

updating
Orithia



a short by karen chance

Updating Pritkin

Dante's, Vegas' only magical casino, was no more magical than some of the shops it housed. Like the studio of the self-proclaimed world's greatest designer, for instance, the flamboyant Augustine, who regularly pulled out all the stops in an effort to part the supernatural community from its hard earned cash. Or not hard earned—Augustine wasn't particular where the filthy lucre originated, as long as it ended up in one of his tills.

And it usually did.

And not without reason.

"Damn," Billy said, as he and Cassie stared at the western shirt on a male mannequin in Augustine's window. It had a desert scene that changed along with the day outside, or the night in this case, since the fabric slid from a sun-drenched landscape with elongated shadows to a star-strewn evening as they watched. Complete with a coyote that climbed a bluff and bayed loudly at the moon rising over the shirt's right shoulder.

"It's something," Cassie agreed. It wasn't exactly subtle, but then, this was Vegas. Subtle wasn't even in most people's vocabulary.

"If that something is awful," Pritkin commented, causing her to jump. With all the music and conversation and distant sounds of ringing slots, she hadn't heard him come up behind her.

"Right. Like our resident hobo would know," Billy said.

"He isn't," Cassie replied, under her breath.

"I saw a tourist trying to give him a dollar a couple days ago."

"You did not!"

"Who are you talking to?" Pritkin asked, glancing about suspiciously. Because even war mages can't see ghosts.

Or their own reflections, apparently. Pritkin must have just come back from a run, because he was wearing grubby sweats and a pair of track shoes that had seen one too many tracks. And a hoody that he'd thrown over his ensemble, probably to hide the weapons he was never without. It had a hole in the elbow. Cassie bit her lip.

"You're right," Billy agreed. "He's not a bum. Homeless people dress better than that."

"Stop it!"

"Stop what? What's wrong?" Pritkin demanded, slipping a hand inside his threadbare jacket.

"It's just Billy," Cassie said quickly, before some poor tourist got a surprise. "He . . . he likes Augustine's outfit."

Pritkin snorted and drew his empty hand back out. "What does a ghost know about fashion?"

"More than you, obviously," Billy retorted.

"Billy—"

"*What?*"

The sudden question made Cassie jump, although it hadn't come from Billy. Or Pritkin. And all of their fingers were in plain sight, instead of biting into the tender space between her shoulder blades.

But someone's was, until it moved to the small of her back. She spun to avoid said finger, only to have it thrust in her face. A look past the quivering appendage showed her the great man himself, with some sort of robe on his elongated body and a chapeau of the gods perched on his perfectly styled blond head. The robe had a mass of gold embroidery, and the hat . . . had gauze. Layer upon layer of it, swaddled delicately around what appeared to be a pith helmet.

"Well?" the vision demanded, and poked her again.

"Well, what?" she asked, still staring at the hat. The air shimmered around it, like the sun off the desert, and in the heat waves flickered scenes of another time. Planes dropped bombs in great battles in the sky, pyramids rose pale against deep gold sand, and a gorgeous woman in a bit of tasseled nothingness draped an arm across the hero's chest.

"Who are you supposed to be?" Pritkin demanded. "Bloody Valentino?"

Augustine shot him a scathing glance. "Lawrence of Arabia!"

Green eyes took in the girl. "Thought he played for the other team."

Augustine's scowl grew. "Go away," he demanded, glaring at Cassie.

"Any particular reason why?" Pritkin asked.

"Yes," it was hissed. "I have a show today!"

"And?"

"And the pair of you are destroying the ambiance!"

"Man has a point," Billy said.

Cassie looked down at herself. She had on a pair of khaki shorts and a blue tank top with Suck it up, Buttercup, written across the front. It had been tossed at her by Pritkin during a recent training session, when she complained once too often about the completely ridiculous number of sit ups she was being asked to do. She'd chosen to wear it ironically thereafter, but couldn't use it where she was going next, which was what she needed to talk to Augustine about if he'd stop trying to manhandle her off the sidewalk.

"What do you want?" he finally hissed, when she refused to go.

"That's just it," she said, struggling to explain and to hold her ground at the same time. "I don't know. I never know. But—"

"Then go away!"

"I will be! That's what I'm trying to tell you. I keep having to flip through time, often at a moment's notice, and most historical people don't take well to shorts and a tank top—"

"Modern ones don't either, if they have any taste."

She ignored that, but not the forceful hand on her back. "Wait! I need a favor!"

"Not calling security on you IS a favor," he told her, turning to go back inside his shop. Cassie grabbed his arm, and had a camel almost take a bite out of her hand for her trouble.

