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ARAKNID

A Triumvirate Novel by
CHRISTOPHER ANDREWS

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Araknid

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with the words, “Work on your book as hard as you can!”

The following story takes place approximately
four months after the events depicted in
Of Wolf and Man.

She'll never see it coming, Mitch congratulated himself as he poured the wine. *They never do*.

Mitchell Gamall — “Mitchell” to his clients; “Mitch” to his friends, and to the women he seduced — made a decent living as a photographer. He was quite proud of this fact, as the Los Angeles area often seemed to have more “photographers” peddling their work than wannabe actresses who begged their services. Not that Mitch was above such proclivities, of course; that’s why he was Mitch tonight.

Step One: Get the tasty young ladies into his pad, cater to and/or exploit their insecurities, take a few photos to demonstrate that he really could make them look good. And start the whole process by getting them to take a sip of wine, just a sip or two, so that they would relax. He always bought the good wines, too; the better to cover the taste of his special additive of self-brewed GHB.

Step Two: Once the augmented wine loosens them up, resume taking photos. Said photos become increasingly erotic, but still elegant enough to pass muster as their acting headshots and on their websites. And apply more augmented wine.

Step Three: Once they were completely out of it ... fuck the shit out of them.

Of course, the camera never stopped; that was key. Because when the surprisingly few figured out what had happened to them and started making noise about it, he would reveal the unexpurgated galley of their session — making it clear that if they didn’t *stop* making noise, said gallery would find its way online, where anyone and everyone could enjoy it.

The noise stopped then, every time. Such was the beautiful,

terrible power of the World Wide Web.

His latest acquisition was due to arrive in a few minutes. She had moved into the apartment building across from his a few months ago, but to be honest, he hadn't really noticed her at first — a bit too homely, too short, too frumpy ... scarcely enough to show up on his radar.

Then, one morning, they bumped into each other at the local coffee shop.

Mitch had been nursing a mild hangover from a private session the night before — he never sampled the augmented wine, of course, but that didn't mean he couldn't have a few drinks as the evening progressed — but a legitimate gig today forced him out of bed. He grabbed a muffin with his espresso and sat down for a quick breakfast while he thumbed through his phone. When a woman approached and mumbled a request to share his table, he barely registered her presence as he gestured for her to help herself.

A minute of silence later, he heard another short mumble, which he belatedly absorbed had been the word, "Hello."

Looking up, he realized it was his new neighbor, and that she wasn't quite as homely as he'd first thought; beneath that long, drab-brunette hair, oversized nose, and dowdy sundress, she might prove fuckable after all. This was enough to curtail his usual perchance of avoiding conversations with people while hungover.

They didn't chat long. She proved so shy, he was surprised she had initiated the conversation at all. And she was a real space case, mumbling about focusing her qi to build confidence — he bit his tongue against the comment, "Honey, it's not working" — and experimenting with self-hypnosis toward the same goal. The real pay dirt came just as he was excusing himself to leave: She was hoping for some new portraits of herself — to focus her qi upon, you see — and she had heard that he was a photographer ...

There it is. He turned his discerning eye upon her once more and, finally, decided that maybe she was worth his time after all.

Besides, sometimes the ugly ones work harder.

So Mitch handed over his business card and told her to shoot him an email.

It later occurred to him that he'd never asked for her name, but

that didn't matter; *if* she focused her qi long enough to email, he'd figure it out then. But after a few weeks, he stopped catching glimpses of her as they came and went, and he forgot all about her.

And then, to his surprise, she emailed him after all.

"Summer" turned out to be her name — which prompted a laugh; she was the least "Summer" girl he'd ever decided to bang — and she was due to arrive at his place any minute now.

Finished mixing his augmented wine, Mitch set about tweaking his photography lights. He preferred to start his shoots a bit earlier in the evening, with the setting sun's radiance caressing its way through his oversized windows. That way, he'd have a nice selection of natural and artificial lighting to choose from. Regardless of his ultimate intentions, he always approached his work with a serious eye. More than once, even his more lecherous sessions had provided some solid shots that he, and his subjects, were quite proud of; he doubted that would be the case with Summer, but one never knew.

