



CLARE SOLOMON

A
DESTRUCTIVE
POWER

PREQUEL TO THE HUMAN HYBRIDS SERIES

Prequel to the Human Hybrids Series

A Destructive Power

By Clare Solomon

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Cover design by Kanaxa.

Chapter One

July 2077, Invercade, Scottish Highlands

Temerin grabbed the teenager's arm to avoid being punched and wondered how the hell he'd got into this mess. "You need to calm down, laddie," he told the boy. "The police are on their way so there's no point in making things worse."

But the kid was clearly too drunk or angry to listen to reason, swaying on his feet before lurching forward to take another swing at Temerin. He blocked the blow once more, not paying attention to the insults being thrown at him from a dozen watching teenagers nor the encouragements they were shouting to the kid he faced.

A door opened, over-loud music coming from inside as a bunch of men spilled out into the night, then the door closed behind them and the sound lowered to a dull beat. The men were genetically-created hybrids, like the kids – Temerin could see the chalky complexions of vampires from here. He looked over to James – his new leader – to calm down the situation and his stomach clenched at the sight of James throwing punches at a couple of kids, escalating the fight instead of ending it.

"What the hell are you doing?" a dark-haired, muscular vampire from the pub yelled, jogging forward and standing against the HyCO group. Someone was going to end up dead or in hospital if they didn't resolve this soon.

"I suggest that everyone takes a breath before this gets out of hand," he called, his arms held out in a halt gesture. "No one will get in much trouble over a couple of broken windows but it needs to stop now."

"Who are you?" the vampire yelled back, walking closer.

Temerin knew that telling the truth would make the situation far worse, with the reputation some of the HyCOs had. As he paused, Hamish shouted, "We're HyCO so stand still or you're all under arrest."

There were murmurs – harsh-sounding and sharp – from the hybrids, then the men were surging forward to weigh in against Temerin's group.

A few feet from him, Ayma shouted, "We're not here to fight you."

"Then you should've stayed away," another vampire responded and there were sounds of agreement from his friends and the teenagers.

The vampire who had first spoken to Temerin walked forward, hand clenching into a fist. Temerin took a breath and prepared for a fight, then he heard sirens in the distance, coming closer, and the blare of noise sounded beautiful.

* * *

“The hybrids will know to stay out of our way now.” Hamish actually looked happy about what had happened last night, the group standing in a loose circle in the foyer of their rented Invercade office, the following morning.

“The whole thing was a disaster,” Temerin said.

“They deserved it,” James shot back at him, red-faced and loud at the reminder of the fight. How they hadn’t all been arrested Temerin didn’t understand, except that James had clearly known the police officers who arrived at the scene. Instead, the vampire men and the kids had been arrested and the HyCO group had given brief statements then been allowed to leave. “This is what we do.”

Temerin shook his head, sick at the idea. “I didn’t join the HyCO to be a thug.”

“Look, things may not have gone exactly as they should...”

You talked about justice, solving crimes, helping the police. Not a word about beating up a group of over-excited drunk teenagers.”

“He’s right,” Ayma said, her expression matching the sternness of her plain black suit.

“They killed my brother,” James snarled.

“Not these...”

James cut Ayma off, looking as if he were too lost in his own thoughts to even hear her: “A vampire went on a killing spree and killed six people, including Ben. It took the police over a year to catch her.”

“We know.” Ayma spoke quietly to him as if calming down a child. “But that vampire wasn’t there tonight and we can’t catch others like her if you get us all locked up in prison for assault. You didn’t even try to speak to those kids – you just started yelling and throwing punches. That’s not how a leader behaves, or not any leader I want to follow.”

“I agree,” Temerin said and even Hamish looked less sure of himself now.

James rubbed his hands across his eyes, the anger gone from his face when he looked back at them. “You’re right. You all are. I lost my temper and put everything we’re trying to do here at risk. It was stupid. I won’t act like that again.”

“Then let’s put it behind us,” Ayma suggested.

James’s phone rang and he snatched it off the strap on his hand and answered. As he listened to James’s responses to whatever was being said to him, Temerin could feel his heart still thudding with impotent anger over how much of a disaster tonight had been. Why on earth had he ever joined the HyCO? He had been happy teaching; he hadn’t even wanted to give it up. He certainly didn’t want to go around terrorising kids or picking fights and Ayma was the only one of his three colleagues who seemed to feel the same way.

The phone call ended and James switched off his phone, looking sheepish for the first time. “One of the teenagers has a broken leg.” Seeing their expressions, he hastily added, “None of us are being blamed for it. They don’t know what happened – it could’ve even been one of his mates.”

Temerin gave a snort of disbelief at this. “Or it could’ve been us.”

James met his eyes. "It won't be like that again."

* * *

"This job will be the making of you," his mother told Temerin, standing in the living room of the house where he'd grown up, with his father talking to James a few feet away. There was a vase of flowers on the coffee table in the centre of the room and, as always, there was no hint of dust or untidiness anywhere.

He tried not to wince at the insult hidden in a complement. He'd thought he was succeeding well on his own, with the teaching job he'd only left to work with her old friend. What was so wrong with his own choices?

"The city has been in desperate need of a new HyCO this last decade and I'm so glad James decided to run it."

James, hearing his name, looked round and he and Temerin's father came forward. "What was that?" James asked.

"I was just telling Temerin how grateful he should be that you're giving him this chance with the HyCO."

Temerin's jaw clenched and he bit back an angry response. Today, at least, had been a peaceful one; none of them had even left the HyCO office.

James clapped him on the shoulder, as if they were the best of friends, and said, "I'm the one who's lucky he agreed to support me in the group. It'll take time but we'll do all the good things I promised."

Temerin remembered the promises vividly and, in retrospect, realised how naive he had been to believe them. He hadn't really known anything about the kind of man James was but had assumed he was an honest person because Mum had known him for so many years and had in fact once worked with him herself. Perhaps he was being unfair and James did deserve a second chance. Temerin was still too annoyed to think straight right now.

His dad went to check on the cooking food and pronounced it ready so they took their seats in the dining room where the crockery and cutlery were set out with mathematical precision on the table and more flowers sat in a vase in the centre. Since his father was a professional chef with his own restaurant, it was a three-course meal and they drank a couple of bottles of wine with it. Temerin drank sparingly, knowing he would get a criticism from his mother otherwise. His mother and James chatted like the decades-long friends they were and Temerin made small-talk with his dad, hearing the progress of the recent renovations at the restaurant.

As the evening went on he felt increasingly stifled and restless, though, so he decided to go on to a club to unwind, preferably hooking up with a good-looking stranger. There were a couple of gay clubs in the centre of Invercade, just a short drive away and they were exactly what he needed. So after several hours he thanked his dad for the meal and told them he was heading home.

"Of course," his mother said. "You need a good night's sleep so you can make a good impression on your new boss tomorrow."

James laughed at this and Temerin forced a smile and a response to James's comment about seeing

him the next day.

His mother walked to the door of the house with him and put a hand on his shoulder as he opened the door, stopping him. "I'm proud of you," she said and he stared at her, for a moment too shocked to respond.

"Thank you, Mum."

As he walked to his car he wondered why he wasn't happy. He had waited his entire life to hear her say that, but this didn't feel right. James had persuaded Temerin to join him at the HyCO with talk of protecting Invercade from criminals but yesterday hadn't been about that and he realised now that, despite the earlier capitulation, he still didn't trust James and wondered if he had some agenda other than what he'd said. A dangerous one.

This wasn't what Temerin wanted to do with his life. He couldn't feel good that his mother was proud of him when he wasn't proud of himself.

Chapter Two

The man was tall, broad-shouldered and had a killer smile; dimples and everything. He was clearly picky too: Lachlan had seen him shake his head at several men who had been hitting on him. Lachlan didn't stand a chance, not unless the stranger turned out to be one of those anti-hybrid nuts who hated Lachlan for being a dragon. No, he corrected himself, with his luck gorgeous-guy was a wendigo who would kill and eat him. He imagined the scenario and himself saying *can we at least have sex first?*

No, even then he still didn't have a hope. He grimaced then straightened and headed over to the bar anyway, moving through the strobe lighting and the mass of half-naked men grinding against each other on the dance floor.

He reached the man and smiled nervously. "Buy you a drink?"

Against all odds the stranger said, "Why not?" and aimed that amazing smile right at Lachlan. "I'm Temerin."

Grinning, hardly able to believe it, Lachlan gave his own name and caught the bartender's eye. "One beer and..?"

"Beer is fine," Temerin said.

The bartender grabbed two bottles which he put on the counter in front of them. Lachlan paid him and he headed away to serve someone else. It was busy here tonight. Lachlan took a seat on the stool beside Temerin. They sipped their drinks, looked each other over and made a little small-talk, yelling to be heard over the music. Temerin was even better looking close up and for some reason he seemed impressed by Lachlan, the sexual tension between them palpable.

"Do you want to come back to my place?" he yelled.

Temerin smiled in agreement and got to his feet.

The flat was a short walk away, through the brightly lit city streets. A few holographic people tried to convince them to enter various pubs or clubs, but Lachlan had already got a better offer. They walked into his ground-level flat and Lachlan winced at the sight of the dirty plate and mug on the coffee table from where he'd eaten his dinner in front of the wall-TV earlier, and muddy work boots by the door. "Sorry about the mess." The last thing he wanted was Temerin thinking he was a complete slob. "I, er..."

The sentence went unfinished as Temerin pushed him against the wall and kissed him with all the focus and thoroughness of a man who couldn't care less how untidy the flat was. Okay, then – great! Lachlan opened his mouth and the kissing at once got sloppy and irresistible. He got one arm round Temerin and used his other hand to undo the man's shirt.

Temerin kissed him once more then pulled back, pupils dilated and his breathing fast. "Bedroom?"

Right. He had one of those. Where was it again? "Uh, this way."

They got to the bedroom and Lachlan switched on the light, then they had their hands all over each other again, getting each other undressed. Peeling away Temerin's clothes was like uncovering a piece of living art: strong shoulders, muscular torso, slim waist, downwards to... wow, Temerin was all ready

to get the action going.

He kissed Temerin again then, still wrapped round each other, they were falling onto the bed and neither one of them lasted much longer after that. Their first time together led quickly into a second and he couldn't remember the last time it had been this wild and passionate.

He managed to stagger out of the sheet-strewn bed to turn the light off then climbed back in, yanking the sheet and duvet over them both. Temerin threw an arm round his waist then moved in so their bodies were pressed together. "You're cold," Temerin muttered.

Lachlan thought this was just an excuse to cuddle until he remembered he hadn't mentioned that he was a dragon. He felt a flicker of unease then Temerin nuzzled his neck and he forgot about it. Temerin's breathing grew deeper and his weight, heavier. Lachlan stroked the arm across his stomach and let the gentle sound lull him to sleep.

Chapter Three

“Given the dangerous work we’re involved in we’ve been given permits to carry guns.”

Temerin listened to this with a growing heaviness in his stomach. The last thing they needed was the ability to make confrontations even more violent.

“I presume we get some kind of training in using them,” Ayma said in a dry tone that suggested Temerin wasn’t the only one who saw the potential dangers here, “and that we aren’t going out into the streets to shoot down every hybrid we see.”

She was sitting beside him in the office section of the HyCO, their computers on the desks around them. A persistent *drip-drip* came from the sink at the back of the room as James spoke again.

“We’re going to an army target practise area to get some training from a soldier who’s on our side. Look, I’ve accepted that our first job got out of control so let’s just do a better job from now on. We obviously need to act within the law so the guns are only to be used if our lives or other people’s lives are in jeopardy, but that might be sooner than you expect. I want us to start patrolling at night – finding trouble before it can get out-of-hand. Me and Hamish will go out this evening and you two get the night off.” He spoke to Ayma and Temerin, who both nodded, although Temerin still had visions of trouble ahead. “From tomorrow we’ll all take a couple of four hour shifts at night and we’ll adjust our hours at work to get some time off during the day.”

They took a couple of cars out of the city to the army base, which was ten miles away and overlooked the Moray coast. It had been raining earlier but had brightened up now, turning the gorse at the edge of the main road a brilliant yellow.

