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## *1 – Veronica*

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*The Hunter claims his sixth victim.*

The Chicago newspapers displayed a variation of the headline last Sunday. Our UN-SUB began dropping bodies at the start of the weekend to make the Sunday papers.

Around and behind me, women jockeyed for mirror space in an attempt to repair the damage sweat inflicted upon their makeup and hair. I looked up and momentarily caught the eye of one in the mirror.

We held each other's gazes long enough to give a sister to sister nod of acknowledgement. Hers ended in a wink. Her deep chocolate complexion kept the black lipstick from looking as shocking as it did on paler female patrons, but not by much.

Black lipstick befriend no race.

I steeled myself for the emersion that waited outside the door. Closed, it diminished the staccato beats hammering through the speaker enough to provide a needed breather to my overwhelmed senses. However, I hadn't gone to *The Crow* to hide out in the bathroom.

The unrelenting bass assaulted me as soon as I pushed open the door. The music grew louder during my respite. Slightly refreshed, I continued my search for one body in a gyrating haystack of bodies. They rubbed against each other. Sometimes they managed to sync their movements to the music. The sheer volume of people on the dancefloor, accompanied by the darkness of the club, and assisted by the deafening music all worked to disorientate me.

Pubs were more my speed. It'd been a couple years since I visited a club, and longer than that since I'd been at a hard core dance club. And never at a Goth club like *The Crow*.

I paused near the bar. To my right a long dark hallway linked the front dancefloor to an even darker back room. My hand wrapped around the phone in my pocket, but I decided not to call for back up. What would I tell them? Send units based on a premonition the killer might be at the club? Yeah, that would go over like gangbusters down at the precinct.

Cops often rely on our guts, but most distinguished between instinct and premonitions, or prophetic dreams, or whatever I felt like calling them at any given moment. Only Sigmund knew about them. Being my cousin gave him special privileges.

Frustrated I pushed my way towards the hallway. I had a vague, generic face to put with the profile his victims created.

White male.

Early to mid-thirties.

The condition of the bodies indicated someone proficient in anatomy, or possibly hunting. That helped me none at all. Half the patrons on the club were white men. So instead of hunting *The Hunter*, I hunted for a woman in a gold dress.

In my latest dream, the victim wore a gold dress. In the gothic themed club, gold should have stood out as much as my blue jeans and tee shirt. But my hunt turned up neither a gold dress clad woman, nor *The Hunter*.

Irritated, I paused and turned in a tight circle. An hour of loud underlining bass beats worked to make the headache brought on by my dream, even more spectacular. Why had I seen the club and the dress clear as day, but not the woman in it?

I wanted to leave, but I knew I couldn't. I hadn't found him but I knew he was there. I tasted his presence like ash on the back of my tongue. He remained somewhere in the walls of the club, I just had to find him before he found victim number seven.

The pending sense of dread prickled the back of my neck and increased my pace. I pushed through the bodies in my journey to the back room. The smell of pot mingled with the smoke from clove cigarettes until I couldn't distinguish the two. I turned around again, searching the faces and bodies of everyone. A flicker from the corner of my eye snapped my head to the right. The image so fleeting, had I been a couple seconds slower I would have missed it.

He grinned at me, and in that instant the features of his face flashed. Inky black eyes glared and a row of razor sharp shark teeth replaced the human dental work. He pulled his lips back in a threatening smile, blew me a kiss, and bolted for the back door.

I moved my legs a split second after his, shoving the bodies in my path out of the way to the door he, or it, crashed through. Everyone assumed *The Hunter* was a vampire, but I've never seen a vampire look like him. The eyes... the teeth...my mind screamed wereshark. If I was right things just got interesting in a very bad way.

He moved fast. Already he put a good deal of distance between himself and the back of the club by the time I burst through the door. Turning thirty-five hadn't slowed me that much in a few months. This bastard was just that fast. His speed went a long way to confirm my wererecreature theory. I encountered a werewolf on another case. He ran like he had two Olympic sprinters for parents and inherited their speed.