She jerked it back and the camel looked at her smugly, its thick lips pulled back in a sneer, its large head draped over Augustine's right shoulder. The harem girl was still clinging to the left, and since neither of them had much in the way of bodies, the hat's powers being limited, the effect was that of a linebacker with a couple of very strange shoulder pads.

Cassie blinked at them.

And then blinked again when a new item suddenly appeared in the air, a sleek black revolver with no visible means of support, which didn't seem to bother it at all. It did seem to bother Augustine, however, maybe because it was leveled directly between his eyes. His baby blues went a little cross-eyed, staring down the muzzle, until they refocused to stare down at Pritkin instead.

"Touch her again and someone else is going to have to handle that absurd show of yours," Pritkin informed him.

"Overreact much?" Augustine sneered.

"Considering how many people try to kill her on a weekly basis? No."

"I'm not trying to kill her! I just want her to leave!"

"Give me what I want and I will," Cassie said quickly.

"And that would be what?" Augustine demanded. Cassie opened her mouth. "In one sentence!"

"A suit. Like the one you sold Sal once."

"Sal?" Augustine looked confused.

"You know. Tony's vamp? You sold her a suit that, well, it became whatever someone needed it to be at the time. Like a swim suit one minute, and a business suit the next. It just sort of morphed—"

"Yes, yes," Augustine said impatiently. "That was last season's model. I don't have any of them left. Although you could check on clearance—"

He turned away, but Cassie caught his arm again. He started to pry her hand off, but the gun moved menacingly closer. He scowled at it.

"I don't want that suit," Cassie said hurriedly. "It only did modern stuff. I want one like it. One that can change into something for whatever historical period I'm in. Like if I have to go to the Sixties one day, and to Victorian England the next—" She stopped, because Augustine's glare had now reached solar-flare levels of forcefulness. "What?"

"Do you have any idea what you're asking?" he demanded. "No, of course you don't," he said, before she could answer. "They never do. All day, every day, it's the same thing. Fat women who demand to be skinny. Ugly women who want to be pretty. Short women who want to be taller and tall women who want me to make them petite! And all through the transformative power of fashion. Because, apparently, using glamouries would be cheating!"

"I don't want to be taller or whatever," Cassie began, only to have him cut her off.

"No, you just want to look appropriate for a hundred—a thousand—different times, many of which have nothing to do with each other fashion-wise, requiring not only different silhouettes, but different fabrics, patterns, notions and accessories! I would have to construct a garment that could go from cotton to denim to watered silk to linsey-freaking-Woolsey, from short to long, from day to evening, from demure to ostentatious, from—" he threw up his hands. "It's absurd!"

"So . . . you're saying it'll take some time?" Cassie said hopefully.

"I'm saying it can't be done!" he yelled, and started back for the entrance to his shop. And then stopped and staggered against the display window, sprawling there to catch himself.

Cassie ran to help him, thinking that the man's perpetually high-strung nature had finally resulted in a heart attack, only to have him glare furiously—but not at her.

"If you don't get this damned thing off me, right now," he said menacingly.

"What thing?" Cassie asked, looking from him to Pritkin and back again. And then making the mistake of trying to help him up. And being snapped at for her trouble by the man, cursed at by the girl and spat on—by the camel.

Cassie stood there, covered in about a gallon's worth of camel slime, and caught between horror and disgust.

"I thought only llamas did that," Billy commented.

"Get it off me!" Augustine roared.

A couple of security guards started in their direction.

"I'll take it off when you give the lady a polite, reasoned response," Pritkin said.

"That's rich, coming from him," Billy snorted.

Cassie stood there and dripped at them.

"You want a reasoned response?" Augustine asked furiously. "Alright, how's this? I have a major show today, and another tomorrow—my first menswear line. Mass orders are sure to start coming in shortly afterwards, just when a bunch of fools want interviews, taking me away from the workroom when I most need to be free to deal with catastrophes. Like my carefully selected model for my upcoming ad campaign calling me from the hospital this morning and saying he can't do it! Skiing accident—in July! And now she," he hiked a thumb in Cassie's direction. "Wants an impossible special order. I don't have time for this!"

"Make time," Pritkin suggested. "Her job's a little more important your ad campaign."

"Not to me!" Augustine snapped.

"How about if I could get you a replacement?" Cassie asked, wiping slime off her face. "For the model, I mean. That would free up some time, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, let me guess. One of those damned vampires of yours?"

"What's wrong with vampires?"

"What's wrong is that everyone does it—"

"I knew he was a hipster," Billy said.

