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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Games Creatures Play**

Edited by

Charlaine Harris & Toni L. P. Kelner

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# DREAMER

BRANDON SANDERSON



Brandon Sanderson has published eight solo novels with Tor—*Elantris*, the Mistborn books, *Warbreaker*, *The Way of Kings*, and the young adult fantasy *The Rithmatist*—as well as four books in the middle-grade Alcatraz versus the Evil Librarians series from Scholastic. He was chosen to complete Robert Jordan’s Wheel of Time series; the final book, *A Memory of Light*, was released in 2013. His most recent YA novel, *Steelheart*, was released by Delacorte in September 2013. Currently living in Utah with his wife and children, Brandon teaches creative writing at Brigham Young University.

“Dreamer” is a blend of what Brandon normally writes—big epic fantasies with interesting styles of magic—with something a bit more weird.

“I’ve got him!” I yelled into the phone as I scrambled down the street. “Forty-ninth and Broadway!” I shoved my way through an Asian family on the way home from the market. Their bags went flying, oranges spilling onto the street and bouncing in front of honking cabs.

Accented curses chased me as I lowered the phone and sprinted after my prey, a youth in a green sports jacket and cap. A bright yellow glow surrounded him, my indication of his true identity.

I wore the body of a businessman, late thirties, lean and trim. Fortunately for me, this guy hit the gym. I dashed around a corner at speed, my quarry curving and dodging between the theater district’s early-evening crowds. Buildings towered around us, blazing with the lights of fervent advertising.

Phi glanced over his shoulder at me. I thought I caught a look of

surprise on his lean face. He'd know me from my glow, of course—the one visible only to others like us.

I jumped over a metal construction barrier, landing in the street, where I dashed out around the crowds. A chorus of honks and yells accompanied me as I gained, step by step, on Phi. It's hard to lose a man in Manhattan. There aren't alleyways to duck into, and the crowds don't help hide us from one another.

Phi ducked right, shoving his way through a glass door and into a diner.

*What the hell?* I thought, chasing after, throwing my shoulder against the door and pushing into the restaurant. Was he going to try to get out another way? That—

Phi stood just inside, arm leveled toward me, a handgun pointed at my head. I pulled to a stop, gaping for a moment, before he shot me point-blank in the head.

Disorientation.

I thrashed about, losing sense of location, purpose, even *self* as I was ejected from the dying body. For a few primal moments, I couldn't think. I was a rat in the darkness, desperately seeking light.

Glow all around. The warmth of souls. One rose from the body I'd left, the soul of the man to whom it had really belonged. That was brilliant yellow, and now untouchable. Unsavory, also. I needed *warmth*.

I charged for a body, no purpose behind my choice beyond pure instinct. I latched on, a lion on the gazelle, ripping and battering against the consciousness there, forcing it down. It didn't want to let me in, but I *needed* that warmth.

I won. In this primal state, I usually do. Few souls are practiced at fighting off an invasion. Consciousness returned like water seeping underneath a door. Panic, horror—the lingering emotions of the soul who had held this body before me, like the scent of a woman's perfume after she leaves the room.

As I gained full control, vision returned. I was sitting in one of the diner's seats looking down at the corpse of the body I'd been wearing—the body Phi had killed.

*Damn*, I thought, chewing the last bite of food the woman had been eating as I asserted control. It left a faint taste of honey and pastry in the

mouth. *Phi had a gun.* That meant the body he'd taken had happened to have one. Lucky bastard.

A group of old women in cardigans and headscarves squawked in the seats around me, speaking a language I didn't know. Other people shouted and screamed, backing away from the body. Phi was gone, of course. He'd known the best way to lose me was to kill my body.

Blood seeped out of the corpse and onto the chipped tile floor. Damn. It had been a good body—I'd gotten lucky with that one. I shook my head, lifting the purse beside me—I assumed it belonged to the woman whose body I'd taken—and began to dig inside. I was an old lady, like the others at the table. I could see that much in the window's reflection.

*Come on,* I thought, standing up and continuing to search in the purse. *Come on . . . There!* I pulled out a mobile phone.

I was in luck. It was an old flip kind, not a smartphone, which meant it wasn't locked or passcoded. Ignoring the yells of the old lady's dining companions, I walked around the corpse on the floor, stepping out onto the street.

My exit started a flood, like I was the cork popped from shaken champagne. People left the diner in a run, many white-faced, a few clutching children.

I dialed Longshot's number. She was the one Phi was hunting, but she wanted to be useful. We often left one of our number back in a situation like this anyway, using him or her to coordinate. With the rest of us jumping bodies and finding new mobile phones, the best way to stay in touch was to have one person keep a set number and phone, taking calls from the other four and relaying messages.

The phone picked up after one ring.

"It's Dreamer," I said.

"Dreamer?" Longshot wore a body with a smooth, feminine voice. "You sound like an old lady."

"That's because I am one. Now." My voice bore a faint accent from the soul that had held this body. Things like that stayed. Muscle memory, accents, anything not entirely conscious. Not languages, unfortunately, but some skills. I'd once stayed in the body of a fine pianist for a couple of weeks playing music alone as the ability slowly seeped away from me.

"What happened?" Longshot demanded.

