

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



NATHALIE
GRAY

DAMNATION

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DamNATION

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DAMNATION

Nathalie Gray

Chapter One

Her warm skin felt like that of a ripe peach when his fangs punctured it. Helios clamped his mouth over the wound when the initial gush of arterial blood flowed over the blade of his tongue, titillated its surface, contracted its muscles to release saliva, the sweet taste and exhilarating sensations an intoxicating cocktail.

Using utmost gentleness, he extended the fingers he had around her nape and angled her chin slightly higher. As a lover would, she moaned against his shoulder when Helios slid his free hand down the small of her back and arched her into him so their bodies would fit. Not perfectly but close. None of them ever fit perfectly. They were human after all. And he was not.

Helios sucked the oxygen-rich blood in long, burning draws, followed the inherent rhythm of her heart, which he could feel against his breast, accentuated the pressure in her back as he felt her slumping against his belly and when she exhaled a long whisper of a breath, he closed his eyes and waited. She did not take long. He pulled away before her blood turned sour and smoothing her hair back from her face, he lowered her gently to the cold ground.

He was already standing by the time the last ribbon of her life rose in the glacial air.

* * * * *

“Humanity created us to serve, protect and to obey them. To wage their greedy wars, work in their poisonous mines. They made us pleasing to the eye so their children would not have nightmares, tall and strong and smart so we would adapt to environments never meant to sustain life. They keep us under their heels by hoarding the enzyme on which we feed, ensuring we remain docile, obedient, yet poison it so we do not become a nuisance. They played god, tampered with our genes so we would conveniently die in our prime. Humanity manufactured the ideal servant, the model soldier and worker. They think they have created the perfect subspecies. Disposable. Resilient. But they made a mistake... They gave us fangs!”

A loud cheer greeted Helios’ speech. Sibilants hissed and fricatives whistled through his fangs. Having recently fed, he felt buoyed, sharp. But not afire as he would have expected after such a heated address. Everyone else seemed to be.

He nodded to his supporters—some of them human sympathizers but most fellow vampires—and jumped from his perch on a cargo container along one of London’s abandoned docks. His black greatcoat fretted when he landed twenty feet below. A shock of pale yellow hair fell across his eyes. Another of humankind’s “gifts”, the unnatural color of his kind’s blond hair and eyes—electric blue—so they would never

mistake a vampire for one of theirs. How he loathed them, these monkeys who would be gods.

But tonight he would deal them a crushing blow. Tonight, he would cut them right at the knees...or at the throat.

* * * * *

The sound of footsteps made her stomach churn. Dawn knew she was being followed, had been since she'd left the office and couldn't do a thing about it.

Should she run? She even started considering taking her heels off. Running would admit her fear though—stoke whoever was after her. If they were. Keeping her heels would make her slower, an easier target.

So which is more important, Eindhoven, your safety or your ego?

Dawn kept her heels clacking loudly as she set her sights on the street corner in front of her.

Admitting to fear, to anything, wasn't in her job description nor was it in her personality. Dawn Eindhoven, or "Hell's Bitch" as the staff called the CEO's executive assistant behind her back—a nickname chosen and proliferated by herself, *thank you very much, losers*—didn't allow such a chink in her armor.

The wet concrete proved treacherous and she slipped a couple of times. *Crap*. Why did she have to take a shortcut?

The one time in her life she'd been late, her, Miss Punctuality, the one time she'd missed the last sky-train of the night—damn that never-ending office celebration—and some lowlife with too much free time on his hands had decided she was worth mugging. Probably an unemployed reprobate with bad teeth. Ugh. The utmost abhorrence in her book. Well, she'd show him a thing or two.

I don't spend all that good money on fitness gurus for nothing. A good kick ought to give me a head start.

Snow began to fall and hid puddles into which she unfailingly stepped. Her wet toes numb with cold, she pushed through the rising fear and the temptation to start running. He wouldn't make her run. No man would ever make her run.

Overhead, the tallest buildings thrust up toward the sky like blades of crystal and steel, and blocked the moonlight. Giant billboards, glittery and inviting purchases or commitments, haloed adjacent structures while sky-bridges arced overhead, threads of faraway spiderwebs. They'd always reminded her of ancient Roman aqueducts, except ten times the height. She could even spot some of the larger orbiting factories twinkling in the sky.

She wished she didn't have to walk on the ground like the unfortunates and destitute. London was practically cut in half with a part on ground level and another, newer, richer, right on top of the old one. Officially, residents could come and go as they pleased through the maze of sky-tubes but unofficially, only the wealthy were

welcome to cross the vertical boundary, using their status-linked ID cards. No work, no ID, and no ID meant no coming up top. So those from ground level—mostly unemployed and unemployable—remained below while their richer neighbors claimed the above.

Dawn couldn't remember the last time she'd walked on the street proper and had forgotten how hard the concrete felt underfoot, especially compared to the lush carpets and chic décor of the covered, ID-mandatory upper walkways. And the wind down here, so biting!

Cursing her treacherous heels and her day suit's restrictive cut, Dawn pulled her shirt collar closer around her neck and plowed between parked shuttles, cut diagonally across the street and thanked her luck when she spotted another figure huddled against the brick wall. Behind her, the sound of steps was gone entirely. Had he given up? Had he seen the other person?

She passed by graffiti, the swirling crimson slogan easily recognizable. It was the color of her distinctive nail polish and lipstick...killer red. She snorted. A vampire sympathizer. Another misguided, idle brain rooting for the underdog. Dawn never chose the losing side, never put her time and money and effort on a dying horse. No matter how lofty their cause—and she sometimes caught herself thinking they really had a raw deal, the poor buggers—vamps and their human sympathizers would never have her cheerleading for their side. Not with what she did for a living. They wouldn't want Dawn on their team, an unbiased, number-crunching exec with a withered conscience and a whole lot of determination. Plus, her company was one of the few that had patented and manufactured the v-serum.

Which reminds me...

That fellow on the summoner last week, calling her and pretending to be the First. What an idiotic prank! Although her boss had readily suspected a rival pharmaceutical company of trying to worm information out of Hemosynthec Corporation, Dawn had dismissed the ludicrous theory. It hadn't been a rival calling in for their secret recipe and it sure hadn't been the real deal. The First. Ha.

Helios by name, he was supposed to have been the first vampire out of the testing tube two hundred years before—the project's "firstborn" so to speak—and first to rebel, break free and live past forty years. An anomaly given the v-serum's potent time-released toxin. But more importantly, Helios had been the first to feed on a human and survive the punishment. No one had seen him since his escape. Several corporate murders had been attributed to him over the last century. Police officials just didn't have anyone else to pin them on most probably. The First was long dead, his name kept alive by his supporters desperately clutching at a symbol for their beaten cause. Dawn shivered.

As she drew nearer to the form huddled against the wall, she could tell the person was very tall and wide of shoulder. A large black coat that looked thick and warm reached almost to the ground. The upturned collar prevented her from seeing a face. Someone used to walking outdoors in the year-round London winter, unlike her.

That's what I should be wearing instead of a waist-length suit jacket. But what can I do? I can't resist a good cut. Fashion slave.

She no longer heard steps behind her. At the price of bruising her ego, she threw a quick peek behind and saw no one. Maybe the perv had decided she wasn't worth it. Or he'd wait until she was alone once more. Although she no longer felt followed for some strange, illogical reason.

