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## 1 - Veronica

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*“You are mine.”*

Last night’s nightmare prevented me from wholly concentrating on the dragon in front of me. Determined to linger in the front of my memory, like an under the covers fart. Sparring with Lachlan turned painful with multiple blows landed to my torso, stomach, side and thigh. And he circled again. Hunting for another opportunity.

We sparred in the park across the street from the apartment me and Sigmund shared in the pre-dawn sleepy hours of the morning. Only a handful of joggers made rounds on a manmade pathway. None of them paid any attention to us. They either knew we sparred or used lack of acknowledgement to remain uninvolved. If it turned out to be the latter, it just meant the parks in DC matched those in Chi-town.

We agreed not to pull our punches, but unable to land a punch I had nothing to pull. Even as I fought Lachlan, the image of the demon my subconscious conjured in my sleep remained with me.

My nightmare demon visually resembled a CGI demon in a B-rated Netflix movie Sigmund and I watched days ago. Visually more frightening, the memory of the growls Durabas emitted between words terrified me more than any computer-generated television demon.

Worse than the look, the smell. The putrid mixture of baby powder, mixed with spoiled milk, left to bake in the summer sun. The stench lingered after I woke and maintained the adrenaline of fear at the back of my throat.

I wrinkled my nose at the sensation of olfactory recall. The feel of weightlessness replaced by the pain of my back impacting the grass blanked out all conscious thought. A deep pulsing ache radiated

between my shoulder blades and traveled down the track of my spine. It dissipated as quickly as it appeared and left a fleeting numbness behind, just as the morning dew dampened the cotton of my tee shirt and pants. I opened my eyes at an unpredicted solar eclipse and stared up into Lachlan's shadowy face.

"You are not concentrating," he chastised.

"I am."

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing."

Two lies in under a minute. Lachlan frowned his disbelief, offered a hand, and pulled me to my feet.

"A newly born fawn could have dodged that last maneuver."

I gasped and clutched a hand to my chest. "What kind of monster picks on baby deer?"

His pointed look telegraphed his lack of amusement.

"I'm distracted." I admitted.

"That much is obvious. Why?"

I tapped my hair and used the same finger to point to his. Lachlan dropped the fight stance he adopted and passed his fingers over the hints of curls of his recently chopped hair. Ever the opportunist, I used the momentary distraction to perform a leg sweep and successfully dumped him on his backside.

"Now who's not concentrating?"

"Very cheeky."

I returned the favor he extended early and pulled him to his feet.

"Why'd you cut it?"

"You do not approve?"

“It’s your hair.”

I feigned indifference and pushed aside the memory of disappointment when I opened the door that morning. In the short time I knew him, the silkiness of Lachlan’s curls engrained into my tactile memory.

The frown that created notebook paper lines out of his brow relaxed. He reached for me. No punch offered, but the gentle caress of his fingers along my cheek.

“It is an old custom for mated dragons and riders to maintain a shorter hair style.”

“Why?”

He continued to stroke my cheek with his thumb, even as his shoulders rose and fell in a shrug.

“Perhaps it sprang from practicality for riders. It makes it easier to fight if you do not have hair in your face, and near impossible for your enemy to grab a hold.”

“Hm. I can see how long flowing locks for a dragon can be problematic in a battle. All that head tossing you guys have to do.”

“Ever the smart ass,” he returned my smirk. “For dragons, it is from a sense of solidarity.”

“I hope you’re not expecting me to cut my hair.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “As I said, it is an old custom. I dare say an ancient one that is upheld by few dragons and even fewer riders.”

Lachlan repositioned his fingers under my chin and collapsed what little space existed between our bodies. His intent to kiss me turned to curiosity as his fingers followed the track of his eyes and caressed the gold medallion that worked free from under my shirt. He plucked the medallion from where it rested, just south of the hollow of my throat. His thumb trace the shield shaped design. His eyes poured over the etching and the implication behind it.

“St. Michael,” he stated.

“A gift from my aunt.”

“Interesting choice.”

“He’s the patron saint of law enforcement.”

“And the archangel that deposed Lucifer.” He returned the medal to my skin. “Is it safe to infer you told your aunt about your heritage?”

