

## Meet Meri Palmer

“Bastard!” I screamed.

Rage coursing through my veins, I wrenched off my headset and hurled it to the floor. Thankfully, it bounced off the couch and tumbled to safety on the hoodie I had hastily discarded earlier this afternoon. I sighed with relief and sank into my favorite armchair. After taking a series of calming breaths, I slowly peeled off my sensory gloves and laid them gently in my lap.

I had to stop letting my emotions wreak havoc on my gaming equipment. Given that I had spent nearly all my savings on the most cutting-edge system available (complete with a highly sensitive motion capture camera, thank you very much), I needed to do everything in my power to keep it in mint condition. Even if I could scrape together some money, making another trip to Game City this soon would require a detailed explanation for Grams.

I was nearly twenty-four years old and she *still* monitored my bank account like a hawk. It was infuriating! Her lack of understanding of my interest in gaming didn't help—not to mention her penchant for spouting her great displeasure for my favorite pastime ad nauseam.

But I couldn't entirely blame her. She *had* been my legal guardian since I was eight years old. Not only did she have to deal with the devastating loss of her daughter to cancer at the age of thirty, but she had been saddled with me for the rest of her life. That would be enough to make anyone a little batty.

For a brief moment, I wondered what life would have been like had I not lost both of my parents. Would we have stayed in Chicago? Would I have been the golden girl my parents always wanted me to be? Would the world have made more sense?

Doing my best to shake off both my disappointment in being ambushed in my favorite virtual world and my apparent existential crisis, I jumped up to splash some water on my face. I needed to think of a plan. I couldn't accept defeat just yet.

After drying my face with my favorite Tinkerbell towel, I gave myself a quick once over in the mirror. It was definitely time for a haircut. My blond hair was nearly touching my shoulders and my split ends were so far gone, even I was disgusted by them. Thankfully, the rogue bout of acne I had been afflicted with last week had vanished and my peaches-and-cream complexion had returned in full force. I stared deeply into my clear blue eyes, begging for an answer to my latest predicament. What could I possibly do to get out of this disaster?

A snort of laughter escaped my lips as I imagined what Grams would say to me if she were privy to my thoughts. *Are you serious with this crap? You're all fakakta over this crazy video game! You aren't even living in the real world! Wake up and think about the important stuff. Like finding a man to share your life with. I won't be around forever!*

No matter how hard I tried to explain it to her, my grandmother couldn't understand my attachment to this game. (She had often told me her “Jewish sensibilities” wouldn't allow it.) *SpellBound* had, for all intents and purposes, saved my life. It had given me an escape hatch from the loneliness which threatened to crush me on a daily basis. It was hard enough to lose my father in a construction accident, but then to lose my mother four years later? What little innocence I had left died with her. If it weren't for this “crazy video game,” I might have ended up in a much darker place.

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