I jerked my gun, a 9mm Sig Sauer, free from its shoulder holster as I pursued him down the alley. The silence outside the club managed to feel more oppressive than the thunderous music inside.

“Stop! Police!”

I knew he wouldn't stop, but the suits in IAB would ask if I issued a warning before I fired.

“Run, run as fast as you can!” Cackles of laughter followed the words.

Not stopping I expected. Taunts just pissed me off.

He widened his head start as he ducked from one alley to another. The papers got his moniker wrong. They should have dubbed him, *The Runner*.

I managed to close the distance by several feet, but the suspect leapt on top of a dumpster and vaulted over an eight foot fence. He stopped long enough to pose with a grin and a beckoning finger. His face harmless and human.

Not being whatever he was, nor a professional high jumper, I climbed the chain link fence, flipped over, and landed in a crouch. I sprang up like a racer off a starting block to the mouth of the alley and found him taunting me again. He stopped at the entrance of the subway, spun around, bowed dramatically, and two stepped down the stairs of a blue line station.

The pro-life choice would have been to call for backup and actually wait for them to arrive. It also would have guaranteed the suspect's escape in the process. There was no hesitation in my actions. I took the stairs two at a time, freed my phone in the process, and paused when I reached the turnstiles to connect with the dispatcher.

“Detective Sykes, badge number 68913, requesting backup at the blue line CTA subway entrance at Grand and Milwaukee. I'm ten-eighty with a suspect wanted in connection to six murders, fleeing into the subway. Plain clothed officer on sight. Suspect considered extremely dangerous. Approach with caution.”

“Be advised, Detective Sykes your orders are to wait—”

I ended the call, effectively cutting off the dispatch operator, and shoved the phone back into my back pocket. Waiting for backup could mean tomorrow's headlines might read: *THE HUNTER CLAIMS HIS SEVENTH VICTIM*. Of course, not waiting could yield the same results, only with me as the woman in gold's understudy. The dream didn't show where he killed her, or where he picked her up from. I assumed since the club had been in the dream he acquired her there.

Stay or go... either way could cause the dream to play out. It occurred to me in that moment, gold could have been symbolic for my detective shield. There in lay the rub with my dreams. Prophetic or otherwise, they were left up to interpretation like any other dream.

A quick jump of the turnstyle and I took the steps down to the train platform two and three at a time. Hopefully I hadn't lost too much time calling dispatch. I jumped the last three steps and reached the bottom in time to see the suspect hop effortlessly onto the northbound tracks.

Overhead fluorescents lit the platform brilliantly, but *The Hunter* hadn't fled to the subway to catch a train. Without a pause in his running or a missed step, he glanced over his shoulder, waved, and disappeared into the darkness of the train tunnel.

No time to get off a shot. I committed to the course and pursued him. My leap to the tracks came much less graceful than his, and accompanied by a flare of pain through my right ankle from the awkward landing. It hurt like a bitch but not enough to stop me. Not when the picture of a seventh young woman gutted and skinned played in my mind. If I didn't stop him, someone else would die.

I pushed through the pain and jogged down the center of the tracks. It didn't take long for the darkness to surround me once I left the bright lights of the station behind. My steps slowed considerably as the darkness enveloped me like a blanket. I removed a thin Maglite from the holster on my hip, clicked it on, and held it on top of the gun in a tight grip. Where the beam panned the barrel of the gun aimed. The light tattled my position. I knew this as soon as I turned the damn thing on, and still it took nearly a minute and several feet into the tunnel before I finally convinced myself to turn it off.

My hands shook as I pushed the button on the end of the flashlight and plunged myself into total darkness. The light from the platform a beacon to guide me back, but too far away for any of

it to illuminate my path. I couldn't see a damn thing, but that didn't mean the same held true for him... it... whatever. I took a breath and held it.

Movement ahead rushed a gust of air against my face. A push of the button on the flashlight left me with just enough time to yell and fire as it rushed me. Green skin and black eyes. Razor sharp teeth and fingers that ended in talons raked across my chest even as I unloaded my gun into the center of his body.

Horns? The fuck! It had horns.