"—not to mention that vampires rely on glamories to look the way they do and the whole premise of my campaign is the natural man. No glamories needed—"

"Just outrageously expensive clothes," Cassie muttered, wondering what to do with her handful of magic slime.

"—and no vamps. I need a mage."

"A mage?" Her eyes came up, and then slid automatically to Pritkin. Billy burst out laughing. Augustine ignored them.

"—and in any case, I've already solved my problem. Part of the show's gimmick is 'be part of the legend'. I'm letting the invitees decide on the new model—"

"How?"

"They're going to be voting on photos I supply of suitable prospects, clad in their favorite couture, if you must know."

"Their favorite? Aren't they supposed to be modeling your designs?"

"Yes, but we're not just deciding on a model, are we? We're choosing the face of *Augustine Homme*. It needs to be someone with panache. Someone with attitude. Someone with a touch of danger—"

"Someone like Pritkin," Cassie said brightly.

* * *

Later that night, Cassie was sitting in the middle of her bed, surrounded by catalogues and glossy magazines. She was trying to narrow down a look for Pritkin that might win the contest, but not having a lot of luck. His iconic one—long leather coat, a couple tons of weapons, a plain t-shirt, and wild blond hair was so ingrained that it was hard to imagine him in anything else. But she had to. She had to!

Not that he'd said he'd do it, even if she did come up with something. He hadn't said much of anything after her pronouncement, or maybe she just hadn't heard him over Augustine's peals of laughter. Cassie scowled. Damn Augustine! Pritkin was . . . well, he was a war mage. They had more important stuff to do than worry about what they were wearing. Or who.

And damn Billy, too. Pritkin looked fine. Okay, the hair could use some help, and maybe the holey stuff needed to go, and the boots were looking a bit scuffed . . . but he didn't look like a hobo, damn it! He looked like Pritkin. He looked fine.

But maybe not fine enough for all those snobby types Augustine was going to have voting. She sighed and went back to flipping through the latest men's mag, which like the others contained a lot of clothes that she couldn't in her wildest dreams see Pritkin wearing. And she only had until tomorrow night!

"Got it," Billy said, and a beam of light hit her in the face.

Cassie looked up, blinking, to see that her laptop had been turned her way, and was glowing brightly in the darkened room.

Billy Joe had recently discovered that his lack of actual fingers did not preclude his being able to manipulate a keyboard, and thus spent a lot of time online these days, including duping a bunch of "flesh bags" in the wild world of internet poker. But this wasn't a list of his latest winnings, it was . . . "Oh, no."

"Oh, yes," Billy nodded, his Stetson bobbing about on its own, because he hadn't bothered to appear all the way. "I did two, so he can choose. On the left, we have the modern cowboy—"

"Forget the left. What the heck is on the right?"

"Vampire hunter," Billy grinned. "I call it Van Helsing realness."

"I call it horrible!"

"Most of the audience will be mages. They'll love it."

"But will Pritkin?"

"Show him and find out. But it's not that far off his usual shtick. Well, 'cept for the collar. And the crosses. And maybe the stakes—"

"I can't show him this!"

"You're just chicken."

"I am not. I just don't think this is his best chance to—"

"Winner, winner, chicken dinner."

"You know what he'll—"

"Bok, bok, bok."

"Damn it, Billy!"

But Billy Joe just laughed, and then even the hat disappeared, leaving Cassie looking at a bunch of the latest in fashionable attire. Well, fashionable in the sense that designers, and presumably their clients, used the term. Meaning that you couldn't walk down a public street in some of that stuff without being scooped up by the guys in the white coats.

But a few of the cowboy pieces were kind of cute, and had she done any better?

She clutched the latest magazine to her chest. God, she *needed* that suit. Time travel was a royal pain in the backside even without the threat of getting lynched for indecent exposure. Or being mistaken for a prostitute. Or a witch. Having a suit that could shift as easily as she did would be just a huge, huge help, and Augustine was a *dick*, and they just had to win that contest . . .

Maybe she was being too pessimistic, she told herself. Maybe Pritkin would like them better than she thought. Only one way to find out.

Ten minutes later, Cassie found herself being unceremoniously ushered back out onto the carpet of Dante's hotel hallway. A couple of printouts fluttered lazily to the ground beside her. "You barely looked at them!" she yelled, at the resolutely shut door.

Nothing.

"Some of the cowboy stuff was nice!"

More nothing.

"Well, crap."



