

1 – Veronica

Just another night in a cemetery.

Sitting atop a gray stoned tomb, I stretched my arms upward, and then twisted at the waist in either direction. Each yielded a satisfactory crack of my bones. Across from me, Izzy, a fellow dragon rider, reclined along an equally uncomfortable stone top of another tomb. How she found a graveyard only a handful of miles from a festive resort in Ponce, Puerto Rico remained a mystery to me. I could have asked, but I found solace in the lack of knowledge.

“What’s wrong, Valkyrie?” questioned Izzy.

“I’m trying to reconcile us sitting here waiting for revenants.”

“Have you ever encountered one?”

I shook my head and replied, “I’ve read about them in a textbook.”

Izzy released a quick burst of laughter. “That’s not exactly what I meant, but what did the book say?”

“Their lore was originally tangled with vampires because they rise from their grave every night and return in the morning. They literally eat parts of their victims. And... that’s all. It was more of an honorable mention in the undead section of the text than actual information.”

“Those are the highlights,” Izzy confirmed.

I picked up the blade next to me and twirled it. Too short to be a sword, too long to be a dagger, and not wide enough to meet machete standards. Braided leather covered the grip, and in the pommel resided an amber stone, nearly identical in color to my dragon’s beautiful eyes. A gift from Lachlan’s mage friend, Komen, who currently resided inside a

coin store in downtown Chicago. A handmade Scottish style dirk that came with an identical sword I left back in DC. Swords didn't pack well in suitcases, and even with an FBI badge, carry-on had its limits.

Both reminded me of swords I used while playing The Witcher 3 video game, right down to the runes etched into the silver and gold blades. Komen refused to tell me what the symbols meant, insisting it would mean more, and I'd be more inclined to remember them better, if I looked up the meanings myself.

One more thing for me to do on my vacation.

My gaze wandered from the blade to the sliver of moon and multitude of stars dotting the sky.

"Are you sure there are three here?" I asked.

"According to the local scuttlebutt there are. A year ago, twelve women were found raped and murdered over a span of nine months. Authorities eventually found the three men responsible for the atrocities, but the Juarez brothers mysteriously died before they faced trial."

"Jailhouse murder?"

"One of the victims was the daughter of Miguel Morales."

I snorted. "They raped and murdered the daughter of a cartel leader?"

"They either didn't know or were too dumb to care. They were buried here, and a few months ago, women started coming up raped, murdered, and partially eaten. Same MO as the Juarez brothers back when their black hearts beat, minus the flesh consumption."

"Huh," I turned Izzy's words over in my mind and eventually shook my head. "So much for fun in the sun in Puerto Rico," I muttered. I returned my gaze to the sky and resumed picking out constellations.

"How are your eyes feeling?" she asked.

From the directional shift of her voice, Izzy spoke from an elevated position. I lowered my eyes to find her sitting up, watching me while I admire the night's sky.

"Delighted the sun's finally set."

My answer spread an amused smile across her face. "The more time you spend with Lachlan the less temporary the enhancement to your senses becomes. Soon they'll be permanently modified. Like me." She beamed a smile at the end of the last sentence.

"Lately, I feel like I'm already there."

"Hearing is the hardest to get used to, but vision is a close second. At least with your eyes, your pupils will eventually catch up and do the filtering for you. There's no filter for sound other than concentrating on the quiet spaces between the noise."

"Speaking of Lachlan, where do the dragons think we are?"

"I told Koi we were going to pay respects to my grandmother, then have a girls' night out."

"A-ha," I paused, and then added with a frown, "And he couldn't tell you were lying?"

"I wasn't lying. I don't like revenants in my grandma's cemetery. She's supposed to be resting in peace. We'll pay our respects and when we're done... drinks."

"Got it," I nodded but quickly pursed my lips and asked. "And why isn't Maylan with us?"

"Because the pretty, pretty princess is not a fighter."