I fell back against the ground too stunned to do much else. It felt like burning hot knives tore through my skin. The flashlight slipped from my fingers as I clutched them against my chest and tried to stem the free flow of blood. I wanted to scream but the required air escaped from the three deep slashes. The thing hissed, then cackled and slowly crept up along my body. It dipped its head into the river of blood and shredded flesh.

In the obscured light thrown from the flashlight I watched it leer at me. It grinned with those razor sharp teeth and a mouth now covered in my blood. I gasped for breath, but each attempt to suck down a lungful of air resulted in more hissing sounds. Somehow the gun remained in my right hand, but during the time the thing on my chest ripped through my flesh it morphed into a gun shaped anvil. I couldn't lift it or call for help... I couldn't even roll my body or push it off of me.

Helpless and terrified, just like when I was nine. Tears leaked from the corner of my eyes. Able to do nothing but watch while it lower its mouth and use its talons to open my chest wider.

And stopped.

It jerked its head up, stared down the tunnel entrance, and hissed. I felt the tug of its claws when it dug into my skin but it didn't hurt. Blessed shock finally came to visit.

I assumed it sensed the approach of a train and simply needed to move my body so it could do whatever it wanted at its leisure until the roar. Not of a train but something else. Something living

raced through the tunnel. The thing tried to yank me up but it couldn't. Not before something knocked me loose. Something with a tail. Something that shimmered a coppery bronze.

They howled in the darkness. Snarled and tore at each other. Perfect. I'd been reduced to things I couldn't name, fighting over me like scraps.

I tried to breathe again and ended up tasting my own blood, but I could move inches at a time. The attempt to crawl back to the station ended in a gurgled scream. Apparently, shock only extended so far.

It felt like I ripped my torso from my waist. But I had to move. The alternative of staying there and being the prize for whatever won was far less appealing than all the pain movement caused. I gritted my teeth and I pulled my body one slow, agonizing foot at a time. I wasn't going out like that. I wasn't going to die in some dirty, garbage, rat infested subway tunnel.

I'd barely gotten a couple of feet when something rustled behind me. Another cry of pain ripped from my throat when that something picked me up. I barely twitched my finger against the trigger when whatever held me removed the weapon from my hand. Tears of frustration escaped from the corners of my eyes.

"You are safe now."

Its words sounded more like growling, but it carried me towards the light of the platform. Each step sent new and exciting shockwaves of pain through my entire body. It felt like I was drowning. Coughing and spitting blood didn't relieve the pressure.

"Hold on." It encouraged. "Stay with me."

I wanted to apologize. I wanted to thank it but tell it I couldn't stay or hold on. Blurred vision prevented seeing the damage in the light, but I was so cold I knew I lost a lot of blood. What hadn't left my body outright leaked into my lungs and choked me. I'd get a department funeral, complete

with the stars and stripes draped over my coffin that would be handed off to my cousin, Sigmund. Funny, as corny as it sounded I thought we'd get taken out together. Or at least at the same time.

Light stung my eyes and forced them close when we reached the station. The ascension to the platform felt effortless. Too effortless, since he hadn't put me down to make the climb. I had to see who, or what, kept me from dying in a filthy, rat infested train tunnel as another of *The Hunter's* victims.

My vision focused on...

Scales.

Reptilian coppery eyes.

A rigid bone along its eyebrow.

I welcomed the darkness.



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## *2 – Veronica*

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Consciousness returned with sharp pains.

I curled into a fetal position, and remained as still as possible until the pain subsided. As the initial rush diminished, realization settled in. I was alive. Unless hell meant existing with the same pain inflicted at death.

The quieted pain allowed my attention to shift from the internal, to my external surroundings. The lights in the bedroom were off, but lights from the hallway filtered in from the open door like breadcrumbs. As I became more aware of my surroundings, I became aware the bed I'd been placed on wasn't in some random hotel room, house, or apartment.

I awoke on a boat.

