SNACK IN THE GLASS

An Incryptid Story
Snake in the Glass

by

Seanan McGuire
"I can't think of any better place in this world for making memories than the Carmichael Hotel. The staff is friendly, the beds are sizeable, and the walls are pretty much soundproof. I expect Heaven will be much the same."
--Frances Brown

Driving toward the Carmichael Hotel, Chicago, Illinois
Now

Things that do not rank on my list of "top one hundred things to do before you die": steering a U-Haul through Chicago rush hour traffic. Horns honked all around us, and our fellow drivers seemed concerned about my education, as they were introducing me to all manner of exciting hand gestures. Some of them were even new to me. I pointed to one of them.

"Look, Dominic. We're learning new things."

Dominic scowled at the man through his window. People could say what they liked about Dominic De Luca, but one thing wouldn't change: he would always be an Olympic-level scowler. When he looked disapproving, you knew about it.

The man who had been showing us his fingers seemed to realize he had made a mistake. He withdrew his hand back into his car and hunched over the wheel, shooting small, nervous glances in Dominic's direction.

"I don't understand why you take such joy in these vulgar gestures," said Dominic.

"Because they're funny, and because if I don't take joy in something right about now, I'll abandon ship and run for the nearest rooftop," I said. I tightened my hands on the steering wheel. We'd been on the road for months, crossing the country at a speed that even snails would mock. It didn't help that we kept turning around and going back the way we'd come the second I remembered some monument or distant acquaintance that Dominic hadn't met yet.

I was a captive in a Hell of my own devising, trapped behind the wheel of a motor vehicle and running only when we stopped for the night. Dominic, who didn't know how to drive in North America yet, was no help. All he could do was ride along and hope that I wasn't going to kill us. (Always a risk, given how much I hated driving and how easily I got distracted by shiny things by the side of the road. It was really a pity that half the time, those distractions meant slowing down for yet another weird roadside attraction. At this rate, we were going to be lucky to make it to Portland before the U-Haul company declared us Public Enemies #1 and came to repossess our truck.)

"We could have stopped outside the city until rush hour had passed." Dominic's tone was gentler now, almost hesitant. He knew how much I hated driving, and more, that I detested driving in traffic. From his perspective, my decision to push on into Chicago probably looked like a sign of an impending nervous breakdown.

I took my eyes off the road and the entertainingly vulgar gestures long enough to flash him a reassuring smile. "Yeah, but then we would have been late for dinner. It's never nice to start a visit by making your hosts wait for you."

Dominic's expression shifted, turning suspicious. "You told me we would be staying in a hotel for this stop. In fact, you promised me that we would be staying in a hotel, rather than sleeping in the U-Haul, camping in a haunted corn field while we waited for your Aunt Mary to make herself manifest--and I'm still waiting for an answer on how many dead aunts you have--or sleeping in a decrepit cabin
with a reputation for being a good place to get brutally murdered. I was excited about the idea of a hotel. One could even say that I verged upon giddy at the idea of proper water pressure and a door that didn't need to be secured with a hammer."

"We are staying in a hotel, you crybaby," I said, turning on my turn signal and starting to inch toward the far side of the highway. Our exit would be coming up soon, and given the speed of the traffic around us, the more notice I gave about wanting to get over, the better off we were going to be. "The Carmichael Hotel is a Chicago institution. It's been here for decades. My great-grandparents had their honeymoon there. The doors shut, there's good water pressure, and the hotel staff was thrilled when I made our reservation."

"There must be a catch," said Dominic.

I didn't say anything.

"Is it haunted?" he asked.

"Nope," I said.

"Am I missing something?"

"Maybe a little bit," I said.

Dominic glared at me and settled back in his seat, brow furrowed in thought.

I wasn't tormenting my boyfriend just for the sake of being mean, although watching him pout was rapidly becoming one of my favorite ways to pass the time. No, there was a method to my madness. Dominic De Luca was the last in a long line of monster-hunters and killers trained and employed by the Covenant of St. George. I say "last" because he had chosen to leave the Covenant after he'd actually met a few of the so-called "monsters" that he had been ordered to kill. My cousin Sarah had been one of the final straws. She was sweet, friendly, obsessed with algebra, and belonged to a species of hyper-evolved parasitic wasps. She had also blasted her own brain to goo in an effort to save me, and by extension, him, from the people who had once been his co-workers.

We still didn't know whether Sarah was going to recover from what she'd done to herself. That was on me. It was on Dominic, too, and that was part of why he'd severed ties with his old organization.

I was the other part. My name is Verity Price: I'm a cryptozoologist and the latest in a much shorter line of traitors to the Covenant. They hate us. The fact that half the operatives who've come too close have wound up marrying into the family probably has something to do with that. There's something about a Covenant boy that no red-blooded Price girl has ever been able to resist.

What was I saying? Oh, right. Chicago.

The cars around us honked as they grudgingly gave way, recognizing that arguing with something the size of a U-Haul was not a good idea, even in an SUV. U-Hauls are basically rolling destruction magnets. They can be tipped over by a hard enough impact, but their main purpose is the protection of the things they carry, and because of that, they're constructed to absorb damage until they can't take any more. If someone hit us, we might lose our damage deposit—which was probably going to be kept just to punish us for taking a record-setting long time to get from coast to coast—but there was a good chance that they would lose their car.

As I was pulling onto the exit, Dominic asked, "Are the owners of this hotel human?"
I smiled.

The Carmichael Hotel was located in a four-story brownstone that was almost as old as the city of Chicago itself. The buildings to either side were considerably more modern, making it look shabby and run-down, rather than rustic and quaint. If there had been any space surrounding the structure, it would have been different: add some gardens with bird baths, maybe a gazebo or two, and you'd be looking at a cozy, probably ruinously expensive bed-and-breakfast, instead of an outdated deathtrap with the temerity to charge people to sleep under its probably-leaking roof.

There was a small parking garage across the street, with a sign that read "Guests Only" hung off-kilter in the window of the unattended booth. A numeric keypad was set up in front of the barrier. I rolled down the window and leaned out to punch in the code. A moment later, the barrier rose.

"How does someone who has never stayed here before gain access to the parking?" asked Dominic.

"Which came first, the chicken, the egg, or the apathy-based security system?" I started forward, driving into the gloom of the garage. "When your reservation is accepted, you're issued a code. It never changes. Since most people can't get reservations, there's very little in the way of people parking here when they're not supposed to. They can't get past the barrier."

"Which is made of plywood, and not that difficult to violate," said Dominic.