I smiled and made the sound of an annoyed cat.

"Hey, I like Maylan," she stated but soon amended, "Fine. I find her annoying. Anyway, Oren is super protective of her, and we aren't here to do tombstone tracings or grounds maintenance."

"We kind of are doing grounds maintenance." I winked at her.

Izzy returned my grin, but a reservation I caught in her eyes, dwarfed her smile.

"What?" I asked.

“Nothing. It’s none of my business.”

“It can’t be both nothing and none of your business. What is it?”

She moistened her lips and said, “Can I ask you a personal question?”

I made a gesture with my right hand for her to continue.

“Maybe I’m reading the last couple of days wrong but seems like you’re annoyed with Lachlan.”

A handful of seconds passed while I considered her words and eventually replied, “I wouldn’t call it annoyed.”

“Frustrated?”

I exhaled and rubbed my right fingers along my forehead. “I’m just... he’s so...” I grunted and hoped the noise expressed the sentiment that my stuttered words failed to convey.

“Intense?” Izzy guessed.

“No. It’s more, over-attentive, I guess is a better way to describe it. I feel like he’s waiting for me to go full demon.”

She shook her head. “That’s not it.”

“Then what is it?”

“He’s a young dragon with a crude rider. He’s worried he’s fucking it up.”

“I’m a what now?”

“A crude rider,” she repeated. “It’s what we call riders who were raised outside the community. I grew up learning how to harness and channel a dragon’s energy and learning how to fight. You’ve had what, three months?”

“I know how to fight.”

“Not like a pure rider. I’m not knocking your skill, Val—”

“—I’m not a Valkyrie,” I countered. Izzy continued without a missed beat.

“—but it’s different. And when you consider what happened in Canada last month... it’s enough to cause Lachlan to hover.”

I exhaled a long sigh, studying the runes on the blade. I pulled the right corner of my bottom lip into my mouth and kneaded it with my teeth.

“Want to hear something psychotic?”

Izzy nodded eagerly.

“I hate the way he hovers, but at the same time, I’m afraid he’ll stop once he realizes he’s made a horrible mistake.”

“Nah.” She shook her head. “That’ll never happen.”

“I know. The bond—”

“—hang the bond, that dragon is over the moon for you. He’s finally found his perfect woman. Lachlan is a dichotomy. He’s got this weird thing for law enforcers.”

“That’s not weird. Lots of people have a cop fetish, including me,” I paused and added, “And apparently, a thing for college professors.”

“Yeah, but he has a thing for bad girls too, hence the weird.”

“How is this supposed to make me feel better?”

“In you, he has both.” She offered a shrug. “Sorry, but you are a cambion.”

“It’s cool. No harm, no foul.”

In near unison we snapped our attention in the same direction. Both of us focused on the crunch in the distance. Once more, in tandem, we pushed off from our respective tombs and dropped into crouches on the ground behind them.

My fingers curled tighter around the leather braided handle of my weapon. Three distinct patterns of footsteps echoed with the rumble of distant thunder in the silence of the graveyard.

“Remember,” Izzy’s voice never made it to a whisper and no further words passed her lips.

Once she had my attention, she pantomimed moving her blade across her neck. Glancing in the direction of the movement, she ducked out of sight around the tomb she

perched on top of only moments ago. She wanted me to play bait while she surprised them from behind. An unspoken plan, and one I happily played along with.

Unfortunately, unlike ghouls or their dumber counterparts, zombies, the intelligence of revenants transitioned over from their life to their post-life without diminished capacity. Their patterns changed as two broke off from the front assault and altered their paths to intercept Izzy.

With a split second to decide I called out, "Where are you two going?"

I hoped she heard them coming. I wanted to alter my own direction to assist her, but Juarez number three hurdled the last tombstone between me and him.

I ducked and slid under the undead man's swinging fist. Izzy warned me of their increased strength, but a terrified yelp escaped my mouth when the punch cracked the cement tomb blocked only moments ago by my head.