Inch by inch, I uncurled my body to examine my environment. The furnishings were constructed of a dark wood. Two tables bookended the bed. A chair sat in the corner in front of a wall mounted lamp, and looked just as comfortable as the bed. Lastly, moving against the softest sheets I've ever had the pleasure of sleeping on, I realized save for my panties, I didn't have on a stitch of clothing.

Absence of clothing allowed me to see the extent of the wounds to my chest and abdomen. Red angry tissue covered them in the form of malleable scabs.

“The hell...?”

I moved faster than my body wanted and it objected with another stab of pain that nearly caused my legs to buckle the moment I stood. Thick carpet muffled my progress to the mounted mirror. I pressed my hand to the wall and ran it along the surface until my fingers touched the button connected to the mounted lamp by the mirror.

Four claw marks started just below my right collarbone and extended at a diagonal angle just above my navel. Another set, much shorter, stopped and started near my right hip bone. I braced my hands on either side of the mirror to keep from falling while my mind flashed back to the moments I gained the wounds. The smaller set must have been caused when the thing tried to drag me away. Maybe it planned to use my pelvis as a handle.

Impossible, because I had the distinct memory of spitting up blood. I remembered my chest being ripped open, and the ribbons it made of my flesh. A mortal wound. On the off chance the damage could have been mended, it should have taken internal and external stitches maybe even staples to close the gaps. No way should they have been closed with soft formed, angry, red scabs over them.

I stumbled back and barely caught myself on the edge of the bed. That was when I noticed clothes in the nearby chair. When my legs decided to cooperate and support my weight again, I moved to the chair and carefully slipped on the track pants, and loosely fastened the drawstring waist. Next was the short sleeve hoodie, zipped up enough to make me modest again. A pair of sports style flip flops, my badge, flashlight and the tattered, bloody remains of my jeans and shirt were all tucked under the new outfit. Even my holster rest on the bottom of the chair, but my Sig was noticeably absent.

The clothes were obviously ruined, but whoever or whatever brought me to the room left the decision to toss them to me. The fabric that had been my shirt was just shredded rags caked with dry blood. The jeans hadn't fared much better in the amount of blood coating them. They had been my favorite and may have been salvageable, if only someone had not cut them off.

That much blood loss, that much damage. People die from less. So what was my excuse?

A search of my jacket turned up keys for my car and home, my phone, my wallet but still no gun.

I pocketed my badge, and flashlight, dropped the shoes to the floor, slipped my feet into them, and set off to find my savior, or captor. Slow steady steps brought me out into the hallway. I kept a hand against the wall, partially to steady myself from the gentle ebb and flow of the boat. Partially in some illusionary attempt that a hand on the wall would keep me from falling.

I passed an open door on each side of the hallway. To the left, a bathroom. To the right a bedroom smaller than the one I moved away from, but no less posh. The last door was closed and lingered just in front of me at the top of seven polished wooden steps.

A voice came from beyond the closed door. I climbed the steps but for several seconds remained prone and silent to obtain as much information as possible.

Male.

Alone.

Foreign.

And on the phone since his voice was the only one I heard.

I strained a bit more and tried to make out his words but he spoke in a low volume that made eavesdropping difficult. Only snippets of his conversation filtered through the wood. *Barely reached... no... I couldn't do both... shredded her chest... resting... no, not her...* and even those faded as if he moved further away. He spoke with an offset of a British accent.

Not Irish, his words didn't carry enough of a lilt. Not Scottish, there wasn't enough of a brogue, though it could have just been faded. Welsh perhaps, or northern England. Unable to get anymore from ear hustling, I took the plunge, turned the knob, and opened the barrier.

I stepped up and through the doorway into the kitchen, though being on a boat the more appropriate word made it, the galley. It contained all the trimmings of a modern kitchen, only reduced in size. Directly ahead of the galley lay a sitting area, a breakfast type nook, only without being much of a nook as an open space. There was a staircase leading up to another door identical

to the one I passed through. Standing almost in the middle of the eating area stood the man I heard on the phone.