But, for God only knew what reason, Summer had been strangely adamant about scheduling this gig after sundown, so like it or not ...

A quiet knock at the door brought a smile to his face.

Showtime.

"Come on in!" he called, making a deliberate display of adjusting a final light ...

... except she didn't come in. She just knocked again.

"It's open!" he called. "Come on in!"

She knocked yet again.

What the fuck? he wondered, then made his way across the studio. *Whatever. Maybe she's plain looking and hard of hearing.*

Mitch opened the door ... and his jaw dropped.

Summer stood before him, looking far less "drab" — hell, she was fucking hot. Had he really been indecisive about *this* sweet little number?

Funny thing was, Mitch couldn't articulate exactly what was so different about her. Her nose was still too big for her face, and though this shirt-&-skirt were markedly better than the frumpy thing she'd worn that morning in the coffee shop, she could still use a wardrobe makeover. Maybe it was her hair? She had definitely darkened it, and it suited her ... or, wait. *Had* she darkened it? Or was her skin just

paler than he recalled? Yeah, he thought that was it. Either way, she looked better. A lot better.

Summer still wasn't a "summer," but she would've made a perfect *Autumn*.

And then Mitch realized that he had just been staring at her for several long seconds, like a fuckin' amateur.

"Hi," he managed to say, also like a fuckin' amateur.

Summer offered him a closed-lip smile. And Mitch returned it with a grin that he could feel looked dorky as hell.

C'mon, Mitch! Get your head back in the fuckin' game! Do you wanna bang this bitch or not?

But it was Summer who spoke next. "I'm still new at this," she said, and her voice wasn't nearly as reticent as before; it also struck him as far more melodic. "I'm not sure if I need you to invite me in or not."

That statement was just odd enough to snap Mitch out of it. He scraped together enough dominance to respond with a sarcastic, "That's what most people mean when they shout 'Come on in' from across the room."

She smiled again, but said nothing and remained where she was.

"Oookay. Summer, would you please come inside so I can close the damn door?"

Don't overdo it now, Mitch. Get back in the game, take charge, but don't run her off.

Summer finally got her ass inside, and he led her over to where his lights were set up, the large, cleared-out living room that doubled as his studio. "You can set your purse ..." he started to say, until he realized that she wasn't carrying one, or anything at all — not even a makeup bag. This chick clearly was not acclimated to life in Los Angeles yet. Where had she moved from? He didn't remember, and didn't really care.

Summer took her place center stage without being asked. Her shoulders were back and her head was held high; not at all like their meeting in the coffee shop, and not exactly conducive to his ultimate goal.

"Just relax," he told her as he made his way around his two primary lights — he was going to have to make more adjustments for

that pale skin. He gestured toward her augmented beverage. “Why don’t you have a sip of wine first?”

“No, thank you.”

Doesn’t touch up her makeup and doesn’t drink? She’s not gonna last out here. Out loud, he said, “You should try it — it’ll help you unwind, make for more natural, candid shots.” When she still didn’t pick up the glass, he added with a smile, “It’s a very good Cabernet Sauvignon.”

Amusement played across Summer’s face, and she said, “I never drink ... wine.” This made her giggle for some reason. Mitch got the feeling she was quoting something; it sounded familiar.

Whatever. Maybe I won’t need it with this little weirdo.

“All right then, Summer,” he conceded as he stepped behind his camera. “Let’s start by having you open up that top button and ... let’s have you face this C-stand right here ... good ...”

As soon as he started shooting, Mitch slipped into the zone, forgetting his ulterior intentions — well, at least setting them aside for the moment. He knew some photographers who studied the digital display after every shot, but Mitch preferred to lose himself in the optical viewfinder and do his perusing in segments.

