goon #3. She sneered at me. "Just give us the vermin and no one has to get hurt, sweetie. You can take your pretty bleached blonde head back to bed and sleep off the rest of whatever you drank last night."

"Wait, what?" Any traces of sleepiness that had managed to survive the arrival of my unexpected guests fled as her words sunk in. My eyes narrowed. "Who the hell sent you?"

Goon #1 thumbed back the hammer on his gun, aiming it straight for my chest. "We're the ones with the guns, sweetheart, so I think we get to ask the questions. Where are they?"

Sometimes ignorance is the best defense. I tightened my grip on the glaive and said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about the mice. I know you have them. Now fork them over."

Well, crap. "Let me think about that for a second," I said, taking a half-step backward and knocking the butt of the glaive against the wall one more time before I lunged forward and planted the blade end in the floor. The goons started to laugh, taking the move for the mistake of an amateur. Until I shoved off from the floor and suddenly had the makeshift equivalent of a fireman's pole in the middle of the room.

People who make fun of pole dancers have never actually tried it. The core strength required to hang your entire body from your arms while you move in three-dimensional space is immense. And the psychological impact of whipping around in a perfect arc and planting your feet square in the face of the man who was just pointing a gun at you is not to be underestimated.

Goon #1 made a squawking noise as he staggered backward, dropping the gun. I allowed my momentum to carry me around for another kick. Sadly, Goon #3 had enough of a grasp of physics that she ducked, leaving me to sail harmlessly past overhead. Oh, well. Time for plan B. I let go of the pole, hit the wall with both feet, and flipped myself back into an upright position, landing with both fists up and ready to swing.

"She broke my nose!" said Goon #1, through his fingers. "Kill her!"

Goon #2 produced a gun of his own. How unoriginal. Goon #3 had a length of chain, which she began whipping around over her head. That was a little better, if extremely impractical. I paused to stare at her.

"Seriously? What do you think this is, Beyond Thunderdome?"

She responded by whipping the chain at me. I ducked. The chain got wrapped around the glaive. While she was still trying to untangle it, I kicked her in the head, and ducked again as Goon #2 shot at the place where I'd been standing.

The door to the bedroom burst open, and Dominic shouted, "Verity!" before chucking a rolled-up towel at me. I snatched it out of the air, shoved my hand inside, and pulled out my own gun.
"Hi," I said, wheeling on Goon #2. His eyes widened as he saw the pistol in my hand. "Wanna see who the faster shot is? Spoiler alert: probably not you."

Goon #1, blood pouring down his face, was smart enough to see the writing on the wall. He turned and bolted for the door. That would probably have worked out okay for him, if the mice hadn't run a dental floss tripwire across the opening. He went down hard, and he didn't get back up.

The mice cheered. I grinned.

"Well," I said. "Good morning to me."

Getting our unwelcome guests tied up and secured to their seats wasn't hard. Goon #3 hadn't had much fight left in her after being kicked in the head; Goon #1 was unconscious; and while Goon #2 might be lowlife scum, he wasn't stupid. He'd put his gun down as soon as he'd realized how outnumbered he was. Dominic had kept watch on the trio while I got some clothes on. Fighting bad guys in a bathrobe was one thing, but interrogating them that way was just wrong.

They were all awake and glaring when I stepped back into the front room. Dominic was leaning against the door.

"Has the front desk called?" I asked.

He frowned. "No."

"Right," I said, and turned to the goons. "Here's how this is going to work. I'm going to ask who sent you. You're going to tell me. Then we're going to take our things, including the mice, and we're going to leave you here. I know I can trust you not to call the police, because I'm guessing you want to deal with them about as much as I do. In return for your cooperation, I will leave you with all your fingers. Do we have a deal?"

"Sit on it and spin, bitch," said Goon #2.

"Aw," I produced a throwing knife from my belt, twirling it between my fingers before flinging it at him. It socked into the wood of the already battered chair right between his legs, less than an inch from his genitals. He went pale. "How about you don't use that word anymore, and I don't make you regret it?"