“Sigmund didn’t leave me much choice. It was the most awkward and embarrassing conversation of my life.”

“There is no reason for you to be ashamed.”

I blinked slow and deliberate and drew my eyebrows together in an incredulous frown. “You’re kidding right? Being the daughter of a demon is plenty cause for shame.”

Lachlan stepped closer. “Roni—”

“—I should get back. I have to shower and get ready for work.”

Without waiting for a reply, I began the short walk back to the three story, red brick building.

Lachlan quickened his pace and caught up with me. “What is the matter?”

I opened my mouth, but Lachlan continued and added rules to my reply.

“And do not tell me nothing again.”

I glanced at the dragon. Did he truly not see it, or simply ignored it? The real question I wanted to ask took a backseat.

“I had a bad dream, and I guess it left me more rattled than I care to admit.”

“About your father again?”

I shook my head and I mounted the stairs of the apartment building. “Asmodeus. I guess he wanted to check in on his prize.”

The corners of Lachlan’s lips curved downward and vertical lines appeared between his eyebrows. I silently chided myself for the off-handed comment. My sarcasm sliced like a scalpel sometimes.

“I wish you would not joke in that fashion. You do not belong to him.”

“Durabas said differently.”

“Demons lie. It is what they do. It is as basic to them as breathing. We do not know to what purpose you were branded with Asmodeus’ seal, but until we find out we will not assume worst case scenario. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

I said the words, but the true impact remained unobtainable. Over the course of the past weeks, my mind conjured multiple worse case scenarios, and invented new ones each day.

“Now, tell me about your dream.”

I shook my head. “I’d rather not talk about it. It’s just a dream. Dreams can’t hurt me.” If only I believed those words.

“No.” He climbed one step up, then another, and another, until he stood on the same level as me. Forcing me to tilt my head back to meet his eyes. “But it is obvious it upset you. That it upsets you still.” He paused. His eyes danced across my face. “The offer still stands.”

“If I were staying on your boat—”

“—Or my home in Georgetown,” he amended.

“Either one, I can say with confidence it’s not where I’m resting my head that’s giving me nightmares.”

“No, but I could offer you immediate comfort.”

“I don’t need you checking the closet and under the bed for the boogeyman.”

“Very well, then I could act as your sounding board.”

“I don’t want to talk about them.” I bristled like a harassed porcupine.

“Running from your problems—”

“—Not wanting to talk about my problems does not equate running from them. I’ll talk about them on my terms, when and if I’m good and ready, and not before. Clear?”

“Exceedingly.”

“I need to shower.”

I removed the front door keys from the pocket of my sweat pants.

“As do I.” His curt tone left no room for me to wonder if he was fishing for an invite to shower with a friend.

“I’ll see you at the office?”

“No, you will not. The team is not currently working a demon case, which means my expertise is not required.”

“Oh,” I took his words like a fist to the gut. “I just assumed...” Unsure how to finish the sentence, I let it peter out on a mumble.

“I lecture at Georgetown University when I am not otherwise engaged.”

“Right, you told me that.” I inserted the key into the lock and opened the door. “I’ll see you later.”

“Tonight?” Lachlan pressed his hand against the glass pane of the door and kept it from closing behind me. “I would like to see you tonight.”

In less than a heartbeat, his voice downshifted from annoyed, into that accidentally, on purpose seductive tone he used on me in the past. His ultimate goal being my compliance, not my panties. Though I doubted he would turn down the latter.

“You mentioned you like ballet, so I took the liberty and purchased tickets to tonight’s performance of Swan Lake. A dance and dinner to welcome you to your new hometown.”

I faced Lachlan and admired his handsomeness. Ballet and dinner. A normal date night out on the town. But the same amber pools that pulled me in reminded me of the abnormality of our lives. He rested his body between the door and the door frame and hit me with that cocky grin rivaled only by the brightness of the sun.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” I replied, and added to appease his raised eyebrow. “It’s not a copout. I literally have no idea which boxes contains clothing and accessories worthy of Swan Lake.”

“Let me worry about your attire.”

“What does that mean?”

The smirk grew just a touch wider. “It means, I will pick you up at seven.”

