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MORTAL DANGER, Lupi #3

# Chapter 4

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excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

This being a weekend, there was a live band at the Cactus Corral. Music ripped through the air and beat against the eardrums, a crashing wail of steel guitar and relentless rhythm. This was music as a battering ram, designed to smash into restraints, making customers eager for the slide into booze, the bump and jostle of bodies on the dance floor.

In the pounding darkness it was easy to dance with a stranger. Easy to forget a lost job or a lost wife, unpaid bills and unfinished dreams.

The only empty spot was at the bar next to a middle-aged man with a mustache the color of weak tea and excellent teeth. He was trim but not athletic, looking rather like an accountant who was as tidy with his body as with his clients' money. Though he was a little older than most of the others, he didn't really stand out. Yet the space on his left remained empty despite the number of customers vying for the bartender's attention. And no one seemed to notice.

They didn't notice the squeaky voice that came from that open spot, either. "Did you see the breasts on that blonde?"

Patrick Harlowe heard the voice. He ignored it.

"Cantaloupes," that voice said dreamily. "Big and firm. Maybe you could get it up with her."

Damned little monster. Why didn't the music drown it out? He leaned across the scarred bar and shouted his drink order at the bartender.

"You had a little trouble with the last one, but this blonde could make a dead man rise. Get it? Make his cock rise." That was followed by a girlish giggle.

Patrick had barely heard his own voice over that miserable excuse for a band, but he heard every word from the creature at his side. "Shut up."

“Ha! You shut up. You’d better, or they’ll think you’re nuts, talking to yourself.”

Patrick looked down. He saw a short, squat something with slick yellow skin--lots of skin, since it was both hairless and naked. It stood on two legs shaped more like a beast’s haunches than human limbs. The tail and the forward tilt it imparted made the creature vaguely resemble a stubby kangaroo. The arms were human enough, though, with five-fingered hands; the head was round, with eyes set on the sides like a lizard, no visible ears and a wide slit of a mouth.

The eyes were orange, like flames.

“Stinking hermaphrodite,” Patrick muttered. “Why are you looking at breasts, anyway? Play with your own.”

“I do. Doesn’t mean I wouldn’t like playing with hers.” The little demon winked at the blond woman who was chatting with her friend a few feet away, oblivious.

Forget it, Patrick told himself. He might have to put up with the ugly little bugger for now, but it was temporary. Like hanging out in dives like this. Purely temporary.

That didn’t mean he’d forgotten the chink bitch who’d caused all his problems. She’d get what she had coming. His lips curved up. Oh, yes, she’d pay, and he was the one who would deliver the bill. He’d been angry at first because he wasn’t allowed to kill her, but this would be better. This way she’d be paying for a long time.

“Maybe you’d better stick to blondes. The brown-haired ones remind you of Her, huh?”

Patrick’s mind went white. His heart kicked in his chest so quick and hard that his heartbeat swallowed everything else--thoughts, memories . . . .

He wouldn’t think about it. He didn’t remember it very well, anyway. Didn’t have to. She was in hell and he was here. He was fine. “Stupid little shit. You don’t know what you’re talking about. She’s Chinese--black hair, not brown.”

“I’m not talking about that one. I meant--hey, watch it!”

Patrick had brushed that slick yellow skin with the staff, sending just a trickle of power through it. He smiled. It was satisfying to see the little shit jump. “Whoops.”

“You’d better watch it with that thing! You fry me, you’re gonna be in big trouble!”

“I’ll be more careful,” Patrick assured it solemnly, letting the demon see how little he meant that. Time to remind the creature who was in charge. “You’ll be careful, too, won’t you?”

It rubbed its shoulder--which was smoking slightly--and grumbled under its breath.

Patrick turned away, feeling better. And noticed the way the man closest to him was looking at him. As if he was crazy.

Better fix that. He smiled and stroked his index finger along the staff. The man--a cowboy type whose mustard yellow shirt strained over a beer gut--relaxed and smiled back. He said something, but Patrick couldn't hear it over the pounding music. Patrick shook his head, still smiling, and gestured at his ears.

Before Beer Belly could become a problem, the bartender slid Patrick's drink to him. Patrick turned to him, his left hand grasping on the staff, his expression pleasant and friendly. "Thanks, asshole."

The man blinked. He hadn't heard the words, of course, in all this din. Just the tone, the melodious crawl of Patrick's voice . . . augmented by the staff he couldn't see.

None of these fools saw anything that mattered. Not the demon, not the staff, and only what Patrick allowed them to see of himself. Like right now. As the music crashed to a stop, the dazed bartender stammered, "On the house. Your drinks on the house, man."

"You recognized me." Patrick gave that just a touch of chagrin. "I hope you won't tell anyone I'm here. Sometimes I need to get away, you know? Relax with real people."

"Hell, no, of course I won't say anything. Wouldn't blow your cover for the world, man."

"Thanks." Patrick turned his back on the man, wondering idly who he thought Patrick was. Someone powerful, of course. Someone the man privately revered, but who would a turd like that look up to?

Didn't matter. It was easier to let them make up their own version of who he was. All he had to do was persuade them he was important, someone to admire and serve. He'd always been good at that. Now, with the staff backing him up, he was invincible.

"Invincible," he murmured into his glass before taking a sip. He liked the sound of the word, the sheer truth of it. The bitch wouldn't win, and he would be the one to take her down. Personally. His hand slid lovingly along the staff.

The band swung into another song--something about boot-stomping, with a heavy, driving rhythm. Patrick's mouth tightened. He hated country music. Bunch of losers whining about their lousy lives, that's all they were.

“So are you gonna fuck the blond or just do her?”

This time Patrick was able to ignore the mouthy little twit. He continued to look over the crowd, searching for the right one. The staff wasn't picky. It would take whatever he fed it--and it needed feeding often. She had done something to it, changed it, while he was in . . . that place. With Her.

But that was part of the plan. All part of the plan, and it wasn't so bad, after all, though he'd been upset when he realized how often . . . but a good workman takes care of his tools. That's what his father always said, and what was the staff but a tool? His tool.

There. The girl in the red t-shirt and short black skirt. She was looking for some action tonight, wasn't she? Look how she smiled at that cowboy she was dancing with . . . he'd separate them easily enough. Patrick started for the edge of the dance floor so he could be in place when the current dance ended.

Maybe he'd outlaw country music once he was in charge. Death to all who worship Garth Brooks, he thought, and chuckled.

The girl tossed her head and her hair flew out, a shimmering light brown halo alive with youth, motion, light. And that, too, was temporary. Quite temporary.



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