



THE PHOENIX RISERS

The Case of the Phantom Burglar

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CHAPTER ONE

Kendra Smith didn't feel the strangeness in the reality of being in a stranger's living room at the dead of night. She was with The Phoenix. Strange encounters, she thought in the moment, must be subconsciously willed adventures. She was there, and whatever it was embracing strangeness intimately signified, she only wondered briefly. The circle of The Phoenix made her past years feel like a memory. They had purpose. And without purpose, she had only known paranoia, as part of a lucid dream gone badly. Meanwhile, she thought responsibly, they were there for a reason. Acquiring the specifics of a burglar's mode of operation was becoming problematic.

She glanced towards Citana Lopez who was busy inspecting the fireplace area, and felt a soothing kinship of kinds. Barely sixteen, and just a year older than her, she always acted like the keeper of The Phoenix. And a sister's keeper was better than no sister at all.

Chao Chan was on his knees in front of the fireplace, preoccupied with a decision that will only keep him preoccupied. He was wondering if

he should crawl into the fireplace to check the chimney for soot. But he was too much of a neat freak to do it, not much of a freak to do it. She had run her hands up its side, found it clean and had chosen to keep him uninformed, exploring the chaotic limits which only existed in his mind. Being the youngest, smallest and most vulnerable of The Phoenix fold, Kendra's irresistible urge was always there to protect him, the often underestimated little brother she never had.

They had traveled nights before, to get thoroughly acquainted, integrated as the circle of The Phoenix required, but never to investigate a crime. She felt stranger standing there, unsure of her cluelessness. She had hardly convinced them to come, but had convinced them there had to be something to find. It was of intimate acceptance to all—they were strangely natured. It was almost child kidnapping having Chao there with them, but what realistic morning could they live if as the rest of the mediocre populace; they feared the dead of night?

Chao had the vulnerability of youth but in no way was he a weak link. At any point in their space-time explorations, the twelve year old was their inevitable lookout, their secondary escape route. There was only one member she considered the weakest link. In fact, she hardly considered Tom Winslow a link at all. It bothered her, but

Citana stuck to her instincts; the Messiah in him was coming.

Kendra glanced towards Tom, watched him touch the table in front of him as he sat, and then hold the arm of the chair. Such was the state of the future Messiah: touching things, yet unfeeling, a psycho-static intelligence reception as far as she was concerned. “Maybe we should consult the king of wizardry on this one,” she announced.

Tom held her eyes, his voice firm and masculine. “I am never willed to the powers of wizardry.”

Kendra shrugged. “Maybe. But maybe not.”

“There is no maybe here,” Tom responded.

Kendra shook her head. “Maybe it could well explain why you’ve earned Citana’s trust without any evidence to show you’re worthy. But maybe not. If you can remind me what your specialty is. Can you wish a genie now appear?”

Six feet an inch, athletically built Tom was on his feet in an instant. And that got Citana’s full attention. Chao slowly got on his feet.

“I beg your pardon?” Tom asked.

Citana got between the two, faced Kendra. “We’re going to need more than wizardry to figure

out how he got in and out through that tiny chimney.”

Kendra tilted her head to hold Tom’s eyes again. “I bet if we beg a genie loudly enough, he’ll appear just in time to save us from waking this unsuspecting household while we’re at it.”

Citana held her ground between the two, blocking Kendra’s averted view. “No one can hear us unless we wonder out of the fold.”

Kendra shook her head. “Fold...and how far is this fold?”

“A reasonable perimeter,” Citana answered.

Kendra glance towards Tom, confirmed him out of sight. She faced Citana again. “Well then Citana, witches who actually have powers will it.”

Citana exhaled. “I am not a witch. Now, how many times do I have to tell you that? I don’t cast spells or make portions. The sound barrier came from the integrated powers of The Phoenix.”

Kendra squinted. “And that’s the point. What exactly is anyone’s role in that integration? What is Tom’s?”

Citana closed her eyes briefly, overwhelmed with the inability to give her a simple answer at the moment or at any moment before. “That’s exactly the point. We are—”

Chao, who had hardly spoken since they arrived, being too careful in the home invasion arena, suddenly yelled. “An imbalance!”

His announcement turned Citana around to face him, and fast. “Specificity Chao.”

“Presentiment, auditory,” Chao replied.

“That specificity lacks simplicity Chao,” Citana stated.

Kendra smiled, sarcastically, before explaining. “Clearly, Chao integrated his superior sensations as premonition and Tom’s supposed integration has wondered out of the fold.”