"The Carmichael has other methods of guaranteeing their security." I rolled up my window and slid out of the cab, leaving Dominic with no choice but to do the same if he wanted to continue our conversation.

He met me at the back of the truck, where I was already undoing the lock. "Are you bringing the mice inside?" he asked.

"We're staying here for five days," I said. "What, did you think I was going to leave them locked in the U-Haul? That's not cool. They enjoy cable TV as much as we do. Besides, I got them their own room."

Now Dominic blinked. "I know you prefer to manage your own finances--"

"Damn straight, no visible means of income boy."

"--but isn't that ruinously extravagant? They're mice. They don't require a full-sized bed, or access to a mini-bar."

"Well, that depends," I said, sliding the van door open to reveal the highly modified Barbie Dream House that we had duct-taped to the side wall. Barriers kept nearby boxes from sliding over and crushing it. It wasn't a perfect solution to the problem, but it was the best we'd been able to do on short notice.

"On what?" asked Dominic warily.

"On whether you wanted to spend the next five days having lots of sex in a real bed, with clean sheets, or whether you wanted to spend the next five days listening to the mice recite the catechism of the Violent Priestess. Think about that one, okay? And get our suitcases." I put two fingers in my mouth and whistled shrilly. A few dozen tiny rodent heads promptly popped out of the dollhouse
windows.

"HAIL!" shouted the mice.

"Hail yourselves," I said amiably, lowering my hand. "Get into the carrier bag, okay? We're at the hotel, and I want to get you settled before Dominic and I go down to dinner."

"HAIL!" shouted the mice again. "HAIL THE HOTEL!" They began pouring from the Dream House like a fuzzy river, flowing into the open duffle bag on the other side of the U-Haul.

I leaned over once the last of them was inside, closed the zipper, and picked up the bag, slinging it over my shoulder. Dominic had our two small suitcases, each of which was packed with the absolute necessities of an overnight stay. We could always come back out to the U-Haul if we needed more clothes.

"You still haven't told me the species of this establishment's owners," he said.

"That's true." I closed the U-Haul door, reengaging the lock.

"The mice are not normally so eager to lock themselves away. I was expecting some measure of negotiation on their part."

"That's also true," I said amiably. I turned and started for the exit, trusting him to follow me.

He did. "I must thus assume that whatever owns this hotel is something that has been known to eat mice, or otherwise cause them discomfort."

"Oh, you're feeling smart today," I said, flashing a quick, flirty look in his direction. "You still haven't told me what you want to do once we get to our room."

Dominic's smile was slow, and just as skillful as his scowl. "Apparently, I am the only one who's feeling smart today."

I laughed. I couldn't help myself. It was so nice to see him being playful, going along with me rather than digging in his heels and resisting the urge to enjoy himself. The Covenant seemed to have dedicated a lot of time to beating the sense of fun out of its operatives. It made a certain sense, I guess--people who are looking for a good time aren't nearly as focused on the mission--but it meant that my life was becoming an endless parade of efforts to make him loosen up.

We crossed the street, resulting in a few more honking horns and excruciatingly obscene gestures from drivers who didn't think we were moving fast enough. Then we were at the front door of the Carmichael. A small, old-fashioned wooden sign dangling from the rafters of the porch was the only thing marking the place as a hotel; without that, it could have been a museum, or even a private home.

Dominic looked around, frowning slightly. "This is becoming less appealing by the minute."

"That's part of the point," I said. "Protective coloration. Even people who realize this is a hotel wouldn't want to stay here. It looks like the sort of place where the beds are lumpy and full of bedbugs, and maybe you get murdered in the middle of the night."

"No wonder you like it."

I grinned at him and opened the door.
The foyer was small and plain, and somehow managed to seem cramped despite containing minimal furniture—a couch, a small bookshelf crammed with paperbacks from the 1960s, a lamp that looked like it hailed from the same era, and a reception desk that held neither clerk nor computer. There was a bell, but that was about it in terms of "concessions to customer service." The wallpaper was peeling in places, revealing the mustard-yellow wall beneath, and everything smelled like dust. Dominic looked around, clearly unimpressed.

"Breathe," I advised, and walked over to the desk, where I tapped the bell once, lightly. Despite the bloom of rust on its surface, it rang clear and clean. I stepped back to wait.

And wait. And wait some more. After almost two full minutes spent in silent contemplation of the foyer—long enough that they weren't going to get any gold stars for customer service—a voice shouted, "I'm coming!" and a rail-thin man emerged from the door behind the reception desk. He had strong Greek features, olive skin, and tinted glasses in front of his eyes. What he didn’t have was any visible hair, not even eyelashes. A knit mushroom cap covered the top of his head, looking slightly out of place when compared to his suit, which would have looked more appropriate on a funeral director.

He stopped when he came to the desk itself, resting his hands on the wood, and glared at us. "We're full up," he said.

"That's because we have a reservation," I said, with my best beauty queen smile. "Check your book. We're under 'Price.' Unless Vasia decided to be clever and list us under 'Healy.' That's what she did last time I came to town. I don't believe we've met."

The man blinked. Blinked again. Looked at Dominic. Looked back to me. "Price?" he said, in a strangled tone.

"Uh-huh," I said, still smiling. "That's why I'm so cute. We breed for cute. Is Vasia here?"

"I'll get her," he said, and fled back the way that he had come.

I sighed as I turned to Dominic. "Vasia normally works the desk," I explained. "She's a people person. That can be rare among the Carmichael staff. I don't know that guy. He's probably here looking for a wife."

"Because this establishment is owned by people for whom arranged marriage is still a necessity," said Dominic slowly. I could see him feeling his way through the potential species of our hosts. By now, he would have eliminated most of the really obvious cryptids. The man who had just run from us was definitely not a Bigfoot or a bogeyman, or even a waheela. But there were so many options still on the table. Maybe it makes me a bad person, but I was enjoying the process of him working it through.

Part of the point of our slow road trip was getting Dominic used to the idea that while humanity might be the dominant species of intelligent life on the planet, we were far from alone. He'd always known about the existence of cryptids, since the Covenant had been training him to kill them since he was very small, but I needed him to meet them face-to-face, and get accustomed to interacting with them without stabbing, shooting, or otherwise accosting them.

The door opened again. A plump, pretty young woman in a Vassar sweatshirt emerged. She was wearing the same tinted glasses as the man we had talked to before, and had a kerchief tied around her head. She was also beaming.