He looked to be six feet, though I placed money on him being taller than seventy-two inches. His hair, dark as a starless sky and unruly with loose curls that fell onto his forehead and put his right eye in jeopardy of being obscured. The curls gave it a layering pattern I assumed to be accidental since I knew zero guys that layered their hair. Eyebrows and long lashes matched the hue of his hair and surrounded strangely colored eyes. A scruffy beard in need of a trim blanketed his jaw and surrounded his mouth.

He stood at attention with his hands shoved into the front pockets of his jeans, as he regarded me with those coppery orbs. He studied me as intently as I studied him. Curiosity colored his expression and softened his features.

I sized him up since either on purpose or subconsciously he blocked the only exit. With his muscle definition visible under his t-shirt, and each step I took causing pain, I knew any attempt to take him head on would end in an epic fail. He shifted the angle of his body. Just enough for his broad shoulders to block the sight of the stairway behind him as if he read my thoughts, and knew what I contemplated.

The shift in his stance allowed me to spot my missing Sig Sauer on the edge of the dining room table just beyond the galley.

I averted my gaze quickly, hoping the brief glance didn't give away my goal. Instincts told me the man, or the creature wearing a man suit, wasn't a threat to me. At least not an imminent one. Assuming he was what saved me, he wanted me alive for the time being. Regardless of his intention, I knew one thing for certain. I needed to get him from between me and my gun, and ultimately, the exit.

“Wha...” I caught the word before it fully left. Insulting him didn’t seem like a good idea. “Who are you?” I amended.

“No one for you to fear.” He spoke in a soft, even, and calming voice. Like a negotiator trying to talk me off a ledge, not into a room. “My name is Lachlan Brynmor. I promise I will not harm you. I promise you are safe now. You are safe here.”

The phrase, *you are safe now*, repeated in my head. His words confirmed my suspicion. The thing from the tunnel spoke those same words. The thing that brought me back into the light.

“Brynmor.” I repeated the name and glanced subtly from his face to the door. “Sounds Gaelic.”

“It is Welsh to be exact.”

The smile he offered seemed to be an attempt to put me at ease and reward me for my geographical audio prowess. Still a smile didn’t remove him from in front of the door... or my weapon.

“Huh.” I grunted uncertain how to respond.

A brighter version of the smile already on his face emerged and created linear dimples in his cheeks barely visible under the beard. “I have not been home in many years, but I suppose the decades have engrained the accent into my being.”

Decades? I knew a frown settled between my eyebrows but technically it wasn’t my fault. Lachlan looked to be my age, give or take a year or two. So how many decades were we talking? Experience assured me the longer we conversed the more questions would arise.

“Veronica Sykes.” I replied belatedly to the introduction. “You brought me here?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I tended your wounds but you needed someplace private to recover or they would have reopened, and you would be dead.”

“It was you in the subway station?”

“Yes.” He repeated. “Please sit. You are still incredibly weak.”

“I’m fine.”

“You are most definitely not, *fine*,” his tone took on a sharper edge before he abruptly cut off his words.

I couldn’t sit. The walk from the bedroom to the galley left me tired and winded, but at least standing I had a small chance of luring him out of the way, or maybe making a heroic dash when he tended the pot on the stove. If I sat, the odds were I’d never reach the gun or the stairs.

I tried not to look at it, but like Lot’s wife looked back, my eyes were drawn to the Sig on the table. Lachlan turned his head and followed my gaze. The muscles in my body coiled painfully tight when he turned his back to me and headed for my gun.

Options moved through my head. I could go back down the stairs. Retreat to the bedroom and hope the door had a lock and something inside that could be weaponized. But in the bedroom I’d be trapped. Nowhere to go since even in the best condition I couldn’t squeeze through one of the portholes.

I scanned the counter but there were no knives visible. Maybe I could use the pot, or the wood cutting board to the left of the stove. My search for potential weapons stopped when Lachlan picked up the gun. He didn’t grip the handle, but wrapped his fingers around the barrel and trigger guard like he was carrying a baseball. He offered it to me upon his return and I took it from him almost as soon as he stretched out his hand. My fingers found familiar comfort in the weight.

“I told you. I will not harm you.”