**Billy Joe's Picks:
Upscale
Southwest**

Left and Middle:
Michael Bastian
S/S 2015



Right: Balmain,
S/S 2015 and
Luccesse full
alligator boots



**Billy Joe's Picks 2:
Vampire Hunter**

Right: Alexander
McQueen, Fall/
Winter 2009

Middle Bottom:
3.1 Phillip Lim
silver collar,
Fall/Winter 2012

Below: 19th
century vampire
hunting kit



Clearly, Cassie decided, she was going to need some better help. Which was how she came to be standing on the doorstep of Pritkin's friend and fellow war mage, Caleb. At three A.M.

"What?" Caleb demanded sleepily, rubbing his bald head. He had a gun in one hand and a bandolier of potion bottles slung over his bare chest. War mages answered the door in the middle of the night, but they didn't do it unarmed.

Of course, they probably didn't even shower that way, so no surprise, Cassie thought, slipping past him. "I get that a lot," she told him.

"What?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?" Caleb demanded, as she checked out his living room.

"Exactly."

Caleb sighed and shut the door. "Are you going to tell me what the hell you want, or just stand around being cryptic?"

"I'm . . . not sure." Cassie said, feeling torn.

On the one hand, Caleb's apartment was a pleasant surprise. She'd never thought of him having money, since he dressed in the same standard war mage attire Pritkin favored when on the job, which was the only place she'd ever seen him. But the apartment was a gleaming ode to modernity with chrome and fine wood and a big bank of windows with an impressive view of the Strip. Such apartments did not come cheap. It could be a rental, of course, but still . . .

On the other hand, however, were the worrying Snoopy PJ bottoms he was currently wearing. Which, let's face it, did not bode well. Maybe this had been a bad idea.

"My niece gave them to me," he said, catching the direction of her gaze. "And did you come over here to critique my nightwear?"

"No," Cassie said, feeling relieved. "I came over to get some help."

"With what?" Caleb asked, looking vaguely worried.

But, as it turned out, he was helpful. At least he was once she explained the bet with Augustine, that he would supply the coveted suit if Pritkin was selected from all the various would-be models for the ad campaign. In fact, Caleb even kind of got into it, having harbored a heretofore unacknowledged desire to see his old buddy spiff up a little. And, to Cassie's delight, the closet in the luxurious bedroom was well stocked with exactly the kind of stuff she needed.

"This sounds like fun," Caleb said, unexpectedly grinning at her. "If you need a second horse in the race, maybe I could—"

"It's nice of you to offer," Cassie told him sincerely. "But Augustine only made the bet because it's Pritkin. He doesn't think he can do it."

"Of course he can," Caleb said staunchly. But his eyes flickered a little.

Yeah, Cassie thought. Tell me about it.



Above: Roberto Cavalli, S/S 2012
 Middle: Labouton cammo loafers
 Right: David Yurman dog tags

* * *

The good news was that she ended up shifting back to Dante's with a pile of very nice stuff. The bad news was that she ran into something immediately thereafter, because she couldn't see over top of it. Or make that someone.

"Midnight shopping trip?" Marco asked sardonically.

Cassie tried to slip around him, but of course, that didn't work. When her chief bodyguard was in the doorway, nothing else was going to fit. And that included molecules.

Not that he was fat. Quite the contrary, Marco was one of the guys she'd immediately thought of when Augustine said he wanted someone a little different for his ad. He was tall, dark and handsome in a biceps-the-size-of-small-children sort of way. He'd trained to be a gladiator shortly before his death, and all these centuries later, he still looked like it.

"I just stepped out for a minute," Cassie said defensively, because he was giving her *that* look.

"To do what?" Marco asked pleasantly.

Cassie sighed.

"No, no, it's perfect. Oh, God," one of her other bodyguards cried, half an hour later.

Cassie sighed again, but nobody cared. If there was one thing vamps loved, other than for tormenting mages, it was fashion. So a combo of the two was just pie. Marco had even gotten in on the act, helping himself to a big old piece of sarcasm in the form of a "gladiator chic" wardrobe for Pritkin. That wasn't the

problem, though. It was at least somewhat self-deprecating, poking as much fun at Marco as it did at his target.

No, the problem was what the other boys had come up with.

"I am NOT showing him that," Cassie said decisively.

"Oh, come on. He'll love it," one of the guys said, pushing a collection he referred to as "The Prickly Mage" at her. "If ever anything spoke to the soul of the man—"

"It does not!"

"Oh, really?" The vamp arched an eyebrow. Mircea must make them practice that, Cassie thought resentfully. "Then why isn't he offering to help you?"

"He . . . he hasn't refused," she pointed out, a little lamely. Because he hadn't offered, either.

"Oh, that's big of him," the vamp sneered. "The Pythia, the person he's sworn to help and defend, badly needs something to do her job. Something that could mean the difference between life and death—"

"That's exaggerating."