When she was about ten paces or so from the man – she didn't know any seven-foot women with shoulders like those – Dawn cleared her throat so she wouldn't startle her potential Good Samaritan.

"Excuse me, sir?" she said in a loud and clear voice. Her conference room voice. The one she used when she wanted things done yesterday. Not bitchy, not whiny. Just calm and oh-so loaded with untold menace. Her "get over here and explain this dip in the profit" tone of voice.

Okay, it does sound a tad bitchy. So sue me.

Only the top of his head poked over the rim of his collar and it was the palest shade of blond imaginable. Shiny in the quivering light of a distant street pharos and cut into a serrated style, the man's fair hair would've given him away in an instant, despite his thick shoulders so uncharacteristic of his kind.

Oh...

Now unabashedly alarmed, Dawn meant to skid to a halt but her heel slipped and she only managed to brace a hand on the brick wall to keep from falling over. Mortar dug in her palm, drew blood. She looked down. Against the gray sleeve and the otherwise lifeless, colorless surrounding, her blood gleamed with the richness of liquid rubies.

Dawn looked up to see the vampire turning back toward her, the bronze of his perfect skin, his angular features sculpted to the point of improbability, his eyes too razor-sharp, his nose too refined, his mouth too cruel. Fear stabbed her in the gut, nearly bent her over. Was he alone?

Where are his human masters?

She stared stupidly, immobile, when he detached himself from the wall against which he'd been leaning, his towering silhouette blocking what little light the pharos managed to send her way and advanced on her. A shadow among shadows.

She'd seen many vampires in her life, had visited a few of the factories manufacturing the v-serum and met with the workers there. But this one here was a much bigger, meaner-looking version of the largest male she'd ever seen. As though he were from a different species altogether.

Or the prototype of one.

Oh shit... The First?

It can't be...he's a myth. Long dead. Oh I know, he's some psychopath vamp with a personality disorder. Or with some grandeur complex. A cracked pot twice my size. Why

couldn't it have been some shrimpy little thug I could've smacked around with my handbag? Nooo. A giant vamp. Crap, crap, crap.

While her turbulent mind played all kinds of horror movies just for her—lucky gal graced with a vivid imagination, yay—Dawn was unable to do anything but stare at the menacing creature in front of her. She clutched the handbag tighter under an arm.

“Are you lost?” His voice was gentle, alarmingly gentle. Air hissed between his fangs when he said the last word.

“Are *you* lost?” she blurted, cursing inwardly when he arched an eyebrow and eyed her down the length of his long aristocratic nose.

His saw-like bangs slipped over an eye when he leaned closer and narrowed his odd eyes. “I had envisioned you to be older.”

Dawn cleared her throat. “Do I know you?”

“We spoke on the summoner last week.”

Oh great, it is the cracked pot with the revolving personalities. She hated being right sometimes. “So you’re...”

“Helios,” the vampire replied with a flare to his nostrils Dawn found both erotic and ominous. “Named after the Colossus of Rhodes because of my size. One of my creators had a sense of humor I regret to say was not passed down to me.”

“I was going to say, you’re the *guy* who called to ask about our lines, to get our latest product. Right?”

His anger was palpable when he scowled. “That is what you call the poison your company makes? The poison that kills us? A product?”

“Save the rhetoric for someone who cares. Who sent you? Hakamo and Jeffreys? NSG Group? You can tell whatever imbecile tossed you in my way that Hemosynthec didn’t spend billions on R and D to just give away its formula. And I don’t care who they send to shake me down.”

She could fake it pretty well, she thought, considering she was *that* close to sinking to the ground in a sobbing heap of runny mascara. Good thing she’d spent years as “Hell’s Bitch” and corralling hundreds of employees, hiring and firing with equal effectiveness. And with the moniker, it kept the Old Boys on their toes.

Helios Wannabe cocked his head. “What makes you think I am here to ‘shake you down’?”

Dawn took a small step back. She didn’t like the sudden glint of delight in his eyes.

He took a step forward, in equal measure to her own. “What if I am here to take what you have denied me after I have asked so courteously? What if I am here to make an example of you?”

“You’re not getting the neutralizer,” she managed to croak. She’d die protecting her company’s interests. She should get a bonus. *Another life would be nice because this one will sure be over in a matter of minutes.*

His mouth curved at a corner, revealing one wicked-looking fang. "You do not have the neutralizer to give," he retorted, derision dripping from every word. "But you do hold the access code to your company's labs and this is what I want from you, Dawn Eindhoven."

"You know my name...?"

"More than your name."

Good to know.

"You think if I let you in, you'll come out alive? They'll gun you down before you get to the doorstep – which is electrified by the way."

"Thank you for the logistical detail. But I doubt they would shoot through their top executive."

He lifted a bronzed hand and traced the cuff of her jacket with a pale fingernail. His middle finger must have been six inches long. She knew men who spent a fortune on manicures for hands such as his, with immaculate fingernails and smooth skin. Ah, the joy of DNA tampering. Sometimes she wished she could've had a bit of the vampires' genetic enhancements herself. Not that her body didn't please her. Being a five-ten, fire-breathing dragon lady with black hair and eyes surmounting a crow's beak for a nose did have its advantages...like scaring the shit out of the mailroom boys. A perennial form of entertainment. Dawn tried to imagine how she'd look with a bit of the vampires' physical perfection and allure. Maybe a smaller nose? Blue eyes? Fuller lips? *Ah hell, get back to the here and now, woman. Because it's probably all you have left.*

"You can do it now, whatever it is they sent you to do, because I don't intend to get you in there." With a shiver she clamped her teeth and stared into his beautiful, arrogant and chilling face.

"Perhaps you think that by pushing me to violence I will finish you quickly?" He grinned a cold smile, his fangs gleaming with the smooth quality of alabaster. "How pedestrian of you. How typically human as well. I need you alive...and relatively well. Otherwise you are of no use to me."

Oooh he needs me alive. Aren't I a lucky woman? Crap. And re-crap.

Dawn stopped breathing when "Helios" leaned closer, his bottom lip almost touching her temple, his breath a burning whisper against her cold skin, his hair spilling over his shoulder in a cascade that tickled her cheek. And exactly where had all this hormone-induced flush come from? She stifled a gasp when he bared his teeth, grazed her forehead then lower until his breath warmed the sensitive spot under her ear.

"D-don't make it last, you perv..." she snarled, unable to suppress the long shiver that rocked her on her feet. She drew back, knocked her shoulder against the wall.

"Pervert? I have never taken from an unwilling partner nor have I drawn enjoyment from any deviant encounters. *You* are the perverted one, Dawn, *you* derive pleasure from the fear I inspire." He cocked his head until his chin touched her throat.

"I'm not deriving anything."

Which was such a lie! He was right, she really did "derive pleasure" from the fear he triggered, the massive arousal his perfect vampire body elicited and as shameful as it all was, Dawn couldn't help the sudden vision—an old fantasy she'd never admit in public—of having sex with a vampire. With this one in particular now that she knew what a *real*, as in over-the-top feral and masculine, vamp looked like.

That's just me to go for the psychopathic, personality-confused killer. Her friends always said she kept going for bad boys. Particularly true in this case.