"Verity! You're here! And this must be Dominic!" She turned the full force of her smile on him. "I'm
"Thank you," said Dominic stiffly.

"Oh, this is going to be fun," said Vasia. She opened the door behind her, gesturing for us to follow her through. I went without hesitation, Dominic took a few seconds to get moving, but then he was at my heels, and we were through to the long, featureless hallway on the other side. The wallpaper here was filthy enough to make the wallpaper in the previous room seem new, and the floor was splinterly, untreated wood. It smelled like a carnival haunted house, all artifice and anticipation.

The hall ended at a large oak door that looked as out of place as a ballet dancer at a tango competition. Dominic moved to help Vasia push it open. She blinked, evidently surprised, before smiling again.

"I like him," she said, glancing over her shoulder to me. "He has manners."

"I like him too," I said. "I called dibs."

"Like I'd ever date a mammal? Ew. You people sweat. It's gross." She gave the door one final push, and it came fully open, revealing an opulent lobby that would have been perfectly at home in some old-fashioned murder mystery, the kind where the men wore tuxedoes all day long and the women draped themselves in mink.

Gold and brown velvet draped the walls, and the plush carpet sucked at my feet as I followed Vasia toward the wide mahogany reception desk. There was a bar, and a fireplace, both ringed by conversation pits that had been formed from overstuffed couches and chairs. There were people seated there, talking amongst themselves, and not all of them could have passed for human. One, a woman with brightly-feathered wings and blue-green hair, looked up as we passed, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

"The Carmichael is a Chicago institution, mostly used by the cryptid community, along with a few groups of trusted humans," I explained, watching Dominic as I tried to gauge his reaction. "We might be the only human guests here."

"No might about it," said Vasia. "We try to limit human occupation, for the comfort of our other guests. You have a lot of residency options in this city, and most of the people who come here have the Carmichael. No place else will do once you've enjoyed a hotel that doesn't require you to conceal your true nature before you come downstairs to enjoy the continental breakfast."

"Most places also don't include live mice and goldfish in the continental breakfast," I said.

"Speaking of which..." Vasia gave my duffle a meaningful look. "Am I correct in assuming the second room you booked is for your usual rodent companions, and the customary precautions should be taken?"

"HAIL!" exclaimed the bag.

Vasia laughed.

A woman who looked very much like Vasia emerged from the hall behind the reception desk as we approached, taking up a place at the dead center of the structure. Her uniform was brown and gold and matched the fabric draped on the walls well enough to be considered a form of camouflage. She was wearing tinted sunglasses. She wasn't wearing a kerchief, and the snakes that topped her head
were twisting lazily around one another, forming lovely arabesques with their red and copper bodies.

"Dina!" I called brightly, raising my free hand in a quick wave. "You look amazing. Did you just shed?"

"You noticed!" She patted her serpentine hair softly. It hissed as it twined around her fingers. "How have you been? And who's short, dark, and brooding over there?"

"He's tall enough for me," I said. "Dominic De Luca, meet Dina Kalakos. Vasia is her sister."

"From a different clutch," said Vasia, removing her own kerchief to reveal a full head of lovely, iridescent green snakes. They were longer than Dina's, and seemed largely content to remain draped down the back of her neck, tongues flicking lazily.

"You are...gorgons?" said Dominic carefully.

"Yup," said Dina.

"Who was that guy who met us when we first rang the bell?" I asked, before he could embarrass himself by trying to guess their sub-species. There are three types of gorgon left in the world. The Kalakos family was made up of lesser gorgons, which made the green color of Vasia's snakes all the more unusual.

Vasia wrinkled her nose. "Suitor," she said. "His name's Manos. His family is large, well-connected, and wealthy, and he's a whiny baby-man who wants a wife so he doesn't have to learn to cook now that his mother's kicking him out of the house. I've told him thanks but no thanks twice, he's going to petition dad for a third chance, and then I'm going to tell him no thanks a third time, and that'll be that."

"He's not that bad," said Dina. "Not all of us are striking beauties, you know. You should be more grateful for chances like this."

"Then you marry him," said Vasia. She leaned over the desk and grabbed two sets of keys from the hooks on the other side. Real keys, brass and gleaming in the light from the chandelier overhead, not keycards. The Carmichael was an old-fashioned establishment, and it was content to stay that way.

"If you'd follow me," said Vasia, straightening up again. "I'll lead you to your rooms."

I glanced back when we were halfway up the stairs. Dina was staring after us, a moody, unreadable expression on her face.

Maybe there was going to be a wedding after all.

Our room was located on the third floor. It was big enough for me to dance in, with a bed that seemed designed to hold up to four adults at a time. The mice had the room next door, which was considerably smaller and not nearly as nice. I gave Vasia a sidelong look as I set their duffle bag down on the bed.

"Did we get an upgrade?" I asked.

"It was the room your great-grandfather always requested," she said. "We have a policy of putting
any visiting Healy in that room if it's available."

"You didn't put me in there last time," I said.

"You were traveling with your parents last time," she said. "That's where we put them. Enjoy your stay, and remember, dinner is at eight. Daddy will be very disappointed if you're late."

"We'll be there," I assured her. She smiled one more time and slipped out of the room, closing the door behind her.

That was my cue. I unzipped the duffle bag, took a step backward, and announced, "It's safe to come out now."

"HAIL!" cried the mice, before scampering out into the open and covering the bed in a sea of tiny bodies. I clapped my hands before they could scatter, and they stopped, turning to look expectantly in my direction.

There is an art to dealing with Aeslin mice and not thinking longingly about the virtues of owning a cat. A large part of it is clarity. "We are at the Carmichael Hotel," I said. "It is owned by gorgons. Gorgons have snakes for hair. Snakes eat mice. The gorgons who own his hotel are friends of the family, and have promised not to come into this room for as long as we are staying here. I need you to promise that you will not leave this room unless I or Dominic accompany you. You will not chew holes in the walls. You will not go looking for the kitchen. You will not explore any holes that someone else has already chewed."

The mice muttered amongst themselves, clearly disappointed by my unreasonable demands.

"You will be allowed to order one extra-large pizza with everything per day," I said. It was important to provide them with a reason to go along with me. The muttering stopped. "Uncle Mike is bringing two dozen cupcakes when he comes to dinner. They are all for you. Another two dozen will be provided in two days. You have cable television, and since there are no humans sleeping in this room, you get to control the remote, providing you don't blast the volume after midnight."

The mice, who had much more sensitive hearing than any human being, were starting to nod enthusiastically. "So Mote It Be!" squeaked the colony's high priest, triggering a wave of cheers and scattered "hails" from the rest of the mice.