Sergeant Davison, a grey-haired man of about fifty, met them at the base entrance, shook hands with James and said to the soldier at the barrier, “You can let them through.”

They followed him along a path and into a building with a security lock. “I’ll show you how to load, assemble and disassemble the guns first. You’ll need to practise that – it could keep you alive.”

They spent a couple of hours doing this and learning about the different types of guns and how they were used, then headed back outside to a target practise area. They stood in a line, targets in front of them, ear protectors over their heads. Temerin hadn’t realised gunfire was quite so deafening. Sergeant Davison spent time with each of them, showing them how to hold their gun, aim it and shoot it. Temerin hadn’t expected the kick-back from the gun when it was fired and it took him some time not to jolt it when he pulled the trigger.

Hamish, standing next to Temerin, said something. Temerin took off his ear protectors. “What was that?”

“I said this is more like it. This is fun.”

He grimaced. Having James and Hamish together in the HyCO was worrying – James had a violent temper and Hamish seemed to enjoy fighting. “It’s also dangerous, particularly after things went so wrong last night.”

Hamish refilled his gun with bullets. “James got over-zealous and bashed a couple of kids’ heads

together. It wasn't the big deal you and Ayma made it out to be. No one was badly hurt."

That was the reaction he'd been afraid of. "They could've been and they shouldn't have been hurt at all."

"Don't be such a wuss." Hamish lifted his gun and Temerin just got his ear protectors on before Hamish began shooting again.

Temerin gave a wry smile and reloaded his own gun. If they didn't end up in prison for shooting a hybrid, they'd probably accidentally shoot each other.

* * *

While Temerin was relieved at a quiet day with no one getting beaten up or arrested and he was, they hadn't been given any work by the police and by four in the afternoon he was going out of his head with boredom. The office was small – just a foyer, open plan work area containing their four desks and chairs, a sink, beside which were mugs and jars and packets of caffell and teabags, and a tiny toilet. The building wasn't in the city centre but was only a ten minute walk away, surrounded by several other offices and a few shops, overlooking the wide river that led into the Moray Firth and with a direct view of the castle from the back windows.

James and Hamish were going on their first solo patrol tonight – Temerin winced at the thought of what trouble they could get into together – so they had both left the office at lunchtime to get a break and hadn't yet returned.

He and Ayma had set up a filing system then she had said something about having reading to do and left him to himself to make coffee, clean the desks and make more coffee.

He heard the front door open and hurried into the foyer, happy for once to see James. "Did you have a good afternoon?"

"Fine. You?"

"We cleaned the filing cabinets and set up a filing system so we can keep paper copies of the cases we do, in case anyone wants to review them in the future."

James smiled. "That sounds good."

"Is there anything else..?"

There was a deafening noise the second before the office window exploded inwards, glass flying at them and Temerin doubled over, covering his head, while James ducked behind the reception desk.

He straightened up as Ayma ran into the room, eyes darting about as she took in the damage. "What happened? Are you two okay?"

Somehow neither of them had been badly injured, although one of Temerin's hands was bleeding from a shallow cut. He turned to look at the jagged hole in the window and the shards of glass all over the floor, then he saw a large stone on the ground. He gestured to it, frowning. "Someone isn't happy about having a HyCO here."

Chapter Four

Lachlan wondered if it was too soon to phone Temerin. He didn't want to blow it by seeming too needy or over-keen but he really wanted to see him again soon. Preferably tonight. Preferably now. Well, maybe not right now as he was dressed in his muddy work clothes, hair flat against his head from the rain. But sometime today would be fantastic.

He finished tiling the rest of his section, meeting his brother in the middle of the roof, then they climbed down the ladder to the paved yard of the house. Their father helped collapse the ladder and got it inside the van with the old tiles they had replaced then, job done, they headed to the nearest cafe for lunch.

"Three caffells, three vege burgers and chips?" the waitress at the counter repeated then smiled. "Dragons, right?"

His brother grinned at her. "Right first guess."

Around sixty percent of dragons were vegetarians so it wasn't much of a guess, even less so given Billy's lack of human eyelids, taking after their dad. Lachlan looked more like their mum: regular eyelids and the same pale skin and fair, slightly ginger hair.

Billy collected the coffees then joined them at the table for wait for their food. He got comfortable in his chair and said, "Did you hear that there's a new HyCO?"

"In Invercade?" Dad asked, frowning.

"Aye. Col told me." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper. "Here."

Dad took the paper and unfolded it. "What's this?"

"It's flat-pictures of..."

"That's Temerin!" Lachlan stared at the picture – it didn't really do his lover justice but that was definitely him. "Were did you get this? Who're the other people?"

Billy was staring at him with narrowed eyes. "You know one of them?"

"Yeah, I met Temerin a couple of nights ago. We might be seeing each other. Why do you have a picture of him?"

"You're having sex with that guy?" Billy stabbed a finger at the photo.

"What's it to do with you?" Lachlan asked, his brother's glare making him defensive.

"Billy," Dad said in the tone of someone with years of experience breaking up quarrels between them, "just tell us what this is about."

"Col took flat-photos of where the new HyCO building is and the people working there. This is them." He pointed again at the pictures. "Your new bloke is a hybrid-hater."

"Bullshit!" Lachlan jumped to his feet, catching his hand on the edge of the table and making it shudder. "That's complete rubbish."

“Oh, aye? Did you tell him you were a dragon?”

He began to say yes, then remembered he hadn't. But it couldn't be true. Temerin had been good-natured and friendly, not some violent bigot.

Billy stood up too, leaning forward, hands on the table, trying to be menacing. “That's what I thought.”

The waitress from the counter walked over to them with a tray of food then stopped at the sight of the two men squaring off against each other.

“Sit down, laddies,” Dad said and told the waitress to ignore them, explaining, “A disagreement between brothers.”

Lachlan obeyed first, still struggling to take in what he'd just found out. A plate was put in front of him and he gave an automatic thank you, appetite gone. He picked up a packet of ketchup then just held it in his fingers, eyes moving to the damning pictures. Temerin was a member of a HyCO.

Dad nudged his arm. “Eat up.”

Lachlan pulled open the ketchup, which immediately oozed over his fingers. He opened the roll and poured some ketchup over the burger then put it back together and tipped the rest over the chips. He licked his fingers and stared again at his food.

“Not all HyCOs are the same,” Dad said.

Lachlan raised his head. He didn't know much about the subject. HyCOs had been around nearly as long as hybrids. Genetic-engineering had created the five hybrid races and they had been given names that reflected their race's characteristics, his own people named after the mythical dragons because of the reptilian shape they could change into. The humans hadn't seemed too bothered about vampires and sensors born in their midst but, when dragons and werewolves were freed from the laboratories where they'd been created, the HyCOs were set up around the world to monitor them and find excuses to lock them away. That had been decades ago, though. Maybe some of them these days were different.

“Of course they are,” Billy said, taking a swallow of caffell, a substitute for the coffee that wasn't available in this country anymore. “Their whole purpose is to hassle and fight us. You remember the one over on the Black Isle where a load of hybrids ended up dead?”

Lachlan's chair scraped the floor as he got up and walked out of the cafe and away from the smell of food that was making him want to heave. He leaned back against the wall and breathed in fresh air, salty from the nearby ocean. Seagulls soared overhead and let out screeching cries. After a while the cafe door opened, bell tinkling, and his dad joined him.

“I'm guessing that you liked him?” Dad asked.

Liked. Past tense. “Aye.”

“I heard of a HyCO about a decade ago that was run by hybrids. This one may not be planning any trouble. Look, do what you want. Either find another bloke or tell this one who you are and see how he reacts, right?”

“Aye,” he said again. He could just tell Temerin the truth and either it would be over or it wouldn't. At least he'd know. “That would work.”

“Come on.” Dad opened the cafe door. “The food's getting cold.”

* * *

He had expected his brother to be in his face all afternoon, telling him what an idiot he was, but Billy didn't say another word about it until they had finished their last job and were getting ready to split up for the day and finally get out of this rain.

"Are you going to phone this HyCO bloke?" Billy asked as Dad walked over to join them.

We leaned against his car, unzipping his coat, and tried to look casual. "Maybe. That's up to me."

"You should."

Lachlan blinked at him. "Really?"

"Yeah. It'd be really useful to us – the hybrid community – to know what the HyCO's up to."

Now Lachlan's shock came from an entirely different direction. "You want me to date Temerin and spy on him?"

"No, just ask him the odd question about their plans and let us know."

"Yeah, that's called spying. No way in hell!"

"It's not a fair thing for us to ask you," Dad said, "but what if they actually want to kill hybrids? If you could just find out what their intentions are we'd know where we stood and be able to decide what to do."

Lachlan shook his head, turning his back on them for a moment. When he turned back he was glaring to cover his hurt. "I can't believe you'd take his side and ask me to do something like that."

"It's up to you. If you don't want to see him again after this then we'll understand, but if you do then just asking a couple of questions and telling us the answers could save a lot of hybrid lives."

"Temerin isn't a killer."

Billy stepped forward. "Then what harm can it do to ask about his job?"

Lachlan shook his head and got into his car, ignoring their attempts to say something more to him. He'd had it with this conversation. He couldn't listen to any more. He drove back to his flat, threw off his damp, muddy clothes and got into the shower, wanting the cascade of water to wash him clean in more ways than one.

He didn't believe any of it. Temerin was a good person. He was certain. Almost certain. He wanted to see him again, but there was no way he was going to spy on him. He remembered Dad's words about saving lives by asking. Maybe one question... No, what if Temerin ever found out? He'd be furious and they'd never get over it.

He ran his fingers through his hair, the hot water beginning to calm him. The only thing he could do was not see Temerin again. That way he wasn't doing anything to hurt him or go against his family. But he wanted to see Temerin again and what if it was the other way around? What if the hybrid community turned against the HyCO and Temerin got hurt or killed? He could warn him... but not if Temerin wanted to kill hybrids. That couldn't be true, could it? He certainly wouldn't believe it without proof, without hearing it from Temerin himself. He would call him, say he was a dragon and ask why Temerin was working for the HyCO. He didn't necessarily have to tell his family anything, or he could just

reassure them that no, of course there wasn't any threat to them. That's what he'd do.

He quickly soaped and rinsed his lean body then got out of the shower and grabbed a towel. He would call Temerin because he wanted to say he was a dragon and see that Temerin didn't mind. Because he wouldn't.

He dried off then walked, naked, to the bedroom to get his phone. He opened it and found Temerin's number. He stared at it, finger hovering over the dial button as seconds ticked by. He folded up the phone again, chucked it down on the bed and sat down beside it, head in his hands.

Chapter Five

Temerin had a few hours to himself. He wasn't used to that in the middle of the day but he had a patrol with Ayma later and James had handed out a rota for the week for when they should all be working and when they should take a few hours off. So he had come home, made lunch, watched a bad film and he still had some time before he needed to return to the office. He found himself thinking of Lachlan. Temerin generally had one-offs or casual relationships. He had learnt over time that it was stupid to trust anyone or expect them to stay around for long, but for some reason Lachlan had been on his mind a lot. They had had an amazing night and it had taken his mind off every bad and confusing thing that was happening in his life right now. There had been something compelling about the way Lachlan had focused all that passion and inner fire on him.

What was the harm in seeing him again? He unstrapped his phone from the back of his hand and opened it out, dialling the number Lachlan had programmed into it.

"Hello?" Lachlan spoke loudly, as if he was outside.

"It's Temerin. Is this a bad time?"

"Er, hi; no, it's fine. How are you?" Lachlan sounded odd: worried and subdued. Maybe he was at work. It was a stupid time to have phoned.

"I'm good. I was thinking about you today and I wondered if you wanted to meet up again later."

There was a pause. "Okay. Tonight?"

"Great. I have to work until nine – could I come by then or would you rather drop by my flat?"

"Just come to mine whenever you're free. I'll see you then."