Summer surprised him once again with how tranquil she was; all that self-hypnosis stuff must’ve actually been working for her. He was forced to admit that, as a model, she was a natural; he liked how well, how easily, she took his direction. Maybe he really wouldn’t need the wine after all. To help things along, though, he opened a button on his own shirt — he did pushups every day, so what the hell, right?

The minutes stretched on as the shots stacked up. He reached the point where he would normally ask her to switch into her next clothing choice, but since she hadn’t brought a damn thing with her, he didn’t bother — he just asked her to undo another button, which she did without hesitation, in spite of the fact that she wasn’t wearing a bra. He snapped a handful of chest-favoring closeups, then stepped back to collect his thoughts.

Summer waited, that close-lipped smile looking more and more sultry to Mitch’s appreciative eye. Speaking of eyes, hers were glistening in a peculiar way. He couldn’t put his finger on what exactly it was, but he snapped another couple of shots, this time

focusing more on her face ...

Without prompting, Summer undid yet another shirt button, leaving only the bottom two still connected. Was she trying to pull his lens back down, or just draw him in?

Yeah, I'm definitely not gonna need the wine.

And yet, as he met her gaze once more, he felt almost dizzy. What was *with* him tonight, anyway?

“All right,” he declared, rallying to take charge. “You just stay right where you are, little lady, while I look over what we’ve got so far.”

She nodded, her eyes still shining with what he thought must be excitement. What else could it be, right? It should’ve given him a hard-on ... but instead, he felt the faintest shudder of uneasiness.

Turning away from her — and feeling strangely relieved to do so — he stepped over to his laptop and called up tonight’s folder. Or he meant to, anyway; instead of getting his first shot of Summer, all that popped up was a blank photo of the backdrop, a test shot he didn’t recall doing. Huffing with impatience at himself, he clicked over to the next photo ...

And the next. And the next. What the fuck?

All he kept getting were more empties of the backdrop. Did he accidentally leave it on continuous shooting mode like an idiot? No, that didn’t make sense, because the backdrop kept shifting in every shot, as with the minor adjustments he would’ve made while shooting Summer.

“Everything all right?” she asked, and her tone smacked of teasing. It irritated him.

“Everything’s fine,” he told her, not quite snapping. “Don’t you worry your pretty little head. I’m just ... checkin’ the shots, that’s all.”

“Do we need to take them again?”

He ground his teeth, because he was guessing that maybe they did. Something had to be wrong with the camera; there was no other explanation. And he had been so fixated on tonight’s post-curricular activities, he hadn’t bothered charging his backup-camera’s batteries. What was he supposed to do now, use his phone’s camera? He had to do something — he needed his safety net in place if he was going to bone this chick. Or did he? She sure as hell wasn’t acting shy at all

tonight.

But wait a minute, he told himself, sitting down before the computer. *Stop thinkin' with your dick for a second*. Something really weird was going on here, something that didn't make any sense. If his camera had a glitch so bad that Summer wasn't showing up in the photos, then why could he still see the backdrop so clearly? If the edges of the frame were aligned right—

Mitch glanced up and nearly jumped out of his skin. Summer had crossed the room and planted herself just beyond his laptop. How the fuck had he not heard her coming? For that matter, how the fuck had he not *seen* her coming in his peripheral vision?

"I asked if we need to take the pictures again," she stated, staring at him with a light smirk upon her red lips and those rich, green eyes. Had her eyes always been so emerald? Weren't they a mundane hazel-green even when he first opened the door?

"I ..." was all he managed to get out.

Summer reached out and pushed the laptop closed; Mitch jumped again when it shut with a loud *snap*, and hated himself for doing so. What was happening here ...?

"Let's not worry about the pictures," she told him, leaning forward. He could feel a fevered heat coming off her, but her face wasn't flushed. "I think we both know that's not why I'm here tonight."

"B-but ..." he stammered like a moron, "your, uh, your qi portrait...?"