I had no idea if bullets even hurt him, but illusion was everything, and over the years my gun had become my security blanket.

He moved to the stove and without using a pot holder, or even his shirt to protect his skin, removed the all cast iron lid and stirred the simmering contents inside with a wooden spoon. The aroma of something meaty, and delicious escaped into the room and instantly tempted me.

I should have left. I should have used the opportunity with him at the pot to make my getaway up the stairs, but with gun in hand, curiosity took over. It didn't help that the pain returned in spades. My body made it clear I used up my energy reserves.

“You lost a great deal of blood, and your body has been badly damaged.” He began in a softer tone. “You need to allow it time to heal completely. Please. Sit.” He gestured to the seated nook to my right. “I promise, I will not—”

“—hurt me?” I concluded.

“Never.”

His voice and gaze held an earnestness meant to put me at ease, as did his new laidback stance in the form of leaning against the counter. I recognized them as interrogation tactics used to placate and relax suspects. Being on the receiving end helped me appreciate why they worked so well.

About a thousand questioned in my brain demanded answers. None of them required me to remain standing.

Walking radiated stabs of pain from my chest and hips through my entire body. The journey from where I stood to the nook area left me winded. The effort to sit nearly left me in tears.

Lachlan pushed away from the counter when I first started to move. By the time I made it to the bench, he hovered a couple of feet away.

“Allow me to help?”

I looked to the bench, looked to him, and relented with a nod.

“Do you mind?”

I followed his gaze to the gun in my hand. After a moment of hesitation I removed the holster from my pocket, slipped the gun inside and clipped the rig to the waistband. The extra weight hung awkwardly. Track pants aren't meant to support the weight of a gun.

With the gun holstered, Lachlan took the final step forward and tucked his hands under my arms. He smelled like pine and sandalwood. I focused my eyes on the hollow of his throat and ignored his enticing scent.

"If you allow me to support your weight and guide you, it will hurt less. Trust me." He added at my reluctance.

I'm honestly not sure how much of my hesitation had to do with not trusting Lachlan, and how much had to do with my wounded pride at needing his help to sit. However, with my current limit in options I relented and let him lower me to the seat.

"Do you mind if I check your wounds?"

I offered my Mr. Spock imitation with a raised eyebrow. "You've already seen me naked."

"Not completely. I made a choice between your modesty or your life."

"How *did* you treat them? What did you do to them? What are you?"

Lachlan knelt in front of me and carefully unzipped the hoodie to expose my chest. It allowed for a stunning view of his eyes. Irises a bronze coppery hue I'd never seen in eye pigment. The color of antique pennies, buffed until they shone.

"You know, it is believed dragons can mesmerize maidens with their gaze."

"I'm not a maiden."

The right corner of his lips rose in that same smirk while he continued to probe and examine my wounds.

"How can you see anything?"

With only a dim overhead light, the area seemed too dark for the task at hand.



“Dragons have excellent vision.” He muttered. “Especially in the dark.”

I scoffed. That statement marked the second time he said dragon. “You expect me to believe you’re a...” my words abruptly morphed into a sharp hiss when his exploration hit too close to the center of a deeper wound.

“My apologies.” He offered and returned the illusion of modesty by re-zipping the hoodie. “If it is any consolation you are healing nicely. I do not think it will leave much of a scar.”

“Why am I healing so quickly? Why am I not dead? What *are* you? Really this time.”

“What do you think I am?”

In no mood for his coyness, I glared at him. “If I knew, I wouldn’t have asked.”

The smirk toying with Lachlan’s mouth transformed into a full on smile as he stood and moved back to the stove. He removed two bowls from an overhead cabinet and filled them with the delicious smelling contents from the pot. As he spoke, he kept his back to me and focused on the task at hand.

“You saw my hybrid form in the subway. You already know what I am. You simply refuse to believe it.” He turned back around, a bowl in each hand. “Dragons, after all, only exist in myths, folklore, and Chinese New Year.”

“No.”

I shook my head. He was right. I didn’t want to believe it, even with the image of his copper and bronze skin engraved in my memory.