He inhaled her breath when she let it out through her teeth and filled her field of vision with his perfect face, his electric blue eyes. She'd never noticed before how a vamp's pupils could dilate enough to reduce the irises to thin glowing rings. But then again, she'd never been this close to one this *big*...and all alone with him.

Slowly he ran his finger up along the closure of her suit jacket, flicking the buttons one after the other until he reached her lapel, which he caressed with an index finger. His gaze left her face and settled below her chin. Alarm bells clanged in her head.

"Are you afraid I will bite you?"

"You wouldn't, not with the punishment it'd get you."

"Ah yes, the punishment," he murmured. "But I have already survived it once."

"You're lying, only... He's the only one to have survived it and you're not him."

A flicker of tongue flashed behind his teeth. Dawn decided staring at his mouth could be her new favorite pastime. It was so cruel, that mouth, with a slight curve at one corner, which conveyed mockery, disdain, but at the same time, suggested passion in a seriously sexy way. This man—vamp—could do damage with that mouth.

Did vampire males eat their females? Lucky ladies if they did.

"Why do you doubt my words?" he whispered against her cheek. "Why would I lie? Would it make me more powerful..." He pulled back to look at her mouth. "More alluring if I were the First?"

"It wouldn't change a thing."

"No? Would it not mean humanity has failed in its divine tinkering, that it has created not a tool but a weapon...which is now turning on them?"

"I told you..." she cleared her throat. Damn, but he was hot. In every way. "Keep the rhetoric for someone who cares."

Anger flashed in his strange eyes. "You should care what happens tonight for it will change your life as that of everyone else."

"I'm not taking you inside Hemosynthec. So do your thing and get it over with."

"My 'thing' is to convince you to help me, nothing else."

Dawn barked a quick laugh. "Well, isn't it just too bad. You already failed. I'm not convinced nor will I ever be convinced, and there's nothing you can do about it. So give it up, vamp, or go home."

“Vamp?”

Attagirl. Make the large fangy guy mad.

“That is what my human masters used to call me back on the lunar mines in which I slaved away the first forty years of my life. ‘Vamp’. I always detested it.”

With shocking dexterity he undid the first button on her jacket with only one hand and when the lapels sprung apart by a couple of inches, revealing the satin edge of her bra through the parted shirt collar, his pupils dilated even more. She could hardly see any blue in his eyes anymore.

Dawn tried not to take deep breaths and show more cleavage even if the very real urge to do just that—*you dirty girl you*—almost made her try. “I thought you weren’t a perv.”

“I am not,” he replied, before leaning his hand against the wall. He cocked his head. “But I am a male, even if from a different species.”

Argh, crap, woman, don’t feel proud for turning him on. He’s a vamp. Eww.

“Let me go and I won’t tell the police.”

The vampire arched an eyebrow. He looked amused.

Kayyy, not the reaction I was going for here.

He pushed a strand of hair from his eye. His fingernails glistened like bleached almonds covered with lacquer. “And should you decide to ‘tell the police’, how would you do that?”

“Scream my head off. I have a big mouth.”

“No one from your world comes down here unless they are in hiding, in trouble or conducting a raid. Which one applies to you, Dawn Eindhoven?”

“Which one applies to *you*?”

“You do not need to keep playing that role with me. I see through your ruse.”

A ruse? Dawn didn’t “act” the way she was. For sure, she’d been born a killer-red-lipstick- and nail-polish-wearing bitch and would remain so ‘til the day she died. Which was probably today. “It’s not a ruse, vamp.”

Oops, let that one slip.

His expression darkened. He leaned into her, right under her jaw.

She swallowed hard. Cold filtered in her open collar and pebbled her skin. Snow billowed in fretting snakes along the pavement and the sudden gust pushed her against the vampire’s mouth. Without warning, a burn like a fresh cut flared at her throat.

He’d bitten her!

She let out a yelp of fright and shock when he encircled her shoulder with a long arm and pressed her against him, enfolding her in his thick felt coat. Unable to move her arms for the implacable embrace, Dawn kned him inside the thigh. He seemed to barely register the hit.

In her ear, the sucking accentuated, became long, smoldering draws, inexorable like waves on the sea, coming and going, taking and giving. A moan left her. To her shock, her nipples hardened against the crisp fabric of her shirt, her sex tightened when a great spasm spread through her butt and thighs.

With a soft growl that rumbled in his chest, the vampire arched her back and left Dawn stupidly wondering how they could fit so well being from different species. An image seared her mind.

She, sprawled on her back while the vampire, his glorious hair in a shiny cascade around their faces, was pounding his cock into her. Oh and it'd be good, plus with the size of hands he had and those lips, ahh, those lips – Dawn liked good lips on a guy.

But he's not a "guy", is he? He's a vamp.

Still...

She'd wrap her legs around his waist and squeeze to her heart's content. He'd be able to take it too, being a vamp and all. Would he screw a human, she wondered. Had he already tried it? She'd had vamp fantasies for years despite the societal taboo of it. What was a woman supposed to do? They'd created those vamps so damned perfect and now women were expected not to drool over the stunning males? Mmm, she was sure he'd make for an epic lay with all that stamina.

A stinging burn at her neck brought her right back to the wintry nighttime and her impending death-by-vampire bite.

Too bad there wasn't time for us to screw for real.

What a strange thought...

She was dying, should be thinking about her life, her friends, her lovers...the stuff she'd left in her in-basket. The presentation template! Crap, it'd be late. Womack would quickly point that out to her replacement, the jerk.

No, instead of focusing on her life, she was having some serious mental screwfest with the very guy killing her. And a vamp at that.

She pressed a hand against his chest with the full intention of pushing against him, putting a few inches between his front and hers so she could give her knee another try. What did she do instead?

Crazy, estrogen-stupefied woman, I go and pull on his coat lapel!

She really did. She fisted it – and she could make a fist – and put all her energy into keeping him close to her, despite the height difference. The vampire really must have been seven feet tall.

Something snaked down her back to cup her butt, crushed her belly to his pelvis. The heat of his hand seeped through her pants, her panties, and created a scree of shivers to roll over her thighs. He groaned again and accentuated his pulls. Dawn could hear every one in her ear, the click of his jaw, the rhythm of his swallows, the shallow breaths through his nose and she couldn't remember anything more erotic in a perverse, feral, *fatal*, sort of way. Displaying incredible strength – she was no shrimp –

the vampire used his large hand on her butt as a hoist and lifted her to him, still crushing his mouth against her neck, his fangs digging, his lips clamped solidly.

Since their chests and pelvises were jammed one against the other, she was able to confirm that he was getting excited too, and not just by the increasing tempo of his sucks. A hard mass crushed her belly and she knew, she knew, this vamp must have been extremely well endowed, gifted more probably, if she could judge by the rest of his perfect body. Heat suffused her core, spread to her extremities, even her cold and wet feet.

Another image burned itself behind her eyelids. The top of his head between her thighs and all that gorgeous pale yellow hair spilling and tickling her all over as he licked her sex, nibbled it, sucked at it. Oh man, it was good.

Would be good, woman, 'cause it's not happening.

She'd fist his hair and ground herself to him and he'd be more than happy to give it to her. Those luscious lips would glisten with her honey and he'd lick them, go back at it—she'd let him come up for air once in a while of course, but not too often—to bring her there again and when she'd be close, burning for him, he'd anchor her hips to the floor and take her.