“His body had a gun. He ducked into a restaurant and popped me in the head when I followed. I don’t know which way he went after that.”

“Damn. Just a sec. I need to warn the others that he’s armed.”

“This could be a good thing,” I said, glancing to the side as a couple of cops pushed through the growing crowd. “The mortal police will be after him now.”

“Unless he Bolts from his body.”

“He’s on his third body already,” I said. “He doesn’t have many to spare. Besides, Bolting would risk losing the gun. I think he’ll stick to the same body. He’s brash.”

“You sure?”

“I know him better than anyone, Longshot.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said, but I could hear the implication in her voice. *He knows you too, Dreamer, and he got you. Again.*

I lowered the phone as Longshot hung up and began calling the other three. I itched to be off, chasing Phi down again, but I had to be smarter than that. We knew where he was going—his goal would be Longshot, who hid atop a building nearby, unable to move. What we needed to do was make it tough for him to get to her.

Phi wouldn’t escape me this time. No more failures. No more excuses.

“Excuse me?” I said, hobbling over to one of the police officers trying to manage the crowd. Damn, but this body was weak. “Officer? I saw the man who did this.”

The officer turned toward me. It’s still surreal to me how people’s responses to me change depending on the body I’m wearing. This man puffed himself up, trying to look as if he was in control. “Ma’am?” he asked.

“I saw him,” I repeated. “Short wiry fellow. Tan skin, maybe Indian, with a green jacket and cap. Lean face, high cheekbones, short hair. Perhaps five foot five.”

The cop stared at me dumbly for a moment. “Uh, I’d better write this down.”

It took a good five minutes for them to get down my description. Five minutes, with Phi running who knows where. Longshot didn’t call me, though, so I didn’t have anywhere to go. I’d know soon after one of the others spotted him. Two of the others would be out like I was, hunting

Phi on the streets. One last man, TheGannon, guarded the approach to Longshot's position.

A team of five to deal with one man, but Phi was slippery. *Damn it.* I couldn't believe he'd gotten the drop on me again.

I was finishing my description of his body for the sixth time when Longshot finally called me. I stepped away from the officers as they got corroborating information from other diner patrons and called in the description. An ambulance had arrived, for all the good it would do.

"Yeah?" I said into the phone.

"Icer decided to get a vantage atop a building on Broadway. She caught sight of our man moving down the street, almost at Forty-seventh. Moving slowly, like he's trying to not draw attention. You were right, he's in the same body as before."

"Awesome," I said.

"Icer is on her way down to hunt him. You're not going to let your past issues with Phi get in the way, are you, Dreamer? Phi—"

"I put the cops on his trail," I said. "I'm Bolting, but I'll keep this phone."

"Dreamer! You'll be on your last body. Don't—"

I closed the phone, turning back to the policemen. I chose a muscular man with dark skin. He wore a white shirt instead of blue, and the others had called him Lieutenant.

"Officer," I said, hobbling up, trying to get his attention without alerting the other police.

"Yes, ma'am," he said distractedly.

I faked a stumble, and he reached down. I grabbed his wrist.

And attacked.

It's harder when you're already in a body. The soul immediately gets attached to the body, and forcing out and into something else can be tough. Besides, when you're out of a body, the primal self takes hold, and it helps you—nearly mindless though you are—*claw* your way through another soul's defenses.

Some people say you can control the primal, body-less self. Learn to think while in that mode. I'd never been able to do it. Anyway, I had a body already, and part of my energy had to be dedicated to holding down



the soul inside, that of the old lady. At the same time, I had to attack the police officer and force his soul aside.

The man gasped, eyes opening wide. Damn. His soul was *tough*. I strained, like a man straddling between two distant footholds, and shoved. It was like trying to push down a brick wall.

*I will get him, this time!* I thought, straining, then finally toppled that wall and slipped into the new body.

The disorientation was over more quickly this time. The officer stumbled as he lost control of his limbs, but I had the body before he dropped. I caught myself on a planter, going down on one knee, but didn't collapse fully.

"Lorenzo?" one of the others called. "You okay?" They'd covered the corpse with a white blanket. It lay just inside the door to the diner. Fleeing people had tracked blood out in a mess of footprints, but some diner occupants and employees still huddled inside the restaurant, shocked by the horror of the death. I could remember that fear, vaguely, from when I'd been alive. The fear of death, the fear of the unknown.

They had no idea.

I nodded to the other officers, standing back up, and when they weren't looking I slid the phone out of the hand of the old lady. She stood frozen and slack-jawed. Her soul would reassert itself over the next hour or so, but she wouldn't remember anything from our time together.

I pocketed the phone and began to jog away.

"Lieutenant?" one of the officers called.

"I have a lead," I said. "Keep going here."

"But—"

I left them at a run. The police thought the killing to be a gang-related hit, and so far, they hadn't shut down the streets or anything. Maybe they would, but it was better for me if they didn't. That would mean more bodies for my team to use, if they needed to.

The cop's body felt strong and energetic. I was left with the faint impression of a melody the cop had been singing in his head before I stole it. That and . . . a face. Wife? Girlfriend? No, it was gone. A fleeting image lost to the ether.

I jogged around the corner, keeping an eye out for the glow of a body