"—in the right circumstances, something that would require nothing more than a little time on his part. And what does he do?"

"That Caleb guy stepped right up, didn't he?" One of the other vamps pointed out.

Damn it; I shouldn't have told them that, Cassie thought.

"As any of us would if asked," the first vamp said piously.

"Hell, even if not asked," another laughed. "I always wanted to be a model."

"They don't make glamouries that big," someone else said.

Marco threw a pillow at them.

"So take 'em down and see what he says," the first vamp challenged her.

"It's not even five A.M." Cassie pointed out.

"And? Isn't he supposed to be an early riser? And haven't you spent all night on this?"

Cassie sighed.

But ten minutes later, she was fuming. Okay, maybe Austin Powers Revisited wasn't likely to be a hit; hell, maybe none of them were. But she didn't see Pritkin coming up with anything better. Or anything at all.

Cassie stomped away from his room for the second time that night, tired and put out and just a tad angry. The guys were wrong, she told herself. He didn't HAVE to do this. If ever anything went above and beyond the call of duty . . .

Which would have been fine, if Caleb's delighted face hadn't kept swimming in front of her eyes.

Pritkin has the right to do what he wants, she reminded herself again. And anyway, he still hadn't said he wouldn't do it. Maybe she just hadn't found the right combo of war mage and couture yet. And British war mage, at that. Maybe Caleb's stuff had been too American. Maybe what she needed was a different perspective.

Marco's Picks: Gladiator Chic

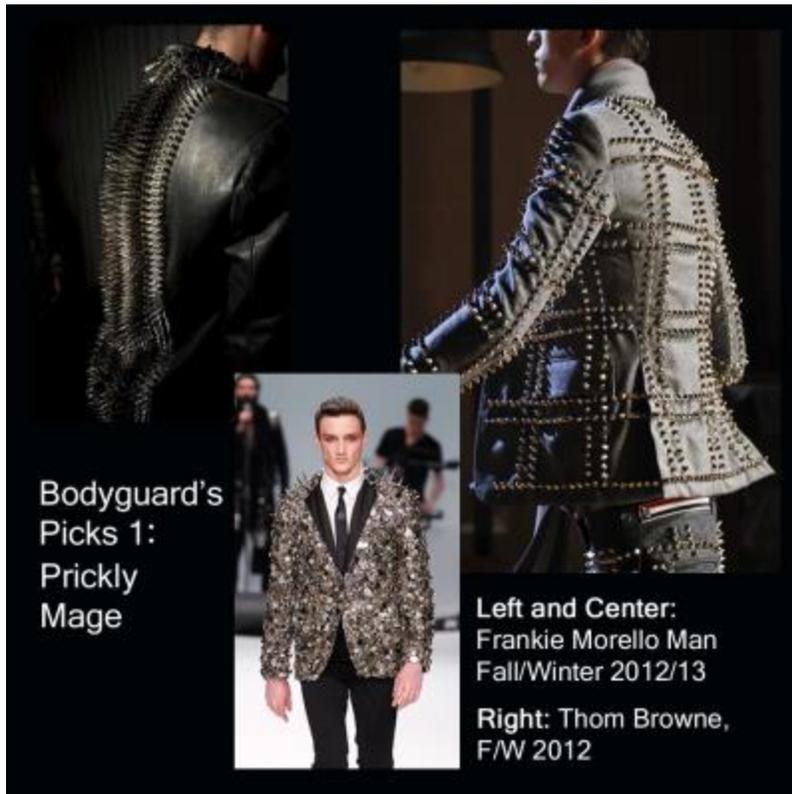


Left: KZT, S/S 2015

Middle: Versace S/S 2015



Middle Below: TraxNYC gladiator ring.



Bodyguard's
Picks 1:
Prickly
Mage

Left and Center: Frankie Morello Man Fall/Winter 2012/13

Right: Thom Browne, F/W 2012



**Bodyguard's Picks 2:
Austin Powers Redux**

**Left: Moschino SS 2013
Middle: Moschino SS 2015
Right: N. Hoolywood, S/S 2012**



* * *

"Come in, dear girl, come in," Jonas told her, opening the door on his vine covered cottage in the English countryside. "I was just doing the washing up."

"Washing up?"

"From lunch."

"Oh, right." Time difference, Cassie reminded herself. And then her stomach reminded her that she hadn't had breakfast. She'd discovered recently that she could do without food or sleep, but not both. At least not and think straight, and she had to think. She was running out of time!

Her tummy grumbled again.

"There's some left," Jonas remarked idly.