He moved nearly as quickly as me. By the time I recovered my footing, he charged again. I ducked, pivoting on the balls of my feet, and sliced with my dirk. The blade caught nothing but air as he performed a lateral flip I've only ever seen when watching Olympic gymnasts. If I was having trouble with one, how was Izzy holding up with the other two? I needed to make it to her.

Quick.

We danced more than we fought. I swung. He jumped back or to the side. He lunged. I stepped to the side and counter swung. After the equal misses we would reset and start all over again.

"Not fair," he rasped. "Your blade. Not fair."

"If you want fair, don't fight women in cemeteries."

For a moment I wondered if the broken English spawned from his undead status or from him speaking little English in life. My lack of concentration resulted in a missed step. I went flat on my ass as he charged, and in the near distance, Izzy yelled.

The revenant straddled my waist like he jumped into a saddle on a horse. Icicles disguised as fingers circled my wrists and pinned them to the ground, making the blade a non-factor.

I should have been able to move him. He couldn't have weighed more than a hundred and sixty pounds, but his mass trapped me on the ground.

"Ahora es justo."

He peeled his lips back in a snarled grin. A row of jagged edged teeth pierced through dark gums. He snapped his mouth down at me. He aimed for my neck, but I managed a solid head butt into his lips. He snarled again and I delivered a second blow. Our dance took on a new routine, until he changed his step. I cried out when he sank his teeth into my shoulder, but the pain didn't distract me from the next snapping bite as he no doubt hoped it would.

The muscles in my chest contracted and flared with a pain consistent of acid reflux on steroids. If I turned my head to the side, he'd have my throat, but if I vomited on him, maybe he'd be disgusted enough to let me go.

Instead of another painful head butt I met his lunge for my neck with my own open mouth. Not my dinner, but a semitransparent viscous substance sprayed onto his face with the smell of syrupy oil. His hands sprang up to deflect the liquid and block it from his eyes and mouth. No longer pinned to the ground, I swung the dirk, removing both hands from his wrists in one sweeping motion. His head departed from his neck in the follow up killing slice.

Without thought, I pushed off his corpse and ran to the sound of the other battle. It raged on but that didn't mean I wasn't already too late. I reached Izzy in time to see the head of a revenant tumble to the ground. His body took a handful of stumbling steps before he collapsed several feet from where his head lay.

“Where is...” my eyes fell on the decapitated corpse of the third revenant. The question of his location answered by the headless body.

“Where you been?” she questioned with an unbridled grin. Her breath came out in quick pants from the exertion of the fight.

“I—”

“—where are they?” Izzy questioned.

“I thought there were only three.”

“No. The dragons.”

I parted my lips but closed them just as quickly and offered Izzy a confused look. “How should I know?”

Izzy sniffed. Stepped closer to me and sniffed again. “Holy biscuits! Is that you?”

“Is what me?”

“That smell,” she exclaimed. “Haven’t you ever noticed it when Lachlan flames on?”

“Not,” I paused, tried, and failed at memory recall. “Really.”

She brushed her finger along my shirt. I looked down in time to see the pad of her thumb come back stained brown. The viscous material I spat up dotted my shirt like splattered blood.

Izzy clapped her hands together and let out a whoop of excitement. “Holy shit, Veronica! What did you do?”

“What? Nothing.”

“Oh my god, did you breathe fire? You didn’t tell me you could breathe fire. That is so fucking badass do it again. Do it again! I have to see this.”

“Izzy,” I grabbed hold of her shoulders to keep her from jumping up and down. Her excitement only caused a resurgence of my panic. “Izzy, stop. I didn’t breathe fire. I spat up...” I tugged the hem of my t-shirt, so it pulled away from my body, “Whatever this is.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief. “Open your mouth.”

“What?”

“Come on,” she made a beckoning motion with her hand. “Open up.”