"Cool," I said. I opened the drawer next to the bed, pulled out the remote, and tossed it on the pillow. "Now what do you want on your pizza?"

Placing the order only took a few minutes. The mice were still cheering when I left the room and walked to the next door in the hall. I knocked twice.

"Yes?" called Dominic's voice.

"Room service," I called back.

The door opened. Dominic looked at me, one eyebrow lifted. He was still wearing his duster, a long leather thing that seemed to have been designed for the modern monster hunter. It was half armor, half security blanket, at least based on the way he kept putting it on while we were driving. If he hadn't taken it off yet, he wasn't comfortable here. Yet.

We'd have to work on that.
"Are the mice settled?" he asked.

"I gave them the remote and ordered them a pizza. Same techniques my parents used on me when I was a teenager." Of course, back then, I had been sharing my hotel rooms with the mice. We had passed more than a few nights in the halogen glow of the TV screen, reruns of Star Trek boldly going while my parents enjoyed the rare luxury of having a door that locked between them and their children.

(Alex had offloaded the mice onto me as soon as I was old enough to have my own hotel room. By the time Antimony was reliably going on the road trips instead of staying behind with Aunt Jane and Uncle Ted, Alex and I were old enough that we were the ones choosing to stay home. Maybe that was why we didn't get along so well with our younger sister. We'd never had the bonding experience that was sharing a hotel with our parents and the talking mice.)

I slipped past Dominic into the room, looking around at all that space before I turned and smiled at him, long and slow and inviting.

"You know, we have like an hour and a half before dinner," I said. "No one's going to bother us up here. The walls are totally soundproof."

Dominic raised his eyebrow even higher. "Have you tested that?"

"Never had a boy worth bringing here before," I said. "But I used to come here with my parents, and I figure there has to be a reason they were so happy to pay for a hotel room when my Uncle Mike and Aunt Lea live just about forty minutes away. Soundproofing accounts for a lot."

"I see," Dominic shrugged out of his duster, draping it carefully over the back of the desk chair. "How did your family come to be regular guests at a gorgon-owned hotel?"

There was an edge in his voice, like something about the situation was bothering him. I paused, reviewing the situation, before I grinned and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Your professional pride is hurt, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"My great-grandparents had their honeymoon here, which means the hotel has been around since the 1930s at least--and you know enough about architecture that you probably guessed it was a lot older."

"I place the foundation of the exterior building at somewhere in the 1860s," said Dominic.

I nodded. "Exactly. A lot older. You're hurt because the Covenant came through Chicago like six times and never noticed this was here."

"It...stings to realize that I once pledged my loyalty to an organization that was so willfully blind to the world around it that we could overlook a large boarding house operated by gorgons," he said carefully. "I wouldn't call it wounded professional pride. They are no longer my people. They wouldn't have me back if I was fool enough to want to go."

"I know." I patted the bed next to me, trying to lure him over. He hesitated before he came, sitting down and starting to unbutton the cuffs of his shirt. I leaned over, resting my head against his shoulder. "You cut ties about as conclusively as you could, and Sarah was in your head when you did it: you weren't lying. That's why we're here. I know you're not a double-agent, and I know you walked away from everything you'd ever known when you chose me over them. I want you to see
how wonderful the world you're part of now can really be."

"And getting away from the mice for the better part of a week, in a gloriously soundproof room, was never part of your design, I suppose." Dominic finished unbuttoning his cuffs, and began working his way down his shirt.

"One day I'm going to get you into a T-shirt," I said, leaning over to help.

Dominic grinned, short and sharp and so close that it half took my breath away. "I've seen you dressed for competitions. Between the two of us, we have the average amount of clothing worn by any two Americans. Besides, you like me buttoned down. It gives you something to undo."

"The man speaks truth," I said, and then his hands were underneath my T-shirt, which was thinner and less complicated than his--and good thing, too, because waiting had never been one of my stronger skills.

Dominic laughed as I pressed myself into him, and we fell backward onto the bed, already wrapped around each other, shedding clothing as we went.

For once, the only one who was likely to start cheering was me, and that was the best part of all.

We lay sprawled on the bed, me with my head resting on his stomach, him drawing lazy spirals on my back with thumb and forefinger. My eyes kept threatening to drift closed. We had been on the road for so long that I had almost forgotten how nice it was to be in a real bed, behind walls that were thick and secure and protected by things other than my personal armory.

"Verity." Dominic's voice was low and insistent.

"Nope," I said, closing my eyes and snuggling down lower, so that the small hairs below his navel tickled my nose. "Staying right here. Nothing you can say will move me. I am a rock. I am an island."

"You are going to make us late for dinner, and while I'd be perfectly content to remain exactly where I am for the next eight hours or so, you seemed set on being here in time to share a meal with our hosts." Dominic pulled his hand away from my back. "I refuse to be the target of your ire when you wake up and realize that we missed it."

"Dinner. Crap." I sat up, raking a hand backward through my hair. I needed to get it cut, and soon; I was starting to look more like a startled cat than a cockatoo, which meant it was getting too long. "Let me hop in the shower real quick. Pull out something casual but dressy, okay? Uncle Mike's going to be there, so you won't be the only human at the table."

"He's coming alone? I thought he was married." Dominic slid out of the bed, starting across the room toward his suitcase, while I struggled not to get distracted by the view.

"He is married, she's just not human. Aunt Lea is an Oceanid."

Dominic turned and frowned at me. Then he shook his head. "Is there anything your family will not marry?"

"I dunno," I said. "I'm banging a guy from the Covenant. I think it shows that we're pretty open-minded."
Dominic opened his mouth, like he was going to say something. He hesitated. Finally, he turned away, unzipping his suitcase and beginning to dig through his clothes. "The shower's yours, if you want it," he said. "I will be ready in a few minutes."

I frowned at him. It felt like I was missing something--something important. Unfortunately, if I tried to get him to explain, I was going to make us late for dinner. The Kalakos family was forgiving of a lot of things. They were not big fans of tardiness.

Making a quiet note to myself to try to figure out what was wrong later, I grabbed my shower bag and bolted for the bathroom.

A lot of older buildings have questionable plumbing and terrible water pressure. Since the Carmichael Hotel was outside a lot of building codes and might not even technically exist as far as the city was concerned, it would have been perfectly reasonable to assume that their showers would suck. It would also have been very, very wrong. The Carmichael didn't have a lot of permits, or access to the human building community. What it had instead was access to an entire world of nocturnal and subterranean contractors who were happy to do virtually anything for a paying customer.