He closed the phone, with a feeling that it had been a mistake to call. Maybe Lachlan had only wanted a one-night-stand, but he never said that and it was him who'd suggested swapping phone numbers. Perhaps he'd forgotten all about Temerin and met up with some other bloke last night, or he hadn't enjoyed it as much as Temerin had. No, if Lachlan really hadn't wanted to see Temerin again he would've said. He was probably at work and had been uncomfortable having a private conversation.

Temerin grimaced, half wishing he'd left it alone. This was what happened when he wanted to get closer to another man – it was always a mistake.

* * *

He and Ayma took her car to patrol the outskirts of the city. Driving in slow circles, Temerin had a feeling that they looked far more as if they were up to no good than anyone else who was outside tonight. There were crowds of people heading to and from pubs, restaurants and clubs and, of course, plenty of shops and cafes would be opening soon to cater for the vampires who couldn't go out in the daylight because of their photosensitivity. He wondered what that would be like – he'd enjoy the nightlife but miss the sunshine. He had a feeling it would get claustrophobic, missing everything that

went on in the daytime.

“I hope we’ll get a proper case to look into tomorrow,” he commented.

“What, nearly getting lacerated by glass today wasn’t exciting enough for you?”

He glanced down at the bandage over his hand. “Wrong kind of excitement. I’d like a chance to show we can do some good.”

“Is that why you joined the HyCO?”

“Something like that. Also, my mum ran a detective agency with James a couple of decades ago. She thought I should do this. What about you? What made you join?”

“I think all hybrids have the potential to be dangerous and should be monitored. Dragons and werewolves were designed to be killers, vampires have inhuman strength and some sensors can control people’s thoughts.”

“And that’s nothing to what wendigoes can do.”

She turned the steering wheel and the car moved into a different street. “I don’t want to even contemplate one of them in Invercade. None of us has the skill to fight those monsters.”

“True.” There hadn’t been a sighting of a wendigo anywhere around Invercade in years and he hoped it stayed that way. With any luck, the country would soon win the war against the cannibal race and wipe them out. “Humans can be dangerous too.”

“Hmm?” Her eyes were on two men standing on the pavement in front of them, arguing, but then one of them threw his hands in the air and turned and marched away in the opposite direction so she drove on.

“It’s not just hybrids who have the capacity to be violent or to become killers. I don’t think of it as *us* and *them*.”

“The police can arrest human criminals. It’s for us to keep an eye on the hybrids.”

He wasn’t satisfied with the answer. He suspected his mother felt much the same as Ayma, but he’d never disliked hybrids, apart from the wendigoes, of course, who’d almost wiped out every other species in the decades-long war. He didn’t think either he or Ayma would change their views so he let the subject drop.

“What do you think of James and Hamish?”

“I think Hamish is short on brains and a bit too happy for an excuse to be violent. James, I don’t know. He obviously blames every hybrid in existence for the death of his brother but I don’t think that’s the only reason he formed the HyCO. If we can keep him focused on using his anger to solve crimes I don’t see why the organisation shouldn’t achieve what we both want. James does seem willing to listen to reason and admit when he’s wrong.”

That was true. Perhaps Temerin had been too quick to assume the worst after the first evening. There hadn’t been any more trouble when James and Hamish had patrolled the previous night. Ayma might not share the same ideas as him but the goals they both wanted were similar: solving crimes and keeping people safe.

He’d made a commitment to the HyCO and he needed to work with the others in the group to try to do some good. It was time to put all his energy into supporting the HyCO, rather than wishing he was

somewhere else, and find out what it could accomplish.

* * *

Temerin had bought a bottle of wine today and changed his mind a dozen times about whether to bring it to Lachlan's flat or not. He didn't want to show up just looking as if he was after sex, but he didn't want to make a fool of himself if Lachlan only wanted sex. Finally he told himself to stop being an idiot and just go.

When he opened the door, Lachlan looked just as good as Temerin remembered and he leaned in to kiss him. Lachlan jerked away.

"Sorry," he said, stiffening and pulling back.

"No, I'm sorry. I just, um... I had an argument with my brother and Dad today and I'm on edge. Ignore me. Come in."

"Are you sure?" Temerin hovered in the doorway. "If you don't feel like company anymore I can go; it's fine."

"No. I want to see you. It's just... family."

Temerin thought of his mother's frequent criticisms. "Aye, I know how that feels."

He walked in and, when Lachlan had closed the door, handed him the bottle. Lachlan looked at it and gave a short laugh. "You have no idea how good alcohol sounds right now, but where's your bottle?"

Temerin laughed, relaxing.

Lachlan gestured to the wine. "Is it okay if we open this now?"

"Of course." The flat looked different than he remembered and he realised it was a lot tidier; he wondered if that was for his benefit and was relieved at the idea that he might not have been the only one who was nervous.

They walked into a compact kitchen and Lachlan poured out two glasses of wine, which they took back out into the living room, sitting together on a well-worn but comfortable couch. There were holopictures on the walls of people Temerin assumed were Lachlan's family.

"So do you want to talk about it? The argument with your dad and brother?"

Lachlan froze, the glass halfway to his lips. He looked away from Temerin and licked his lips. "Er, no, that's okay. I've always fought with my brother and I work with my family so there's no getting away from them." He said this with a nervous smile.

Temerin wondered what he'd said wrong, the atmosphere between them suddenly uncomfortable again. "So what's your job?"

"We have a roofing business. Dad started it. My sister – my older sister, Julie – did it with us for a while, then she had kids and gave it up."

"Do you get on better with her?"

"Oh, aye. Definitely. My Dad would disagree because he has to listen to us bickering whenever we

see each other, but it's all friendly." Lachlan took a swallow of wine, downing half the glass in one go, then looked intently at him. "So what do you do for a living?"

Despite his earlier resolve to make the most of his work in the HyCO, Temerin found that he didn't want to tell Lachlan about it. HyCOs had a bad reputation – far worse than he'd realised, judging by the reactions of the hybrids they'd encountered so far. He didn't want Lachlan to think he was a bigot or wanted to cause trouble for hybrids. "I was working as a teacher but I left to try something else. I'm not sure yet how it'll turn out. Shall we finish the wine?"

"Good idea."

Temerin filled Lachlan's glass and topped up his own half-full one, leaving about an inch of wine left in the bottle. By the time they had taken a few more sips Lachlan was looking more relaxed so Temerin moved closer to kiss him. Lachlan responded with a hunger that had them both undressed in under a minute and they headed to the bedroom, the last of the wine forgotten.

Chapter Six

He hadn't told Temerin he was a dragon. He'd intended to and over and over and he'd nearly done it but in the end he chickened out. He didn't know for sure if Temerin really did work for the HyCO, although he'd been evasive about his job. All Lachlan knew was that he liked Temerin and he didn't have a clue where that left him.

He drove to his parents' house as usual and, of course, his brother was standing there waiting in the garden as he pulled up. "Well? What did he say?"

Lachlan pushed his car door shut and set the lock. Dad came out of the house and Mum followed to give Lachlan a hug and wish them all a good day's work. The way she looked at each of the men made it clear she'd heard about Temerin and the argument, but she gave Lachlan the same affectionate smile as always as they got into the van. She gave them a quick wave then headed to her car.

Billy twisted around from the front seat. "What did he say?" he demanded.

"Nothing. I asked about his job and he just said he used to be a teacher. He didn't say anything about what he does now."

"Yeah, I'd be too sodding ashamed to say it too if I was him."

"We don't even know if he's definitely a member."

"When are you seeing him again?"

"I don't know. Maybe I won't."

"If you do, you need to find out something useful."

"I told you yesterday that I'm not your pet spy. Look, if he tells me he is in the group and they're up to something bad, I'll tell you, but that's all. He's a decent bloke and I don't believe he's mixed up in anything dangerous." Agreeing to this much left the bad taste of betrayal in his mouth. It would have been better if he'd been able to say no to seeing Temerin for a second time. Now that he had, he didn't think he could stay away and, with his family on one side and his lover on the other, he knew that at some point everything was going to go wrong.

Chapter Seven

Temerin stared down at the corpse and silently promised he was never going to complain about boredom again, because this was far more than he knew how to handle. The body was covered in lacerations that had ripped through the flesh as if it had been paper; an arm was completely severed and looked as if it had been mauled.

“Was it definitely a wendigo?” James asked from nearby, the whole HyCO team here in an area of countryside between the city of Invercade and town of Tairl. Temerin focused on the petite army officer next to them and wondered what kind of monster could kill another person then eat their remains.

“It might not be,” Detective Sergeant Howes said. There were four detectives, more than a dozen uniformed police officers and a large squadron from the army, easily recognisable in their uniforms. Everyone was taking this threat as something potentially devastating for the area. “It’s possible that some wild animal escaped from a wildlife park and did this. Because of the rain recently we haven’t got any forensic information so far, although we’re still checking the surrounding area. However, we need to assume it is a wendigo and take every precaution. You all have guns with you?”

“Aye,” James said and Temerin reached up to touch his own gun in the unfamiliar holster that was strapped round his torso under his jacket. He tried to remember all the training on how to use it: turn the safety off, aim carefully then gently squeeze the trigger. Always keep the safety on when he wasn’t using the gun so it couldn’t accidentally go off. He repeated all this to himself so he wouldn’t forget at a critical moment.

“Do you know the signs to look for in identifying a wendigo and what to do if you find one?”

They all said no and, from the sergeant’s expression, she thought they were about as useless as Temerin felt.

“All right,” she said, putting her hands in her jacket pocket and not looking freaked out by at all by the situation. “Wendigos resemble ordinary people so the way to find one is to look for blood on face, hands or clothes. They kill and eat their victims by using their hands and teeth to rip people apart so, unless they’ve had a chance to thoroughly clean up and change clothes after killing, there will be blood.”

Temerin resisted the urge to look at the mutilated corpse beside him as he really didn’t need a visual illustration of what the creatures did.

Ayma asked, “How often do they kill?”

“They’ll kill everyone they encounter. One wendigo can kill hundreds of people in a matter of days.”

“And if we find one we shoot it, right?” Hamish said.

“DCI Singer will send you out in teams. If you see signs of blood on anyone then, first, quietly alert all your team, then ask for the person’s ID card, which will be checked. If the person won’t give their ID and tries to attack then shoot for a quick kill through the heart or head. If they try to flee then shoot them in the leg so they can be caught and questioned in case there are other wendigos with them.”

Temerin’s stomach lurched at the thought. They weren’t remotely trained to do this – he had only practised using a gun once. He focused on what she had said about hundreds of people dying if the

wendigo wasn't caught and pushed away his nerves.

"All right everyone, quieten down," Detective Chief Inspector Singer yelled. "It's time to hunt down this wendigo. Everyone will be put into teams of four people and, since soldiers have the most experience dealing with this kind of threat, every group will include at least one soldier. You will be given specific areas to cover and will proceed quietly and carefully through the countryside. If there is a house in your area then ring the doorbell and check the ID of the person who answers. Even if their ID is genuine, check every room in the house and, when you leave, get a contact phone number and tell them not to leave the house or open the door again until they here from us that it's safe. If they should see anyone they are to phone us immediately and find somewhere with a lock on the door where they can remain until we arrive. If you see anyone who won't give their ID, arrest them. If anyone sees us and tries to run, shoot them in a non-fatal part of the body and restrain them. If anyone attacks your group shoot to kill. Any questions?"

He answered a couple of procedural questions then walked over to the HyCO team, gesturing for them to move closer. When they were clustered around him, he said, "I phoned you because we need every bit of help in this situation. If I find out later that any of you used this as an excuse to harass hybrids or promote any anti-hybrid propaganda then I'll personally make sure it's the last time you're allowed to work on any police case ever again. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," James said, his usual bluster subdued and his expression somber. "We just want to assist as best as we can."

"Then let's get started."

Temerin was put with a young uniformed police officer called John and two army officers, one man called Angus and one woman called Debbie, who were both in their thirties. He wished the rest of the HyCO good luck then watched as the army people checked their guns. He hastily did the same.

As they set off he asked, "Have any of you ever fought a wendigo before?"

"No." John looked nauseous at the idea.

The army officers also shook their heads and exchanged a look he interpreted as uncertainty although Debbie said, "But we've had a lot of training for this kind of situation."