Too bad you're dying. That would've made for a nice bit of loving right there.

Because he had his arm wrapped underneath her armpit so he could come up behind her and cradle her neck, Dawn felt completely enveloped, softened to the point of melting, and couldn't for her life come up with anything other than "oh my". His hand espoused her butt cheek perfectly, as if it'd been built for just that purpose.

She used the last of her energy to slowly raise her hand to his head, comb his hair with her fingers before all strength left her. With a long sigh, she let her hand fall down by her side.

When she closed her eyes, stars fizzled and popped behind her eyelids. Her last cognizant impression was of the vampire scooping her in his arms. It was nice to finally meet a man tall enough to do that. The last time a guy had tried, she swore her feet had scraped the floor all the way from the living room to the bedroom. Not with this vamp though. She wondered where he was taking her. Crap. Her neck burned. She was so sleepy.

He better not leave my designer handbag behind...

Chapter Two

What was happening to him? He had never meant to take so much. Only a small sip to make his point. Neither had he intended to get aroused, to caress and hold this human female. But as soon as the human's skin connected with his lips—thanks to the sharp wind—a vortex of jumbled impulses swarmed over him, clouded his usually sharp judgment until he yielded to the temptation and sank his teeth into her flesh. And the sweet nectar that flowed into his mouth nearly unmade him. He drew it in, sucked until his cheeks concaved. And still he wanted more. His cock stirred painfully, crushed as it was between them.

Helios fought against the tidal wave of ecstasy triggered by her burning essence, struggled between his thirst, his arousal and the need to keep Dawn Eindhoven alive. Moreover, the human female was not at all what he had expected and he wanted to explore this hard diamond of a woman. Clearly, she could be a definite aid to his cause. He would only need to work harder than expected to convince her, even if the prospect of prolonged persuasion did not appeal to him. But the cause superseded every other need or interest he could have. There was nothing more important than freeing his kind from humanity's chains, and if he had to deceive that woman, trick and use her...he would do it. Only he needed her alive.

Stop it, he told himself.

But her soft moan and the way she snaked her hand in his hair—as a lover would—tipped the scale to the polar opposite of what he meant to do. Working his jaw and tongue, Helios sucked her blood even harder until he felt his tendons rising under his chin, along his neck. She slumped against his breast. The subtle abandon denied what little triumph he could have had against his great hunger. Helios growled in abandon. He wanted her, her mouth on his, his sex in hers. He wanted her blood, all of it. Yet he had to stop.

Do it now.

But to deny himself such ambrosia would kill him. He had never tasted anything similar. Surely not the enzyme his human masters had fed him or the human scientists whom he had hunted down and on whom he had fed. The creation turning on its makers...how poignant.

Still he sucked at her tender neck, unable to stop his teeth sinking deeper, his tongue pressing against the pulse to draw more blood, which he greedily swallowed, savored each drop. The heat of her skin warmed his clamped lips. A ripe fruit, the taste of her was sweet, genuine, with no aftertaste of biological manipulation, and left him quite drunk. Of its own accord, his hand cupped her backside, drew her against him so

she would feel his arousal. A high of adrenaline and sexual stimulation blanked his mind.

He had to have her, all of her—her sex, which would surely be the most succulent of all, her mouth painted the color of rubies, her hands. Helios realized he shook from head to toe.

His hands gentle against her lower back, he arched her tall and lean frame into his—a more perfect fit could not be achieved, surprising considering she was a human female—welcomed the carnal thoughts their close contact triggered. A very real urge to take her flashed in vivid detail. It would be easy. But as he had informed her, Helios had never resorted to taking pleasure from an unwilling person.

A sudden fear he was taking too much, was taking enough to kill her, had the effect of a bucket of glacial water—which effectiveness he could personally attest from his years of backbreaking toil in lunar mines. With a gasp he pulled away.

His breath and her warm blood created faint tendrils of steam to rise between them. Already the industrious nanobots in his blood and saliva, the technology that had kept him alive all these long years, repaired the damaged tissues, reconnected blood vessels and generated a microscopic suture membrane identical to her skin. She would not even bear a bruise. Not physically anyway. His lack of self-control shamed him. After he licked her clean, Helios scooped her behind the knees and lifted the human into his arms.

While she would be whole and unharmed in a few hours, the other humans he had fed on had died. He had made sure of that. No amount of nanotechnology could repair a throat torn open. They deserved the justice he had dealt them for their part in the brutal regime subjugating his kind. And he had felt no remorse butchering them, ripping them apart. Still did not and neither would he when he killed again.

This human was different. Barely mid-thirties, she had not been part of the monstrous community of corporate scientists working on the vampire project even if she presently occupied a position important in its future. Hemosynthec had discovered a neutralizer to the v-serum, the enzyme humans fed to vampires to keep them alive but was laced with a slow-release toxin killing them in their prime. A convenient, disposable workforce. With this neutralizer, he would be able to free his kind. They would no longer be forced to feed from pouches containing the hated saline solution. How ironic and humiliating that the stronger species of the two would be forced to feed this way, out of the hand of its weaker neighbor. How unnatural for a race created superior in every aspect, with exacerbated aggressive traits and tweaked predatory behaviors—thus the fangs, size and stamina—to be forced into subservience. He would put an end to this. He would get the cure. And Dawn Eindhoven held the key—literally—to the labs where it was held. He would get that key. No matter the price.

Holding her close to his chest against the harsh wind—the clothes she wore, although decidedly stimulating, had never been meant to protect her from anything, least of all his male interest—Helios took a run and leaped on the ten-foot-high brick wall. Following the narrow edge to the corner, he hopped onto a nearby roof, silently

padded the length of it and used his great strides to clear apertures between buildings. He soon stood by his compound along the once mighty River Thames, now reduced to a docile urban canal, and waited until one of his sentinels had spotted him. He vaulted to the ground, landed amid a snow gust. A few paces ahead a female vampire nodded as he walked by, her eyes on the woman in his arms.

“Takeout?” asked Artemis, taller than usual for a female. She gave him a long look.

“She is the one.”

She opened her mouth in astonishment. “Dorian will be relieved. He has sent several messages.”

“Dorian should learn patience.”

With a toss of his chin, he sent the sentinel back to her post. Eyes blazing for an instant, she nodded and followed his command.

His compound, though undistinguishable to the untrained eye, did not count fences, armed guards or search lights but it did comprise several pairs of wary eyes, both human and vampire. Such as this young female on duty tonight.

Climbing up the rickety gangway to the top of the Tower Bridge proved treacherous with the precious cargo tucked to his chest but Helios used extra care in choosing his footing and soon had reached the thick parapet surrounding the lone remaining tower. After sparing a hand to retrieve his portable summoner—his whole life was in this device...as was his kind’s and his own future—from his inside pocket, he punched the code with his thumb alone, waited for the click of the bolt then shouldered the thick metal door opened as he swept into his home. Snow followed him inside before he could shut the door with a foot.

A look at the human’s face confirmed his fears. He had taken much. Her skin looked pale compared to her glossy, painted lips. Although she was undoubtedly strong and resilient—had she not tried to unman him while he sank his teeth into her flesh?—Helios feared losing his precious prisoner. With the utmost care, he deposited her on the only concession to luxury in his home, an oriental rug still thick and vibrantly colored in ambers and reds despite its advanced age.

