

Siren

The Cambion Rider Chronicles, Volume 0

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SIREN

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The Cambion Rider Chronicles

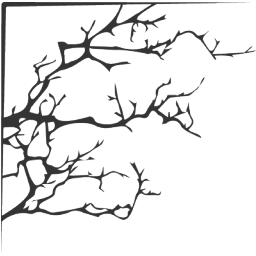
Siren

Demon Hunt

After the Flesh

Burn

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I

“Tell me again why are we here?”

Sigmund Greer, fellow homicide detective, and my cousin looked through the windshield and asked with his face scrunched into a frown. The target of his disapproval? A high school on Chicago’s south side, abandoned three years ago thanks to budget cuts. The exterior foreboding despite the bright morning sunshine.

“I dreamt about this place last night.” I confessed.

“Your radar?”

“That’s your name for them now?” The new term earned Sigmund a skeptical, elevated eyebrow along with the question.

“You hate it when I call them visions.”

Sig followed my lead when I exited the vehicle. I grabbed my badge from the dash, hung it around my neck, and then rounded the car to the trunk and removed my taser. I’d bet my eye teeth something paranormal or supernatural lurked in that building. Some nonhuman creatures shrugged off bullets, but electricity almost always gave them pause.

“Visions makes me sound like I should be sitting in front of a crystal ball wearing a headscarf.”

“Hence radar. It’s like that movie,” Sig stated.

“What movie?”

We approached the school, bypassing the front entrance since a heavy chain secured both handles of the door. If anyone made it in the building, they found another way inside.

“Eric Bana played a New York cop. You know the one.”

“*Deliver Us from Evil*?” I asked in an incredulous tone.

Sigmund snapped his fingers and pushed through an opening in the chain-link fence leading to the rear of the school. “That’s the one.”

“Perfect. Bring up the movie about demonic possession while entering the creepy building.” I ducked through the opening and followed him.

“How’s your headache?”

“Couple more hours and it’ll be gone. Just once I’d love if the visions didn’t come with a migraine.”

Sig nodded, but kept his eyes focused on the building. “Safe to assume since this thing tripped your radar we’re dealing with the supernatural?”

“Probably,” I muttered.

“What are we looking for?”

I exhaled a frustrated sigh and replied, “I don’t know.”

“Come on, Roni. You’re the expert on this crap.”

“Taking a handful of courses at Northwestern doesn’t make me an expert.”

“The force only requires Paranormal and Supernatural one-oh-one. The six additional classes you took makes you CPDs resident expert.”

Sigmund tested a set of double doors with a firm tug. We moved on when they didn’t budge. Weeds sprouted up through cracks in the pavement behind the school. Some grew like scraggly bushes. Others, tall and thick, bore more resemblance to small trees than weeds. Cheap plywood sealed the windows along the ground floor, while the upper windows became victims of target practice for rocks, bottles, and possibly bullets. Residents in the neighborhood were more likely to turn up the volume on the television than to make a 911 call about shots fired.

I continued to survey the area while Sigmund hunted for a way in. A sweet scent teased my nostrils when we rounded the back. Without people or flowers in the area, the smell must have originated from inside the building.

“You ever wonder how many cases have gone cold because we are looking for mundane answers to a supernatural problem?”

I nodded my agreement. Since the Unmasking in 2014, an event where some supernatural and paranormal creatures went public with their existence, I’d asked myself versions of the same question.

Sigmund released a quick whistle. The burst of sound pulled my attention to him as he pushed aside the plywood covering the bottom half of a door. He crouched to the side of the opening and panned the flashlight beam from one side to the other. Once he determined it was clear, he drew his gun from his hip holster and crawled inside. Armed with my taser I followed.

A suffocating, absolute darkness encircled us. The pockets illuminated by our flashlights caused everywhere else to feel that much more oppressive. Paranoia invaded my psyche with tactile illusions of something crawling over my skin. Non-existent eyes watched us from open classroom doors.

