

Demon Hunt

The Cambion Rider Chronicles, Volume 0

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Published by Platinum Dragon Publishing, 2019.

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DEMON HUNT

First edition. September 24, 2019.

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ISBN: 978-1393931270

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The Cambion Rider Chronicles
Demon Hunt

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Demon Hunt



I soared in wide circles high above her.

A few graceful flaps of my wings occasionally interrupted riding the air currents. My movements resembled those of a bird of prey. Tracking its prey high above the earth. Waiting for that fatal error in judgment that left it open for death. I preferred the favorable analogy to that of a carrion bird, though I supposed had I not used the ability to cloak my body while in the full grace of my natural form, I would resemble the latter over the former to people below. Most humans have yet to see a dragon beyond CGI imaging, or from an artist's rendering. Only a minority of them know of our existence.

In the summer of 2014 groups of preternatural creatures revealed their presence to mankind. History dubbed the event the Unmasking. Historians omitted many of the uglier facts surrounding the events. One such fact being humans unrelenting hunt of non-human creatures. Elders of various preternatural races agreed to reveal their existence.

Harder to hunt in the dark what exists in the light.

I found considerable irony in the course my thoughts took. Contemplating humans that hunted preternatural creatures while I hunted one from above. Dragons were not alone in remaining out of the spotlight of the Unmasking. Many other preternatural creatures joined us, including demons.

The one I hunted jogged below me. With minimal foot traffic I could have dove down. Tucked copper scaled my wings close to my body

and attacked before she knew, quite literally, what hit her. Uncertainty kept me in the air. The sulfuric stench that accompanied demons was so degraded on her I missed it the first time around. In addition to her diminished demonic scent, her deeds during the period I watched her were not the actions of an innate evildoer. Observing her at the last crime scene her reaction appeared genuine and real. The skinned state of the bodies disturbed her. Not the response I expected from a demon ridden human.

A demon possessing a homicide detective? Possible, but something was off. I learned many lessons in my youth. None so painfully as the consequences that accompany a rash decision. I followed my instincts and watched her for a week. Five days later I found myself no closer to figuring her out. If the demon kept to schedule, the sands just about drained from the top of the hourglass.

I disengaged my surveillance when she returned to her home. I spent enough mornings following to know when she departed her brownstone in forty minutes, she would be heading to her precinct. Banking to the left, I flew out over Lake Michigan and headed to my boat docked a short distance away in Burnham harbor.

Flying, I loved it. The stretch of my muscles when I beat my wings harder and drove my body faster. The wind pressing my scales flat as it rushed over and under my body in answer to the increased speed. The kaleidoscope of scents pushed into my nostrils. More than anything I loved the dive. That rush in the pit of my stomach when I tucked my wings close to my flanks and hurdled my body towards the earth.

I did not pull up. I sucked in a deep breath, sealed off my nostrils and took a header straight into the lake. I remained underwater and pushed my body through the transformation back to my human guise. Docking in the last berth allowed me to surface unseen by anyone who might have been asleep on their boats and awaken when I broke the surface of the water with a thunderous clap from a cloudless sky.

Using the ladder at the rear of my boat, I climbed halfway out of the water and paused. While I stalked a Chicago police detective that might be a demon, someone boarded my boat. A deep breath in brought a familiar scent to my nose.

Without a stitch of clothing on I climbed the rest of the way onto the stern of my boat, not the least bit surprised to find Victor Carter, parked on one of the outboard cushions.

“I do not remember giving you permission to come aboard.”

“One of your neighbors let me in the gate.” He sat with his right leg crossed over the left, and his arms spread across the back of the bench. He kept his eyes purposely trained on my face. His expression somewhere between amused and annoyed. “Any particular reason why you’re naked?”

“I was in dragon form.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you do have the ability to clothe yourself when you change from dragon to human. Or did you make that up?”

“When I left this morning, my boat was empty. I expected to find it that way when I returned.”

“Feel free to magic up some pants.”

“It does not work after I have changed.”

As much pleasure as Victor’s discomfort brought, standing naked on the deck of a boat docked in a public harbor was not the best way to keep peace with the neighbors. Although Mrs. Fisher, the retired schoolteacher to my immediate left might not mind.