Half an hour later, Cassie was finishing up some really wonderful chicken salad while Jonas modelled some of his favorite outfits for her. He seemed to be having a good time, and damn, who would have guessed that he was such a clothes horse?

But Jonas wasn't just her part time magic teacher. He was the head of the Silver Circle, the world's leading magical organization, and therefore a powerful political figure. Of course he had nice clothes. He probably had events to go to all the time.

But the thing was, while his clothes *were* nice, they were nice for an, uh, older gentleman. The layers of tweed and velvet and fine wool that complimented Jonas's shock of white hair and portly frame might not

work so well on Pritkin's more muscular one. Or on the elite of the magical world, who probably wouldn't be impressed by tweed.

"John also left a few things of his here, up in the attic," Jonas offered, "If they're any use to you."

"But it's his clothes that are the problem," Cassie explained.

"Well, yes. But he didn't always dress the same way, did he?"

"Didn't he?"

"Oh, no," Jonas said, and then got off on a tangent about umbrella styles.

Cassie escaped as soon as possible and went upstairs, wondering what could be gleaned from Pritkin's old clothes.

And discovered to her consternation that a wardrobe wasn't the only thing waiting for her in the attic.

"About time you showed up," Rosier said, and threw something at her.

Considering that the blond-haired devil bent over a trunk literally deserved the title, being prince of the incubi, a demon lord, Pritkin's estranged father and Cassie's long-time nemesis, she very understandably ducked. As a result, the bundle hit the wall behind her head, but instead of exploding it only bounced off and came to rest on the dusty floor.

The demon scowled. "Damn it! That's Cavalli."

"It's what?" Cassie asked nervously, shying away.

"Not what, who."

She just looked at him.

"Cavalli, Cavalli. The Italian designer?"

Cassie spent a moment wondering how Rosier had gotten him in there, before it clicked. God, I need sleep, she thought wearily. "What are you doing here?"

"Helping you." He threw something else at her.

This time, she caught it, mostly to keep it from slamming into her face. It was more couture. Versace.

"This isn't Pritkin's," she said. It wasn't a guess. Strewn haphazardly around the attic were a bunch of clothes, most dating from the nineteenth century by the look of them, and the outfit she was squashing between her hands was from the current season. And so not Pritkin. She recognized it from an ad she'd seen in one of the magazines, and had quickly dismissed for looking like something a gigolo would wear.

Or an incubus, she suddenly realized.

"It is now," Rosier said, pulling something out of the bottom of the trunk and sitting on the lid. He summoned a lit cigarette with a gesture, and smoked it while the pages of what looked like a photo album turned over by themselves. "If you can get him to wear it, that is."

"You . . . want him to wear it?" Cassie asked, looking suddenly askance at the expensive clothes.

"I want him to get his head straightened out!" Rosier said, exhaling vigorously. And then muttering under his breath as the pages continued to flip. "Damned boy, nothing but trouble, don't know what I ever did to—ah!"

Cassie jumped, as that last syllable had been as loud as a whip.

“Here it is,” Rosier said, and pushed the book at her—from across the room. Like Pritkin’s gun, it ignored gravity. Unlike Pritkin’s gun, it shot across the space between them and hit her in the gut.

She let out an audible oomph, and wondered if she’d just cracked a rib. But she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of acting like it. She pulled the damned book out of her solar plexus, and glanced at the open page instead.

And then abruptly sat down, pain forgotten, to peruse it more closely.

The picture was old, faded and yellowed, and half obscured since time had glued half of it to the back of the preceding page. But enough remained visible to show her Pritkin perched casually on the edge of a desk, holding a familiar-looking coat. But there the similarities ended.

The hair was more I-couldn’t-be bothered-today and less full-scale catastrophe. The boots had some buttons and flaps on them, but they were also unscuffed and maybe even a little shiny. The shirt likewise was old fashioned and high collared, but it didn’t look bad with the sleeves rolled up over muscular forearms. And the vest was actually attractive, plain gray or some dark material, but snug-fitting and buttoned up over a broad chest.

None of the pieces looked particularly high end; this was a working man’s ensemble. But everything fit him, and was noticeably missing holes, dirt or other signs of wear. And Cassie suddenly realized what she was seeing.

“This was before,” she said slowly.

“Yes.”

Rosier didn’t say anything else. He didn’t have to. The picture was from before Pritkin’s world fell apart, before his incubus abilities accidentally killed his wife, before he attacked his father for not telling him that that was a possibility. Before the demon council condemned him to slavery in the service of said father for all eternity as penance.