He waited for my protest and list of why-nots. At my silence he abandoned his position as door stop and stepped further inside. The door closed with a resonated thud, while Lachlan maneuvered me against the wall of mailboxes. He touched his fingers to the wall on either side of my head. Trapped, but not pinned.

“What do you think you’re doing, Brynmor?”

“Sending you off with a kiss.”

I scoffed. “I’m not heading into battle.”

“You are an FBI agent. Who knows what your day will hold.”

He interpreted my parted lips and silence as permission. Captured my mouth with his. The world melted away when Lachlan kissed me, and despite multiple uncertainties on my side, his mouth sealed around my bottom lip and silenced all thoughts. Marble walls and brass mailboxes dissolved.

When we ended the kiss, he promptly exited the building. I watched Lachlan jog down the steps and walk down the street towards his car before I headed up to my pseudo new home. Boxes lined every wall in the apartment and in some areas stacked high enough to eclipse my height. Belongings of two households, combined into one space, made for tight quarters.

I detested the clutter. I wanted to unpack and get rid of the boxes, even if it had only been a day. But I saw the pointlessness of unpacking only to repack when I found more permanent living conditions. Sigmund and I hadn’t lived together since he joined the marines and I went off to college. Our living situation needed to work itself out before we worked on each other’s nerves.

I hung my towel on the bar outside the shower door, stripped off my clothing and stepped under the jets. I scrubbed away the dirt and sweat from our sparring session, but not even the sweet scent of honey and shea butter from the body gel washed away Lachlan's words.

Perhaps truth lay in Lachlan and Talia's separate, but identical observations.

Lachlan and I mated. In that lay a stronger bond than matrimony for dragons. What difference did it make if I lived with him outside of marriage or not?

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"Nervous?" Sigmund asked.

I plucked the bread from Sigmund's toaster and joined him at the table. He slathered jam on his. I spread the scrambled eggs already on my plate over mine and topped it with bacon.

"About what?"

"Our first day as feds." Sigmund took a large bite from his toast and chomped several times before he continued. "Is it my imagination or are you not that psyched? This is your dream job."

I took a bite of the open-faced sandwich and chased it with a healthy gulp of coffee.

"I wouldn't call it a dream."

"Fine. Goal. Whatever. Point being you applied to the bureau."

"To a different department three years ago." I followed the statement up with another bite.

"And now they've offered you a job on a silver platter."

"Pewter platter," I amended. "I applied to the behavior analyst unit, not predator crime."

"This sour mood of yours, does it have anything to do with your dragon?"

"He's not my dragon."

Sigmund's right eyebrow arched upwards as he gave me a pointed look.

“Alright, fine, he’s my dragon.”

“And yet you’re here and not moving in with him. Aren’t you guys married?”

“We’re not married.”

“You’re sorta married.”

“Well, he hasn’t put a ring on it, so we’re not married.”

“Me thinks the lady doth protest too much.”

“Me thinks the cousin doth pry too much.”

Sigmund chuckled. “I’m just asking... why are you here?”

“Sick of me already, eh?”

“Just wondering if there’s trouble in paradise, so to speak. You haven’t really talked about him since he left back in Chicago.”

I smiled lightly, finished my coffee, and placed the cup back on the table. “Since when did you join Team Lachlan?”

“What are you talking about? I like the guy... dragon... whatever.”

“Yeah. Like you like having a root canal.”

“I’m not going to lie, I don’t completely trust him, yet. I may not ever.”

“What does he need to do to gain your trust? Literally die for me? He saved my life isn’t that enough?”

“And in order to do it, he had to perform some binding ritual that’s like a marriage, but not like a marriage. A little too convenient if you ask me.”

“There’s nothing convenient about it.”

“You’re telling me. Are we going to have to come up with a system?”

I reached for a napkin as Sigmund spoke, but I stopped wiping crumbs from my lips at his cryptic question.

“A system for what?”

“You know. A sock or a kerchief on the doorknob if we have company over.”

Laughing, I balled up the napkin and tossed it at his face. “Stupid.”

“About time. I was beginning to think you left your sense of humor in Chicago.”

“What can I say, I don’t like change.”