He tried to take comfort from that but couldn't entirely banish the thought that, given their mutual lack of experience, if they found the wendigo there was a strong possibility they could end up dead.

Chapter Eight

Temerin hadn't minded walking through miles of fields filled with gorse, crops and a few sheep, but he looked warily at the woods ahead of them. The wendigo could be hiding behind any tree and kill them before they ever saw it.

"Take it slowly," Debbie said, "and we'll guard your backs."

So he and John did just that, walking forward, eyes peeled for any movement, guns in their hands. Debbie and Angus walked backwards, checking the rear and sides for trouble. It didn't help that, with the sun out, there were shadows everywhere and he kept thinking he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye but, when he turned, there was nothing. It was like being in a horror movie but without the comforting knowledge that nothing was real.

"Is that a person?" John said and Temerin whirled round and raised his gun, using his left hand to take the safety off. John was pointing his own gun towards a tree about thirty feet away. There was a dark unmoving shape which looked like a crouching figure.

"We'll check it," Angus said. "Wait here and keep watch."

He and Debbie moved away from each other so they could approach the tree from the sides. After a minute they were out of sight and Temerin's breathing sounded loud to his own ears. He wanted to stare fixedly at the maybe-figure but forced himself to turn his head constantly, looking in every direction. Beside him John was doing the same and Temerin could see his gun hand shaking.

The sound of twigs breaking had him and John aiming their guns off to one side of the maybe-figure then, from the direction of the noise, Angus's voice called: "All clear."

Angus and Debbie came into view, striding back over to them and Temerin breathed shaky breathes as he lowered his gun. "Just a log," Debbie reported and Temerin grinned with relief while John let out a quick laugh.

"Let's get moving," Angus suggested, "so we can move away from this damned wood."

"Aye," he agreed with feeling and the other two echoed the sentiment.

They continued more quickly but Temerin's eyes never stilled as he thought what a perfect place this was for an ambush, his mind supplying an image of the corpse whose discovery had begun this search. How could an entire race be cannibals? He couldn't imagine what they got out of it unless there was something in people's flesh that the creatures needed to ingest for survival. He thought he would rather die than live in such a way.

A flash of movement to one side made him jump and turn his gun in that direction. "Stop," he told the others. "Something moved."

They all paused, watching. He heard leaves rustle as if someone had taken a step forward.

"Everyone take the safety off your guns and head forward slowly," Debbie said.

They obeyed her, inching forward. Another rustling sound convinced him some creature was here. Something moved further away and he and Angus must have seen it at the same time as they both turned

and stepped towards it, the others a few steps behind them. He saw something move above them in a tree just as Angus gave a quiet laugh and pointed his gun: "Squirrels."

Temerin let out one breath then breathed in and out deeply, realising by the need for oxygen that he must have been holding his breath. He watched the pair of squirrels chase each other higher up the branches of the tree.

"Let's check about just in case," Debbie said.

They checked thoroughly but there was no sign of anything else and when they turned and headed in their original direction the trees began to thin. They were out of the woods a few minutes later, the brightness and clear view all around them a welcoming sight.

They had several more fields and copses to cover in the area they had been allotted and a couple of houses in the distance to check. It was already the longest morning of his life.

It took them nearly two hours to reach the first of the houses, a centuries-old detached building with peeling paint and a semi-derelict barn a short distance away. There were lavender bushes in the front garden that gave off a strong fragrance.

As soon as they approached the house there was the sound of dogs barking. John rang the front doorbell then stepped backwards, the other three behind and to each side of him with their guns out. After a minute the door opened and they all braced themselves.

A middle-aged woman stood there, two barking mongrels at her feet, and took in the guns. "Oh, my God!"

"We don't want to scare you, ma'am," John said, "but we found a dead body a few miles away this morning. It was likely that he was killed by a wild animal but there is a possibility that it could be a wendigo."

She put a hand over her chest. "Here?"

John nodded and continued, "Try not to worry just yet but we'll need you and anyone else in the house to show us your ID cards and then we'll need to search the house."

"All right. There's just me here until my daughter gets back tonight." She walked back into the house and they saw her open a large handbag and search it with shaking hands before producing a card.

She gave John the ID card and he moved away and opened the computer wrapped round his wrist to check it. After a few minutes he nodded to the group and gave the card back to the woman.

"Thank you. Can we have a look round now?"

"Aye, of course. Do whatever you need to."

They took one room at a time, Mrs Mackinnon watching and the dogs expressing displeasure at having their home invaded with barks and growls. When this was done they check the barn and immediate surroundings.

Finding nothing, they prepared to go and Mrs Mackinnon said, "You're leaving me here alone? What if it finds me?"

"We'll wait while you lock all the doors," John said. "After that, if you see or hear anyone outside just call us and we'll come back at once. If someone should try to break in then get into a room like a bathroom that you can lock. It might well be a false alarm but we'll keep checking the entire area and

give you a call in two or three hours to let you know.”

“What if it is a wendigo and you don’t find it?”

John glanced back at the army officers and Debbie said, “If that happens we’ll evacuate the area and send soldiers to protect you while you’re on the move. Don’t worry. This is all just a precaution.”

The second house was empty but John was able to use a police tool to unlock the door so they could look round. There was no sign that anyone had broken in so they left a note on the door for the owner and left, pulling the front door so it locked behind them.

They returned to where they had first met, where the corpse had now been taken away, and rendezvoused with the rest of the group, eager to hear that someone else had found and killed the wendigo responsible.

They sought out DCI Singer who told them, “There’s been no further sign of any wendigo and no more dead bodies but there haven’t been any reports of a wild animal having escaped from anywhere, or sign of one.”

“So where does that leave us?” Temerin asked.

“It means that this is an ongoing investigation and when we get further information we’ll pursue it.”

Chapter Nine

Lachlan had caved and been the one to phone Temerin this time and they had met at his flat again. It was after ten o'clock at night and Temerin seemed in a subdued mood as he accepted a bottle of beer, taking a sip from it as they stood in Lachlan's kitchen.

Lachlan leaned against a counter, hooked as always by how handsome Temerin was but concerned by the shadows in his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. It's just something that happened at work today but I'm not allowed to talk about it. It's confidential, I'm afraid."

It was the perfect lead-in so Lachlan said, "So where do you work?" He waited nervously for the answer.

Temerin looked away and for a horrible moment Lachlan was sure he was going to lie to him. "Actually, a new branch of HyCO has just started up and I'm a member."

There were no longer any doubts about it then. Lachlan tried to keep his voice neutral. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"On occasions it's a lot more dangerous than I'd bargained for." Temerin laughed slightly in a way that was the opposite of humour. "It's fine – I know how to defend myself."

Not exactly what he'd meant. "What about the hybrids? Aren't HyCOs about controlling or killing..." Us. "... them."

"Only criminals. The police are over-stretched so we help with cases involving hybrid crimes."

"I thought I heard something about a group of kids getting hurt by a HyCO."

Temerin looked thoroughly uncomfortable now. At least he wasn't bragging about it which was something. Not much, but something. "Our first job involved stopping some drunk teenagers who'd thrown bottles through windows. It shouldn't have been violent but it went wrong and we got into a fight. We all regret that some of the teenagers were hurt. We handled it badly but that won't happen again."

Well, that sounded better than he'd expected. "So you don't want to hurt hybrids? You don't hate..." Us. "... them?"

"No, of course not. I'm not a thug, Lachlan. I want to help protect people."

"Okay." The words were in his head: *Then there's something I need to tell you about myself...* He couldn't say them. His mouth was dry and he just couldn't. He hoped now that it wouldn't make a difference, but he couldn't be sure. How pathetic was he that he wanted to be with someone he might only be able to keep by lying about who he was?

Temerin kissed him and Lachlan put his arms round him and closed his eyes.

Chapter Ten

Temerin arrived at the HyCO office the next morning and found James and Ayma arguing and the words *Go Away HyCO Bastards* spray-painted across the window. It gave him a brief unease but after yesterday it was clear that there were far more terrifying threats they might have to face. Besides, lazy early morning sex with Lachlan had left him in too good a mood to be upset by this.

“What happened?” he asked them.

“It was here when we arrived,” Ayma said shortly. She was wearing a navy multi-layered dress-suit along with the kind of sturdy shoes a person could tramp round the countryside looking for wendigos in. He presumed her less practical footwear yesterday had given her problems.

“I’ve called the police so we can track them down,” James added in a tone that promised retribution and Ayma grimaced at Temerin.

“Then let’s let the police solve that as we’ve got a lot more important things to talk over,” he said, heading towards the door to the office.

As hoped, James turned away from the graffiti to focus on him. “What things?”

“Can we go inside?”

“Aye, okay.”

Temerin ignored James’s impatience and made caffell – coffee substitute – for each of them and Hamish joined them in the open-plan office area. They pulled their chairs away from their desks and into a rough circle.

“I wanted to talk about yesterday,” Temerin said, holding his warm mug in his hands.

“There isn’t any more news,” James told him at once.

“All right, but that wasn’t it. Was I the only one who felt out-of-my-depth hunting for that wendigo? I mean, if I’d found it I think I’d be the one dead.”

“Yeah,” Hamish agreed and Ayma nodded and said, “One session training with a gun wasn’t nearly enough for something like that.”

“The army saw that we wanted to help,” Temerin said to James, “so surely they’d be willing to give us proper training like their officers get, along with a regular place we can go for further gun practise?”

“Good ideas,” James said, sounding a bit surprised. “I’ll call someone today and see if I can set that up, put times into our rotas for when they’ll let us use the gun range.”

“That sounds great. I think it’ll take quite a few sessions before I feel confident handling a gun and in that kind of situation...”

“Aye,” Hamish agreed, “a hesitation could get us killed.”

“I can ask if they’ll let us train every day this week then every couple of days after that until we’re more proficient,” James said and they nodded.

“Perhaps they have some kind of manual as well,” Ayma said, “with advice on how to proceed in that kind of situation.”

“I’ll ask.”

The meeting didn’t last much longer but it was satisfying and helped subdue Temerin’s lingering panic over not knowing what he was doing yesterday. For the first time he felt like part of a team, all of them pulling in the same direction.

* * *

In light of having bigger things to deal with, including a theft case the police were willing to share with the HyCO, James had changed their rotas so they just did one patrol per night, two people going out one night and the other two the next. This gave him an entirely free evening tonight and he thought immediately of spending more time with Lachlan. They had been getting together every night – he wasn’t obeying his own rule of keeping relationships casual. In the past he’d cared too much for men and been dumped with brutal carelessness but his instincts told him to trust Lachlan.

He phoned Lachlan and said, “I’ve got the evening off. How about dinner at my place?”

“I finally get to see your flat?” Lachlan asked and Temerin could hear the smile in his voice. “Just tell me a time and I’ll be there.”

They agreed on seven o’clock then said goodbye and he was thinking about what meal to make them when James called the group over, saying, “I’ve just had a courtesy call from DCI Singer. They’ve analysed all the DNA in that area and found evidence that yesterday’s killer definitely was a wendigo. The army have been out all over the outskirts of Invercade and there’s no more sign of it, so it’s hopefully left the area.”

No one asked what would be the result if the wendigo hadn’t left, because the answer was obvious: there would be a bloodbath.

Chapter Eleven

“What are you looking so happy about?” Billy asked in a sour tone as he replaced broken tiles on the roof of a bungalow while Lachlan cleared the gutter.

Since he had no desire to talk about Temerin with his brother, he said, “It’s a bright, sunny day and we live in the Highlands where we’re lucky to get a dozen days like this in a year: why wouldn’t I be in a good mood?” He got to his feet and carefully made his way to the ladder, holding a bag of gutter sludge. “I’ll meet you down there. We’ve got three more jobs this morning, don’t forget.”

“I know,” Billy shot back, glaring. “I booked one of them. Don’t try to order me around.”