When he stood over her to gaze at the human female, Helios could not help the stir of lust knifing him. She was beautiful for her kind with long limbs and angular features. If his rousing speech of earlier in the evening had failed to warm his blood, this human female certainly did. To dangerous levels actually. Helios noticed with astonishment that his hands shook.

If only she would embrace his cause, help his kind.

Vampires would not rise against their human masters until they could be assured of steady sustenance afterward. By contrast to his ability to feed directly on a human—an anomaly stemming from his being the “flawed” original of his race—other vampires required the enzyme to survive, the same that was slowly killing them. Weaning them from it would span decades whereas the neutralizer would allow them to feed freely within days.

But then again, he could always sink to humans' level and use mass violence to force them to change their ways. Helios shook his head. He would not resort to it. There had to be another way. For what cause would be worth the wholesale murder of innocents?

He removed her wet shoes, paired and put them by the door. When he returned, she seemed to have shifted slightly. Already? More than resilient then. He felt better knowing he had not hurt her beyond help. Beyond use. He should send his supporters a message to warn them of the impending task while the human was still unconscious. Breaching into Hemosynthec would prove arduous even with her help. But in case she woke while he was on the roof and tried to force the issue, Helios remained by her side.

Her blood still warmed his belly yet he was thirsting for her again. So soon? Hers had been a most nourishing nectar, the sweetest in fact. Why should he crave it again? Yet he did – acutely.

She moved a foot. She had such fine long legs and striking black hair in an angular cut, which suited her very well. A modern-day, pale-skinned Cleopatra. One wearing a blood-red shade of lipstick. A sharp knock interrupted his mental computations of her many attributes.

“Come in.”

Dorian barged in with his usual restlessness and slammed the door behind him. “So this is the human who'll help us.” The younger vampire gave her an uninterested once-over. “Has she said anything yet?”

“Patience, Dorian, truly is a virtue.”

“What if she won't help us?” Dorian countered, shaking snow off his bomber jacket. His short hair stood on end. “We can't wait forever, First, some of us are dying as we speak.”

He unzipped his jacket and rested his fists on his narrow hips. Dark circles underlined his eyes. The young vampire would need to feed soon. Helios could not wait until his kind could feed properly without the enzyme killing them. Rationing would slowly erode their patience and some of them, like Dorian, had precious little to begin with. Their “movement” was still so young, barely a couple of years, so brittle and volatile. Sometimes Helios wished he had remained alone in his fight for his kind's freedom, working in the shadows instead of having supporters dog his steps and worship his words. But they were young and would learn patience, as he had.

“She has already been quite clear that she will not cooperate in any way beneficial to us.”

“Then we'll have to force her.” A glint of cruelty darkened Dorian's eyes.

Helios was surprised at the heat rising to his face and recognized a potential problem. He could not become attached to this human female for he intended to kill her after she helped them breach her corporate fortress. Unless he was only being protective of his prisoner, in a purely territorial way. “We will not need to.”

“How? You said—”

Helios threw the younger vampire a warning look. "I am gifted with an excellent memory and perfectly recall what I said. But with some patience she will come around and give us what we need."

"So we just wait until...what?" Dorian snarled, pacing the room twice. "Until she grows a conscience? She's human, First, and will never help us. Not voluntarily. Just let me have a moment with her, it wouldn't take long."

"Perhaps you have forgotten what your methods have cost us last month. We lost three because you could not wait for my signal."

Helios could still see his fellow vampires being arrested—those who had survived the police raid on their depot—and their subsequent trial. Only one sentence had been deemed appropriate. For those humans so inclined, a direct and live feed on the cells into which the renegade vampires were held played their long and agonizing deaths by starvation. Not a pretty sight for anyone, human or not, but for a vampire, especially horrific given they tended to try to feed on themselves after a while. It had taken several days for them to die. He too had lasted a while before his jailers had come to finish him off. That had been their mistake. All that blood...

"First?" Dorian asked, interrupting Helios' painful reminiscing.

"We wait, Dorian." He looked down at the stylish woman lying on his rug and wondered how long it would take to break her.

A look of seething rage flashed in the gaunt vampire's face. He muttered something then left.

Helios shook his head. First he had to make sure the key to his kind's freedom did not die on his floor. After retrieving a pair of solar energy batteries from the charger near the placarded window, he activated the heating plate and soon had tea steaming in a pair of handleless cups, one of which he brought to her and held to her lips as he cradled her head in a hand. Her neck was so slender, so smooth and inviting. He bit hard to quash the urge to feed on her again. He kept to a near-starvation diet himself out of solidarity since none of his kind could feed freely either. His last feeding went back to a few days ago when one of his sympathizers had learned she was dying of an incurable disease of the brain. Because of her selfless sacrifice, he would remain sated for at least another two days. Or he should anyway. But already a hint of hunger poked him behind the teeth, stung his palate and swelled the blade of his tongue. So soon?

With faint sounds like moans a lover would make upon waking, Dawn cracked an eye open. For a split second their gazes met and held. Time seemed to stop for him.

Helios was not a spiritual being. His "youth"—even if vampires were birthed from tanks fully matured with embryonic personalities and sets of skills—at the hands of his human masters on the lunar mines had all but eradicated any belief in the divine. Yet he could not ignore the mystical pull he felt when he looked into the eyes of this human. As though he already knew her.

When he had spent his life in solitude, unable to trust, unwilling to try, he saw in Dawn Eindhoven a solid hand that one could hold. When his existence had been

devoted to revenge and hunting his creators, her cool, clear mind offered sanctuary. And while he had not sated the carnal needs of his flesh in many years, he recognized in her ardent gaze a vortex of passion. One into which he could lose himself.

A burning flash of desire and hunger sliced through his gut. The physical pain was so sudden, so intense, Helios flinched. And this broke the spell.

Her reaction was so swift Helios barely had time to withdraw his hand when she slapped the cup from it and sent its burning content all over herself and him. She hissed in obvious pain. He barely felt a thing.

Helios stood, towering over her as she knelt and seemed to be meaning to stand. "No," he said with a shake of his head. "Stay where you are." Even with the much smaller human barefoot and kneeling on his rug, he still felt he ought to keep some distance between them. For her sake more than his.

Helios kept her well in sight as he retreated to the counter, ran a dishcloth under cold water and lobbed it at her. His hands shook the entire time. Even more so than a few minutes before. The need for her blood was quickly becoming hard to control. How could he have yielded so deeply back when he had bitten her? And so soon after a profound indulgence?

While the woman dabbed her chest and neck, he retrieved his own cup, wearing a feigned mask of impassiveness he struggled to maintain, and sipped his peppery tea hoping to sate his thirst. But it was not that sort of thirst.

She kept her jacket and shirt pinched away from her chest...as much as the tailored garments allowed anyway. Another wave of arousal tightened his cock and triggered urges with which he had not had to deal in a long time. His hips and lower back cramped with the impulse to push forward. Her legs would feel so...

Stop it!

Thankfully, the coat hid his predicament well. Now was not the time to indulge in carnal needs, even if the sight and taste of her were pushing him closer to the edge than he had ever allowed himself to be.