I swept my beam along the floor over layers of dust and dirt that left no telltale sign of footprints. We cleared the main floor two classrooms at a time. I searched the right. Sigmund covered left. The front office we investigated together. Sigmund checked the principal’s office while I tugged on a locked door to the left. Everywhere reeked of mildew, rot, and that sweet flora scent, but after clearing the first floor, I’d yet to find its point of origin.

We climbed the stairs to the second level, exploring each room in the same fashion before moving on to the top floor. Sunshine from broken windows provided light, but even areas soaked in sunlight retained that oppressive sensation created in the darkness. The center of my back burned. Every time I turned around, I expected to find something there. Ready to attack.

I exited the last classroom and glanced down the end of the corridor. Were we too early? I paced the width of the hallway and tried to recall details of the dream while I waited for Sigmund to emerge from the last

room. I thought the room in my dream had been in a locker room, but the school didn't have a gym. Maybe I translated the dream too literally. The ground could have been a symbol for something. Outdoors, or maybe a lab, or teacher's lounge? We hadn't located a teacher's lounge.

"Sig?"

I approached the room he searched and found it as empty as the others.

"Sig?"

I stepped back into the hallway and called his name louder before I moved back into the room where he should have been. No trace of him remained. I walked to the front of the room and looked behind the teacher's desk as if he were playing some elaborate joke and hid underneath. A cop for over ten years, Sigmund wouldn't just wander out. Something took him without a struggle and without a sound.

I put my back to the wall and returned the way I came. At the doorway, I glanced out into the corridor when I heard it. Faint at first. I stared at the ground and concentrated on the sound. Singing from a female. High pitched and horrible. I imagined it might be how Mariah Carey sounded if she gargled with sharp rocks and punched herself in the throat before singing.

The sound oozed out an overhead air duct and grew louder as I moved closer to the vent. When I tilted my head back and sniffed, the sweet flowery scent tortured my nose.

Air duct.

Basement.

Goddamnit Sigmund.

I took the closest set of stairs down to the first level and followed the vocalization no longer filtering through the ventilation shaft, but free flowing all around me. I pursued the voice to the previously locked door in the office, now ajar and lit from within by a flashlight beam. I held my flashlight and taser chest high and edged the door open with my foot.

In the tattered remains of a filthy ball gown, a creature stood in front of my cousin's crumpled body. The beam of the light reflected over scaly skin with a translucent glow. Round, black, lidless disks stared at me from eye sockets on a face without a nose. Thin, near non-existent lips closed and plunged the room into blessed silence.

My eyes dropped to Sigmund and I must have lowered the taser, because when she stepped forward my arm raised and leveled the weapon at her chest. She opened her mouth, and the screeching resumed, but louder and painful. My equilibrium shifted. The fleeting but sudden sensation of vertigo pushed a rush of salty saliva into my throat.

Her singing morphed into a shriek.

I pulled the trigger, but the prongs found only empty air. She struck me, or threw me, maybe both. Darkness aided the speed of her movements. By the time I realized I was airborne, my back slammed against the wall. I rolled but stayed on the ground and drew my gun. I fired five shots into the air in front of me. The muzzle flare captured random snapshots of the creature getting struck by bullets.

One caught her in the shoulder. Two more struck her chest. The sound of retreating steps followed another shriek. I scrambled forward and slammed the door shut, using my weight to hold it closed while I cast the light over the room.

Alone. The bullets repelled her but didn't appear to do any real damage. My beam of light stopped on Sigmund. He sat up and stared at me. Pupils dilated wide despite the light.

"Sigmund?"

"Where is she?"

"Gone. What happened? Are you all right?"

I stood and moved to my cousin, offering a hand and helping him to his feet.

"Odds are high."

Relieved at his reply, I shone the light in his face for visual confirmation. He looked fine, save a film of something translucent and slick around his lips and coating his chin.

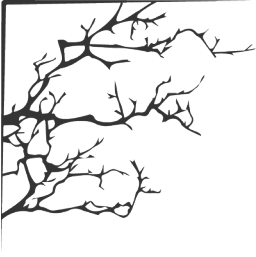
“What did she slobber on you?”