Lachlan returned the glare but he really was in too good a mood to let his brother wind him up. He climbed down the ladder to the ground and went and got his thermos of mint tea, sitting on the floor of the van to drink it, the sun on his face. Last night with Temerin had been great. Not just the sex, which was always fantastic, but the way they had talked and made each other laugh. Temerin had been a bit closed-off with him before but now he seemed to be relaxing and saying more about himself. Lachlan was really getting to understand him, seeing his smart side, his caring side, his quirky sense of humour and the more Lachlan saw, the more the relationship meant to him. It was time for Lachlan to tell him about being a dragon. It was beyond time. He really didn’t think it would make a difference and he had to tell the truth at some point. Temerin was a decent man: he wasn’t in that HyCO because he hated hybrids but because he wanted to help people. It would be fine. Lachlan just had to tell him.

Billy came clattering down the ladder, dumped the old tiles he’d removed on the ground and took out the clips so he could collapse the ladder. Lachlan watched him struggle and considered giving him a hand, then took another sip of his drink instead.

Billy lugged the bulky ladder over to the van and Lachlan got up so he could put it away, cup in one hand and thermos in the other. “Don’t strain yourself helping, will you?” Billy said.

“Oh, did you need help?” He finished his drink and headed for the front of the van, screwing the cup back onto the top of the thermos, smiling at the muttered abuse from behind him.

They finished their morning’s work then drove across the city, through the usual bad traffic, to their parents’ house.

“Dad not back yet?” he asked after hugging his mum, who only worked in the mornings now and liked getting them together at lunchtime.

“I’m sure he’ll be along soon,” she said.

Billy went and turned the TV on, stepping over the robot hoover that was moving about with a soft humming noise, and Lachlan followed his mum into the kitchen.

“I gather you have a new boyfriend?” she said.

His mouth twisted. “Aye, I’m sure you’ve been told plenty about him.”

“The only thing I need to know is whether he makes you happy, which from your expression I’m guessing he does, and at what point I get to meet him.”

He immediately felt bad for doubting her. He'd never been concerned that his being gay would bother his family – dragon sexuality was the most fluid of all the species'. Bisexuality was the most usual but plenty of dragons were straight or gay. Around thirty percent of them were born androgynous; about ten percent of them would naturally change sex during their lifetime; and a small number of dragons could change the sex of their bodies at will. This situation was something different, though, with his choice of lover causing so much tension. It made him feel as if he were standing between two opposing armies, right in the firing line.

“I haven't told him I'm a dragon yet,” he confessed. “It's stupid and every time I see him I intend to tell him...”

“You're afraid of his reaction?”

He sighed, finally admitting to himself the truth. “I'm terrified. I don't know if what we have is real or not and I'm crazy about him.”

“I'm sorry, laddie,” she said gently, “relationships are the toughest things in the world, but they're also the most satisfying.”

There was a sound from the hallway then the front door banged shut. “I'm home,” Dad called out and the conversation was put on hold.

Chapter Twelve

Temerin and Ayma had spent the morning looking into the theft case the police wanted help with. There was no DNA at the crime scene and this suggested the culprit was either a dragon – since they left no DNA in their reptile forms – or had just worn gloves. He didn't care which reason it was; he was just glad to be doing useful work. They probably weren't as efficient as the police, as they were learning how to do things like this as they went along, but they had time and enthusiasm to give the owner of the company that had been burgled and she had seemed to appreciate their help.

They returned to the HyCO and were confronted by a red-faced James who snarled at Temerin, "Why did I just get an anonymous phone call saying you were screwing a dragon who was sharing HyCO information with the enemy?"

"What? That's ridiculous." Where on earth would a lie like that have come from?

"You're not seeing anyone?"

"I am, but he's not a dragon."

"Do you know that for a fact?"

"No, but I know him. He would've told me."

James gave a snort of disbelief. "They used him to spy on us and you fell for it."

"No." Lachlan would never have kept this from him. It was impossible. "You're wrong and even if he was a dragon, which he isn't, I haven't told him a thing about our work."

"Nothing at all?" Ayma asked and he was hurt that she was ganging up with the others to interrogate him.

"He knows I'm in a HyCO and he'd heard about that kid breaking his leg in our first fight..."

"... Heard from his hybrid friends," Hamish said.

"... But I said that was a mistake and we only wanted to catch criminals. I didn't tell him anything vital; hell, there are no big secrets that I could have told him!"

"Luckily for us." James looked at him with hard eyes and a sneer. "I can't believe you were so stupid."

"He's not a dragon."

"Get out of here and find out."

He looked at them, all three lined up to condemn him over a mistake. "Fine."

He walked outside and got into his car, pausing a minute to calm down before phoning Lachlan, "If it's possible, could you meet me now?"

"What's wrong?" Lachlan's voice was concerned.

"Nothing. It's stupid but there's been a misunderstanding and I just need to ask you something to get

it sorted out.”

“Okay. I’ll drive over to your place now. I shouldn’t be more than fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks.”

He arrived at his flat in a few minutes and decided to make them both some lunch. It was the least Lachlan deserved having to interrupt his work and come here like this and Temerin was in no hurry to return to the HyCO office. So much for his feeling yesterday that they were becoming a team. He’d known that they all had some kind of anti-hybrid feelings but it had been a shock to see how quickly and strongly their bigotry made them react.

He made a ham sandwich for himself but the only vegetarian filling he had for Lachlan was salad unless he boiled a couple of eggs to mash up with mayonnaise. He was debating this when the doorbell rang so he decided to just ask Lachlan what he wanted.

He opened the door and kissed Lachlan who smiled and apologised for his muddy work outfit.

“You look good in it,” he said truthfully, enjoying the way the T-shirt and trousers with suspenders were all close-fitting enough to cling to the lean body. He wore his trousers in the current fashion, cropped below the knee, revealing strong pale legs.

Lachlan grinned and shrugged off his jacket. “So what did you need to ask me?”

“Some idiot phoned my boss with a ridiculous story about you being a hybrid who wanted to spy on the HyCO.”

Lachlan froze and went pale, the look on his face unmistakably guilty. “Shit! It’s not like that.”

The breath left Temerin’s lungs and for a moment he couldn’t get any words out. “It’s true?”

“No, not like that. I mean, I am a dragon. I kept wanting to tell you but I put it off, first because you worked for a HyCO then... I don’t know; I was an idiot.”

“So you knew I worked for a HyCO when you met me? It really was all a set-up?”

“No, Jeez, no. I didn’t know anything except that I liked you, I swear it. But after our first night my brother had this sheet of pictures of everyone in this new HyCO that had just been set up and of course I recognised you. He said a lot of people were afraid the HyCO might go on a hybrid-killing spree or something and he and Dad... It wasn’t spying. All I told them was that nothing like that was being planned, that the HyCO wasn’t there to bully or murder us. That’s everything.”

“Then why didn’t you just ask?” He didn’t recognise Lachlan anymore. The relationship he’d thought they’d been sharing didn’t exist. He had been told one lie after another. “You could have told me at the start you were a dragon and I might have been a bit shocked but I would’ve got over it. I really liked you.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I should have. I was a coward.”

Temerin shook his head, still hardly able to believe he’d been so wrong about Lachlan. He’d been really falling for Lachlan, thinking this was the start of something long-term and now that hope was gone. “I want you to leave.”

“I know I’ve hurt you but please give me a second chance. This relationship means everything to me.”

“It can’t,” he said, just wanting Lachlan to go so he could grieve in private, “or you never could have done this to me. Get out. It’s over. We’re over.”

Chapter Thirteen

Lachlan ignored the two phone calls from his brother and the voicemails asking him where the hell he was.

He couldn't believe he'd messed everything up like this. He still didn't know if Temerin would've kept seeing him if Lachlan had said he was a dragon, but at least they might have had a chance. His own cowardice had ruined it. He couldn't get Temerin's betrayed expression out of his head. Lachlan had really hurt him and he hated himself for that.

His mobile rang again and he peeled it off his hand to see who was calling: it was Dad this time. He answered it and Dad said, "Billy called me and said you'd vanished in the middle of a job. What's happened? Are you ill?"

"Temerin found out I'm a dragon."

There was a pause then in a sympathetic tone: "Well, it was only a matter of time."

"I should've told him myself, Dad. I've been so stupid. Someone called his boss at the HyCO and made it sound like the whole relationship was a set-up." Who could have done that? It was only a few hybrid friends of Billy and his family who knew about the relationship and why would they have made the phone call? It didn't help anyone.

"I'm sorry, laddie. I gather he was pretty angry."

"Furious. Not that I blame him. I tried to explain how it had really been but why would he listen to me after he found out I lied to him about who I am?"

"Look, why don't you take the rest of the day off? Maybe go and see your mum. She's better at this relationship stuff than me and perhaps when your man calms down you can sort this out with him."

"Maybe. I'll speak to her tonight. I may as well get back to work or I'll just sit around being depressed. Do you know if Billy's still at Melville Street?"

He got the information and drove off to find his brother who was just getting started on a big job that needed scaffolding set up. They were to the north side of the city with the castle high up on its hill in the distance. He needed to move past his emotions and concentrate on work, but he couldn't. He wanted to do something to make things right with Temerin – offer to tell him anything, apologise over and over again – but it was too late.

"Dad said you were on your way," Billy said. "He told me to go easy on you but you can't have really thought you and that bloke were going to work?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"He hated hybrids and you're a hybrid!"

"He didn't. He was angry because I lied, not because I'm a dragon. And that whole stupid idea of yours to spy on the HyCO didn't exactly help. Who did you talk to about it? Someone phoned up his boss..."

“... Then they did you a favour. Stop being blind to the truth. It could never've worked.”

“It could have.” He bent down and picked up another scaffolding pole. Maybe it still could work. When Temerin had had a few days to cool off Lachlan would phone him and try to get Temerin to meet him to talk. Lachlan knew from his misery now that he loved him and he wasn't giving up.

Chapter Fourteen

There was no point in putting it off, as much as he wanted to, so after the confrontation with Lachlan Temerin returned to the HyCO office. He didn't eat any lunch first as his appetite had fled and he didn't sit about at home because he wanted to put all his focus on his work and ignore the knowledge that the best part of his life right now had never even been real.

Everything his colleagues had said had been right. It wasn't just the humiliation but the fact he'd really wanted it to work with Lachlan. He had really thought that the relationship had a future. Lachlan had made him happy. He had the taste of emptiness in his mouth, a bitterness that filled him.

He walked through the foyer and didn't let himself hesitate before going into the main office. They were all still there, at their various desks and looked round at him with intent expressions.

"It was true," he said to the group. "He lied to me. He's a dragon. He said his family wanted to know if the HyCO was a danger to hybrids. That was all he wanted to know."

There was a silent pause as the others digested this then Ayma got up and walked over to him. She put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it. "I'm sorry. This is horrible for you."

James was up now and pacing the room, red in the face and worked up. "Do you understand now what we're fighting against? They're all liars. You can never trust them."

He wasn't going to buy into James's fanaticism because of one mistake, no matter how much it hurt, but he didn't have the strength to argue. "I know I was deceived."

James stopped and fixed him with a long look. "You're sure you didn't tell him anything he could use against us?"

Temerin didn't think he knew anything confidential to tell apart from the wendigo attack which he knew he hadn't mentioned. Thinking back he remembered that Lachlan had only asked if they were dangerous. Nothing else. "I'm positive."

"You won't see him again?" James checked.

"There doesn't seem any point."

"Then I'll let it go. You were just too trusting. Get back to work and forget you ever met the bastard."

Temerin walked to his desk and sat down. His colleagues were being supportive now but he couldn't forget the way they had acted earlier and their negative attitude to hybrids jarred more than ever. He had some paperwork to do but he didn't seem to have any energy left and, as hard as he tried, he couldn't concentrate on it. He tried to imagine never having met Lachlan but it didn't make him feel any better.

* * *

A police officer came into the office mid-afternoon to speak to James. They talked privately for a few minutes then the officer left. Temerin couldn't have said he cared what it was about right now, using all

his energy to not think about Lachlan.

James came back into the main room with a hard look in his eyes and spoke to them as a group. “The police got fingerprints off the rock that was thrown through the window and spoke to the man responsible.”

“And what did they do?” Hamish asked from his desk chair.

“He made up some story and the judge let him go.”