They scanned the room for him. And found him as he bumped the side of the open cabinet at the west end of the living room. He had knocked over a decorative figuring; setting in motion a gravitational splash Chao believed could wake the household.

Kendra rushed forward and fast, focused on the immediate area occupied by Tom and held a reasonable energy field surrounding him immobile. When she got to him, the figuring was suspended some few inches away from the hardwood flooring. “And clearly,” she said, “the fold isn’t far enough to avoid mishaps.”

Kendra's energy holds were mainly molecular, restraining matter which isn't core anatomy, mainly holding motion impulses and neural reflexes. And thus consequently holds the conscious awareness of a victim in recurrent as some sort of reverie in static transitions.

And the residual effect of the hold would penetrate as a flash drive occurrence of strangeness, always inexplicable or sourced to her except by people with elevated level of awareness. And she was too often urged and advised by Citana never to use it on humans unless it was absolutely necessary. It seemed an opportunity at the moment to test the theory Citana believed earnestly: that Tom was much more than merely human.

She picked up the figuring as she held Tom's eyes, ignoring her hold. It was her first on him, but she was almost certain he supposed himself an alpha male. Was he feeling helpless? Consciously aware rather than in transitions? There was only one way to find out.

"Release him," she heard Citana yell.

Kendra ignored her urgings by encouraging small talk. "How come I can hear you outside the fold?"

Citana did not take her eyes off Tom. “Because you’re a part of it, and I’m closer to you. Now release him!”

Kendra frowned, stroking the figuring. “That will mean—”

Citana nodded. “Yes Kendra, the bond that binds us all is connected to me. Now, release him.”

Kendra hesitated. “If the bond—”

“Release him Kendra,” Citana urged in a concerned tone. “He’s probably fizzling out. He may die.”

Kendra shook her head as she scanned Tom’s appearance, taking a step closer to him. “No. He’s nowhere near death. The field that binds him depends solely on me. And I say the hold barely penetrated his cores. I can hear his heartbeats.”

Indeed Citana was right, Kendra thought. Extermination was possible with her holds but she would be able to sense integral energy discordance, let alone possible cessations. She will be able to sense the end coming. That was a responsibility most intimate. And despite the infallible fact that Tom was breathing in an oxygen deprived environment; he was breathing.

Citana walked over to stand behind Tom, and when her attempt to bridge the energy hold failed, she faced Kendra. “Release him please.”

Kendra complied. “Well then if you plead.” She drew the energy towards her as she refocused before she discharged her focus and molecular hold. The liberation she granted made her uneasy, such, unable to predict his reaction, and sensing he may know of her hold, she drew backward.

He came out in a gasp for breath, staggering backward. Citana caught him as he rushed in a fury, towards her.

“Tommy let it go. She did it to save the mission,” Citana told him breathlessly.

He broke Citana’s hold easily and barely struggled for equilibrium before he charged, forcefully towards her.

She had underestimated his physical strength, and he got pretty close to her before she held him.

“Oh Jesus Kendra!” Citana exclaimed. “Release him!”

Kendra stepped back and shrugged. “Or what witch? How long will it take you to yell a wand?”

“Kendra!” Citana scolded.

“Is that your best wand?” Kendra asked.

Citana lowered her voice. “Must you be power strung on him?”

Kendra shrugged. “Must he always irritate me?”

“So do you him!” Citana replied.

Kendra walked away from Tom to stand some distance behind him. “Restrain him Citana or I’ll be forced to do it again and again until the genie appears or this household wakes.”

Citana exhaled. “Release him.”

Kendra did.

And this time, as Citana held him back, she began to whisper in his ear, pleading that he should understand Kendra’s attempt was to save the mission against the danger Chao had alerted.

“Freaking crazy bitch,” he cursed.

“What are you gonna do? Psychometrize?” Kendra asked, smiling.

“It is Psychotelemetry, you ignorant bitch...” Tom shot back. “And try the initial stages of ...”

Kendra frowned. “Of what? Something suddenly top secret or useless as usual?”

“Only Citana holds the privilege,” Tom replied.

Kendra shrugged. “Well until the information is declassified, you only have your Psychotelemetry or the Tel thing as you call it.”

In a few seconds Tom was as calm as he could be. And they were all back in the fold, silent, staring at the fireplace, clueless, equipped with curiosity.

CHAPTER TWO

Tom broke the ensued silence. “Specific reason why they’ll think he came down the chimney and not by any other means?”

Citana and Chao stared at Kendra, who they knew had the answer. Tom refused to engage her.