Sigmund grinned stupidly, wiped his palm across his chin, and licked his hand clean. “She tastes like honey.”

Gross. What the hell was she?

What the hell was in her saliva?

What the hell had she done to my cousin?



II

Conversation died to mutters when I entered the squad room. Shoulders back, tablet clutched in hand, I ignored stares from my fellow detectives on my route to Bilko's office. I spent the past twenty-four hours Monday morning quarterbacking the past twenty-four hours. Rolling through the what ifs.

What if me and Sigmund hadn't split up?

What if I looked for him sooner?

What if I called for backup before we went in?

I knocked on the frame of my lieutenant's open door and waited for him to acknowledge my presence with a look up.

"Veronica. Come in," he beckoned me forward with a quick gesture. "Close the door. Have a seat."

I followed his request and claimed one of the chairs in front of his desk. Going by his rumpled shirt and the red veins spreading from the corners of his eyes, Bilko ran on the same lack of sleep as me.

"How's Sigmund?"

"Infected by a siren."

We locked eyes. He stared with deliberate focus and asked, "Come again?"

"The other five victims, the man that died in a coma last week, and Sigmund, are and or were, infected by a siren."

"There are sirens now? Jesus Christ. What's next?"

"They're territorial, so chances are slim there's more than one in Chicago. That's the good news. The bad news is there's no telling how many deaths it's responsible for."

“Another super.” Bilko exhaled and collapsed back in his chair like a deflated balloon. He laced his fingers together and let them rest over his slightly expanded gut. “How is it you’ve caught seventy percent of our supernatural cases?”

Unsure of how to answer, I remained silent. Bilko didn’t know about my dreams and I had no intention of telling him. In the face of my silence, he continued.

“I’m assuming you’ve been researching sirens.”

“I reached out to professor Monzón.”

“Should I know who that is?”

“She teaches preternatural biology at Northwestern and is one of the first professors in Chicago to earn a Master’s in that field.”

Bilko gestured for me to continue.

“Right. Sirens are classified as fae, aka fairies.”

“Like Tinker Bell?”

“Yeah, that’s the Disney version. They came out during the Unmasking with vampires and witches and the like. They let people believe they are harmless, but their truth runs a lot darker.”

“How dark?”

“Murder and child abduction mostly. They have little regard for human life. They view humans as cattle.”

“What doesn’t,” he remarked with a snort. “How do we contain them?”

“Unlike vampires, one size does not fit all. The Fae, both singular and plural, are made up of multiple species. Sirens, are aquatic elementals.”

Bilko tapped his right index finger to his lips and with his other hand, motioned for me to continue.

“Despite being waterborne, they can exist on land. When in water they breathe through gills located along their ribs. And they feed on souls.”

“As in *‘I pray the Lord my soul to keep?’*”

“It’s why they come here. Pureblood fae don’t have souls, at least not edible ones.”

“Where does the singing Sigmund described come in?”

I tapped my tablet to wake it and scrolled through the notes I collected. “They sing to enchant their victims. Once the prey is under their spell there must be an exchange of bodily fluid, usually accomplished through kissing, in order to feed.” I scrolled for more highlights. “Their prey goes through four stages. Stage one is hearing it and obsessively thinking about it. From there each stage gets progressively worse but with different manifestations. Some self-harm, some lash out at others. Ultimately, all become trapped inside their own minds, which outwardly resembles a coma. From there... death.”

“What’s the timeline?”

“According to Prof. Monzón each person is different. Could be days, could be weeks.”

“Weaknesses?”

“They’re fae, so iron should work. Other than that...” I shook my head and turned the screen off. “There are two ways to cure the infected. The first is to give them an elixir made from the blue pools of the fae realm. Catch 22, the elixir can only be consumed in the fae realm and after consumption the person must remain there a year and a day.”

“What’s the second way?”

“Kill the fae.”

Bilko nodded and stood. Arms crossed over his chest he moved to stare out his office window and onto the streets below.

“I’m pulling you off the case,” he said with his back to me.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, detective.” He turned back to face me.