“I’m sure it was conditional on him not causing more trouble,” Ayma said in the calming tone she used with James when he got like this. “He’d likely be put in prison if he came near us again, so he’s not a threat.”

“Aye,” Temerin agreed. “That’s good news.”

“Good news!” James yelled, gripping the back of a chair as if he wanted to throw it. “He got away with it. He attacked us and he wasn’t punished. Not by them anyway.”

“You can’t go after him,” Temerin said.

“Yes, I can.”

He tried to appeal to make James look at the situation logically. “If you break the law you’ll destroy the HyCO. If you end up being arrested the police and the army will never trust us again.”

“I think you’re wrong. You don’t know how many of those officers understand how dangerous hybrids are. It’s time to show them the consequences of their violence.”

Temerin and Ayma tried to stop him leaving but he wouldn’t listen to them and, as he drove away, Temerin could only wonder what trouble he would cause for them all this time. This was getting out of control.

Chapter Fifteen

Lachlan went to the pub with his brother after work. He seldom socialised with Billy, as they usually just ended up arguing, but he needed to stop going over and over in his head the argument with Temerin; to stop constantly remembering the look on his face when he'd realised Lachlan lied to him.

He downed half a bottle of beer without pause, sitting on a bench in a booth with Billy and several of his brother's friends. The place was popular with werewolves and dragons, the hybrids who sometimes got a cold welcome elsewhere. Temerin, a member of a HyCO, wouldn't have been welcome here at all. Shit, why couldn't he stop thinking about Temerin for even a minute? It was his own fault everything had been ruined. So what was he going to do to put it right? Was it even possible at this late stage to put it right?

A couple more people arrived and greeted Billy so Lachlan automatically moved up to the edge of the bench to give them room to sit down.

"I know you," one of the men said to Lachlan and he recognised the man as someone who'd been in Billy's year at school. "You're the brother who dates hybrid haters."

Everyone at the table, and a few at nearby tables, turned to stare at him with furrowed brows and wide eyes.

Lachlan held himself still and met the man's eyes. "He's in a HyCO but he doesn't hate anyone."

"Aye, sure, they don't hate us: they just beat up hybrid kids for fun."

There were some angry mutters at this and Lachlan was aware of the complete lack of support, as always, from Billy, who was sitting the other side of the table with a look that said Lachlan was getting exactly what he deserved.

"Temerin didn't beat anyone up. Things went wrong in that fight and he would be the first to say so and to apologise for it. He's a good person."

"None of the HyCO are good people – it's against the job description," Billy's friend said, leaning across the table to glare down at him. "They're our enemies."

"I don't have any enemies," Lachlan said to him, forcing his voice to sound calm.

"Aye, you have," the man said, lip curled. "If you're on the side of the people who want us dead or back in cages then you're making enemies of every one of us."

"Temerin isn't like that," Lachlan exclaimed and half stood up, but he was boxed in and suddenly it was suffocating. The other couple of people on the bench got up to let him out, expressions unfriendly. He slid to the other side of the bench and stood to face Billy's friend. "If you're looking for a fight then, fine, I'll fight you but I'm not an enemy to my own people just because I don't want to start a war with the local HyCO." He stepped up nose-to-nose with the man. "So are you going to fight me or not?"

The man looked away. "Forget it."

Lachlan walked out of the pub, reeling from the encounter. He'd never realised that his relationship with Temerin might make hybrids think he was against them. He was a dragon, for goodness' sakes! The

reaction in the pub made it sink in for the first time just how strong the feeling was against the HyCO. The groups had caused so much trouble in the past that no one would believe this one might be different. It seemed certain that there would be a show-down between the HyCO and local hybrids and people on both sides, including his brother or Temerin, could be hurt or killed.

Chapter Sixteen

James returned to the HyCO within a couple of hours, with a black eye and a dark, pleased look in his eyes that made Temerin want to shake him.

“What did you do?” he demanded.

James took off his jacket, hung it up and walked over to the kettle, flicking the switch on. “Well, he certainly won’t be in a fit state to throw any more stones through our windows.”

“How badly was he hurt?” Ayma asked, eyes cold. “Did you put him in hospital?”

“Not quite. He’ll recover.” James turned to Hamish, saying to him, “Come on, we have a police case to work on.”

Hamish nodded, not looking at the others, and they left the building.

“That stupid fool,” Ayma said, tapping her fingernails on the desk in front of her.

“I thought between the two of us we could keep him out of trouble, but he just wouldn’t listen.”

“He’s got his revenge now so that should calm him down for a while. I just hope it doesn’t back-fire on the rest of us.”

“And what happens when he gets riled up again?”

She didn’t have an answer to this and neither did he.

* * *

No one showed up to arrest James and he and Hamish returned from whatever they had been doing without further problems, so it looked as if the fighting was over for now. However, it made Temerin realise just how destructive James’s hatred was and that he himself couldn’t remain in the HyCO long-term. He wanted to make sure the wendigo situation was resolved but after that he would resign and go back to teaching. He knew the decision would annoy his mother but he had to follow his conscience in this and he wasn’t happy to be a part of an organisation that wanted to harm others.

He decided something else as well that afternoon. He still cared a lot about Lachlan and was beginning to understand why Lachlan hadn’t felt able to tell him he was a dragon. After all, he hadn’t immediately told Lachlan about being in the HyCO and, knowing what people thought of the organisation, it wasn’t surprising that Lachlan had thought he might be prejudiced. Now that he’d had time to put things in perspective he believed that Lachlan had just wanted to reassure other hybrids about the HyCO and had never been spying on him. Lachlan was far too open to have lied to him and everything he had said when Temerin confronted him made sense. Temerin had just been too hurt at the time to listen.

He didn’t even know anything about dragons as a species, but it didn’t matter to him that Lachlan was a hybrid and what they’d had together meant a lot to him. He decided to call Lachlan tonight and see if

there was any way they could get back together. He wasn't sure how Lachlan felt but his own feelings were too strong to let him walk away from this.

Temerin had an evening patrol with Ayma where they broke up a pub brawl, actually resolving things instead of making them ten times worse, so that was an achievement.

He had just got home when his mobile rang. He answered it and heard the familiar cadence of Lachlan's voice.

"I know I messed things up," Lachlan said, "but would you meet me so we can talk?"

"Aye," he said, a smile ghosting his lips. "Okay."

Chapter Seventeen

Lachlan raced about his flat, tidying up, straightening things even when there was nothing left to straighten. It was that or pace about, waiting for Temerin. He'd half expected him to refuse to see Lachlan so his immediate agreement was a relief, but Lachlan didn't know what else he could say to explain not telling Temerin that he was a dragon. He'd been scared. He still was: he wanted to make things right so badly but everything seemed to be getting in their way; everyone seemed to be against them being together.

The doorbell rang and he hurried to answer it. He and Temerin stared at each other then he backed away to let him come in. "Do you want something to drink?" he asked then mentally cursed himself for making it sound as if this was a date.

"No thanks."

"Please sit down." Now he was being too formal and sounding like an idiot.

Temerin sat on the sofa and Lachlan took the chair opposite, coffee table a barrier between them.

Lachlan took a deep breath. "I'm really sorry about not telling you I'm a dragon. It was stupid. I swear I meant to. The first night I never even thought about it then I found out you were in the HyCO and I didn't know if you'd mind or not, and the longer I put it off the more impossible it was."

"I think I can understand that."

Huh? This stopped Lachlan, mid-grovel.

"The HyCO has had some problems: graffiti and a brick thrown through our window. James, my boss, found out today that the person who threw the brick hadn't been charged and he ran off alone and got into a fight with him. I don't know how bad it was but I'm realising that you were right all along to fear the HyCO being trouble and I was a fool to ever join."

"What will you do?"

"Leave." Lachlan barely had time to sigh with relief at the words that would solve all their problems when Temerin continued, "But I can't quit just yet. There's a case that I can't leave in the middle of, but as soon as I know it's finished I'll resign."

"You'll go back to teaching?"

"Aye, if I can."

Lachlan cleared his throat and asked, "Where does this leave us? I know I should've been honest with you about myself and I swear I'll never lie again. Do you still want to be with me?"

"Yes, I do. I really do."

Just like that, the tension left Lachlan and he smiled for the first time since the break-up, almost unable to believe that he had a second chance, that they were back together again. They both got to their feet and, of course, the stupid coffee table was in the way, but it only took a few seconds to get round it. They hugged, both holding on tightly as if they expected something to try and pull them apart, and he

bloody well wasn't going to let that happen. He leaned upwards and kissed Temerin and it was just as good as it had always been between them.

"Can I see your dragon form?" Temerin asked, expression uncertain as if he wasn't sure if this was a good idea or not.

"Okay." It was past the time for hiding who he was. Lachlan pulled his T-shirt over his head and began to unbutton his jeans, explaining. "It's easier naked."

Once he was undressed he changed, a layer of mottled yellow and green scale growing over his human skin. His vision altered, making him dizzy for a second, as his eyes became a reptilian red with a vertical slash of pupil and his nose would flatten and almost disappear beneath a new layer of skin. He looked like what he was: a different species.

Temerin just stared, frowning, for ages then put out a hand, hesitantly touching Lachlan's altered chest. He waited a few minutes for Temerin to grow used to seeing him like this then changed back to human shape, the dry layer of used scales falling from his body. He picked off a few lingering bits of scaly skin and only then did he take in Temerin's expression. "What? It's not that bad, is it?"

"No, of course not." Temerin spoke quickly and he still looked a bit shocked.

Lachlan grabbed his clothes and began to pull them back on. "Why did you call me if you felt like that about it?"

"I don't. I want to get to know the dragon part of you. I mean... I really like you." Temerin swallowed and said with emphasis, "A lot."

Wow, that almost sounded like Temerin-speak for *I love you*. He found himself grinning, hurt and anger vanishing. "Me too."

Chapter Eighteen

Temerin had made love to a dragon. To Lachlan, he amended, smiling to himself. He couldn't deny that it had shocked him seeing Lachlan's dragon shape but not because it offended or disgusted him; just because it was so alien. There was a side to Lachlan he didn't know anything about, didn't understand at all. But he could learn. He wanted to. He wasn't going to let anything split them up this time.

It only hit him as he parked behind the office that he couldn't tell anyone at the HyCO about this. James would fire him and Temerin couldn't leave without knowing that the wendigo wasn't still in or around Invercade killing people. He had wanted to tell Lachlan about the case – something the HyCO was involved in that he was actually proud of – but the army had managed to keep the situation a secret for the moment. Neither the army nor police wanted civilians finding out and panicking; if a load of people fled the city and a wendigo pack was nearby there could be thousands more deaths. The wendigo might be long gone by now but, until he was sure, Temerin would stay at the HyCO.

He walked into the office and Hamish stood up. “Ready to go?”

He blinked. “What? Where?”

“Gun practise, remember?”

“Right.” He glanced over at Ayma, sitting at her desk, who looked up and nodded to him. “Where's James?”

Hamish shrugged. “I don't know. He'll show up.”

Yes, but what trouble was he getting into in the meantime? The man was like an unexploded bomb in their midst.

* * *

Temerin's aim was improving. If he used both hands to hold the gun and aimed carefully he could hit the target to within a few inches of where he intended. Or no more than a foot out anyway.

As he began to reload, Hamish, who had just answered his phone, nudged his arm. Temerin took off his ear defenders and took in his colleague's expression. “What's he done now?”

“It's not James. It's the wendigo. It's back.”

He unloaded his gun and put it in the holster he wore, carrying a case of bullets separately. He had been half waiting for this moment – he was sure they all had – and he was better prepared. They could do this.

They left and drove as fast as possible to Invercade, several trucks of soldiers just behind them. The killings had just been reported to the police – several dozen deaths – and someone had immediately phoned the HyCO. The new string of killings had occurred in and around an industrial estate on the east side of Invercade, miles from where the last corpse had been found. Temerin wondered if there were

other dead bodies between the two areas that just hadn't been found yet.

He parked his car as close as possible to a taped off area which already had a number of police cars and vans and about twenty officers. He and Hamish joined James and Ayma and the soldiers joined the rest of the crowd. He reloaded his gun, made sure the safety was on and put it back in the holster.