When I failed to open wide enough, Izzy assisted by pushing my top and bottom teeth away from each other. She didn't say what she saw, but she shrieked with the exuberant joy of a four-year-old finding a puppy under the tree on Christmas morning.

“No. Fucking. Way.”

“What?” I demanded.

“The dragons are going to freak.”

“What? No! We're not telling them what I did.”

“Why not? You just created part of the mixture used in their fire. Like natural napalm. Do you have any idea how rare that is? This is so fucking cool.”

“No,” I replied in a high-pitched voice. “Not cool. Nothing about this is cool.”

I swallowed and tasted the substance. It clung like a thick coat of oil in my mouth, only I tasted oil before, and this damn sure didn't taste the same. I placed my hands on my thighs and tried to steady my breathing.

“Whoa, hey... okay, deep breaths.”

“This is...” I panted and spat on the ground in between words. “So, fucked.”

“You're not looking at the bright side.”

“My body created napalm! What bright side am I missing?”

“You know what?” Izzy placed her hands on my shoulders and helped me straighten up. “You'll feel better after a few drinks.”

#

“Goddamn Reign of Fire.”

In the bathroom of the most dive of dive bars, I scrubbed my hands in the caliber of a doctor prepping for surgery. I perpetrated the ruse for the benefit of my fellow bathroom companions and stopped when the last of the giggling gaggle of gals exited.

Once alone, I opened my mouth as wide as I could and stared at the back of my throat. An extra hole resided in the center of my right tonsil. It remained constricted and tight but the tiny opening in the center was undeniable.

Positive my eyes deceived me I stuck my finger into my mouth. Touching it with the tip of the nail on my index finger threatened to trigger my gag reflex, so I settled on limited exploration with the back of my tongue. It felt firm and hard, like a muscle. But even with my tongue's partial brushes over the edges, the muscle did not relax or open.

I had no evidence or proof, but I knew that must have been the source from the viscous material I sprayed on the revenant. How did it work? Was it controlled by fear or a self-preservation mechanism?

I turned on the tap, splashed water on my face, and patted my skin dry with toilet paper since the paper towel dispenser lay empty and abandoned under the sink. It wouldn't stand up to scrutiny, but on a glance and under dim light the spots on my t-shirt appeared purposely styled by a designer.

I raised my hand and touched the pendent connected to the necklace around my throat. A silver heart the size of a dime, with an amber stone embedded on the external side. On the side next to my skin, Lachlan engraved the platinum pendent with our initials. I only removed it during showers, which was more often than I removed the bracelet of protection he gave me back in Chicago, on the night Komen mated us. And more than I removed the charm bracelet that contained the St. Michael medal from my aunt.

Komen's bracelet warded against demon by the power of Lachlan's scales.

St. Michael warded against everything else by the power of Aunt Deloris's beliefs.

Neither left my arm.

I tucked the pendant back inside the shirt, departed the bathroom, and returned to the table Izzy and I commandeered just a few steps away. To be fair, the inside was so small, the bathroom, bar and front door all lay near each other. Music dominated by trumpets and guitars filled the small room through tinny speakers devoid of bass, hidden in the dark corners of the ceiling on either side of the wall with the bathroom door.

Outside of myself and Izzy a handful of people occupied the interior. All appeared to be locals from the adorably hairy bartender making casual conversation with the giggling gals of the bathroom, to the couple sitting by the front door, to a table of five men playing some version of poker.

As a pair of slightly bloodied strangers, Izzy and I received questioning looks upon our entrance. However, my dark complexion and Izzy's flawless Spanish created the illusion of us being locals to the area, if not necessarily the bar.

A near empty pitcher of warm beer sat towards the middle of our table, along with scarred plastic glasses of questionable cleanliness. I came out to Izzy taking a healthy swig from her mug. She raised her tumbler to me and downed the rest of the contents.

"Well?" she questioned and refilled with the rest of the beer in the pitcher.