“Sir, with all due respect, like hell you are.”

“You’re too close.”

“You said yourself seventy-percent of my caseload deals with the supernatural. Despite that, I still have the lowest amount of open cases than any *man* under your command.”

Bilko’s face remained expressionless. Never a good sign.

“I really hope you’re not insinuating I’m removing you because you’re a woman.”

“Give me a better reason.”

“I don’t have to give you a reason,” he answered. He pushed his hands into his front pockets. “But for the record, despite you and Detective Sigmund Greer being cousins I allow you both to be partners because I’ve never seen two people make a more effective team. However, Det. Greer’s exposure makes you personally involved.”

“That and my record are reasons to keep me on the case.”

“You’ve been exposed to her song, Sykes. You’re a walking liability.”

“It didn’t affect me. Sigmund described its voice as vocalized sex. What I heard... so not sexy.”

“Why didn’t it work on you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Go home. Be with Sigmund. Get some rest.”

“This is time sensitive. Sigmund could have days.”

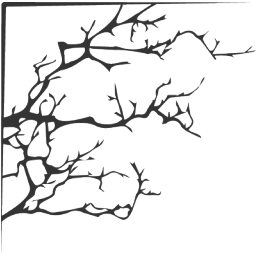
“And we have a room full of detectives to handle this.”

“Sir—”

“—that’s not a request, Sykes. You’re dismissed.”

My exit from his office came complete with flinging the door open and storming out.

If he thought I planned to sit at home and do nothing he was crazier than the siren.



III

Sigmund collapsed into the nearby chair.

Witnessing his decline made it harder to downplay the anxiety creeping into every sinewy fiber of my body. Energy bled from him too quick to be triaged, all because of that damn Siren.

He passed a hand over his clean-shaven scalp and let said hand return to the arm of the chair with all the unenthusiastic flop of a lifeless fish hauled onto a boat. Sigmund and I shared a lot of family features. Same coffee bean colored eyes. Same pronounced cupid's bow dip in our top lips. Same high cheekbones, thick, flat eyebrows and what my aunt, his mom, called a determined chin. Whatever that meant. His dark cocoa complexion beat my caramel tones by multiple degrees, still to me we often looked more akin to siblings than cousins.

Save tonight.

Tonight, aspects of the lively man dimmed right before my eyes. The most recent being his vibrant complexion, decayed to the ashen tones of a corpse.

"This is insane," Sigmund stated.

"We don't have a choice." I replied.

"We could choose life."

I scoffed and shook my head. "You always say that."

"Because choosing life is always a good option."

"I *am* choosing life. Your life."

"Are you high? I'm infected Roni. I hear her in my head. I can't think straight, and this is us just sitting here with no pressure. I won't be any good to you out there, hell I can damn near guarantee I'll be a liability."

"You're right, Sig. It's a bad plan. What's your plan?"

He glared at me several seconds before ultimately directing his dark-eyed gaze outside the picture window of my living room and onto Fullerton Avenue. I watched the quickened rise and fall of his shoulders, a signal of his increased, rapid breathing. Sitting still left him winded. Stage one my left butt cheek.

“Inaction is better than executing a bad plan,” he concluded. “Plus, Bilko pulled you off the case.”

“When Aunt Deloris and Uncle Nick ask what I did to keep their son from dying, I’m not going to tell them nothing because it wasn’t my case anymore.”

“Now you’re being dramatic.”

“Dramatic?” My voice hit a high incredulous tone. “You’ve progressed to stage two in less than forty-eight hours. Loss of interest in everything except it, heightened aggression... Its call?”

“What about it?”

“It’s gotten louder, right?”

Sigmund dismissed my words with a snort.

“How long until you’re catatonic? Forty-eight hours? Less?”

“Fewer.”

I wanted to hit him or grab him by the collar and shake him until he took this seriously. His coping mechanism of making a serious situation into a sitcom never aggravated my nerves as much as it did in that moment.

“How do you know this will work?”

“I don’t.”

“Great.”

“But Prof. Monzón thinks there’s a good chance it will. She theorizes the reason some infected turn to violence is because they want to return to the siren but for whatever reason can’t.”