An army officer – Major General Carlisle – shouted for quiet and, once again, divided them into teams. There would be police stationed at the outskirts of the search area, ready to catch the wendigo if it saw them and ran. They had to catch it this time, he said, or the number of casualties would steeply rise.

Temerin found himself put with Ayma and four others, one army sergeant and three police officers. They headed forward, passing the police barrier and the forensics people who were examining the bodies.

“How could anyone do that?” Ayma asked in a low voice as they walked by the first of the corpses.

Temerin had never seen anything so horrific in his life. The dead bodies looked as if they couldn't have ever been people they were ripped apart so much, limbs torn away, internal organs in a bloody heap amid shredded skin.

“Wendigos aren't people,” the army officer said. “They're monsters. We're just meat to them. So if we find one, don't hesitate to shoot or it could cost you or one of us our lives.”

“Understood,” he said. After all he had seen of the wendigos' behaviour he couldn't think of them as people and if he got the chance to kill one and stop the slaughter, he would.

Beside him, Ayma got her gun out of the holster. She kept it aimed at the ground but her expression became harder than usual and more focused.

He kept his own eyes peeled as they headed past the carnage and into an industrial warehouse.

“You two, watch our backs,” the army officer said to him and Ayma then led them in a slow circuit, checking everywhere someone could hide: behind stacked up boxes and in offices. Nothing.

They repeated the procedure in two more buildings, Temerin's heart pounding every time they couldn't see what was around a corner or door. So far the only people they had found were more ripped-apart corpses, the constant odour of death and view of those desecrated bodies making him have to fight off the need to gag. The murders meant that the creature had come this way so it must be close by. He gripped his gun firmly, the memory of how off-target his shots had been at practise earlier no longer amusing, and scanned the warehouse.

He headed around a forklift truck and a man appeared from the shadows and grabbed one of the police officers in their group. In seconds he had ripped her head from her body and tossed her aside, the two parts of her body landing on the floor and spewing blood.

The man ran forward without pause and there was old blood as well as new on his hands and his clothes. He grabbed Ayma's arm and Temerin lifted his gun but the army officer was quicker, firing repeatedly. The man – the wendigo – half-collapsed, letting go of Ayma who backed away. The wendigo tried to rise but blood was spreading over his torso and he fell backwards and stilled.

Ayma crouched down and hesitantly put her hand out. Temerin didn't understand what she was doing as she touched the wendigo's neck until she said, “It's dead.”

Temerin stared down at the wendigo, not able to take in what had just happened. In barely any time two people were dead and one of them was a wendigo but he looked human. There had been blood on

him, a lot of blood, but he looked like any other person and the speed at which he had killed was unbelievable.

The army officer – he had saved all their lives and Temerin didn't even know his name – got out a walkie-talkie and contacted someone to let them know what had happened.

It was over.

Chapter Nineteen

“When can you leave the HyCO?” Lachlan asked as soon as he was inside Temerin’s flat. “You said there was something you needed to finish first but when will that be done?”

“What’s happened?” Temerin asked.

Lachlan wondered where to start. His brother had been in a state all day, yelling at Lachlan, and even Mum and Dad were worried. His mum just didn’t want him getting hurt but Billy was furious that he was dating Temerin again. “My brother’s friends found out that your boss beat up another hybrid, the father of the boy already in hospital.”

“The father was the one who threw a brick through our window. We tried to stop James going after him but we couldn’t. How badly is the man hurt?”

“He doesn’t have any broken limbs but I gather he’s black and blue.”

“I’m sorry but, in answer to your first question, the case I needed to stay for is over, so I guess I can leave now and we can forget about HyCOs and fights between species’.”

Lachlan hugged him, grinning like an idiot and never wanting to stop. “Seriously? You’ll quit now?”

“Aye. I can tell you the truth now it’s over, although I still need to ask you not to tell anyone else. It’s nothing to do with any of the anti-hybrid issues.” When Lachlan nodded Temerin went on, “There was a wendigo.”

“Shit! Here?”

“Aye. It killed someone outside Invercade then headed into the city. We’ve been working with the army and police, trying to track it down. We found him – it – yesterday and killed it.”

“What was it like?” Lachlan could hardly believe it: he had grown up on tales of how destructive the wendigos were and how difficult to kill.

“It ripped someone apart right in front of me. It just grabbed her and killed her without hesitation. It was only luck that it wasn’t me dead.”

Lachlan hugged him again, going cold at the thought that his lover had been in so much danger. “Thank the spirits it’s over.” He kissed Temerin then began to unbutton his shirt, suddenly needing more than anything to be close to him.

“It’s okay.” Temerin kissed him back, one hand beneath his T-shirt against his back. “We don’t have to worry about anything anymore.”

They made love slowly, savouring the feel and taste of each other and the fact that they were both alive and free. Later, when the night had settled in and they lay in Temerin’s bed with only a lamp illuminating the room, they began to talk about their families and past.

“Mum was always anti-hybrids,” Temerin told him. “I don’t know if it was what she was brought up believing or if she got that idea somehow. She never said all that much about it, just never had any hybrid friends and Dad never brought any hybrids to the house. I was involved with a vampire when I

was a teenager and when I told her she was so angry. I can't even describe what she was like."

"She must be really fanatical if she hates vampires."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know how a lot of humans dislike werewolves and dragons but most people are fine with dragons and sensors?"

"Really?" Temerin looked surprised.

"I thought everyone knew about that. Vampires and sensors were born in society so humans see them as a lot less alien than us. We were created in laboratories, an experiment in creating soldiers until the media found out about us and there was a public outcry. After that we were free but we still made a lot of people uneasy. You didn't know any of this, did you?"

"No."

Lachlan ran a hand over his lover's chest. "What happened to the vampire? The one you dated?"

"I agreed to stop seeing him or I honestly think Mum would've disowned me."

"Poor bloke."

"I wasn't happy about it either – if I hadn't been such a coward then I probably wouldn't have let her talk me into joining the HyCO in the first place and we could have met and not had any of these problems."

"It doesn't matter now," he said. "We've got a second chance with no more HyCO and we can move forward."

"The sad thing is that the group could have really done some good. It never should have been about race wars. That was mainly down to James, our leader. His brother was killed by a vampire serial killer and I think he wants every hybrid to pay for the crime."

"I suppose I can see how he could feel like that." As much of a pain in the ass as Billy was, Lachlan would be devastated to lose him. He didn't know how something like that would change him, perhaps make him bitter. Another thought occurred to him: "So, that vampire you dated. Your mum's not likely to be any happier about you dating me than him?"

"I'm not a teenager any more and..." Temerin took a deep breath. "... I love you. If she can't accept it then that's her choice."

"I feel the same about you." Nothing was in their way anymore – they could relax and be happy together. After the tension of the last few weeks it seemed like a miracle. Lachlan leaned down for a slow, deep kiss. "Ready for round two?"

Chapter Twenty

“This is my letter of resignation.” Temerin held out the envelope to James who got to his feet and shook his head, not taking it. They were in the HyCO office and Hamish was off interviewing someone for the theft case while Ayma was out of earshot making herself a drink at the back of the room.

“You can’t go.”

“I think we both know that we want very different things from the HyCO. I never would’ve joined if I’d known you had such a vendetta against all hybrids.”

James’s cheeks reddened and his voice got louder. “So you want to just take the easy way out and walk away? I thought more of you than that.”

“And I trusted you to want to do some good, not just use your power as leader to start a fight with the local hybrids. I’m not interested in helping you with that.”

“What about the wendigoes? Do you want to make friends with them too?”

Temerin kept control of his temper, not letting James get him into a yelling match. “No, of course not. I wouldn’t have left until the wendigo was dead and now it is.”

“There’s another one.”

He went still, taking this in. “Another wendigo?”

“Aye. The police phoned to say their forensic tests showed two sets of wendigo DNA. There’s another one still out there. So will you stay or turn and run?”

He had no choice but he knew this would be as much of a blow to Lachlan as it was to him. Just as they’d thought they could relax and move forward with their relationship. James was still waiting for an answer so he said, “I’ll stay until this one is dead.”

* * *

He had left for gun practise after talking to James, the resignation letter left on his desk. As soon as he was in the car he called Lachlan, hating himself for putting Lachlan in the middle again. Lachlan swore when he heard the news.

“I’m really sorry,” Temerin said. “I wanted it to be over for both our sakes. Hopefully it will be. The army are out scouring the whole of Invercade for sign of the second wendigo. I’ve already told James I’m only staying until the wendigo is dead. It could be any time.”

“Promise me you’ll do everything you can to protect yourself.”

He closed his eyes, concentrating on the sound of Lachlan’s voice. “I promise.”

“Don’t trust James. I asked Billy if his friends knew anything about your boss and someone just called him back. James didn’t tell you the truth about his brother.”

Temerin listened to the new information with growing anger. He had had enough of being lied to and manipulated by James. When he got back to the HyCO he confronted his boss in the office in front of Hamish and Ayma.

“You’ve been telling us from the start that you had a reason to hate hybrids,” he said, “that a vampire killed your brother in cold blood.”

James stood and glared at him. “She did.”

“She wasn’t the brutal serial killer you made her out to be. Your brother and five other men raped and killed her daughter.”

Ayma breathed in sharply and even Hamish looked taken aback, asking, “Is that true?”

“No, of course not. She made up some story but no one believed her. Hybrids always lie.”

“Lie about being raped? Another girl accused your brother of the same thing, didn’t she?”

“I told you,” James yelled, his temper not making him any more convincing. “They’re liars. I don’t believe a word that comes out of their mouths.”

“And from now on,” Temerin said, “I won’t believe a word that comes out of yours.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Lachlan spent the rest of the morning worrying about Temerin. He'd only been able to bear the thought of Temerin going against a wendigo because he thought it was over and his lover was safe. But now there was another wendigo and it could slaughter hundreds. It could kill Temerin.

He wanted to be there with his lover, to help protect him, but there was nothing he could do and he couldn't stand that, his own job seeming meaningless in comparison.

"Are you doing any work today or not?" Billy snapped at him, grabbing new roof tiles out of the van. "It's that HyCO bloke you're thinking about, isn't it?"

"Jeez, can't you just leave me alone for one sodding day?"

"I can't believe you were stupid enough to get back together with him."

In that moment something clicked into place in his mind and he turned his head to stare at his brother. "It was you who phoned Temerin's boss and said I was a hybrid."

Billy took a step backwards then raised his chin. "I was trying to help you and make you see sense, but there's just no point, is there?"

"No, there's not." He took a step forward and Billy backed away again. Lachlan unclenched his fists. "I love him."

"More fool you."

Lachlan just looked at him until Billy dropped his gaze and moved away. They continued working for the rest of the day in almost total silence, Lachlan constantly thinking about the pain Billy had caused and what was happening with Temerin.

He moved automatically through the motions of disassembling two ladders and putting them away, the work a long job that they would return to the next day.

Before he could leave Billy turned to him and looked him in the eye for the first time since their argument. "There's a war and you need to decide which side you're on – your family's or your new boyfriend's."

He sighed, the hybrid-versus-HyCO dispute seeming far less important when compared with a wendigo going about butchering people. "*Decide which side I'm on* – it's cliché city with you, isn't it? And no one's fighting anyone."

"You think our people are happy that the HyCO thinks it can control us and pick on whoever they like? All the hybrid races have been having meetings – if you hadn't been so caught up with your bloodthirsty lover you'd know about it. We've got to put a stop to them."

"What the hell does *put a stop to them* mean?"

"It's a cliché," Billy said with a nasty smile, "but an appropriate one."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Temerin dropped by to see his family after work, feeling guilty at having not visited them for a couple of weeks. Between the job and being with Lachlan the time had got away from him. His mother had a pinched look that didn't bode well as she opened the door and he followed her through to the sitting room. She didn't sit down so he didn't either.

"James phoned me and said you tried to resign this morning," she said. "What were you thinking of throwing away your big chance like that?"

He gave a bitter laugh. "My big chance or yours? I only joined the HyCO because it was what you wanted and because I thought James was a decent man, but all he wants is to fight hybrids in some utterly pointless vendetta."