I shook my head unable to find the right words.

She raised the empty pitcher and in Spanish called out to the bartender for a refill. I knew enough Spanish to translate a few key words, *mas* and *cerveza* being two of them. But I put my mental high five on hold when the dry blood surrounding the sliced material on the back of Izzy's shirt captured my attention.

"Izzy, your shoulder."

She glanced in the direction but waved it off. "It's nothing."

"Did one of them," I looked around and lowered my voice. Sure, everyone knew preternatural creatures existed. That didn't mean I wanted to announce our activities.

“Did one of them bite or scratch you? Don’t we need to clean it out? Will something happen to you? Or me? We’re not going to change, are we?”

She expelled a full-bodied laugh that left her with only the ability to give a nod of gratitude to the bartender who swapped our pitcher with a full one. Yep. Not cold.

“Val, you are hilarious. They’re revenants, not werewolves or zombies. Worse thing you can get from a revenant’s bite is an infection.” She reached over her shoulder and winced when her fingers encountered the wound. “Besides, this is from my own blade. Drink.”

I raised my glass, banged it against hers and downed more warm beer, swallowing until I drained the last drop. My throat felt the same and everything went down my esophagus as intended. I refilled our tumblers and immediately drank more.

“Not the best but it takes the edge off.”

“Thanks to Lachlan, I’ve developed a tolerance for warm beer.”

“What is it with Brits and warm beer?” Izzy made a playful face of disgust. “Anywho. Feeling better?”

I shrugged and said, “My head is all over the place.”

She nodded, “I’m not surprised, but you did well.”

I chuckled at that. “How would you know? You were fighting two of them.”

“I know because after fighting two, I did not have to fight a third,” she offered a shrug to my raised eyebrow. “Fighting revenants isn’t easy. They’re fast. They’re hella strong. And their teeth can rend flesh from bone. That bite is just a scratch compared to the damage they can do.”

“Looks like we both have a couple battle wounds.”

“Yeah, but only one of us expelled a palmitic compound.”

“In the cemetery you said this is rare.”

“I have not met any other fire drake riders that can do it. Most we can hope for is variations of pyrokinesis. The range of the ability varies from rider to rider, and it’s not

guaranteed. And after being mated it takes decades to manifest. You breathing fire is a fucking epic.”

I held up my hand. “I can’t breathe fire.”

“No but spitting out palmitic sounds like a logical first step. Oren might know more about it. If not, we add it to the ‘Ask Swain’ list.”

I picked at a groove in the table with my nail. “I’m serious about not telling our dragons yet.”

In the middle of finishing her beer, Izzy slowly lowered the glass. The space between her eyebrows became marred by a frown.

“I thought you were joking.”

“Nope,” I made an invisible circle around my face with my right index finger. “This is my serious face.”

“Why? This is a good thing.”

“Is it though?” I asked.

Her lips parted, but words did not immediately come out of her mouth. Instead, a couple beats passed with her staring at me before she spoke. Understanding settling in behind her eyes.

“You think it’s related to your being a cambion?”

“Makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“We don’t have any proof of that.”

“You’ve never met another fire drake rider with the ability to breathe actual fire.”

“It’s not like I know every fire drake rider in the world.”

“If I tell Lachlan, he’s going to become more of a hover dragon than he is now, and Koi doesn’t need another reason to give me the stink eye. Better to wait and see if this even becomes a thing.”

“It’s already a thing,” Izzy said. “Besides, we’re not supposed to keep secrets.”

“Says the woman who told our dragons we were going to pay our respects to her *abuela*.”

“We did,” she stated with mock indignation. “Is it our fault those undead bastards showed up?”

“Uh-huh.” I said and finished my beer.

“Speaking of which, we should head back before they come searching for us.”

“What are we going to tell them about...” I gestured to her shoulder, and then mine.

“We’ll tell them we kicked some revenant ass. Trust me, they’ll be impressed.”