“Is it really so hard to believe? The Unmasking happened just over three years ago.”

“Dragons didn’t revealed themselves.”

Damn. Dragons? Vampires, shape-shifters, real witches, and fae were one thing, but dragons? And if dragons existed what the hell did that make *The Hunter*? Sigmund liked to tease me about being an expert. I wasn’t. But I knew enough about shapeshifters to know he was not one.

“Calm yourself.” He chided. Lachlan returned to the table and offered me one of the bowls. “Sudden movement may reopen your wounds and I’ve given you as much blood as I can spare this evening.”

Instinctively my eyes went to the crook of my elbow.

“Into your cuts.” He answered with his hand steady, still offering the bowl. “I transfused blood directly into your wounds. You will heal faster that way. I do not have equipment for a proper transfusion, and despite what the movies show, force feeding an unconscious person is exceedingly difficult and—”

“—feeding? As in making me drink your blood.”

“Allowing you to consume my blood.” He corrected sharply. “Dragon’s blood is sacred. It is a powerful elixir used in many spells, and I assure you, not something offered on a whim.”

“And yet you shared it with a complete stranger.”

I caught the hesitation when his eyes flitted over me and came to rest on the bowl.

“Take your stew,” he ordered.

I mentally high fived myself and took the bowl. Stirring the contents as I set it on the table. Beef stew meat, some sort of baked fish, and Andouille sausages dominated chunks of vegetables in a thick brown liquid. He called it stew but it looked and smelled like hybrid gumbo.

“I promise it tastes even better than it smells.”

Lachlan took a seat on the bench across from me and began eating.

“Where am I?”

I brought a spoonful to my nose for a closer sniff and quickly lost the battle to hold off eating.

“About thirty miles east of the city.”

“East?” the spoon paused, but only for a few moments. “You mean out on the lake, east?”

“Mm-hmm,” he confirmed with a nod while he ate.

“Why did you bring me here?”

Accusatory tones remained out of my voice while I ate. Keep things light. Don't piss off the dragon. My brain hadn't completely wrapped around the whole dragon identity, but he was right. I saw him with my own eyes. And while I wasn't sure how much of it had been blood loss hallucinations, I hadn't hallucinated my chest being shredded.

“Even the most accommodating hotels frown upon bringing an eviscerated woman into their establishment. I told you, you needed to heal and water hinders both innate, and magically designed scrying.”

“What's scrying?”

“The ability to locate someone. Think of it as mystical GPS.”

Part of me wanted to ask what would be scrying, and who would be the subject. I settled for silently eating the stew while my mind rebelled.

Dragons?

Impossible.

With so much blood loss could I really trust what I saw, or thought I saw? Darkness plays tricks on people, especially in the face of fear. Made them see things that weren't there and weren't real.

“Stop trying to convince yourself it was a hallucination.” He reprimanded in a clipped tone. “You're smarter than that.”

“How did you... Did you just—”

“—read your mind?” He finished as he glanced up from his bowl. “No, I do not need to read your mind to know what you are trying to do.”

“Good.”

A cocky grin blossomed across his entire face. “But, for the record, my blood allows us an empathic connection.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I might not be able to read your mind but I can sense your emotional state.”

I snorted at that. “Great, just what I need, a mood dragon.”

“If you were trained and knew how to use it you would be able to sense mine as well.”

Lachlan let the smile take on more smug undertones. The kind of condescending smile that needed to be removed with a physical connection. Fortunately for both of us the table made the connection too far of a reach. And motive withstanding, I wasn't in the habit of hitting people, or creature just because they annoyed me.

“You know, this will be easier if you just accept what you saw, Veronica, and stop trying to fight it. I am a dragon. A cliff dweller to be exact.”

“There are different kinds?”

“Are all humans the same race?”

“Touché.”

“We are the smallest of the dragons, but what we lack in size we make up for in formidability.”

“I'm guessing all dragons believe their race is the most formidable.”

“Truth and belief are often unaligned.”