"Where am I?" she demanded. Despite his command, she jumped to her feet and backed away until she stood against the wall. Fear and outrage alternatively narrowed and flared her lovely obsidian eyes.

"In my home."

"And where's that?" Her gaze flicked to the door.

"Escape from either my home or myself is impossible, human, for my sentinels would immediately stop you from leaving the compound. So I recommend you do not even try unless you wish for a very unpleasant stay here."

"Wow, more unpleasant than this?" she snarled, putting a shaking hand to her throat.

"Much more."

Actually, unpleasant might not be the proper word here. More like unexpectedly, unbelievably...erotic? *Not erotic, you imbecile. The guy bit you. Wake up and smell the kidnapping.*

And for the life of her, she could feel around her neck all she wanted with her fingers and still couldn't find any bite wound or blood on her crisply white shirt, this despite the very real memory of his fangs piercing her skin. Just as the memory of his fever-hot hands pressing her to him was real. Plenty real.

She'd never felt more aroused, in every sense of the word. Aroused in the primal fight-or-flight impulse, in the vestigial reflex that had made her knee the guy in the crotch...and coming short by a good foot. So she definitely, unarguably, *was* aroused with alarm. But also in a deeply entrenched female instinct to find a suitable procreator, the male bird with the best plumage and boy did "Helios" have a great set of feathers! But hadn't those scientists created vampires to respond in every point to primeval standards of strength and resilience, right down to the fangs? Hadn't vampires been created strong and smart so they'd survive where man couldn't? No wonder then that her hormones worked double shifts. One of those lab rats must have thought, "Hey, why not make them drop-dead gorgeous too! As a freebie!"

To compensate for the life of servitude waiting for them maybe.

So yes, she was aroused in a sexual sense as well, even if the notion made her want to roll her eyes. A budding Stockholm Syndrome. Classic. Fall for your captor. Although she doubted whoever had come up with the name had seen one of these guys right here, had had him wrap those muscled arms for a burning embrace.

And while Dawn wrestled with her inner cavewoman, the vampire just leaned back against the counter and sipped his tea. He still had his coat on. She was barefoot. Talk about a shift in power. Only thing missing was the small hard chair for her and the giant exec, genuine-leather monster of a throne for him.

"Are you cold?"

The small pot light high between the I-beams did nothing to make him ugly either. The soft amber light spilled on his glossy, hay-colored head, his wide shoulders, underlining the perfect symmetry of his features seemingly cast in bronze.

"Yes, I am cold," she snapped, angry at her moronic behavior more than at him. Okay, maybe not more, but equally. There. "And I'm woozy, which doesn't surprise me given you've basically had a seven-course meal at my expense."

"Had I sated myself completely, as you have intimated, you would be dead. And so would the next four humans afterward."

"Ah, so you kept me alive to have a little snack later on. How foresighted. So, do we start right away with the torture?"

You have a big mouth, Dawn Eindhoven.

His intense electric-blue eyes narrowed. "I will not sink to humanity's level."

"So you're just going to drink coffee and stare at me?"

“Tea. And yes, staring at you is a perfectly enjoyable activity.”

Oh?

“You don’t sound like a vamp – ire.”

She’d pissed him off enough the last time, might as well call him by a name he preferred, even if the difference escaped her. Vamp, vampire. All the same to her. Although he certainly didn’t resemble any other vamps. He was striking even among his kind. Twice as big. And twice as scary too.

“You mean I do not sound like someone ruining his health in a mine or slaving away on an orbiting factory?”

“That’s not what I said –”

“But it is what you meant, is it not?”

He drained his cup and put it on the counter. One by one, he undid the buttons on his coat – she noticed his hands shook hard – gradually revealing a black turtleneck that hugged his tall and trim form. Dark gray Army fatigues and the biggest booted feet she’d ever seen completed his perfect urban warlord look. With the size of feet he had, Dawn wondered if he was proportional. She almost smirked, almost forgot this was a kidnapping with he her jailer and she his very cold, caffeine-deprived prisoner.

A personal summoner clipped on his thick belt caught her attention. Hers was in her handbag, useless and set to vibrate. She wondered if his was coded. If she could get her hands on that baby, a quick message and the entire block – wherever it was – would be crawling with police. But she’d have to come close to him to get it. Extremely close. Um.

“If you are cold, then take this,” he said, proffering his coat.

To take it, she’d have to walk to him, cross the divide and let him win this implicit battle of wills. She crossed her arms. “Never mind, I’m not cold anymore.”

With a shrug, he hooked the coat on the backrest of an armchair. Dawn noticed only then the rest of his place. She had no idea where they were, except that it looked industrial, as if they stood inside some large machine or mechanism. Thick wires ran from the ceiling and disappeared through the concrete floor while a giant set of cogs occupied the far wall. Everything was either concrete or metal. Very austere and minimalist. She stood on a large rug with fringe, the only thing that looked soft in the entire place. A steel staircase coiled up to a trapdoor in a corner. She wondered where it led.

“Unless you can fly off the tower, this will not help you.” He was looking at her looking at the stairs.

“Tower, huh?”

A small mocking grin lifted his high cheekbones but was gone the next moment. “Clever. Perhaps my endeavor will take longer than I had anticipated.”

“What endeavor?” She didn’t like the scared-mouse voice that had just squeaked out of her but couldn’t really help it. First, it was already out and second, she honestly was getting a bit scared. Okay, a lot scared. She cleared her throat.

“Breaking you.”

She had a mental and emotional tack right to the heading “anger” in even less time than usual. “Ex...cuse me? No one, and I mean no one ‘breaks’ me. I haven’t been running one of the hottest corporations in London to be ‘broken’ by...by a...”

He arched a pale blond, almost white eyebrow. “Vamp?”

“Yes, a vamp.” She waited for a reaction but none was forthcoming. His expression remained mildly irritated.

“I told you trying to push me to anger would not work. I have learned patience, have survived years in conditions that would kill you within an hour and I have bided my time, even while your kind was meting out its punishment on me. So please, stop wasting both our time and be more cooperative.”

“I’m not taking you up to Hemosynthec and that’s the end of it.”

She instinctively angled her face away when he drew near and was shocked at her behavior. Either she’d done it to avoid meeting his ardent gaze—how pitiable coming from “Hell’s Bitch”—or even more disturbing, she’d anticipated his bite, something that didn’t quite trigger the horror it should. She squared her chin as he stopped barely a step away and cocked his head down at her. A shower of glorious hair spilled over a shoulder, some strands stuck to the wool turtleneck and glistened like dew-covered spiderwebs. She couldn’t stop staring.

“You will eventually, Dawn. I have waited over a century and a half for the perfect opportunity. What are a few days more to me? I am patient.”

A shiver tickled her nape.

“Will you sleep on the rug or the chair?” he asked.

She hated how he abruptly changed subjects. Tried to keep her on her toes? She’d seen it often enough in boardrooms and during momentous meetings but no one had ever dared do it to her, not unless they wanted to get one stinging retort. She looked at both in turn. “I’m not sleeping.”

For some moronic reason, refusing to sleep felt like a small victory. No one could force her to sleep. The logic behind her choice did escape her but it felt damn good anyway.