“I don’t know, Roni.”

“Here are your options. You can, A) Find a portal to the fae realm. Find a fae willing to make the elixir. Pray they don’t literally want an arm

and leg for their services. Then hang out in fae land for three-hundred and sixty-six days. B) Hope the CPD locate and are inclined to kill the siren before you die. Or, C) We can take advantage of your ability to hear it and track this bitch to where it's laired up."

"And you're going to kill her, just like that?" he questioned with a snap of his fingers.

"I don't suspect it'll be that easy but that is the plan."

I produced a weapon from the side of the couch with a narrow blade and less than a foot long. It had more in common with a knitting needle than a knife, or even a dagger.

"Iron?" Sigmund questioned.

"Yep," I said.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Same place I got these." I reached my hand under the couch this time and pulled out a machete encased in a leather sheath, and a vintage railroad spike.

"Seriously?" Sigmund eyed the spike.

I shrugged. "It's iron."

"You've got a machete. It's overkill."

"Bullets hurt it, but we need to kill it. So, unless you've got some raw iron and the means to make bullets, this is what we got."

Sigmund relented and said in a defeated tone, "I don't want you to kill her."

"And I don't want you to die, so..."

"She's gorgeous, no... what's more beautiful than gorgeous?"

"Stunning? Lovely?"

"Magnificent. Her hair's not just red it is like embers on fire with the most perfect sapphire eyes, and her lips—"

"—got it, thanks." I shook my head, thankful he stopped. How could two people see something so completely different?

I remove my belt and thread it through the machete's sheath, securing it on my waist and then tying it around my thigh. The needle I shoved

between the belt and my waistband, while the spike I secured in the back beltloop of my jeans. An untucked shirt and jacket hid it from sight. I tugged the hair tie from being a makeshift bracelet, gathered my thick curls into a pile on top of my head and secured them in place with the black elastic.

Gearing up to kill something should have bothered me. Human or not I should have agonized over taking a life, but in my mind, the siren was already dead. Bilko called it. There was nothing I wouldn't do for Sigmund. Die for him. Kill for him. Either without batting an eye.

I'd tell people she gave me no choice.

I'd tell people it wasn't just to save Sigmund, but all the victims.

Scarier than my single-minded commitment to my course of action was the unanswered question. Would I lose sleep over this? If I didn't, what did that mean? Was I trading my soul to save Sig's? My cousin snickered and shivered in the summer heat.

"What?"

"Blade on each hip, you look like an urban samurai."

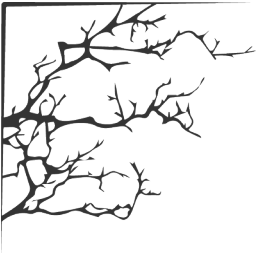
I didn't carry the honor of a samurai, but I played along. "Can black female Chicago police detectives fall under that umbrella?"

"Marvel successfully turned Valkyrie into a badass black woman. Anything is possible."

"Can you still hear it?"

"Loud and clear."

"All right. Let's get this party started."



IV

Sigmund's tone became more aggressive.

An hour into the drive, his answer shortened along with his temper. Information was barked or growled out. He twitched and writhed in the seat next to me, alternating between wrapping his arms around his stomach, or death gripping the handle above the side window.

We took I-290 out of the city, headed east on I-294 and turned north onto I-55, taking that back into the heart of Chicago. His death grip on the door handle confirmed my exit onto Damen got us closer to her lair. By the time we turned down fourteenth street and rolled by some abandoned buildings he damn near pressed himself through the back of the seat.

Next to me, I got a gander of how Odysseus must have behaved while tied to the mast of his ship.

"Damn it!" Sigmund grunted out between a clenched jaw.

He flung his belt off, frantically scratching and clawing at the door. Automatic door locks baffled him in his current state, but once I rolled to a stop and shifted the car into park, the setting sprung the locks free. Sigmund hurled the door open and bolted.