"I thought you had more sense than that." Other people got louder when they were angry but his mum grew quieter. "Hybrids need to be stopped."

Not this rubbish. He'd heard more than enough from James. "Stopped from what? The majority of hybrids just want to live their lives in peace like anyone else."

"Is this what you dragon boyfriend said? James told me all about him too."

"I already told you and Dad I was seeing someone and James can't have told you very much, unless it was another pack of lies, since he's never met Lachlan."

"Temerin, I'm trying to protect you," she insisted and he knew she believed it but he was beginning to see how dangerous that kind of prejudice was. It had almost destroyed his happiness and had caused an unnecessary rift between the HyCO and hybrid community.

"Lachlan is the last person I need to be protected from. If you'd just meet him..."

"No." Her face grew cold again, an expression he had always dreaded as a child, but he wasn't a boy anymore so he refused to be intimidated. "A hybrid will never set foot in my house and as long as you're seeing him, you're not welcome either. You have to give him up right now for everyone's sake."

"No," he said and he didn't have any doubts about his answer. He knew what he wanted. "I don't want to be at odds with you but I love Lachlan and I want to be with him permanently. You can get in touch any time if you're willing to get to know him."

"Then I'll never see you again."

"That's up to you." He walked out of the house.

* * *

"Did anything happen? Is the wendigo dead?" Lachlan asked the second he arrived at the flat. He shook his head. "No sign of it yet."

“Shit.” Lachlan buried his head against Temerin’s shoulder, arms around him, breath warm against his neck. “This waiting around is crap.”

“Aye,” he agreed.

“Did you confront your boss about his brother?”

“Yes. I said it in front of the others so they can decide for themselves whether to keep working for him. He said it was all lies but I don’t think even he believed that.”

“Things are building up with the different hybrid groups. Apparently there’ve been meetings held about the HyCO. Billy wouldn’t tell me what they’re planning but... Hell, is there any way I can convince you to leave now?”

He thought about how wonderful it would be to just walk away from the whole mess. Yesterday he’d thought he could do just that. He couldn’t leave while another wendigo was on the loose, though. He’d never be able to live with that. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I know I probably won’t be the one who kills the wendigo but maybe I can make some difference. The more of us search for it, the less innocent people it can kill.”

“Yeah, I understand.”

Lachlan looked at him with raw pain in his eyes and Temerin kissed him again and again until it was replaced by something better.

Two hours later Temerin got a phone call from James that the army had found signs – meaning another pile of dead bodies – of the second wendigo. It was time to track the creature down and kill it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

It was just after eleven-thirty at night and as cold as if it had been winter, not the middle of summer. It was beginning to look as if the population of an entire housing estate had been butchered and there was no sign yet of the second wendigo.

Temerin was with the same group he had been put with the day before yesterday, with an extra person added to replace the policeman who had been killed. He made sure he got their names this time. It only seemed right when they were putting their lives in each other's hands and that still might not be enough to save them. The army bloke who killed the last wendigo was Lieutenant Kevin Pellman. The police officers he already knew were PC Adrian McInnis and Detective Sergeant Sally Wilson and the new person was PC Casmir Gorski. That just left Ayma who looked tired and grim but held onto her gun with a determination that matched his, not to be standing by helplessly the next time they saw a wendigo.

For the first few minutes they were together PC McInnis had kept up a nervous flow of chatter, then he was told to shut up before he got them all killed by DS Wilson. After that they all only spoke when they had to, checking house after house, tension building. After two hours they had achieved nothing more than a body count and with some of the partially-eaten killings it was difficult to be sure that was accurate.

The houses had no less hiding places than the woods had so they all had their guns out and safeties off. Temerin thought he heard a noise from the kitchen but he wasn't sure so he didn't alert the others, who were still in the front rooms. He carefully headed through the hallway, gun raised, and entered the kitchen. At first he saw nothing then a movement made him jump, heart pounding, and turn, only to find a small ginger cat watching him from beside a food bowl. He switched the safety on his gun and picked up the animal. The wendigoes had slaughtered a family of four here but left the cat alive? The animal nestled in his arms and he made a mental note to call an animal sanctuary to find homes for any pets left alive. For now, though, the cat was safer outside so he opened the backdoor and watched the animal run off.

There was a shed at the back of the garden and he was going to check it but it was dark out here, lit only by a full moon overhead, so he decided not to take any risks and get back-up. He could hear the faint drum-beat from music being played somewhere nearby. It reminded him of his first job in the HyCO, the drunk teenagers and vampires, fighting with the faint sound of pub music in the background. That job had ended badly. He was jolted from his thoughts by a burst of sound in the distance. He strained to hear then the music got louder, as if a door had been opened somewhere at the end of the street, and there were audible shouts and screams. He ran through the kitchen and hallway, yelling to the others to follow him and raced through the front door towards the noise.

He came to a halt at the pub where the chaotic babble of noise was coming from. People were pushing past each other to get out of the building and run away in different directions. Several police and army officers had got here ahead of them and were yelling for order, somehow getting a dozen or so people to stand still and quieten down.

“She's ripping people apart,” a teenager was saying in a shaky, high-pitched tone as he moved closer.

“We have guns,” a police officer yelled to the crowd. “You’ll be safest staying with us.”

More officers, including Temerin’s team, were arriving so he followed a small group inside, leaving the new arrivals to protect the civilians. A couple of people headed to the front door while he and two uniformed army officers walked through a courtyard to the back so the wendigo couldn’t escape. Temerin walked inside through the door and found himself in a kitchen. They quickly checked it then kept going into a long dark hallway. He couldn’t see a light switch but there was enough light from the kitchen to see, although the shadows made him nervous. There were doors on either side just ahead and he raised his gun towards one while one of the officers kicked open the door. It was a toilet, clearly empty, so they did the same thing with the next door. This turned out to be a storage room, dark and full of boxes someone could hide behind. He and an officer kept their guns trained on the room while the other officer struggled to find a light switch, finally getting the room illuminated. If the wendigo had seen them coming this would be a good place to hide. Temerin kept waiting for an attack as they checked behind piled up boxes but there was no one. They left and continued up the corridor to the end doors.

As soon as they opened the double-doors his ears were assaulted by music so loud it was impossible to hear anything else. The pub lighting was bright in the central part of the room but low around the edges, where most of the tables were, leaving a lot of shadowy areas. There were around thirty dead bodies, ripped apart and mauled even in the short time the wendigo had been here, blood and flesh all over the floor and the odour of death in the air.

Temerin couldn’t see the wendigo but it had to be close by. He had his gun held in front of him but aimed at the ground so it wouldn’t harm anyone if his arm was jostled. There were five officers, including him, but he assumed more were just behind them. It looked as if they were already too late as there was still no sign of the wendigo. Perhaps the creature had escaped before they arrived. He didn’t want to accept the thought of waiting around for another round of murders and another hunt.

Temerin walked from one side of the room to another, checking every dark space, then he noticed another door. He glanced behind him and managed to get the attention of a police officer, gesturing to the door. She nodded, grabbed the arm of someone else and headed towards him. He pushed the door open to find carpeted stairs ahead of him, a light already on. He walked up them one step at a time, gun raised.

On the second floor he saw rooms with numbers on the doors and realised the pub must have locked bedrooms for guests to stay in. The two officers arrived behind him and he said quietly to the woman, “We’ll need a master key to get into the rooms.”

She unzipped her coat pocket and took out a small metal tool. “I can get us into them.”

She was still speaking when he caught a flash of movement from a bend in the corridor.

It happened like the last time. One moment there was nothing and the next the female officer was being ripped apart. The creature was lunging for him when Temerin lifted his gun and fired at the same time as the others and the wendigo collapsed.

Even with the music still loud up here, it felt quiet. There were people dead and dying and Temerin couldn’t take his eyes off the slender woman who had been the cause of it all. She was covered in blood but she looked so harmless.

“Is it dead?” the army officer asked.

He could see bullet wounds through the wendigo’s skull, heart and across her torso so she had to be

but he bent down to check for a heartbeat just the same. "She's dead," he said.

It was finally finished.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“My brother’s on his way here now with about fifty hybrids and they’re out for blood.”

It was the morning after the wendigo was killed. Lachlan had been waiting when Temerin got home and grabbed him in a bear hug, muttering something about never letting him out of his sight again. They made love then, too soon, it was time to start another day so Temerin wrote out a fresh resignation letter and headed to the office.

He had been there less than half an hour, everyone so exhausted and in such a state of shock that his intention to leave the group that day made no impact. He was saying goodbye to Ayma when Lachlan raced inside with his announcement of yet more trouble. They had all come out into the foyer when he arrived, James glaring because a dragon had dared to set foot in his building. All Temerin could think was that he refused to die just because James was a prejudiced thug who antagonised everyone.

“Get your guns,” James told the group.

“No fucking way!” Lachlan exclaimed, standing barring the front door.

“Really?” Temerin asked James simultaneously. “That’s your response? No. You started this fight and it’s got nothing to do with the rest of us. I’m not going to kill Lachlan’s family and friends because of the vendetta your bigotry started. We killed a wendigo and I’m done with the group now.”

“We can’t let him face them alone,” Hamish said, hovering by the internal door and for once not looking as if he relished the idea of a fight.

“I’m phoning the police to deal with it,” Ayma said, opening her mobile.

James vanished into the office area, returning holding his pistol as Ayma told the police what was going on. She eyed it and calmly told the police her boss was acting like a lunatic and had a gun.

“I’m not letting you kill my brother,” Lachlan told him, still blocking the way out.

James raised his gun, aiming it at Lachlan and Temerin lunged forward and grabbed his arm. James pushed him away and Temerin saw people pouring in through the door. Lachlan tried to tell them not to do this before but was being shoved aside then Temerin lost sight of his lover in the crowd.

Someone punched him and Temerin lifted his arms to defend himself, pushing the man back. “This isn’t going to do any good,” he yelled. “We’re not your enemies. There’s no need to turn on each other.”

No one listened to him and the next moment he realised he could smell smoke from somewhere nearby. What the hell had they done?

He pushed forward, trying to find Lachlan, and a blow to the face nearly knocked him out. He returned the punch, feeling blood pouring down his nose. A shot sounded, loud like a crack of thunder, behind him and the room went still before the fighting became even more frenzied. Two more shots rang out.

Temerin heard police sirens outside. The air was cloudy and he coughed convulsively for a moment. Smoke was pouring in from the office area – it looked as if someone had started a fire in there. He couldn’t see his lover anywhere.

From outside came an amplified voice: "This is the police. Come outside now holding your hands in the air."

People began to obey but Temerin wasn't going anywhere without Lachlan. He moved from one person to the next, searching. The crowd began to thin and there he was, gaze meeting Temerin's with the same relief he felt. Lachlan had the beginnings of a black eye but otherwise looked unharmed. They grabbed hold of each other and got out of the burning building.

* * *

7 Months Later

Temerin shook Ayma's hand and she smiled at them both and said, "Good luck."

Lachlan's family were there too, even Billy who still refused to speak to Temerin and hadn't had much contact with Lachlan since the fight. James and two hybrids were dead and the HyCO building had been burned to the ground. Hamish had been in hospital for a while but Temerin, Ayma and Lachlan had got out of the fight with only bruises. Billy and a few of the hybrids were on suspended sentences but no one gone to jail. With no evidence to the contrary, the police had concluded that James had killed his killer. The HyCO had gone as if it had never existed and Temerin thought that that was for the best.

A car pulled up in front of Temerin's flat and his father got out. His mother wasn't there. She hadn't spoken to him since he'd told her he wasn't giving up Lachlan.

Temerin hugged his dad, grateful to have the support of one of his parents. He pulled back but his father gripped his arms and said with feeling, "Call me if you ever need anything. Anything at all."

"I will."

He said goodbye and he and Lachlan exchanged grins as they got into Lachlan's new lorry, the one he would be using to start his own roofing business. Temerin had got a teaching job on the Black Isle and he and Lachlan were moving there and buying a house together.

"Ready to go?" Lachlan asked, turning the key in the ignition.

Was he ready to leave his past behind and start a new life with the man he loved? "Definitely."