I motioned for Victor to stand. When he did, I raised the cushion he vacated and removed a towel from the stack hidden in the storage area under the seat.

“Better?” I questioned after I secured the blue and white striped cotton around my waist.

“You have no idea.”

“Coffee?”

“Please.”

I led the way inside, sliding open the door separating interior from exterior after typing in a numeric code. Once inside, Victor followed me down into the galley. I gestured for him to sit in the kitchen nook area while I put on a pot of water in an electric kettle for the French press.

“Dark roast?”

“Please.”

“Cream or sugar?”

“Battery acid black.”

I added the grinds to the bottom of the press.

“I believe this is my first time being on your boat.”

“No one from the team has, save Emily. I place a high value on my privacy.”

“Am I supposed to read into that?” Victor asked.

“If I did not want you here, Carter, I would have issued a request for you to leave by now.”

“Good to know.”

Carter watched me with a guarded look while I added the boiling water to the press. I waited to push the plunger down until the hue of the water grew darker than my guest’s skin. No matter how many time Carter and I worked together, each new case began with us sizing each other up. Each time I asked myself why I assisted his team. Something kept me from placing my full trust in him. Or, perhaps my desire to rid the world of demonic entities overrode my trust issues.

“Emily passed on your analysis.” Carter stated. “Hence my presence.”

I poured half the contents of the decanter into a cup and placed it in front of Victor, and then sat opposite him.

“FBI does not sit on their laurels.”

“Six murders warrant a fast response. The others will be here this evening. I wanted to fly out ahead and start greasing the bureaucratic wheels.”

I clasped my hands on the table and held Victor’s gaze, but slowly lost focus on the conversation he attempted to initiate around the mur-

ders spanning the last six weeks in Chicago. My mind returned to the detective.

“You with me, Brynmor?”

I blinked at my name and returned my focus to the federal agent in front of me.

“My apologies.”

Victor took his first drink of coffee and gave me a pointed look of satisfaction. “Everything all right?”

“I am just thinking,” I began and rubbed one thumb over the other. I met Victor’s eyes and pushed up from the seat. Leaning against the counter, I crossed my arms over my chest and faced him again. “I may have been mistaken in what I told Emily last night.”

“Which part?”

“I am not entirely certain the detective is the demon we are looking for.”

“But she is a demon. Right?”

I voiced my answer after a breath of hesitation. “I believe so.”

“You believe so?” Carter placed the cup back on the table and turned his body out to face me head on. “You’re not sure?”

“I am not infallible, Special Agent.”

He held his hands up. “A little touchy this morning, aren’t we?”

I parted my lips to apologize but held off and opted to use the still hot water to make a cup of tea. Carter was right. I was touchy, but why? The demon bothered me. As did the beyond brutal manner in which the women were murdered. No ritual came to mind that required the victims to be skinned, which meant the demon did it for fun, for shock, or both.

“Let me ask you this, is it possible for two demons to coexist in one city?”

I raised both eyebrows quickly and answered, “It is more common than you might imagine.”

“I have quite an imagination.”

Adding a smidge of cream to my tea I returned to leaning against the edge of the counter facing Carter.

“Demons operate in a pecking order. When multiples are present in one location, the one with the most seniority will take the leadership position while all the others fall in line.”

“Which is the detective? Leader or follower?”

“That is what troubles me. The more I think on it, I feel she is neither. Her reaction to the murder does not fit with someone who is aware or part of it. She was genuinely upset.”

“Aren’t you the one always reminding us demons are marvelous liars?”

I began with a nod but ended up shaking my head. “I cannot put my finger on this but there is a difference.”

“But the murders are the work of a demon?”

“Unmistakably.”

“So, if there are two here, one is rogue?”

“Now *that* would truly be a unique situation,” I remarked and sipped my tea.

Carter drained his cup and stood. “Thank you for the coffee.”

“Leaving?”

“Yeah. I have a meeting with the police superintendent and mayor in an hour.”

“Mm,” I returned to my seat with my cup and held in my hand. “I am meeting up with a friend, a reporter whose been tracking the story. She has been digging into the background of the lead detective. Seems the public is not particularly fond of the police at the moment.”

“With six brutally murdered and mutilated, and a big ol’ question mark instead of a suspect, or even a person of interest, is there any wonder why?”