Summer giggled, flashing pointy little teeth. "Oh, Mitch, I'm impressed! I didn't think you'd bother remembering that." Pushing the laptop aside, she moved around toward his side of the table and parked one ass cheek on the edge, then leaned in to loom over him. "I didn't think you cared about *anything* I said. Not that I blame you. I was such a loser when we first met. I was so intimidated by how good looking you were, I just prattled on and on." She rolled her alluring, unnerving green eyes. "But let me tell you a secret ..."

She leaned further forward, her braless tits practically hanging out. But for the first time since before puberty, Mitch didn't feel any urge to touch breasts so close to him.

"I'm *not* a loser now. Not anymore."

Mitch yearned to run away from her, and he didn't understand why.

"I had a plan for this," Summer told him as she reached out with one finger and probed into the open collar of his shirt. "It was a whole seduction thing. I'd let you feel in charge, then *I'd* take charge, get you in your bedroom and give you a nice surprise." She chuckled at that, her eyes practically luminescing. Her finger stroked upward now, coming to rest underneath his chin. "But you know what ...?"

Mitch grunted something akin to "What?" as he made an impotent effort to pull back.

Summer snagged his chin between her thumb and finger. "I've decided to skip all that and go straight to the surprise." She leaned all the way in, her loose tits brushing against him — her nipples felt, not just erect, but strangely sharp — as she whispered into his ear, "Because I'm hungry."

Mitch couldn't say anything. Hell, he was having trouble breathing. His heartbeat pounded in his ears.

Summer pulled back to reveal glistening eyes that had gone completely solid green, with no white showing at all. And Mitch found his voice.

He started to scream.

Summer shifted the hand that was holding his chin and thumped his throat. That's all she did — thump him with one finger — but it felt like she had karate-chopped his Adam's apple back into his spine. He gagged and struggled for air, thrashing up from his chair on instinct.

Summer snickered and shoved him down hard enough to topple the chair over backward. When he struck the floor, any residual oxygen in his lungs took flight.

Before he could move an inch, Summer was on top of him, sitting on his belly with her knees pinning his shoulders. Mitch had a vague recollection of heat coming off her just seconds ago, but now her flesh radiated cold straight through his shirt.

Summer grumbled with a playful pout, her tone suggesting nothing more than she might have chipped a fingernail, "I wanted to drag this out, I really did. I was going to take you to bed, then turn on you right before you came — to see how long you could keep it up as

I sucked the blood right out of you.” She sighed, then offered an apologetic shrug and a big smile that showed two rows of nothing but fangs. “But, like I said: I’m new at this. Maybe I’ll be able to hold back longer next time.”

Mitch caught almost none of her speech. His vision was fading out as he pissed his pants, and he wondered why he’d been such an asshole his whole life.

Summer bent over him, her features distorting further, becoming more bestial. Even her voice was deeper and rougher as she sing-songed, “Bye-bye, Mitchy!”

Mama ... he whispered in his mind.

Then a blast of wind swept over Mitch, as though the window had blown open in the middle of a hurricane. Except it was over in an instant, and Summer was no longer on top of him.

A loud crash drew his still-dim vision to the left. Summer was sprawled on the floor against the wall, a large dent concaved right into the drywall above her. She shook her head as though dazed, and it pleased Mitch to see it. But what the fuck just happened?

Summer looked up and past him, and her emerald eyes widened. She looked less human than ever, but he was still able to read shock — and fear? — on her gnarled face.

“No,” she growled. Then rage overtook everything else, and she sprang into a crouch so fast it was nothing but a blur. “*No!*”

Mitch managed to draw a tight breath, which triggered strained coughing. Summer ignored him as she leaped toward his apartment door.

She didn’t make it. Mitch continued coughing uncontrollably, so he couldn’t see exactly what occurred. All he caught was what appeared to be an ivory mist shooting past him, slamming her into the wall once more, and then his spasms turned into retching, and his eyes closed against his will.