Said penance had been postponed because Rosier didn’t want an unwilling, resentful slave; for what he had in mind, that would be less than useless. So he’d cut a deal with Pritkin to allow him to continue his life on earth as long as he obeyed one prohibition, the one thing it was believed that no incubus could ever do: never have sex.

It meant avoiding attracting any women, or interested men. It meant denying part of what made up his nature at its most basic level. It meant forfeiting a major source of his power. And it meant keeping on doing it for as long as he wanted to remain free of his father’s clutches.

And unless Cassie was very much mistaken, *that* was the time Pritkin’s wardrobe went straight to hell.

“What’s wrong?” Rosier asked, seeing her suddenly burning cheeks.

“Nothing.” She gently shut the book.

“Oh, what now?” he demanded. “This is a prime opportunity, can’t you see that?”

“For you.”

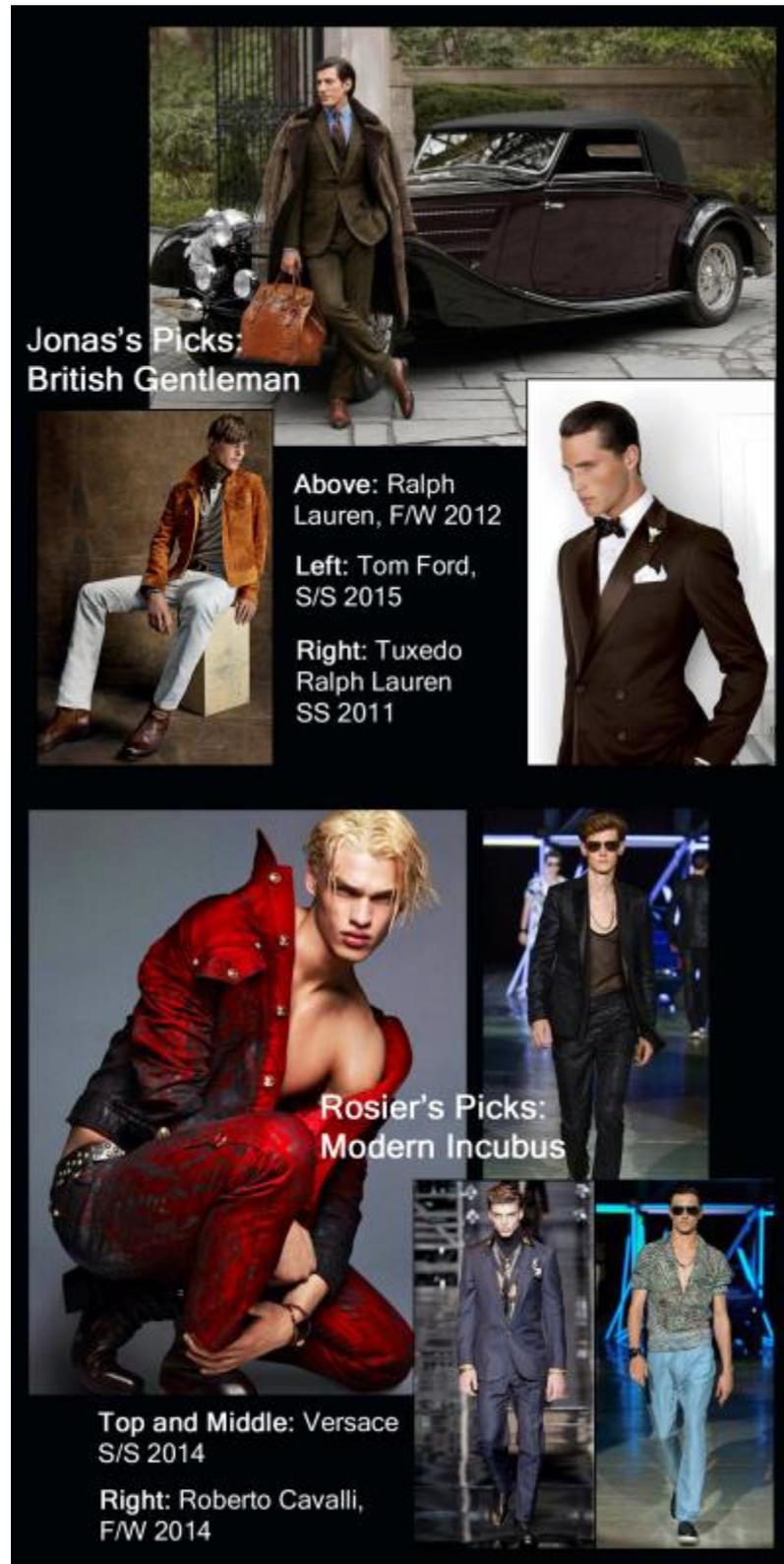
“For him. You want him to live like this for the rest of his life? Stuck here, all but penniless, certainly powerless, put upon by every Tom, Dick and Harry on this pathetic ball of—”

“I want him to do what he wants to do.” And to wear whatever he wanted to wear. She’d been thinking only of herself, of her needs, of the crazy job she’d somehow ended up with and the thousand little details that went with it. She hadn’t been thinking about him.