Without a word the vampire went to the chair and sat. The black leather provided a sharp contrast to his platinum hair. He crossed his bronzed hands over his lap and stared. Although he appeared perfectly calm, she could see his hands were still shaking, even harder now, and a sheen covered his lips. Some terrible force seemed to be coiled inside him, ready to snap.

“What? You won’t sleep either?”

He shook his head. “I require very little sleep.”

Oh great, a staring contest.

Not knowing what else to do—and standing there like an imbecile wouldn't achieve anything—Dawn tentatively knelt along the wall and sat on her ankles. The pants strained over her lap, molded her thighs. Across from her, the vampire must have noticed as well for he stared hard. With a flare to his nostrils, he looked away, took a deep breath.

"Go to sleep," he told her.

She crossed her arms tightly to ward off the insidious cold as much as to show her uncooperativeness. Just in case he'd forgotten already. "Why is it so cold in here?"

"This structure is supposed to be uninhabited. And as the authorities do not come here except to conduct raids, there is no electricity, only smaller battery-operated appliances. Although I am sure your kind will someday find a way to regulate solar energy as well."

She shivered. "Couldn't you have a woodstove or something? Burn a few logs?"

"They would see the smoke and would know someone lives here. Something I cannot allow. Count yourself lucky that we have running water in this part of the city, thanks to a few good-hearted human sympathizers who redirect it from their own reservoirs."

She sighed. "Where are we anyway?"

"In London."

She rolled her eyes. "I know we are, but where? In a tower, you said. Which one?"

He cocked his head. "Is there a man in your life? A woman perhaps?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Since you have clearly indicated you will not cooperate, we will spend much time together. I look forward to knowing you better."

For the life of her, he looked serious. Dawn nearly barked her characteristic, mocking laugh but kept it in at the last moment. He really was serious. She'd been kidnapped by a large lonely vampire with mental issues. Great.

When he shifted, the summoner at his belt gleamed. If only she could get her hands on it. Tomorrow her boss would be going nuclear at seven-thirty sharp when she'd fail to show up. No matter that everyone would probably sleep in after the prior evening's celebration. The revolutionary formula her lab guys had stumbled upon—let's not give them too much credit—after all, they'd admitted on not being sure how they achieved it in the first place—would put Hemosynthec at the forefront of every pharmaceutical corporation in the world. Yet her boss would still expect her to be in her office to man the ship through the white waters ahead. Everyone would want a piece of them now. Womack had already hinted he'd be willing to sell the v-serum neutralizer before even producing it. She had reservations about that but would go with whatever decision Womack made. He was the boss. Officially anyway.

“Did you know that you purse your lips when you ponder?” the vampire asked, shifting in his chair. He uncrossed his hands, grabbed both armrests. Even from where she knelt, she could tell he was digging his fingers in. What was wrong with him? Was he ill?

Now that she paid attention to his incisive facial features and the subtle lines around his eyes, Dawn thought he really did look older than the other vamps she’d seen.

“Are you him for real?” she asked in a breathless sort of voice she wished wouldn’t betray her so blatantly. *Man, I sound like a groupie. Pathetic. But still, the First!*

“I told you, my name is Helios and I am two hundred and three years old.”

Wow. She was starting to believe him. “I still won’t get you inside Hemosynthech, Helios, you know that.”

“You will. Eventually.”

A pregnant silence settled between them. She stared at him, he returned the favor. After a while stress gave way to extreme fatigue but still Dawn kept her gaze on him and his on her. Her eyelids grew heavy. She stifled a yawn.

Chapter Three

Helios wanted to shake his head when the woman's eyes finally rolled in her head. She slumped against the wall, propped on her elbow. Gradually, she sank on the rug to rest there, lying on her side, one arm bent under her head, the other resting along her flank and hip. An urgent need to touch her, taste her again, stabbed at him. He would not. He did not trust himself around her. She roused him in ways he had not known possible, he the master of self-discipline. Had he not once spent nearly forty years biding his time, enduring the mistreatment, sexual abuse and deprivations of lunar mining, waiting for the one mistake his masters would make? And they had. Although their first mistake had been to train him. Over the years, he had become an expert blaster, able to detonate charges just light enough or accurate enough to dislodge the precise amount of ore needed. He had turned this knowledge of blasting into good use since his escape.

Parts of London were literally sitting on depth charges set up in the abandoned underground railway system, the old Tube. Yet he would not stoop to mass violence when he could free his kind by securing the neutralizer. Detonating his caches was a last-resort measure, one he would not use unless everything was lost and there was no way out. He patted his summoner into which each of the charge's triggers was safely coded.

When Helios knew the woman was fast asleep, he stood on shaking legs – the depth of his thirst surprised him, caught him off guard – and retrieved his coat. After he crouched by her shoulder, he flipped out his coat and let it settle gently over her. But he came too close and his knuckle touched her cheek. Though she did not wake, the subtle contact had the effect of an electrical jolt through his arm. He hissed against the impulse to bend over and take her, take her throat with his mouth, her sex with his. His hands balled into shaking fists. Abruptly, Helios snapped to his feet and backed all the way to the door.

You are acting like a fool.

He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. Fatigue pulled at him, whispered in his ear. Yet everything about her kept him awake. In more ways than one. He tried to keep his eyes open but they kept closing every time he did not consciously think about it. Then they would flare and he would find himself staring at her again.

His reaction shocked him. He was *afraid*. Of all the things he had ever wanted yet could never have – companionship, hope. Afraid to his soul he had found something special only to be forced to destroy it afterward. Terrified at the feelings she instilled in him, those conflicting, confusing emotions coming in at all angles and slapping him, buffeting him. He was afraid of Dawn. A human? What had she done to him?

A great languor sank him deeper into the chair. A twitch pulled at his thigh. He exhaled a long breath and felt himself falling.

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Helios wanted to touch her again. He tried to get up but could not. After several attempts he forced himself upright and took a tentative step toward her. He only meant to touch her. Nothing more. But the thirst clawed at him without relent. He was afraid to come nearer. What if he succumbed? Should he take too much...

He was standing outside gasping when he realized what he had done. Was he running away? He could not remember moving yet there he was. Something did not feel normal.

"First?" a young female voice asked. Artemis came out of the shadows, another female on her heels. They looked worried.

"Guard her. Allow no one else access," he snarled through his teeth. "No one."

They nodded, their expressions tight and unsure. This show of emotions was so unlike him. A third came up the grilled gangway and threw an oblique glance at him. He remembered her, though not her name.

"Are you feeling well, First?" she asked, her smooth voice bringing saliva to his lips.

He took a few steps away from her, shocked at his lustful hunger of her trim silhouette. A gust of wind plastered her coat against her side and hip. He licked his lips.

Without his coat even he should have felt the mordant wind, but a fever had taken hold of him, tightened his jaw and cramped his belly. He had to feed, to mate, anything to douse the fire burning his gut. He could hardly think. He was spinning.

And he was so, so afraid. It would be so easy to go back inside and take her. She would not be able to stop him. No one would. Except himself.

He shook his head. Everything felt so strange, so blurred. Was he dreaming all this?

"I need to feed," he managed to growl before lurching forward and clambering down the gangway toward the base of the tower.

Once in the street, he ignored everything but the hunger and followed its keen directions. His quest to quench the terrible thirst took him outside his sentinels' visual reach. He would be on his own. As he had always been. Images of a long-dead past flashed in pitiless clarity.