The laughter faded into an easy smile. For a moment we drifted back home and into our regular routine of sharing breakfast on the way to work.

“Think we’ll find a place like *Arthur’s Diner* here?”

Sigmund cringed. “I hope not.”

“Hey, the food wasn’t that bad,” I defended. “Their hotcakes were decent.”

He gave a bark of laughter, “Getting nostalgic already? Saying the food at *Arthur’s Diner* isn’t bad, is like saying Antarctica is just an island.”

“Technically it is.”

“I will miss a lot of things about Chicago, *Arthur’s Diner* will not be one of them.”

The doorbell momentarily ended our debate on the deliciousness, or lack thereof, of the food at the diner across from the precinct back home. Sigmund disappeared down the hall and returned a few minutes later with Ben in tow.

Benjamin Dixon made up one third of Victor Carter’s team. Lachlan referred to him as a sensitive. A mundane human who couldn’t work magic but sensed it. Lachlan and I interpreted the word mundane, differently.

He looked the same as the last time I saw him, minus the haircut. He and Lachlan might have received a buy one, get one special at *Supercut*. His new shorn hair added golden tones to his locks and made him resemble a new army recruit on leave, since he wore jeans and a polo shirt instead of

fatigues. Lack of jacket left his shoulder rig exposed for all the world to see, along with the FBI badge clipped to his hip.

“Agent Greer, agent Sykes,” he greeted with a wide grin, arms crossed over his chest.

“Would you like some coffee, Agent Dixon?” Sig returned the grin and played along with the formal introductions.

“I’m good. Just came to pick you two up.” Ben’s gaze pinged from me to Sigmund. “You’re about to get a down and dirty tour of northeast DC”

“Northeast DC?” Sigmund paused to gulp the last of his coffee. “I thought FBI building was downtown?”

“We’re not going to HQ. A body turned up this morning which might be related to the case we landed last week.”

I rinsed our plates and loaded them into the dishwasher. Grabbing my jacket from the back of the chair, I clipped my holster onto my hip and headed outside with Ben and Sigmund to the unmarked unit double parked in front of the building. He left the hazard lights blinking, but the government plates insured the black SUV from potentially being towed. Although I arrived first at the truck, I left shotgun open for Sigmund and climbed into the back behind Ben.

“We did some research on the way out here,” Sigmund began. “Turns out there’s more than one PCU.”

“Different teams of the predator crime unit focus on different monsters.” Ben began. “Specialization creates expertise in a particular field. Right now, we have three divisions. The undead team focuses on zombies, vampires, ghouls, ghosts, if it doesn’t have a pulse, was reanimated, or failed to go into the light, they take care of it. Our team specializes in magical, non-human entities. Spirits, demons, fae—”

“—Magi?” I interrupted.

“They would if the bureau new about their existence.”

The pointed look Ben delivered with his answer lasted longer due to the stop light. He stared at me in the rearview mirror, perhaps broadcasting a telepathic message I failed to receive. If the bureau still knew nothing about magi, Victor must have left Komen out of his Chicago report, but why?

“Are all of the teams based out of DC?” I questioned.

“That they are.”

“Is it true Victor is the only unit leader that hand-picked his team?”

Ben pulled his eyes from the road long enough to give my cousin a quick glance at his question.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“Around.”

Ben smirked and nodded. “Yeah, he recruited each of us. He tried to recruit Lachlan, but he turned him down. Took a liaison position instead.”

“Why?”

Ben used the mirror again to glance at me. “You’ll have to ask Lachlan.”

“What’s the last one?” Sigmund questioned.

“The last what?”

“Team,” my cousin clarified. “You said there were three. What’s the last one?”

“Lycanthropy, though the name is misleading since they handle anything with the ability to shape shift from human to some type of creature.”

“Damn.”

Ben chuckled. “Welcome to the PCU.”

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## 2 - Lachlan

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“That’s when fear becomes phobia.”

The sounds of pens furiously scribbling, and the clacking of keyboards accompanied my glance to the clock. From the time piece on the back wall, I traveled my gaze over the faces of my students. Most of them looked like they understood. Then again, the first day of classes rarely ended in blank stares. That came later in the semester.