(It's borderline impossible to exist entirely outside the human economic system these days. Money talks, as the old proverb says. So does the media. Bogeyman children who would once have been perfectly happy with homespun and hand-me-downs were just as vulnerable to trends as their human counterparts, and their parents were just as susceptible to pleading, begging, and the all-important whining. Even cryptid communities that lived mostly off the grid were apt to take small jobs and produce handmade goods for sale to human markets, just for the sake of keeping the local currency on hand.)

The shower was hot, and strong enough that it felt like it blasted off the top layers of my epidermis, taking all the grit and weariness of the road along with it. I turned off the taps and stepped out of the tub, once more ready to take on the world. I could hear Dominic moving around in our shared hotel room. That was enough to bring a smile to my face. He might be a little weird sometimes, and we might still be working our way through the places where our divergent upbringings clashed with our relationship, but he was here, and he was mine, and I was happy to be his. For as long as he wanted me to be.

I gave my hair quick once-over with the blow dryer before I shimmied into the clothes I'd brought with me: a peasant-style yellow blouse, tight gray jeans, and a necklace of tiny silver snakes that had been a birthday gift from my big brother. They weren't fighting clothes, and that was why I was wearing them. The Kalakos family had known us for generations. That meant they trusted us...to a point. They never forgot what we were, any more than we forgot what they were. We just needed to tread lightly around each other.

Dominic was dressed when I emerged from the bathroom. All in black, of course, which was pretty normal for him; black slacks, button-down black shirt, and even a black belt. I smiled. I couldn't help it.

He frowned. "What?"

"Just thinking about how much I'd like to undress you again, and wishing we had more time before dinner," I said. "I'm really looking forward to getting to Portland, and being able to slow things down whenever we want them. I'm tired of quickies in cheap motels while the mice aren't in the room. That's all."
"How long are we here again?" he asked.

"Five days. Uncle Mike is going to show us the city."

This time, Dominic smiled. "Then we'll have plenty of time to 'slow things down' before we get back on the road. Now come. Introduce me to your friends." He offered me his arm. I took it, and together, we walked out of the room.

The stairs down to the lobby were broad and beckoning as we walked down the hallway. I pulled Dominic away from them and down a bend in the hall to a smaller stairway, almost hidden by the construction of the floor. It was just as opulent as the rest of its surroundings, with a polished brass bannister and thick carpet on the steps, but it was somehow uninviting, like it didn't want to be used. Part of that was the narrowness: there wasn't room for two people to walk side-by-side.

I stepped in front of Dominic, explaining cheerfully, "This way no one can attack them any way but single file," before I started down.

"Charming," he said, and followed me.

The stairs went down, down, down to lobby level and then lower still, finally widening out and opening onto a room large enough to host a professional ballroom dance competition. The floor was marble, and the draped fabric on the walls matched the lobby upstairs. Conversation pits formed by careful groupings of furniture studded the edges of the room. All of them were empty, unlike the long table set up on the far end, which was surrounded by gorgons.

Gorgons, and one couple that appeared human, although the woman had blue-green highlights in her wheat-colored hair. I smiled and waved when I saw them. Aunt Lea waved back, while Uncle Mike looked indulgently on. It was too far for me to really see his expression, but I knew that he was probably smirking, looking forward to watching Dominic try to navigate dinner without starting a diplomatic incident.

I slid my arm through Dominic's as we walked across the room toward the table. "The big gorgon with the red and yellow snakes on his head is Angelo Kalakos. He's the current patriarch of the family, and he's the one who decides things like 'who is welcome at the Carmichael.' He's a pretty reasonable guy, and he used to be a professional Scrabble player, because the world is profoundly weird sometimes. The lady with the white and orange snakes is his wife, Lydia. Her father, Hector, knew my great-grandparents."

Dominic paused to work through this before he asked, "Who takes whose name in gorgon culture?"

"Ooo, good catch. See, you're adapting fast to the idea that human cultures aren't the only cultures that count. Among lesser gorgons, the family name is tied to the place, not the specific bloodline. Lydia was born a Kalakos, and since she stayed here at the Carmichael, when she took a husband, he took her name. Her sister, Aspa, moved to a gorgon community up in Canada, and she took her husband's name. That way, ownership of property or hunting grounds is continuous, and tied to the name."

We were almost to the table. They'd be able to hear us soon. I gave his arm a squeeze. "Any more pressing questions?" I asked.

"Are we going to be expected to eat living things? I love you very much, Verity, but I don't think..."
even love can convince me to swallow a guinea pig."

It was all I could do not to stop where I was and laugh myself sick. I forced myself to keep my expression neutral, and said, "No, they mostly eat a variation on traditional Greek cuisine. Oh, and spaghetti."

"Spaghetti," he said blankly.

"Yeah. When we were kids and we came here with our folks, me and Alex used to have spaghetti-eating competitions with Vasia, Dina, and the rest of the kids. They used to scarf down pasta like it was about to be banned."

We were close enough to the table now that my comments had been overheard. Uncle Mike grinned.

"Your table manners haven't really improved since then, you know," he said. "You still eat like you expect hyenas to take your food away at any moment."

"I watched The Lion King too many times at an impressionable age," I said, before pulling away from Dominic and throwing my arms around Uncle Mike. He responded by lifting me off my feet, wrapping me in a hug that was as carefully controlled as it was all-encompassing. I leaned back enough to kiss his nose before he dropped me to my feet.

His smile was the twin of mine as he said, "You weren't this happy to see me in New York."

"You were stepping on my toes in New York," I said. "Here, you're not someone trying to take over my assignment. You're just a member of my family, and I'm glad to see you."

"Just him?" asked a warm, almost buttery voice. There was an undertow in it, something dark and strange and strong. Aunt Lea could drown you if you crossed her. That was part of what made her so perfect for Uncle Mike. She was about as dangerous as something beautiful could be, without actually marrying the Atlantic Ocean.

"No, not at all," I said, turning and offering my hands to the woman who was now smiling indulgently at me. The blue-green highlights in her hair were even more evident at this distance. They matched her eyes, which were not a color normally found in mammalian nature. They were the blue-green of deep sea nudibranchs, of tropical fish and coral reefs, and they were the only thing that really gave away the fact that she was something stranger and more fluid than a human woman. The invention of color contacts had been a real gift to the Oceanids.

"Hello, Verity," she said.