I raised my right shoulder in a shrug. “I will watch her tonight. If the pattern is adhered to, tonight is a kill night. If she is not the demon, perhaps she will lead me to him.”

“Don’t you think you’ll need backup?”

“If I need backup, I will call Emily to teleport you to my location.”

“Right.” Victor touched his right finger to his forehead and headed to the ladder. He stopped and turned back around after he placed one foot on the bottom rung. “I almost forgot. What’s this cop’s name? No offense to your reporter friend, but no one digs up dirt like the bureau.”

I hid my hesitation behind drinking my tea. Why did I not want to give up her name? The swell of an overwhelming instinct to protect this woman, this demon created even more confusion. It made no sense. It ran contrary to everything I felt about demons. I should have led the charge to rip out her heart, but instead...

“Brynmor?”

I looked up and met Carter’s eyes.

“Her name?”

“Detective Veronica Sykes.”



I WATCHED THE WEREWOLF’S approach.

Dressed in khaki slacks with the hem of a white blouse stylishly poking out from under a matching khaki vest, Dana’s high ponytail swayed from one side to the other with each step. She blended in with the rest of downtown’s corporate employees lunching along the Riverwalk. I would even dare to say her attire and hairstyle brought out a plainness about her. Yet, her passing caused many heads to turn. Some discreet, others less so. Not every werewolf had it, but she possessed raw animal magnetism in spades.

I stood and skirted around the table, placing a kiss on either of her cheeks.

“I like this,” she seized the hair on my chin and playfully tugged my beard. “Is this because you know I think facial hair makes a man look sexy?”

I pulled her chair out and replied, “Yes. I have absolutely been growing this for over two months on the off chance I might come to Chicago and have lunch with you.”

She hung her soft leather briefcase from a hook under the table. I barely reclaimed my seat when the waitress, who had been hovering in the doorway since Dana’s approach, darted out to take our orders. Dana ordered cranberry beef salads for us and sent her away with a wave of her hand. Barely a blink later, a busboy appeared to refill my water, and place a glass containing a lemon slice in front of Dana.

Her eyes locked onto mine, and a slow smile crept across her lips to suggest the two of us shared a silent secret.

“How long has it been?” she questioned once we were finally alone.

“Three years?”

Very deliberately, she combed her eyes down my body until the table halted their descent. “You look good, Lachlan.”

“As do you. How is Daphne? Are you two still together?”

The smile redoubled and produced a hidden dimple in her right cheek. “For now, and she’s well. I’m surprised you remembered.”

“She matters to you, so she matters to me.”

“That’s very sweet.”

“Give her my best.”

“I will. You know she was nervous about us having lunch.”

“And why is that?” I raised an eyebrow and my glass.

“I may have said something to the effect that you are the only man I’d consider going straight for.”

I gave the only appropriate response and laughed. I found it hard to look at Dana and not ultimately see the five-year-old girl with pigtails I met three decades ago, staring back from the eyes of the woman she became.

“I do hope she realized you were joking.”

Dana answered with a shrug. She plucked the lemon slice from the glass and tossed it onto the table. “Doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“It matters to Daphne.”

“Things are not the best between Daphne and me, mainly due to her insanely jealous nature.”

“Which of course you give her no reason to be.”

“Someone can’t give someone else a reason to be jealous.”

I regarded her with an elevated eyebrow and angled my head slightly.

“Whatever. We’re not here to talk about the idiosyncrasies of me and Daphne’s relationship.”

“We can be if you need to discuss it.”

Shaking her head, Dana placed her phone on the table and moved her finger over the screen from the bottom to the top in a scroll. “Let’s talk about Detective Sykes instead.”

“You found something?”

Attentive, I leaned forward and into the shade the umbrella mounted through the middle of our table provided. I angled my head a bit but could not make out the words on the screen.

“Not really. It might help if I knew what I was looking for.” She looked up with a hopeful expression.

“I cannot say.”

“Cannot or will not?” she pushed, and quickly continued. “If you don’t want this on the record just tell me.”

“It is not that,” I lied. I loved Dana, but I trusted her to keep a juicy story out of the paper as much as I trusted a bear not to disturb a honeycomb.

“Then what?”

“What did you find out?”