When he finished vomiting, Mitch drew a slow, deep, painful breath. Throat abused inside and out, he desperately wanted something to drink, would’ve drunk almost anything put before him — even the augmented wine. But even more than that, he wanted to know where the fuck Summer was and whether or not he was safe.

Lifting his head, which felt enormous and doughy, he cast about

the room. To his surprise, almost everything was in its proper place, and this somehow offended him — after the experience he'd just had, shouldn't his whole apartment be in shambles? That would complement the disarray that was his current state of mind.

... *Summer's glistening eyes had gone completely green ...*

Mitch shuddered, a pathetic whine escaping his maltreated throat, and looked around more frantically.

He finally located Summer, but what he saw didn't make much sense. She was halfway to the door, pinned to the wall by the ivory mist; she was struggling but could not break free. Her creepy-ass eyes were wild with fear now, her voice muffled by the mist over her mouth. And a man wearing a trench coat stood over her, his back to Mitch.

But now that his vision had cleared, Mitch realized that it was not "mist" covering Summer's body. It was ... well, he wasn't exactly sure *what* it was, but he thought it might be some sort of ... webbing?

The man standing over Summer hunkered down before her; her struggles grew so fierce that the wall around her began to split and crack, but she still could not free herself.

Serves the freaky bitch right! Mitch thought, but his nerves were still on high alert, his skin crawling and his instincts screaming at him to run! The problem was, Summer and this stranger were between him and the door, and he wasn't thrilled with the idea of getting any closer to them than absolutely necessary.

But whoever the stranger was, Summer seemed terrified of him, so that made him one of the good guys, right?

"Hey, man ..." Mitch began, but his voice was so croaky he had to cough more, which hurt like hell. When he could, he spoke louder, "Hey ... thanks, man ... for, uh ..."

The stranger had been reaching toward Summer, his fingers wriggling toward her belly — long, skinny fingers, Mitch's photographer's eye noted; *arachnodactyly*, "spider fingers," a term he only knew from his brief foray into shooting hand models. When Mitch spoke up, however, the man paused. His head cocked to one side, as though uncertain as to where the sound had come from; Mitch could only see wiry black hair over the shoulders of his filthy trench coat, the coat of a homeless man.

Mitch wished he had not spoken. Where had this guy come from? Why did he show up when he did? How did he get in here? And, more importantly, how had he *stopped* whatever the fuck Summer was?

Mitch knew he wasn't ready to walk yet, let alone run, so he settled for scooting backward, away from his unwanted guests ...

Moving was a mistake. Whereas his coughing and vomiting had evidently been ignored, and his voice had seemed to only confuse the stranger, the second Mitch started his clumsy retreat, the man leaped back to his feet and spun around. His large, black, unblinking eyes pinned Mitch with their malevolent glare.

That is, the man's two *biggest* eyes did. The six smaller ones, three arcing around the larger one on each side, were too small for Mitch to read. That, plus he was equally distracted by the two gargantuan teeth that dominated the lower half of the man's inhuman face.

Taken as a whole, that face was just too much to process. Not that Mitch tried. He was too busy screaming, and this time shitting his pants.

The stranger apparently did not like the screaming. He held open his dirty coat, exposing a mottled torso covered with thick, spiny hairs and four additional, undersized arms reminiscent of a Tyrannosaurus Rex's. A stream of that ivory webbing shot out from somewhere below where a man's belly button should be, crossing the room and coating Mitch's face.

Mitch kept trying to scream, even as he smothered, because the webbing had missed his left eye, and he saw the spider-thing coming for him ...

ONE

The dead man lay in the shadows, slumped against the fence behind the hedge and out of sight from the main street.

The cat, a mangy stray that had been lurking about the neighborhood for weeks, crept closer. The animal knew carrion when she smelled it, and it had been a full two days since she had caught her last bird. She was hungry. This was food.

And yet, something about the body set the cat on edge. Not that it took much; cats tended to be skittish by nature, particularly homeless ones. She wanted the food, but the hair along her back rose and would not relax.