"You know, my chivalrous side says I should step in when men talk to you that way, but it's just so much fun to watch you work," said Dominic.

"I am the gift that keeps on giving," I said blithely, before focusing on the goons again. "Come on. One of you has to be willing to give up your employer."

"Lady, we would, believe me, but we don't know," said the first goon. His nose had stopped leaking, largely due to the wads of tissue paper jammed in both nostrils. He was going to make a mess the next time he sneezed. "We got a call from one of the brokers we work with, said he had a confirmed Aeslin colony in this hotel, and that it would be an easy pickup, on account of the people who were roaming with them had gotten wasted last night."

I dimly remembered a few complementary bottles of champagne. They'd still been sealed, so I'd assumed they were safe to drink. I hadn't considered the possibility that getting us drunk might have
been the goal. "If your broker knew we were out drinking, why didn't you just make the pickup then?"
Even saying the words made my stomach crawl.

"We tried," said Goon #3, glaring daggers at me. "We searched this whole damn place, and we didn't
see a single mouse. So we figured maybe they only came out when you were around."

I looked down at the mice, who were sitting on the floor around my feet. "Is this true?" I asked. "Why
didn't you say anything?"

"Because we Did Not Know, Priestess," said the head priest, stroking his whiskers with his forepaws
and bowing his head in contrition. "We were granted permission to Hunt, and so Hunt we did. We have
grown restless, sealed in the Van of Moving for so long. We wished to feel the wind in our fur, and to
taste blood against our teeth."

"...right." The mice had gone out, which I had told them was okay, and as a consequence, when the
goons had come to visit, they hadn't been there to be taken. The narrowness of their escape chilled me
as I swung my eyes back to the goons. "So a broker called you and told you what, exactly?"

"That you had a healthy Aeslin colony traveling with you," repeated Goon #1. "Lady, I don't know if
you're stupid or just perverse, but we could still make a deal. We were promised a half-million each for
any live mice we brought in. Two million for every breeding pair. We could split it, fifty-fifty. Just
untie us and grab your rodents, and you'll be rich before dark."

My fist hit him squarely between the eyes, rocking his head back so hard that it damn near hit his spine.
He groaned, and stopped talking. I turned to glare daggers at the other two. They shied away, as much
as their ropes would let them. That didn't make me feel any better.

"Aeslin mice are intelligent creatures," I said. It was a struggle to keep my voice level. "What you're
talking about, what you tried to do? That's slavery. Unless you were planning to purge their current
religion by breeding them and then killing the adults. That's murder. And I don't suggest telling me if
that was the idea."

They didn't have to tell me. Their eyes darted to the side, looking at anything but my face. I folded my
hands into fists. The urge to hit had rarely been so strong.

"Okay. Well, you kept our deal. We're leaving. You don't call the police, and I don't call my parents.
Everyone gets to walk away."

"Your parents?" demanded Goon #3. "What the hell, lady?"

"Oh, good, nobody told you. Hi." I smiled at her, a great baring of my teeth, like I was getting ready to
rip out her throat and swallow it. "You just tried to steal a group of living, sentient creatures from the
latest generation of the Price family."

The conscious thieves turned white. Neither of them spoke again as we gathered our things--including
the mice--and made our way out of the room, leaving them behind.

At the last moment, Dominic turned the heat up to full. The door shut on their dismayed faces.

"It won't kill them, but they may wish it had," he said.

"My hero," I replied.
There was one more piece of business to take care of before we left. Dominic took our things--
including my glaive--out to the truck while I sauntered up to the front desk. There was no one there
except for the clerk. He blanched when he saw me, and scrambled to his feet when he saw that I was
smiling.

"Hi," I purred, dropping a handful of crumpled bills on the counter in front of him. "I guess we made a
bit of a mess upstairs. Oopsie. But you're not going to charge us a cleaning fee, because if you did, I'd
need to tell my family that you're a black market wildlife dealer, and that you tried to take my mice." I
was going to tell them anyway. We couldn't let something like this go unchecked. Worse for him, I was
going to tell Al. As a member of the Las Vegas cryptid community, he would be very interested in what
had happened to us.