Or about the fact that the world’s shabbiest incubus might be that way for a reason.

“And you think he’d be better off here with you, I suppose,” Rosier sneered.

“I think that’s up to him, too,” she said. And shifted.



* * *

“Cassie! Cassie!” Someone was yelling her name, and she wished they’d stop. She pulled the blanket over her head. “Cassie!” It didn’t help.

She finally stuck a tumbled blond head out from under the covers, only to see Billy Joe hovering in the air right above her bed. “What?” she demanded.

“Don’t start that again.”

She put her head back under.

“No, no.” A chilly ghost finger lifted up the blanket. “Come out. You’ll like this.”

“I won’t.”

“You will.”

“If it involves getting up, I won’t.”

“How about if it involves getting a present?”

She poked a single eye out. “What kind of present?”

“This kind,” Marco said, coming in the bedroom door.

There were several vamps behind him, but they were almost obscured by the dress box in Marco’s hands. One with Augustine’s label on it. Cassie sat up.

“What is that?”

“Open it and find out.”

So she did. And felt a little disappointed, since it was only a plain grayish dress without even any embellishment on it. It looked like the kind of thing her governess would have approved of, but it definitely wasn’t up to Augustine’s usual standards. Which made it weird that everyone was just standing there, looking expectant.

“Um. Tell him thank you?” Cassie said.

“Oh, don’t thank him,” one of the vamps laughed. “He was ungracious enough about it, the bastard.”

“Ungracious?” She rubbed some sleep out of her eyes.

“Seems he doesn’t like losing a bet.”

“Doesn’t . . . losing . . .” Cassie’s eyes got wide. And then she threw back the covers, grabbed the dress, and hared off to the bathroom, where a moment later she was wearing a stylish fringed flapper ensemble, complete with long beaded necklace. And a second after that, an eighties era, wide shouldered power suit. And then a sixties mini-dress, an Edwardian velvet gown, and a silver disco dress—

“You’re gonna wear it out,” Marco told her.

“It’s so cool!” She spun around. She looked like Olivia Newton John in that horrible movie she couldn’t remember the name of right now but it didn’t matter because she had her dress! Although, come to think of it, why did she have her dress?

"It only works for the last century or so," Marco was saying. "Augustine said something about—"

"Marco."

"—the silhouettes getting too complex after—"

"Marco."

"—that and him having to layer too many spells onto one garment, which would result in none of them—"

"Marco!" Cassie shouted. He stopped, pursing his lips. And raised a single eyebrow. "*How?*"

He grinned. "Go downstairs and see."

And so she did. Before she ever got across the lobby, she did. Because the damned things were almost a story high.

She stopped abruptly, in the middle of the concourse, her mouth hanging open, and stared for a full minute. "Goddammit!"

"You don't like it?"

Cassie spun to find Pritkin standing behind her, wearing the same sweat stained exercise clothes as before.

"No—I mean, yes—I mean—"

"Thought it came out rather well, myself."

"I—yes. Rather . . ." Cassie swallowed. "Well."

"And it matched the title of the collection."

"What?"

"The Natural Man."

She looked back at the very natural, one might even say *au naturale*, man adorning the promotional posters. "Uh—"

"And I suppose Augustine's clients must have thought so, too."

Cassie bit her lip. She didn't think that's what his clients had been thinking. Not the women, anyway. And then she knew it wasn't, when two came out of the shop, loaded down with packages. And started walking their way, stopping every so often to look back at the posters.

"If they could make my husband look like that, I'd buy every damned piece in the line," one of them said.

Her companion didn't say anything. She was too busy looking at Pritkin. And sneering.

Cassie belatedly realized that they were standing directly in the path leading to the main lobby. There was, of course, plenty of room to go around, but someone with a diamond on her finger the size of a quail's egg probably wasn't in the habit of being the one to move. "Excuse me," the woman said glacially.

Cassie stood her ground. But Pritkin moved out of the woman's way, albeit with a slightly ironic bow. She swept past, and the two ladies resumed their conversation. "I wonder who they used?" Quail Egg said.

Pritkin caught Cassie's eye, and smiled slightly. "I suppose the clothes really do make the man."

"No," she told him. "No, they don't."



The End