I snatched the taser from where I stashed it between the seats and fired. The bolts flew true and struck my cousin in the back. My finger on the trigger continued to deliver charges to the prongs as I climbed over the seat divider and scrambled out the same door he escaped through.

Sigmund's twitching ceased when I released the pressure on the trigger.

"Sorry Sig," I whispered, as I engaged in the part of the plan I neglected to tell him about.

I left the prongs embedded in Sigmund's back. He appeared down for the count, but for how long? I knew the effects of a taser on a normal human, but the siren's infection added an unknown variable.

I returned to the car, opening the trunk and removing a blanket, duct tape, and zip ties. Good thing I'm a cop or someone might accuse me of having a murder kit in my trunk. When I returned to Sigmund, I rolled him onto the blanket. It made it easier to drag him back to the car without scraping him up.

Witching hour.

The city remained awake, but an eeriness settled over the abandoned factories of the neighborhood. As I strained and dragged Sigmund back to the car, the surrounding silence stood out even more. Abandoned or not, there should have been crackheads, meth heads, or homeless people seeking some place to get high or sleep. Summer pulled them out in droves, yet nothing stirred. Not even an infamous Chicago rat.

I trussed Sigmund up before I dumped him into the trunk. Binding his ankles together and hands behind his back. I had already removed any hardware he might injure himself on, which left me to pillow his head on a towel and secure his mouth with duct tape. Last, I pinched the tip of ear plugs and pushed them into his ears. It might not help, but it wouldn't hurt.

I closed the trunk and turned towards the shell of the warehouse he rushed to enter. Somewhere inside the siren waited. Chances were, I no longer had the element of surprise. If it ever existed to begin with.

I drew the machete and advanced on the building. The closer I got, the more a feeling in the pit of my stomach urged me to run in the other direction. Icy tendrils gathered at the back of my neck and ran down my spine. Something wanted me to leave. Something external that presented itself as an inner driving force.

According to the legends, a siren's contagion worked on women and men alike. Bilko's question lingered at the front of my mind. Why didn't the siren's song affect me earlier? Maybe I'd ask it before I removed its

head from its shoulders. Probably not. Witty comments before the death strike only worked in movies.

No door prevented my entrance, but something invisible impeded my path. I breathed deeply, stepped closer to the opening and breathed in again. The same floral smell from the abandoned school building and the sea lingered beyond the doorway. Not the dead fish stench Lake Michigan belched up every spring, but the smell of salty seaweed and sand. It surfaced memories of my visits to the beach with Uncle Nick. Of us driving along the highway that linked all the keys to the end of Florida. I marveled at how air managed the duality of freshness and saltiness.

I raised my left hand, unclenched my fingers, and slowly pushed them through the invisible veil, only to snatch them back as soon as they disappeared beyond a barrier. No time to be timid.

I stepped through and paused at the threshold. Magic transformed the interior from some decayed, degenerated building to what I supposed passed for home in the mind of the siren. Professor Monzón's information made no mention of sirens' ability to work magic.

Flora and greenery I only ever experienced through pictures, movies, or in Jamaica, spread out before my eyes. Pockets of water, like edgeless wells, appeared in various spaces along the sandy pathways. No birds flew overhead, but I heard their calls in the distances, potentially nesting in trees. Except there were no trees. Only grass grew at varying heights. Short and sandy in spots. In others, it towered well over my head and swayed in the breeze.

Yeah, this place only existed in the fae world of the siren. No doubt it missed it. Too bad it would never see it again. Not unless fae believed in an afterlife.

I walked, uncertain of the correct direction to take. I tightened my grip on the machete's handle. A reassuring extension of my hand. The tall grass rustled to my left, but I couldn't tell if it moved because of the wind, or from some being hiding in the depths.

“You brought him back to me.” The siren’s disembodied voice called out.

“You need to come through me to get him.” I replied.

I struggled to reconcile Sigmund’s version with the cat howling in heat I heard when words poured from its mouth. I tried to use the retched sound to pinpoint its location. A splash in the pool behind me drew my attention, but by the time I turned around only the telltale ripple remained.