With no dog in that particular fight, I let the topic drop. If he wanted to claim cliff dwellers as the most bad asses of the dragons, who was I to argue? I quietly ate the last of the stew and ran the spoon around the sides and bottom of the bowl.

“Would you like more?” Even as he asked the question Lachlan stood and collected my dish.

“Eating fuels the healing process and protein in particular, accelerates it.”

“The thing that attacked me in the subway tunnel...”

“The one you refer to as *The Hunter*.”

“The papers gave him that. He's just another perp as far as I'm concerned.”

My eyes lingered on his profile as he refilled the bowl. I originally thought his erect stance had been to discourage me from trying to rush past him to the door, but he stood the same way as he dished out more stew. Spine straight, shoulders squared... I probably could have placed a level from his heels to his head and it would have been even. My eyes lingered on his backside. The smirk that graced his lips when he glanced over his shoulder with an elevated eyebrow, a painful reminder of our connection.

“Referring to him as *just another perp* is a bit dismissive, would you not agree?”

“Was it a dragon too?” I asked, ignoring his statement disguised as a questions.

“No.” He returned the bowl to the table and sat next to me, instead of reclaiming his original seat. “He is a type of demon.”

“Is?” the wounds ached all over again. “You mean it’s not dead?”

“He. The demon is male, and no, he is very much alive. In pain and missing an arm for the time being, but very much alive.”

“For the time being? It can regenerate lost limbs?”

“Yes, but that is not atypical for demons. Even harpies can regenerate.”

I ate the stew and digested his words. Dragons *and* demons? Oh, this kept getting better and better. It had the makings of a horrible bar joke, with a deadly punchline.

“Why did you save me?”

“You would prefer death?”

“That’s a stupid question.”

“As is yours.”

“You’re the one who equated dragon’s blood to holy wine. So why share it with some random woman you don’t know? Isn’t that against the dragon code?”

“And what would you possibly know about a dragon’s code?”

“There’s a dragon’s code?”

“Of course there’s a bloody code. What of it?”

I parted my lips and just as quickly snapped my mouth closed. I offended him. Not smart considering my current state and geographical location. But it hadn’t been my intentions.

“I’m sorry, you’re right. I don’t know anything about dragons or their code.”

“Have you heard of the FBI’s Predator Crime Unit?”

“The Spook unit? Yeah I’ve heard of them.”

“But?” he pushed.

“You’re not giving me fed vibes.”

“I am a liaison, not an official member. Demons are my specialty, so naturally they consult me for my expertise when they have cases involving demons. The PCU got wind of your *Hunter*, and called me in to confirm.”

“And?”

He shrugged and offered that same smug smile from before. “I confirmed it was a demon after the last murder.”

“That’s why you were there, in the subway.” I concluded. “You were tracking it.”

“Him.”

“Whatever.”

“Actually, Detective Sykes, I was tracking you.”

“Me? Why?”

“Because I knew that you would lead me to the demon.”

“You used me as bait?”

All traces of the smug smile, and any other smile for that matter, vanished from his face. He looked pained.

“I did not think that you would actually chase it into the tubes. I assumed once you realized what he was and where he was going that you would call for backup and wait.”

“I did call for backup.”

“Yes but you did not wait, did you?”

“I didn’t know it was a demon I thought it was a werereature. I can handle a werereature. You, however, knew what it was. You could have warned me.”

“Yes, and that would have gone over swimmingly, because you would have completely listened to a stranger when you scarcely believe what you have seen with your own eyes.”

Bait.

Silence stretched while we stared at each other and that one word repeated over and over in my head. *Puff the Magic Dragon* used me as bait to flush out some demon, and what made matters worse, he hadn’t killed it. It, he, whatever got away. Missing an arm but it still got away. And all the while, I had been bait.

The bowl flew out of my hand and towards him first. Quick reflexes on his part put his arm up to deflect the dish with the side of his hand instead of his head. The stew left behind spilled down his arm and tagged parts of the bench.

My fist followed.

A left hook that unlike the bowl caught him square in the jaw. A satisfying hit that knocked surprise into his features.

I enjoyed my handiwork for a second, maybe two.

And then I passed out.