"Hi, Aunt Lea," I replied, and stepped into the safe harbor of her arms.

Her embrace lasted only a few seconds before she was letting me go and looking past me to Dominic, eyebrows raised and expression curious. "And you must be her new beau. Lea Gucciard."

"Dominic De Luca," said Dominic, bowing slightly at the waist. His eyes never left her hair. "Your stylist is to be applauded."

"My stylist is a plastic hairbrush and a bottle of sulfate-free organic shampoo," said Lea. She sounded amused. That was always a good sign in her. Fewer drownings followed her amusement than her anger. "The color's natural."

"Then you are very fortunate," said Dominic. "Some women of my acquaintance have been known to
pay hundreds of dollars to accomplish that same effect."

Lea raised her eyebrows further before she turned to me. "Mike told me you were from the Covenant. Was he wrong?"

It would have been impossible to miss the stillness that fell over the people around us, all of whom had been waiting politely for the family introductions to be complete before they began making their own. Gorgons put great importance on the family unit, maybe because there were so few families left. They also put great importance on their safety. If Dominic answered her question incorrectly, it was going to take everything I had, and then some, to get him out of here alive.

Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea after all.

"I was, yes," he said, without a trace of hesitation or anxiety. "I was raised by people who believed that anyone who was not human was the enemy, and should be cut down where they stood. I have seen the error of my ways."

"Verity can be quite convincing," said Aunt Lea. "It wasn't her." Dominic glanced at me, shrugged a little, and looked back to Lea. "Her cousin is a member of a species dedicated to destruction. She can pluck your thoughts from the air as easily as I might pluck an apple from a tree. If anyone was going to be a monster purely due to the circumstances of their birth, it would have been her. And she asked me if I wanted to talk about algebra. She was hopeful, as if she had been waiting her entire life for someone to come along who wanted to discuss mathematics. If Sarah Zellaby is not a monster, when she had every right to be, how can I pass judgment on anyone else? I was of the Covenant. I was sworn to the sword and the secret. I got over myself."

There was a moment of silence. Then Angelo was there, clapping Dominic on the shoulder with such force that my ex-Covenant boyfriend nearly had a quick introduction to the floor.

"You see? Everyone can change!" Angelo beamed at Dominic, the snakes atop his head twisting and twining together in a serpentine tango. He was wearing smoked glasses, just like all the other members of the family. It would have been easier to put protective glasses on their guests, but it could have been read as inhospitable— and more, it would have taken control away from the gorgons. This way, if someone got out of hand, they could be stunned before they knew what was happening. "You can leave the Covenant, we can stop burying bodies in the basement, our Verity can settle down. We live in an age of miracles."

"Miracles and scalloped potatoes, if my nose isn't lying to me," I said. "Hi, Angelo. Can we eat? I am a hungry miracle."

"Of course, of course," said Angelo, waving a hand expansively at the table.

That was my cue. I pulled out a chair, motioning for Dominic to sit down. He blinked at me, his manners and training warring with the fact that I was pulling out the chair for him. I nodded firmly toward the chair, hoping that he would take the hint. He was usually pretty good about that sort of thing, especially when we were swimming in dangerous waters— i.e., interacting with intelligent cryptids whose idea of proper behavior probably didn't match his.

To my great relief, Dominic sat. Uncle Mike did the same for Aunt Lea, getting her settled on the other side of the table. Angelo pulled out a chair for Lydia, who flashed me a smile before she sat down, the snakes on her head curling contentedly against her scalp. On cue, the majority of the gorgons followed their lead, until there were only three people standing: me, Uncle Mike, and
Angelo looked at the two of us, his expression going carefully neutral. "Do you admit yourselves to be guests in my home?" he asked.

"I do, and call you head of household," said Uncle Mike.

"I do, and you're totally the boss," I said, prompting an eye roll from Uncle Mike and a small, sidelong grin from Angelo.

"You can't follow rules even if it's to save your own soul, can you, girl?" he asked.

"Not usually, but if you give me one that makes really good sense, I'll give it a go," I said.

"It's a good thing I'm very fond of you," said Angelo. "Both of you, sit, and be welcome."

We sat.

Dominic was looking straight ahead, which meant that he had no idea what was going on, and was trying admirably not to ask. I put a hand on his knee, smiled, and said, "Ritual exchange wherein Uncle Mike and I, as the presumably dominant members of our respective relationships, accepted that Angelo is the boss here and promised not to cause him or his family any harm."

"Don't worry about the 'dominant' thing," said Aunt Lea. "Gorgons can be old-fashioned sometimes."

"Madam, you are in our home," said Angelo.

"Yes, and I could drown you in your own water glass," said Lea. They both laughed. This conversation had been happening over and over again, in various permutations, for as long as I had been old enough to eat with the adults.

(Uncle Mike was considered the dominant partner in his marriage because Aunt Lea had taken his last name. The fact that Oceanids didn't have surnames was beside the point as far as gorgon traditions were concerned. That didn't mean that the Kalakos family had anything but the utmost respect for Aunt Lea, and her ability to leave them perfectly dry and utterly drowned at the same time. She was a woman of unique and dangerous talents.)

"Ah," said Dominic.

Younger members of the family began appearing through the door behind the table, carrying trays of food and baskets of bread. It was mostly modified Greek fare, with lots of chunky sauces covering interesting cuts of meat, and olives in every place it was possible for olives to go. The bread was a broad mix of white, wheat, olive loaf, and interesting little crunchy rolls. I piled several on my plate. I wasn't in training at the moment, and that meant it was time to enjoy all the carbs my mouth could hold.

Two more of the younger gorgons started coming around with wine. The humans, and Aunt Lea, got a sparkling white. The gorgons got a dark, dangerous-looking red.

"Gorgons really like their Medusa," I said lightly, breaking a roll in half and starting to use it to sop up the sauce covering my baked rabbit. "Sadly, we don't get to really like it, on account of how it's made with their venom and would cause us to die horribly. You should ask Alex about it sometime. He really understands the whole 'this is how drinking gorgon venom destroys your cells and paralyzes your nervous system' process."
Dominic wrinkled his nose. "I think I will refrain, if it's all the same to you."

Aunt Lea laughed. "Okay, I like him. You didn't tell me he had a sense of humor, Mike. What else have you been hiding from me?"

"I have a second wife in Kentucky, who is currently raising my three secret children," said Uncle Mike, in a perfect deadpan. "Can you please pass the olives?"