“Fine,” she released an exaggerated sigh and began reading from her phone. “There really isn’t much. Graduated from Northwestern. Average grades. Graduated the police academy near the top of her class. Did time as a beat cop and in the domestic violence department before transferring to homicide. Her career is relatively normal and uneventful except for last month.”

“What happened last month?”

I pushed my water glass to the side, opening room on the table for the salad delivered by the waitress. She grinned enthusiastically at both of us, leaving after making sure we wanted for nothing else.

“She killed a siren for which she received both a public commendation, and a private reprimand that resulted in a two week’s suspension.”

“Why was she reprimanded? Was it not a clean kill?”

“It’s not public record, but I have a source on the force.”

“Of course you do,” I teased.

“And according to said source she killed the siren after she was taken off the case.”

“Why was she taken off the case?”

“Her cousin became poisoned by the siren’s song.”

“Ah.”

“Exactly.” Dana picked up her fork and pointed it at me, before stabbing lettuce leaves and a chunk of meat. “According to her report she didn’t have a choice, but it was just her and the siren and conveniently the siren’s not around to tell her side of the story.”

“The only way you can cure a siren’s toxin is through an elixir or if the siren dies.”

“Or is murdered in cold blood.”

“*In cold blood* is a matter of perspective.”

“Well, the mayor was pissed, hence the suspension. She wants Chicago to appear like a preternatural friendly city. My guess... the only reason she wasn’t fired is because the siren was in the process of racking up a hefty body count. One confirmed death and seven others in the wings.”

I nodded and sat back while we ate in silence. Single handedly killing a fae, a siren at that, was no easy feat. Her success went a long way to confirming her being a demon. Perhaps I was wrong in my hesitation with Victor. Did the siren threaten her agenda? Would she be vainglorious enough to take on a demon?

Yes. If she thought the demon was lower level? Yes, she would.

“Are you going to tell me why you wanted to know about her?”

I raised my eyes to meet hers but remained silent.

“Is this about the six murdered women?”

“Why would you think that?”

Dana stared at me and devoured more of her salad.

“Yes,” I finally conceded. “She is the lead detective on the case.”

“And?”

“And nothing,” I lied. “I am simply playing a hunch.”

“Is this for your FBI friends?”

On that I closed my right eye in a quick wink.

“Will you at least promise me the exclusive?”

Smiling, I picked up my fork and said, “Absolutely.”



STALKING OR STAKEOUT?

I waffled between the two possibilities. I arrived in the true grace of my dragon body, but transitioned to my lighter hybrid form, a taller broader human body with the scales and wings of a dragon when I landed. The cloak of invisibility I used to hide in my dragon form evaporated with the transformation to hybrid. Some dragons possessed the ability to work magic in hybrid and human form. I was not one of them. Perhaps because I had yet to take a rider.

The flat roof of the building across the street from Veronica's brownstone became my perch. In the dark, clusters of thick leaves both hid me from sight and created a foliage barrier. It made it difficult to see her clearly, yet when she sat on her couch, I saw her perfectly through the top section of the window.

She should have been out hunting. Instead, she sat in her living room with what looked like multiple files spread across her coffee table.

The hours stretched on and once again doubt needled into my thoughts. That scent. I knew I was not wrong. The scent of a demon is not easily confused for something else, but her actions and behavior at

the last crime scene and in the days that followed ran contrary to a demon's behavior.

With her asleep on the couch, I decided to call it a night. I stood and took two steps back when movement from her living room recalled my attention.

The detective sat up abruptly and rest her elbows on her knees, massaging her temples. Arms crossed over my chest, wings folded to my back I watched and waited. Ten minutes later she exited the front door of her brownstone and climbed behind the wheel of a car in front of the building.

She took to the road while I took to the air, as a dragon I once again masked my body from the gaze of those below. We ended up at *The Crow*, a gothic club under normal circumstances I would have avoided like an ex-lover after the end of a tumultuous relationship.

The detective flashed her badge to get past the doorman inside. I landed on the roof of a building a few doors down and formed an image of my attire in my mind's eye. Shifting down to the form of a man, the black leather pants, boots, and black tee shirt from my thoughts covered my body. I took the fire escape to the ground. Staying in the alleys and the shadows, I maneuvered my way to the back of the club and stopped at the door.