“I will not apologize for him, or any of the others. I need them to survive in this realm.”

“If you need to feed on someone to survive, maybe you shouldn’t be here. Why don’t you just go home?”

Unmistakable regret filled the siren’s voice when she spoke. “Home is closed to me. I am left to this... sad replica of what my home was. I scarcely remember it anymore.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I turned to see another ripple. “You want my sympathy?”

“I want you to understand,” it continued. “We are similar you and I.”

“Yeah? How do you figure?”

I thought if I kept it talking, I might find it, but the voice moved in unrealistic patterns. On my right one sentence. On my left the next. Behind me one second, and then in front of me. I moved forward but stayed clear of the tall grass. It had the advantage of home turf and whatever abilities it possessed so I needed to play this smart. Or what passed for smart in my current predicament.

“For most human I sing, I purr, and they fall at my feet. But not you.”

“So?” I pushed.

“Only fae are immune to other fae, and even then, it’s not promised.”

I shook my head and said, “I’m not fae.”

“Then what are you?”

A splash echoed behind me and instincts sent me diving to the sandy dunes as air rushed overhead. It followed up with a swipe I failed to

avoid. Pain preceded trickles of blood down my left elbow before I got up and ran. I didn't dare look behind to see if the siren gave chase. I heard it.

I turned right, left, and then left again. I had no idea where I was going, but I prayed I wasn't running headlong into a trap. The cool blue sky above went gray and grew darker fast. I stopped and whirled around, bringing the machete up in a fighting stance to nothing.

Damnit. Where had it gone?

It cackled behind me. I drew the dagger with my left hand and shoved it backwards. It disarmed me by digging its claws into my flesh and dragging them down my arm. I ignored the pain and freed the machete, slicing as I turned in one fluid movement. It avoided the blade with a graceful sidestep. If I'd been a hair faster, I might have caught some flesh.

The siren lunged forward and wrapped a gnarly, clawed hand around my right wrist. It pirouetted and ended up behind me with my arm twisted and pinned to my arm back. The force of its grip made the machete useless. When it jammed its thumb into my wrist and gave another upward yank, my fingers released the blade and it dropped to the sandy grass between us. Next upward tug would either break my arm or dislocate my shoulder.

I threw a strategic punch with my left fist. The force of the momentum hurled my body forward and pulled my left shoulder free. I pivoted into a clockwise rotation that straightened my right arm and continued the motion, using its grip on my wrist to pull the siren close. I didn't want to reverse the hold, I intended to break its arm, but it released me and jumped back, putting several feet between us.

I pretended to take the bait when it feigned to the right. When it charged me head on, I took hold of its shoulders. I dropped and rolled onto my back, flipped it, and came up sitting on its chest. It shrieked into my face, raised its arms, and delivered a deafening clap with its hands.

Weightless, I realized the siren transformed air into water. The grass waved back and forth like seaweed in the undercurrent. The siren swam past me and sliced my stomach open with a fin protruding from its elbow. I barely glimpsed the disappearance of a vertical tail while my blood colored the water. It altered its body like it transformed our surroundings. Its movements now impossibly quick.

I swam frantically in the direction I prayed to be the surface even as the horrible thought settled into my brain. No surface existed for me to reach.

The last remaining air burned my lungs. I forced my body to relax and slowly sank towards the depths. The siren came at me. It reached out and stopped my descent with its webbed hands cupping my face. It looked into my eyes. Wanted its visage to be the last horrid thing I saw and know that it won.

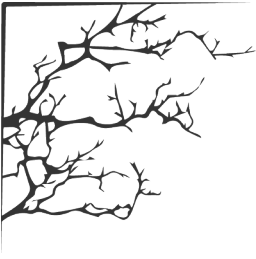
With our gazes locked and the last bit of air leaking from my lungs, I drew the spike with the speed of an old-timey gunslinger and rammed it into the siren's chest. Underwater it gasped. Its eyes dropped to the iron embedded between its ribs. Dark blood flowed from its body and merged with the water. Even muffled, the scream it released pierced my ears.