“That’s it for today. Read chapters one through four for the next class and fair warning, there will be a quiz.”

Based on the lack of groans I must not have taught any of the students before. A smile blossomed across my face from the knowledge. Poor buggers had no idea what they awaited them.

The thinning room allowed easy sight to the interloper in the back of the class. Of course, at six-four with a broad chest and shoulders corded with muscles, when he stood it took more than twenty other bodies to block Koi Halakalā from sight.

Koi rose after the last student passed him on the way to the door. I packed my laptop, books, and papers into my leather satchel as he headed to my position at the bottom of the room.

“They’ll let anyone teach at this university,” I commented.

“Obviously, they keep bringing you back.”

I chuckled at Koi’s reply and once he drew close enough offered my hand. He gripped my forearm like a warrior. Our handshake a maneuver to pull each other close enough for a tight, back pounding hug.

“Glad your back mate.” I greeted him after we separated from the embrace.

“Likewise. When did you get in?”

“Last Saturday. You?”

“Last night.”

“How did it go?”

Koi offered an ambiguous shrug and fell into step next to me as we headed out onto the Georgetown campus.

“You know, the usual. Father wants to know when I’m going to stop dicking around and accept my responsibilities”

I grinned brightly and gave my fellow dragon a side eye glance. “Used those actual words did he?”

Koi snorted at that. “Hell no.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Never mind that, what’s going on with you, you son of a bitch?”

I valiantly attempted to keep my face expressionless. “What do you mean?”

“I mean this.”

He palmed my head and vigorously scrubbed my newly shorn hair. When he withdrew his hand, I followed up by smoothing my hair. Tresses that felt like a longer version of velour greeted my palm and reminded me the cropped style currently did not fall victim to the same disturbances as my curls would have.

Despite my best efforts a ridiculous ear to ear smile blossomed across my face. Merriment filled me with the giddy, carefree sensation of a youthful dragon new to flight.

“I leave you alone for six months and you go and get yourself mated?”

“Trust me when I say it was not my intentions, but,” if possible my cheeks drew back even more into a larger smile. “It is the *beatius vinculum*.”

Koi’s eyes doubled in size before he joined me in an ear to ear smile.

“Details man, who is she?”

I shook my head, “No one you know. She’s from outside the rider community.”

“But she is a rider,” Koi asked for confirmation. When I nodded, he pressed on. “Where did you meet her?”

“In Chicago, of all places.”

“When do *I* get to meet her?”

“Tonight,” I offered. “Assuming of course I can tempt you and Izzy with tickets to see Swan Lake.”

Koi chuckled under the groan, “I can think of about twenty things I’d rather do on a Monday night than watch Swan Lake, but if I tell Izzy you had tickets and I passed she’ll kick my ass.”

“I always liked Izzy.”

“Don’t get any ideas motherfucker,” Koi chuckled and draped a beefy arm around my shoulders. He engaged me in a brief headlock and released me with a playful shove.

“I have my own rider now, but I do need to borrow Izzy this afternoon.”

“For?” He asked.

“Shopping.”

Koi scrunched his face and asked in a suspicious tone. “Why do you need Izabella to go shopping with you?”

“It’s for Veronica.”

“Ooooh. Veronica,” he teased, elongating the pronunciation of her name. “Her name is, Veronica.”

My smile needed very little encouragement, and upon returning to my face spread like an infection to his. Saying her name, hearing her name... I was smitten.

“She just relocated and has not yet unpack her formal attire.”

“She moved here for you?”

“For work,” I paused and after a moment of hesitation added, “And me. It is a complicated situation.”

Koi exhaled and stopped as we broached a five directional footpath in the middle of the quad.

“Speaking of complicated, you, Oren, and I need to talk.”

“About?”

“The same damn thing we’ve needed to talk about and put to bed for the past year. My father is riding my ass for me to officially join his colony. You can’t tell me yours isn’t pushing for the same, especially now that you have a mate. What did he say about her, anyway? Does she meet his standards, or is he still pissed you turned down Anika?”

“I have not spoken to my father about her.”

“You did have a ceremony. Right? By the way, fuck you very much for not inviting us.”

“Yes, we performed the ceremony, and I did not invite you because there was no time.”