"Oh, great, now he thinks he's funny." Aunt Lea shook her head before returning her attention to her original target: Dominic. She was still smiling, but her eyes were slightly narrowed, indicating the intensity of her interest.

I settled back in my seat and reached for my wine. Aunt Lea was a forensic accountant, which gave her lots to discuss with my Grandma Angela, and made her scarier than I liked to think about when she decided that she wanted to know something. Since she wasn't currently focusing on me, this made her interest a spectator sport. It was just too bad the gorgons didn't believe in popcorn with dinner.

"So Dominic," she said sweetly. "Tell me about yourself."

"I was born to an Italian Covenant family; the De Lucas have been sworn to the secret and the sword for hundreds of years, and prior to myself, none have defected or chosen other than a warrior's path. We were not scholars. The pen and the page have their adherents, but it was our burden to raise hands against the dark, not wards."

"There's a lot of alliteration in those sentences, but not much context," said Uncle Mike. "What does it mean?"

"To be sworn to the secret and the sword is to be someone who kills when the Covenant tells them to," I said, all too aware of Dominic's growing discomfort. "To be sworn to the pen and the page is to be someone who...well, who still kills when the Covenant tells them to, but who mostly stays home and does research." There were several other categories of service within the Covenant. I didn't know all of them. The fighters were my primary concern, and probably always would be.

Judging from the look on Angelo's face, right now I was his primary concern. "How do you know so much about the Covenant?" he asked. "Have you been discussing philosophy with your new suitor?"

"I wouldn't have brought him here if I thought his loyalties were under question: not unless I wanted help disposing of his body," I said. "I know what I know because my grandmother's family used to be sworn to the secret and the sword, and my grandfather used to be sworn to the pen and the page. Too recent for us to forget, you know?"

"I know very well," said Angelo. There was a pointed note in his voice. The Price family hadn't forgotten our Covenant roots. Neither had the rest of the cryptid world, not even the people who were our allies. That was good. As long as we didn't forget, maybe we wouldn't go back to being the kind of people who thought that anything we did was justified, as long as it backed up our beliefs.

Aunt Lea was still looking at Dominic, her head tilted very slightly, like she was trying to break the code that would explain him to her. "Do you have any siblings?"

"No," he replied.

"Where are your parents?"
"Deceased, hence the lack of siblings." He grimaced and took another drink of wine. "They were both warriors in service to the Covenant. My mother removed herself from the field for a short time, after I was born, but not forever. That would have been far too much to ask, even if I had been old enough to make the request. They were killed when I was very young. I do not know what they were fighting when they died. Please do not ask me."

"I wonder why the Covenant didn't tell you," said Uncle Mike. "Seems like that sort of knowledge would have made you a much better fighter."

"It would have made me a man with a vendetta," corrected Dominic carefully. "Men with vendettas are not such useful tools. They go off on their own. They make their choices based on whether or not those choices will get them closer to the source of their anger. Margaret Healy has a vendetta. She hates the family that she feels betrayed her by choosing to leave, stripping her of the glories that should have been her birthright."

"And we all saw how well that worked out," I said. Margaret Healy was a distant cousin of mine, from the branch of the family that had remained behind when my great-great-grandparents came to America. She was also a stone bitch, and had done her best to take me out back in Manhattan.

"So they kept you ignorant in order to make you more versatile," concluded Aunt Lea.

Dominic nodded. "Yes. Their reasoning was more elegant than that, I'm sure, but in the end, they simply wanted a man who would go where he was told and kill what he was instructed to kill. In a way, they did me a favor."

For the first time since dinner had begun, Lydia spoke. "How was that a favor?" she asked. "They kept your history from you. In our culture, that's a crime."

"In most cases, I would agree with you," said Dominic gravely. "In this case...I have a thousand prejudices to battle every day that I spend in Verity's company. Some of the things she asks of me are so alien to my prior experience that I have to stop myself from asking if she has lost her mind. I'm trying. Every day, I'm trying. I don't have any choice. I want to be a part of her life. Even if I didn't--even if I were fool enough to walk away from her--this is the only world I'm suited for, and I can't go back to the Covenant. I am no longer a good weapon. So I need to learn to be a better man, and that means it's best if I don't have some deep-rooted hatred of a specific species."

You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed. Then Aunt Lea smiled, bright as the morning, and asked, "So, do you want to have kids?"

I choked on my wine.

Half an hour later, we were most of the way through the first course of dinner, and Aunt Lea was most of the way through her interrogation. Good thing, too: Dominic was starting to look a little wild around the eyes, like he was afraid this was going to end in an execution. I should probably have stopped it before she ran out of steam, but honestly, I was as interested as she was. After we'd gotten off the delicate topics of his parents--painful--and our potential future children--awkward--he'd been willing to talk about essentially anything, all of it informative, and all of it interesting, at least to me.

Dominic De Luca was a complicated man, which really just meant that he was alive and in the world. Everyone was complicated, once you dug down past the surface and started looking at the actuality. I
was finally starting to see where some of his snarls were, and it was wonderful.

"So Verity, you're a young woman in the world," said Angelo. "What do you think a father should do when he makes a perfectly lovely match for one of his daughters, a match that would see her cared for and supported all the days of her life, and she rejects it out of hand? Would you punish her?"

There was a clatter as Vasia dropped her spoon into her soup bowl. I dared a glance down the table. She was sitting perfectly still, face stricken. Dina's expression was a cold mask, unreadable and closed.

I looked back to Angelo. "No, sir," I said. "My father was always very clear about the fact that I would be the one spending time in any relationship I chose, not him. We have more dating options than you do--there are more humans in the world--but finding humans who knew about my occupation and what it required of me has always been hard. So he let me find my own way."

Before Dominic, my romantic life had been a series of one-night stands and short-lived affairs that inevitably ended with my partner accusing me of cheating. There was nothing else that explained the way I would disappear in the middle of the night, not coming back until morning, if I came back at all. To be honest, I'd started to despair of ever finding someone I could be happy with long before Dominic had come along.

"Your species is not at risk of extinction," said Lydia.

"Maybe not, but even if my father had been able to order me to marry someone I didn't like, he wouldn't have been able to force me to have kids. So if the goal is continuing the species, isn't it better to go with a good match?" I didn't look at Vasia. I couldn't. I wouldn't be able to stay as calm as I was if I saw the look in her eyes.

"Manos is a good man, and he finds our daughter beautiful," said Lydia. "Matches have been made on far less."

Dominic glanced to her, and then to me, looking unsure.