The stench of a demon much stronger and sharper now. Not from her. The second demon lurked inside. I considered calling Victor and the team for backup but held off. When she landed, Emily texted so I knew she arrived. With her being in the city and being a witch, if push shoved, she would be able to teleport the team to my location.

The follow up text she sent with her room number I assumed to be a not so subtle invitation for a late-night visit. Two years ago, I would have gladly accepted. Two years ago, I would have preemptively asked. What a difference twenty-four months makes.

I pulled my mind back to the matter at hand. A firm yank on the door handle broke the latch and allowed me access to interior. I opted to go in solo. One demon I could manage on my own.

Atrociously loud synthesized assaulted my ears and assailed my body. The base from the steady, underlining drumbeat pulsed through my chest and took up residence. It gave the illusion that the drums and my heart, beat in synch. I adjusted my pupils, dilating them to allow more light to see in the darkness of the corridors, while a focused my hearing on my breathing. It helped distract me from the music and reduce the noise to tolerable levels. At least for a little while. There were reasons I avoided clubs.

With too many scents to track either the detective, or the second demon I hunted for her outfit. In a sea of blacks and reds and other muted colors, I relied on the white of her tee shirt to grab my attention. The number of patrons wearing white shirts of various designs surprised me. Regardless after entering the larger room it only took a handful of minutes to locate her.

She prowled the narrow catwalk suspended by thick metal rods that sprouted up to the ceiling. I watched her eyes scanning the crowd below and knew she hunted for the other demon as I hunted for her. Did she know it? Could she have been working with, or for it? For it seemed more likely.

Cambion.

The word finally clicked into my head and with it the confusion from earlier fell into place. She was demon born, but not quite a demon. It went a long way to explain her scent. I had no proof to back the theory, but it made sense. The other demon could have been testing her, grooming her for her change.

Maybe.

I blended into a corner and watched her, moving only when she did. Trailing her from one room to the other while she searched for either her next victim, or the other demon. She took her time in each section, scan-

ning the perimeter and working her way in. One of the other rooms contained another catwalk, and just as in the main room she headed up for a bird's eye view of the premises below.

An hour into canvassing the club she returned to the main room and ducked into the bathroom. I took a page from her book. Leaning over the railing of the catwalk I spotted the second demon. A sickness swirled around his aura.

He flashed portions of his true features. A mouth full of elongated sharp teeth. Black filled the whites of his eyes. He turned and shoved his way through the crowd with the detective on his heels. I weaved past the handful of people on the elevated platform to the door marked by the exit sign. My intentions to crash through and take to the sky crumbled when I hip checked the handle and the door refused to budge. I gave a second deliberate shove to the same results.

I wanted to avoid drawing attention to myself. The hell with it.

Stepping back to the railing, I lashed out at the door's handle with my foot. Surrounding bricks on the exterior wall broke away when the door went flying open. Startled yelps pursued me outside. I used the fire escape on the other side to access the roof. Once there I focused and listened. Laughter came from the front of the club. The sound of cars passing. Footsteps on the fire escape. The rattling of a chain link fence and the sound of running steps retreating.

Scales flowed over my skin. Muscles and bones lengthened and rearranged, and wings burst from my back. I launched myself from the roof and pushed a cloaking spell through my body from snout to tail. Whoever pursued me from the catwalk below got a fleeting glimpse of something copper diving over the side.

I flew up and over the neighboring building. I heard her voice calling into dispatch followed by her location. Grand and Milwaukee. I redirected my flight and pulled my wings in close to accelerate the dive. I morphed several feet from the ground into my hybrid form and cleared the

stairs to the ticketing vestibule in three leaps. I expected to find her waiting for backup, but no one waited below.

Did she truly plan to challenge the demon solo? A series of gunshot from the station's platform beneath confirmed my worse thoughts.

She didn't know what it was.

She thought she could take it.

She was wrong.



SHE WAS ABSOLUTELY insane.

She followed it onto the platform and into the tunnel to what purpose? Shoot it with a handgun? She meant to stop it, even if that meant sacrificing her life in the process.

Foolhardy. Fearless. Reckless.

The stairwell allowed me to spread my wings and glide down to the platform. The sounds emerging from the tunnel sickened me. I dropped onto the tracks and red flooded my vision at the sight of the demon mounting Veronica's body with his head bent down to taste her blood. She was not his to kill.