The area around the puncture darkened and black veins spindled outward. The wound a nucleus for some dark matter that took over the siren's body. It was dying. I needed to hold out. The world it created would die with it. I just needed to hang on that long.

No air in me and no air out. I wouldn't make it.

I breathed in. Water burned my nose and lungs.

My vision blurred. The siren was the last thing I saw. thrilled



V

I coughed and water spewed from my lungs.

Consciousness returned to find me on my side. More coughs rattled my body and caused me to curl until my knees damn near touched my chest. I placed my hand flat on the ground. Warm concrete touched my fingers.

With the last of the water expelled from my body, I rolled onto my back. Staring up, my eyes rested on the crumbling concrete of the warehouse's second floor. No needle, no machete, no spike. Nothing remained to show for the efforts... save the wounds to my stomach and arms.

Sigmund.

I scrambled to my feet, cried out, and nearly collapsed back to the ground. I pressed my hand to the gut wound and got back up. Carefully this time. The return trip to the mustang out front more sluggish than when I departed. The pounding grew louder as I drew nearer.

I pressed the button on the key fob, pulled the trunk up, and stared down into one pissed off face. The duct tape came off with a quick yank and a string of curse words flew out of Sigmund's mouth. I retrieve the pocketknife from my glove box and cut off the zip ties that bound his wrists and ankles.

"Are you all right?" I asked when he accepted my hand and pulled himself out of the trunk.

"Odds are high."

I nodded and followed up with, "How are you feeling?"

"A marching band is banging in my head and my body feels electrified. But her voice is gone."

I occupied my attention by looking around us. It allowed me to avoid the look my cousin gave. I would have preferred to see accusation in his eyes over the sorrowful regret that stared back at me.

“You’re alive. That’s all that matters,” I assured him and myself.

“Jesus, Roni.” Sigmund’s gaze fell on my bloody hand.

He pulled the towel from the trunk and worked it between my fingers and the wound on my stomach. I pressed the keys into Sigmund’s hand and let him take position behind the wheel.

Emergency room first, then I’d take my lumps with our lieutenant.

Hopefully, I’d still have a job in the morning.

Don't miss out!

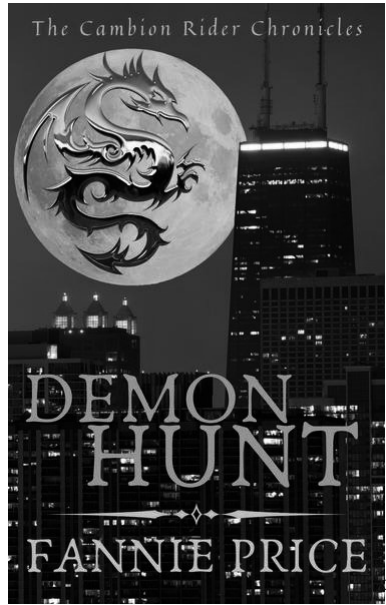
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Did you love *Siren*? Then you should read *Demon Hunt*¹ by Fannie Price!



My name is Lachlan Brynmor. I am a dragon. I hunt demons.

Summertime in Chicago. The city plays host to concerts, food festivals... and murder. When the FBI's Predator Crime Unit liaison, Lachlan Brynmor arrives in the city, he thinks he has found the one responsible for the body count. A demon who has assumed the identity of Chicago Police Detective, Veronica Sykes.

However, the longer he watches her, the more uncertain he becomes of her guilt. With time running out, Lachlan must determine if Veronica is the demon... or the demon's next victim.

Demon Hunt is a short story prelude to the debut novel of The Cambion Rider Chronicles, *After the Flesh*, available October 22, 2019

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About the Author

Fannie resides in the Chicagoland area and enjoys creating stories that bring her hometown and other cities to life. Her favorite part of writing is the art of creating a vivid and visual world, populated by an entertaining, interesting, and flawed cast of characters with a real life feel.

An avid Assassin's Creed fan girl, when she's not writing she spends her free time with her family, watching football, hockey, and Investigation Discovery, going to movies, or looking for the next good book to read.

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