“Then who performed the ceremony if not for your father?”

“Komen.”

“The magos?” The annoyed expression decorating Koi’s face shifted abruptly.

“You need not look so surprised.”

“But you’re mated now. I thought the origin of the rift between you and your father was over you rejecting his match without bringing an alternative to the table.”

“My issue with my father began before and extend beyond my rejecting his match. Besides, Veronica is... different.”

“Nothing wrong with different.”

I continued the internal debate on how to devolve her status to Koi. Her sent altered after we mated, but not enough to avoid the perceptive nose of a dragon that smelled demons before. How much would it matter to him? Would he reject her as I had no doubt my father would? What impact

would such a rejection have on our friendship? Koi saw me through the darkest part of my life. I did not relish being in a position where I had to choose between my best mate and my rider.

“She is cambion, Koi.”

I delivered the words with a deliberate tone and watched a dumbfounded look take over my friend’s expression.

“What?”

“She is cambion. Her father was, is, a demon. Her mother was a rider.”

“That’s... how is that even possible?”

“I do not know how, but her existence is proof that it is possible.”

In his eyes, I witnessed him struggle with the revelation, but our friendship kept him from doing what other dragons probably would have and condemn her right off the bat. Of course, it may not have all been driven by our friendship, it very well could just have been Koi’s nature. There were many reasons we were best friends. Our twin tolerance for accepting what other dragons reject being one of those reasons.

“Damn Lachlan,” Koi combed his fingers through his hair, and hit me with a thoughtful look.

“Just give her a chance. Meet her before you pass judgment. She helped me in Chicago. It is because of her a knight and his legions remain trapped in hell, instead of walking the earth.”

“I’ve got to file some papers at the administrative building. I’ll ask Izzy to meet us at Saxby’s Coffee in an hour? That work for you?”

“Us?”

“I would like to know more about this Veronica before I meet her tonight.”

“What else do you need to know?”

“Come on man, she’s cambion.”

“That is not her defining quality. Nor can she be held responsible for what her father is.”

“I get it. You chose her, which means she’s obviously of strong character.”

His words sounded off, but I gave him the benefit of the doubt. Besides, Komen had been right, I needed to thicken my skin and get used to how other dragons would react to Veronica.

“All I ask is when you meet her, you give her a fair shake.”

“She’s your mate, Lachlan. Whatever you saw in her, I’m sure I’ll see it too. But I’m not the only one you’ll have to convince.”

“I could give a hack about what my father thinks.”

I lied so convincingly I almost believed my own words.

“Nah man, I’m talking about Oren, not your pops.”

I snorted. “Oren broke from tradition decades ago, I hardly doubt he will disapprove.”

“Maybe, but picking a human lover over a rider is…”

“…different than picking a cambion rider?” I asked, filling in the blanks of Koi’s sentence.

“Yeah man. Something like that.”

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“I like her already.”

Izzy’s statement created the hint of a smile at the right corner of my mouth. She offered a quick wink in my direction and liberated several pecans pieces from the top of Koi’s muffin, popping the nuts into her mouth.

“You haven’t met her yet,” Koi pointed out.

“So? She sounds like someone I can relate to. Someone whose world won’t implode if she chips a nail. Besides it’ll be nice to have a rider around to train with.”

“She just found out she is a rider. She has no idea what it means to actually be one yet.” I pointed out.

“Aren’t you lucky I’m around to teach her,” Izzy replied with a grin.

“Your enthusiasm is touching. I hope you feel the same after you have met her.”

“Can you smell it on her?”

Izzy’s hand moved quick and swatted Koi’s closest bicep to her.

“It’s a valid question,” he defended.

“It’s not polite.”

“That makes it less valid how?”

“Yes,” I interjected, “But it is not overwhelming like a full-blooded demon or even on par with someone possessed. Since we have bonded it has grown fainter. It may be undetectable to you.”

I raised an eyebrow in a questioning look when Koi leaned across the table and inhaled.

“I didn’t notice it before, but now that you mention it, you smell different.”

“What does he smell like?”

“I don’t know,” Koi admitted with a shake of his head. “Not like before.”