"Ah, does the newcomer have something to contribute?" asked Angelo. "Speak, Mr. De Luca. I would be fascinated to know how someone from the Covenant regarded our little situation."

"It's not my place..." Dominic began.

Angelo narrowed his eyes. "You would deny me my request?"

Sensing danger, Dominic changed course in the middle of the sentence. "Not at all. I simply did not wish to give accidental offense. You will please forgive me if I stumble over something that would have been better left unsaid, yes?"

"I suppose so," said Angelo. The snakes atop his head hissed and writhed. He wasn't pleased. He was still going to give Dominic a little more rope to hang himself with.

I slid my hand onto Dominic's knee under the table, squeezing lightly in the hopes that he would take it as a signal to be careful. He put his hand over mine. He got the message. Now I just had to hope that he could navigate these waters as skillfully as he could field-strip a rifle.

"The Covenant of St. George maintains a breeding program," said Dominic. Aunt Lea and Uncle Mike reacted with expressions of surprise and, in Lea's case, disgust. Angelo and Lydia's faces
remained neutral. They were waiting to see where he was going to go with this.

Dominic continued. "My parents were matched by their elders, who had looked at the historical strengths of both the De Luca and Koerte family lines. They did not argue. They did not attempt to evade their engagement. They simply married, and had a son together, before they died. A successful outcome, from the perspective of the program--or was it? They had no love for each other. Those who knew them have made that perfectly clear to me, although I believe everyone who told me tales of my parents was hoping that what I would take away was their devotion to their cause, and not the fact that at the end of the day, neither of them had anything to make them believe that they had reason to come home."

Angelo and Lydia stared at him. Dominic pulled our joined hands from under the table, settling them between our plates. His tone had remained calm and reasonable throughout; even now, it didn't waver.

"I think that love is important. Love is an anchor; it gives us a reason to come back when we might otherwise have gone too far into vengeance or anger or sorrow. Love can't be the only thing we depend upon, but if there is a chance to find it, it should be pursued. However much that may change the life we believed that we were going to lead."

"Holy shit, Verity, are all Covenant boys secretly romance novels walking around with knives strapped to their thighs, and if so, can you find me one?" asked Aunt Lea, causing Uncle Mike to roll his eyes. But he was looking at her fondly as he did. If ever there had been an endorsement for love over duty, they were it, the cryptozoologist's son and the lady from the water.

"Sorry, he's taken," I said.

"Father, I don't want to marry Manos," said Vasia. Her interjection was abrupt. We all stopped talking and looked at her.

Even Dina was looking at her sister. She swallowed hard, and said, "But I do."

Angelo paused. "What?"

"I said, I do." Dina turned to her father. "I want to marry Manos. He's kind. He's not clever, and he's not hard--nothing has ever come along to harden him--but he's kind, and that's important to me. I want to go somewhere. I want to see more of the world than just this city, and I can do that as his wife. I can't do it as your daughter."

"His family's offer was for Vasia," said Angelo.

"So we make a counter-offer," said Dina. "We say she doesn't want to get married, but that I'm available. Manos likes me. I'm not the pretty one--"

"Stop that," said Vasia.

"--but I'll do, and I'm willing," said Dina, ignoring her sister's interruption. "I don't love him yet. He doesn't love me. Give us time, and we could figure it out."

"Most things grow better in fertile soil," said Uncle Mike. We all turned to stare at him. "What? I thought this was 'say portentous shit like it somehow makes sense' night."

"He has a point there," I said. "I love you all, but you sort of talk like you think you're being graded
"Verity claims I got exceedingly high marks in my 'pretentious bastard' class," said Dominic.

Aunt Lea laughed.

Angelo was still looking at Dina. Most of the gorgons were. Their faces were calm, but their snakes were in a state of high agitation, twisting and twining atop their heads. Even the most composed gorgon couldn't fully control their snakes. It made it hard for them to lie to each other.

"If Manos won't have you? What then?" he asked.

"Then I guess he doesn't have me," said Dina.

"I'll have her," said a new voice. We all turned.

The man who had greeted us when we first arrived was standing about ten feet away from the table, still wearing his funeral director's suit. His mushroom cap was gone, and his snakes were lying docile and calm. Out of everyone around us, he was the only one who seemed perfectly at ease.

"What was that?" asked Angelo.

"I said, sir, that I would have your younger daughter." His eyes were on Dina as he spoke. "I didn't come here looking for a Helen. I have no need to launch a thousand ships. Not that she's not beautiful--I find her quite pleasing to the eye. I just don't think beauty is the only consideration. My bride and I would have to get along. She'd have to be someone I'd like to spend a lot of time with. I think your younger daughter and I would be able to manage both those things." He glanced to Vasia, looking suddenly nervous. "If it wouldn't offend the daughter I was meant to be courting, this would be...I think this would be perfect."

"Vasia?" said Angelo.

"I stand aside, and gladly," said Vasia. She leaned back in her seat, putting more distance between herself and her former suitor.

"I simply stand," said Dina. She rose, looking at her father.

There was a pause. Then Angelo stood as well, and beckoned for Manos to come closer. "Come," he said. "Sit down. There's plenty."

"Thank you, sir," said Manos. He walked quickly over and took one of the open seats. Angelo sat down, and the second course of our dinner began to circulate, carried in by teenage gorgons whose blank faces couldn't conceal their agitated snakes.

"I'm gonna need more wine," I said.

Aunt Lea laughed.

The rest of dinner was nowhere near so exciting, thankfully. By the time I hugged Aunt Lea goodbye, I was ready to retreat to my room and sleep for a week. Manos and Dina were sitting in the lobby, holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes, when Dominic followed me up the stairs. He smiled
a little at the sight of them. I grinned, elbowing him lightly in the side.

"You're a big sap," I said. "That's what you are."

"I've never denied it," he said. "It's...nice, being in a world where people are allowed to make their own decisions. Soothing. I know that if you're with me, it's because you want to be."

"There's no 'if' about it, buddy. You're stuck with me now." We had reached the top of the stairs. It was a short walk from there to our room.

Dominic turned and grinned at me, so brightly that it made my knees go slightly weak. "I was hoping that would be the case."

"Aw, did I void your warranty?"

"Something like that." He unlocked the door to our room, pushing it open. "I think I like things better this way."

"Oh, trust me." I reached up to caress his cheek before walking past him and inside. "So do I."

He closed the door behind us, and the rest of the night was perfectly normal for two consenting adults, and needed no explanation. The walls were thick, the bed was soft, and somewhere below us, two gorgons were getting engaged.

I love Chicago.