"Oh my God," muttered the clerk. Louder, he said, "I'll scream if you touch me."

"We're not the bad guys here," I said. "We're just the people who were trying to have a few days of
peace and quiet. You're the monster who sicced a bunch of poachers on us. I won't try to explain why
what you did was wrong. I'm sure you already know. But I will give you some advice: retire. Right
now, while you still have hands. Because the folks around here aren't going to be thrilled when they
hear what you did."

He slumped for a moment before pulling himself laboriously upright and asking, "How did you know?"

"This is a dive. Even in a dive, when a gun goes off, management should want to know what the hell is
going on. You told me it was you as soon as you left your goons alone to finish us off." I shook my
head. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have believed I could get comfortable anywhere that wasn't owned by
an ally. But damn, I wish you hadn't been an asshole."

I turned and walked away. I'd tell Al about him; within the week, whatever connections he had would
be cutting him off to protect themselves. Within a month, no place in Vegas with a connection to the
cryptid community would be willing to work with him. It wasn't much. It was what I had, or at least, it
was what I had that didn't involve breaking bones and possibly going to prison.

Dominic was standing next to the U-Haul, having already stowed the mice safely in the back. "Where
to?" he asked.

"The bank," I said. "Let's get this over with."

Al had finished Dominic's paperwork, even down to dual citizenship and an Italian passport, which was
substantially more battered and well-traveled than its American counterpart. What's more, he was
happy to watch the mice, especially after what I had told him about the Golden Oasis. I started to
wonder whether my estimate of a month before that clerk's life was conclusively ruined might not have
been a little overly generous.

The mice were thrilled to have the run of the pawn shop for the day. I ducked into the employee
bathroom to change. Maybe I was eloping, and maybe I was going to get my ass tanned by my father
when he found out, but by God, I wasn't going to get married in jeans.

There was a knock on the door as I was trying to figure out what to do with my hair. "Who is it?" I
called.

"Al," came the response. "You decent?"

"I am," I said, turning away from the mirror. "I just didn't want Dominic to see me in my wedding dress."

Al opened the bathroom door and stopped, blinking. "I won't make any more jokes about you being a kid, Very," he said, in a strangled tone. "You're all grown up now."

"You like it?" I was wearing one of my competition gowns. This one had been designed for the Venetian waltz. It was all gauze and sequins and plunging neck and back, slit up to the hips to allow for ease of motion. I could have taken on an army in that dress, if there hadn't been any way for me to change my clothes first. It was one of the most concealing things I owned. The life of a ballroom dancer is an often chilly one.

"Your mama would be so proud," he said, stepping fully into the room. He had a trench coat draped over one arm, which he offered to me. "I figured you wouldn't want him to see you. As for the rest, you need a few things."

"Like what?"

"Like something borrowed, and something blue." He dipped a hand into his pocket, coming up with a necklace of diamonds and blue topaz. He held it out to me. "Put it on. You look amazing, but this is Vegas. A few sequins isn't going to cut it."

"Oh, Al, it's beautiful." I got the necklace fastened around my neck, checking its position in the mirror, before turning to beam at him. "Thank you so much."

"That's not all." He handed me a small bag. I looked inside. Twenty-five thousand dollars looked back at me.

"No." I closed the bag, shoving it at him. "I can't."

"You can, and you will. That guy was bad news, Very, and you shut him down. So this is my wedding gift to you. Not a freebie, because I don't do freebies. But a suspiciously similar cash prize." Al smiled. "You're a beautiful bride, you did a good thing today, and now it's time for you to go show that fellow of yours what he got himself a new identity for. Go on. I'll watch the mice."

"You're the best, Al."

"Yeah, I am."

He stayed where he was, still smiling, as I kissed his cheek and ran out of the room, toward my waiting future.