The cat looked around, her ears twitching every which way. A big dog dozed on the stoop across the street, a chain around his neck. A little dog yapped from the window of the house next door, but that glorified rat barked incessantly; the cat had learned to ignore him some time ago. Two birds chirped in the tree above — oh, how she would love to bring down those strident fliers! A car drove by, the big metal thing going too fast for concern.

The cat's gaze returned to the dead man. She licked her chops, her whiskers twitching in concert, and took a tentative step closer.

The body did not move, of course. The man was dead. The cat knew this. And yet ...

She played this game for nearly half an hour. One step forward, stop and look around, two steps forward, then arch her back and retreat a step. Over and over. There was a duffel bag lying next to the body; she paused to investigate this for a while.

Finally, she drew close enough to give the body a tentative poke with her forepaw, then retreated again.

The body did not move.

So the cat closed the distance once more, hunched over, looked around one last time, then opened her jaws to take a bite.

And the dead man grabbed the cat by the scruff of her neck.

The zombie lifted the animal to inspect it closer. Modern lore taught that “scruffing” a cat virtually paralyzed them. The zombie had even seen a video on YouTube where a vet put a binder clip on the back of the cat’s neck, and it was like turning off a robot.

Not so in this case; the cat went berserk. Hissing, spitting, growling, and scratching at him for all she was worth, the terrified little furball twisted and turned in a desperate attempt to escape the dead man’s grasp.

The zombie held the cat away. The last thing he wanted was to have to explain any scratches he might receive. He also wanted to make certain she wasn’t wearing a collar or any other indications of ownership. He had been watching this cat since it appeared on their street, but he wanted to be extra sure.

The cat grew noisier, showing no signs of wearing herself down. The large dog on the stoop across the street lifted his head and guffed a few times.

He needed to finish this before the yowling drew unwanted attention.

The zombie lifted his other hand and smacked the cat atop her head. Just hard enough to stun her, not to kill her.

He needed her alive. For a few more seconds, anyway.

Trey Matthews took the dazed animal’s hind legs in his free hand, turned her sideways ... and sank his teeth deep into the cat’s belly.

* * *

A web ...

Trey, sitting behind a hedge ...?

A man hovering before a fire, speaking something like French, but not ...

“Leve, araknid ...”

A spider ...

Alistaire Bachman rarely dreamt.

Months or even years might pass between them; for him, the hours of daylight were more like unconsciousness than sleeping. And when he did dream, he almost never recalled the details upon waking, but would be left with lingering impressions that occupied him for days to come.

These scarce “feelings” almost always proved apropos to events in his very near future, important events. Such an occasion preceded their first meeting with Trey’s sister, an encounter which led to their gaining the third member of their Triumvirate. Another dreaming incident helped them locate Trey here in this world, where Alistaire and Sean found themselves drawn into the bodies of college students Neil Carpenter and Mark Hudson.

The latter example was, in fact, the only time Alistaire had dreamt since crossing over to this world ... until now.

The erratic images persisted in more rapid succession, flitting through the darkness of Alistaire’s mind:

Trey, with blood on his face, all around his mouth—

The man over the fire again, his dark face hidden except for a malignant smile and piercing, bright blue eyes—

“Obeyi, araknid ...”

The face of a very large spider — a tarantula, perhaps—

Trey shaking his head—

A large spider—

“Obeyi, sèvitè ...”

A web—

Trey—

A spider—

“Obeyi, esklav!”

Trey!

... and then Alistaire’s mind slipped back into oblivion.

ARAKNID

Available now!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHRISTOPHER ANDREWS lives in California with his wife, Yvonne Isaak-Andrews, their wonderful daughter, Arianna, and their Pug, PJ. In addition to his duties as stay-at-home Dad, he is always working on his next novels, and continues to work as an actor and screenwriter.

Excerpts from all of Christopher's novels can be found at www.ChristopherAndrews.com.