Releasing a roar, I rushed forward. The demon attempted to drag Veronica off, releasing her when he realized he would not escape carrying her. He snarled and I answered with a growl that shook the concrete above us. He turned, lowered his head, and charged. Horns thick and curved like those of a ram surged forward. He meant to slam into my stomach and break ribs.

I flew up, twisted my body midair to grab a horn, and flung him further back. Away from Veronica. As soon as he hit the ground the demon was up and charging me again. This time when I went up, he launched into the air. I pulled back and shoved my feet into his chest. The blow hurtled him backwards. He rolled and came up on his haunches in time for me to shove him back. I twisted my body to avoid the claws of his feet

when he lashed out, and as I completed the turn, I raked the claw on my wing through his shoulder and severed his left arm.

Behind us Veronica groaned and choked on her own blood. A scraping sound let me know she attempted to drag herself to safety. Too late. Her heart beat slow and slower with each second. She did not have long.

In front of me the demon retreated deeper into the subway. He left behind his severed arm. He moved quick, but the blood trail made him easy to follow. At least right now. Following him sealed Veronica's fate. The scent of her corrupted blood filled the shaft. I estimated a generous five minutes before death claimed her.

She was demon born. Her life should not have mattered to me, but something compelled me to turn back to the foolhardy, fearless, reckless detective. It could not have been instincts, could it? Instincts should have encouraged me to abandon her to her fate and chase down the demon. Kill the demon or save the detective.

I returned to Veronica. With her right arm she dragged herself along the payment. Her gun still clutched in her hand. Her left hand clutched her ruined chest in a hopeless attempt to stymie the blood loss. She cried out but didn't resist when I gathered her as delicately as possible and scooped her up.

"You are safe now." I assured her. Or attempted to. My hybrid form made clear annunciation of some letters a challenge.

Blood colored her lips when she coughed. It reached her lungs and prevented her from breathing properly. Not good. She had even less time than I thought. I moved quickly but carefully. Mindful of the limited time she had left and of inflicting unnecessary pain.

"Hold on," I encouraged and followed up with a command of, "Stay with me."

Her eyes fluttered open when we ascended onto the platform. For half a second she focused on my face, and then her eyes rolled up into her head exposing the whites. Police sirens wailed in the distance. I clutched

Veronica to my chest and increased my speed. Once we made it out of the station, I expanded my wings and rose to the nearest rooftop.

Her heart stilled the moment I stretched her onto the covering. I wasted no time using a claw and slicing open the vein in my arm. I held my arm over her shredded chest and let my blood flow directly into the wounds.

“Breathe Veronica.”

I could not do compressions, not with her chest in tatters, so I continued to let my blood run into her body. Her heartbeat fluttered. A faint little thing. More like an involuntary quiver but it grew stronger as my blood fused with her tissue and the wounds began to mend.

Her scent touched my nose and I jerked up to my feet. Pacing away from her to the end of the rooftop, I turned and stared at her mutilated body. What had I done? What was wrong with me? Had I just saved the life of a demon? The memory of my father’s voice spat chastising words in my head. Years past since we last spoke, but I could picture the disgust upon his face if he knew what I’d done. If he’d been there.

And yet, my being and soul screamed in unison to protect her then and to heal her now. Fury at the demon flushed my face and trembled my hands. Ragged, strained breathing pulled my attention back to Veronica. Her lungs struggled to function properly and retain air through the wounds. They healed, but not enough to keep her alive. Not without further intervention from me.

Her death hinged on my inaction, but I didn’t want her to die. Moreover, I wanted to be the one that saved her.

Letting my dragon form overtake me, I shook myself once the change completed and beat the air with my wings. I curled my talon feet around Veronica’s body with a care reserved for only the most delicate and breakable of things. Together we rose into the sky.

I would take her somewhere safe.

Someplace the demon could not track.

Someplace I could get more blood into her.

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About the Author

Fannie resides in the Chicagoland area and enjoys creating stories that bring her imagination to life. Her favorite part of writing is the art of creating a vivid and visual world, populated by an entertaining and interesting 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 watching football and hockey, going to movies, reading, or surprise, surprise, playing Assassin's Creed.

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