“That’s a relief,” Izzy picked off the remaining pecans, “For a moment I thought you were going to say he smelled different. Glad you cleared that up.”

His face lit into a bright smile. “Have I told you, you’re a smart ass lately?”

“Not since last night.”

Izzy returned his smile and leaned against his shoulder while she claimed his lips in a kiss. I focused on the mostly empty ceramic mug in front of me and unsuccessfully ignored the prolonged display of affection.

“Fifty years later and you two still behave like a couple of randy teenagers,” I teased when the seconds reached over five.

“Amen to that.”

“Does your father know?” Izzy asked. She settled for leaning into Koi, and he accommodated her by draping his arm over the back of her chair.

I sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly as I spoke. “No, he does not. I have not informed anyone in my family.”

“But you will. Right?” Koi questioned.

“When Veronica is ready to meet them.”

“Better sooner than later.”

It bothered me that I could not tell if Koi was sincerely okay with the concept of my mate being cambion, or if the accepting front he displayed was just that, a front. For the hundredth time since arriving back in DC I thought my actions in Chicago rash. Some dragons, specifically the traditionalist, would have trouble or find it impossible to accept Veronica because of what she was, but I never really stopped to think how their rejection might affect her. Especially considering Veronica had yet to accept her own ancestry.

“Koi said you asked if I could help you pick out something for her to wear tonight?”

“Yes. Dress, shoes, and stockings I suppose. Whatever other accessories a lady needs for an evening out.”

“Stockings in eighty-degree weather, that’s cute.”

I smiled again despite myself, “Whatever is appropriate.”

“Are we picking out some undergarments for *your* pleasure?”

My face warmed under the veiled insinuation. It started at the top of my ears and under her suggestive stare spread to my cheeks and down into my neck.

“I am quite sure she has appropriate knickers.”

“Or none at all.”

“Koi, a little help?”

“Sorry my friend,” he smiled warmly at me. “I think Izzy’s been looking forward to this moment for a long time.”

“I told you payback was a bitch,” she stated triumphantly.

“Yes, well, perhaps we can do the shopping without the sexual innuendos.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“I do believe I am going to regret this,” I only partially joked.

“Oh, it’ll be fun. I already have a couple of boutiques in mind. You’ll hold my purse and look uncomfortable while I model the options.”

I returned Izabella’s smile. It was impossible not to when it was so damned infectious. I expected her to be excited about the ballet, but not about meeting Veronica. Her enthusiasm nearly made me forget the second reason I would have sought Koi out had he not found me earlier.

“On a much more serious note, Durabas, the demon that incited the trip to Chicago escaped.”

And with one simple statement the atmosphere at our table changed from jovial to solemn.

“What do we know about him?” Koi’s body remained in a lounged position but the fingers around Izabella’s shoulders curled protectively.

“Very little, and even less about Durabas’ master, Furcas, whom Durabas tried to free.”

“Doesn’t sound like fun.”

“It gets better. He managed to complete all but one part of the ritual, so while the door is not completely open—”

“—it’s ajar,” Koi finished.

“And Durabas was receiving special powers from his master.”

“You think he still is?”

“I believe so yes. I also believe he will continue until either Durabas finds another way to break Furcas out, or Furcas finds a way out on his own.”

“Is there any way Durabas can complete the original ritual?” Izzy asked.

I shook my head. “No.”

She looked doubtful. “You sound sure.”

“I am positive. The Key lists four other rituals, however they all require the same final sacrifice and the one who originally summoned Durabas is dead.”

“Silver lining,” Koi chimed in.

“Under a very large cloud,” I added.

“And the *Key of Solomon* doesn’t list any other rituals?”

I shook my head at Izabella’s question.

“I’ll reach out to my grandfather.” Koi stated. “Sometimes there are general rituals for certain levels that can be performed, tailored and customized to a particular demon.”

Izabella frowned, “That hardly seems fair.”

“The good news is, the higher up they are on the demonic food chain, the less general rituals are applicable to them. It’ll be more specific and have more restrictions. He’s a knight of hell, right?”

“Right,” I confirmed.

“Are we talking virgins in a volcano here?” Isabella asked.

Koi shook his head and reward her with a frown, “Not for a knight.”