Unwilling to engage Citana, Kendra turned to Chao. “My mother won’t give me details but there was something about some writing on the floor or in front of the fireplace or on the

chimneypiece...there was writing that said Merry Christmas from Burglar Santa.

Chao smiled. “Merry Christmas Burglar Santa?”

Kendra smiled as well. “I know. He actually wrote that. He’s trying to be nice as they are expected to I guess.” She moved towards the fireplace to inspect the triangular frame. “And this particular Santa Clause is a real one. He comes down the Chimney.”

Tom chuckled.

Kendra ignored Tom’s rudeness and leaned over to hold Chao’s eyes. “Now you know Chao. The secret is out. Santa Clause is not just real. He’s a burglar.”

“Kendra,” Citana cautioned.

“The boy has to know what’s real and what isn’t,” Kendra replied.

Chao’s tone could not easily be declared that of neither excitement nor doubt. “He’s real like I’m real?”

Kendra was silent a split second, considering briefly whether to tell a story of nonexistent. She shook the thought. She then considered offering the story of various impersonators bringing one to life. She shook it and nodded in agreement. “Yes.

Real as you are. But this one is real in a different sort of way than you're told..." She lowered her tone. "He's a thief, a burglar."

"According to legend—" Chao said.

"You mean your mommy?" Tom asked.

"Why not his Mommy?" Citana asked.

"Mommy or legend or whoever believes Santa manufactures, packages and delivers gifts on Christmas Eve," Chao finished.

Kendra smiled. "Boy, your powers have made you believe in too many possibilities. Yes he's real and yes he brings things but your mother has not told you the truth and nothing but the truth."

"And this you know?" Tom asked.

Kendra ignored Tom. "You see Chao, Santa, all Santas, were once thieves, burglars—"

Citana raised her eyebrows. "Really Kendra?"

Kendra ignored Citana and continued. "I mean...think about it Chao. Who comes down the chimney in the middle of the night undetected, drops things, delivers things so to speak, take things or whatever and not be a trained thief or something of that sort..."

Chao's eyes flared. "A selective...elite group of operatives..."

“Once thieves...now givers...” Kendra added

Citana shook her head. “Oh for freaking sakes Kendra. Stop corrupting the boy.”

Kendra didn’t face Citana as she spoke. “He understands logic more than anyone in this room. He cannot be corrupted. But he can always see reason from all that is given.”

“Now givers?” Chao asked.

“They were all summoned to use their powers for good. And they consented,” Kendra replied.

“Of course they did,” Tom commented.

Kendra continued. “That’s how I know this one is the real deal. Old habits die hard. So, he steals the milk and cookies, your laptops and accessories, your big screen TV’s and ipods...” She watched Chao shake his head. “...yes accessories...anything children and adults consider toys...He’s tired of giving and not getting back.” She clasped both hands together, “...Wham! It’s payback time. I mean, what in this life is ever really free.”

“Kendra,” Citana cautioned, “stop feeding the boy stories...”

Kendra ignored Citana. “It’s crazy and maybe even funny when you think about what people ask for during Christmas. It’s like in that song...”

adopting a sexier tone, "...Burglar Santa, now hurry down the Chimney tonight."

Tom shook his head. "Oh for goodness' sake. Is that really necessary?"

Citana shook her head as well. "Is this how it's gonna be at a crime scene?"

Kendra raised an eyebrow. "Uh...crime scene...can Santa ever commit a crime Chao?"

Chao paused. "Well...this one did."

Kendra squinted as she held Chao's eyes. "Are we sure? Are we sure he's not just taking the time to take back all the things he gave them when they appreciated him?"

"A conditional gift?" Chao asked.

Kendra nodded. "Indeed a conditional gift. Be good, or I'll yank your chains."

"We need to get to possible reality here..." Tom urged. "...before Chao senses a complex interference."

Kendra faced Tom. "What do you want to know Tom?"

"Any good reason for specificity here... that is, concerning the manner of entry?" Tom asked.

"No sign of forced entry," Kendra replied.

“Coming down the Chimney seems forced to me,” Tom said. “Do the police think the Chimney is the clear entry point?”

Kendra shook her head. “I don’t know what the police think, just roughly what my Detective mom thinks...the most I heard of the discussion with her partner.”

“And?” Tom asked.

“So far they believe the parents knew the burglar and they let him in. That will explain how someone could bypass the alarm system,” Kendra replied.

“That makes sense,” Tom said.

“It also makes sense that the reason the alarm never triggered was because of the rather covert and unusual entry point: the chimney,” Chao added.

“I don’t buy the knowing the culprit theory,” Kendra replied. “Why would they call police afterwards?”

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