They stood in rows as they waited for their human masters to dole out their daily ration of the detested enzyme. Helios, larger than the rest, towered by a good head and spotted the cart first. He had come to recognize the squeak of the wheels, the dull grating of the cart as it rode the tracks, pushed by a pair of vampires wearing the inescapable gray coveralls. The color of damnation, of ashes and of cruelty. Of death.

As usual, Delong, a large human guard, grinned his sadistic smile as he scanned the row of workers, looking for the one who would be his unwitting entertainment that day, a pouch of saline solution in his other hand. Because of his size and the challenge he offered, Helios' turn came back often.

Delong took his time, pretended to zero in on a younger vampire, who stared naively like only the newly arrived could – they all learned to keep their gaze downward after a while in the mines – but then he settled on Helios and motioned with his baton that the tall vampire should “come this way”.

Sand and dust crunched in his teeth when Helios clenched them. He stepped forward, kept his gaze on the ground in front of him.

The baton rose high – Delong was a very tall human. Pain erupted in blinding suns behind Helios' eyelids when the guard struck him in the lower back. But he stayed upright.

Always stay upright.

“How's my favorite vamp today? Had a nice beauty sleep?”

With the tip of his baton he nudged Helios under the testicles, ran it a few times between his thighs then pulled it out. “Are you hungry?”

Helios did not reply, his only victory against Delong, who preferred his victims loud and lively. While a pair of guards tossed the pouches to the rest of Helios' work crew – as blaster, he was afforded some level of authority among his kind – and sent them away, Delong bit the polymer plug from the pouch, squirting a bit of solution in the process, and set his dark gaze on Helios.

“You know what to do.”

With numb hands, in his mind killing the abhorrent Delong countless times, Helios unsnapped his coveralls and slipped them down around his ankles.

Helios careened back to the here and now, shaking and gagging. And hungry.

What had this human female done to him? How could he be starving this way after having fed on her only a few hours before? Delong's regular attentions forced Helios to knuckle his eyeballs in the hopes of wiping away the last vestiges of his painful past. He had never experienced such vivid memories, such completely garish, debilitating flashes. Was he going insane?

It was all her fault. Damned humans.

When he had thought himself in complete control of the situation, Dawn Eindhoven and her addictive blood – her luscious body and diamond-hard mind – had turned him upside down and inside out. All he could think about was her. Not that he could think clearly.

But he could feel, even if he wished he could not. A jumble of emotions assailed him, emotions with which he did not know how to deal. Desperation, fear, confusion. Lust.

He staggered to the street corner, spilled into the darkened alley and zigzagged up to the next block. He stumbled so many times he lost count. His gums ached, the back of his tongue felt swollen and raw. Both his hands clenched and unclenched sporadically. Helios growled in frustration. Then a faint presence alerted his keen senses.

His hands were suddenly filled with someone's hair—a woman's—and his mouth with her blood. She had already fallen by the time he pulled himself off her. In the faraway pharos, her blood gleamed with the rich depth of rubies against her shoulder. Looking down, he saw his hands were covered in it. Like gloves of crimson satin.

Yet visions of Dawn's slender neck haunted him, how her body had fit his so perfectly. His cock stirred at the memory. He stumbled over something, cursed. A man lay on his back, his vacant eyes staring up at the night sky.

"What...?"

Blood everywhere this time. Spreading in the snow, an ink stain on porous paper. Helios floundered back against a wrought iron fence he did not remember being there. He felt so drunk. Disoriented. But thirsty still. So thirsty. A deserted park gaped over a low brick wall where snow had accumulated at acute angles. Wind made some of the children's play equipment creak forlornly. Where was he?

Dawn's pale skin against his lips, that intoxicating nectar flowing like silk on his tongue... He was salivating, getting hard. An image of her slim legs wrapped around his waist made him palm his eyes.

Helios growled in frustration and desire.

Snow flew across his face in cold slaps. He leaned forward, crossed his arms.

Delong letting saline solution from the pouch trickle down along his baton so that Helios was forced to lick it off to get any nourishment at all. At least that particular time it had been his baton.

Helios could not remember moving, but when his fangs sank deep into warm flesh, when his canine teeth punctured skin, a flash of lucidity revealed a scene of chaos and bloodlust. He held a woman by the waist, facing away, while a man knelt in the snow, a red torrent gushing through the desperate fingers he pressed to his neck. His eyes were huge.

"Please..." the woman murmured. Her fist clutched at his hair, tried to pull him away.

He would not. He could not.

Then blackness enveloped him in a swirling cocoon. With a snarl, he collapsed to his knees. He knew now that he was dreaming all of this. Nothing made sense. He had never lost control this way, not in all his years, despite some very real reasons to. He tried biting his lips so the pain would wake him. No sensation. Nothing.

Delong urinated over the pouch he had just thrown to the dusty ground. His hard eyes, the ever-ready baton in its quick-release holster on his belt.

"Take it, vamp."

Already kneeling after having received the guard's debased attentions, Helios picked up the pouch, brought it to his lips.

His surroundings changed again. Thankfully, he managed to pull himself from his past's claws. This felt like his present-day life. He sighed in relief.

When a dizzy Helios looked around and put his hand out to steady himself, three female vampires rushed to grab him. Wind picked at their hair and clothes. Their hot bodies pressed along his front, his legs. One put her hand to his forehead. He was back home? How?

"First? Are you all right?" Artemis looked down at him. Her eyes flared. She licked her lips.

He followed her gaze and stared. His sweater was gone while his chest and belly glistened red. As were his arms. His hands. And he knew none of it was his own.

Images flashed with dizzying clarity and for an instant Helios remembered what he had done. Or thought he had done. He felt no chagrin other than the malaise of losing something he had worked all his life to attain. Self-discipline.

As though someone else moved his hand, he grabbed the female vampire's wrist and licked the inside of it. Artemis' eyes flared yet she did not take it away. Her companion presented her own wrist. He curled his lip and grazed it with his fangs. Never, ever, had he shown any desire toward these two. With the exception of Dawn, he had not been stirred to sink his cock into any female in quite some years. Helios could not help the feeling he was slowly losing his mind. He suspected what was coming and he did not want any of it. *Wake up!*

Throaty whimpers accompanied his pitiless mouth. When Artemis kissed him, hard and deep, Helios knew he had lost against whatever fever had seized him. Again.

Their hands touched his body. Hot mouths claimed his in rapid succession. Someone was licking the blood off his chest and back. Helios shivered violently. He had to sate the hunger. It was burning him whole.

Clothes ripped when he grabbed fistfuls of it. Female moans accompanied his demanding, plundering fingers, his ravenous mouth. Sparks of reason revealed a scene of animalistic abandon, of frenzied coupling, of his member storming each female vampire in turn, front and back, then two at once, one with his cock, the other with his hand while a third filled his mouth with her sex. Cries filled his ears, dazed his brain even more. They mounted him, used his fingers, his face. He crushed them under his great weight, pounded savagely, felt his hair being pulled back, his neck being kissed and licked, his back tilled with sharp nails. He pulled out of one's vagina so he could

sink in another's anus, taking her hard on her knees, his hands full of her hips while her companions managed to sneak their own hands into his every orifice, to take turns returning his ferocious attentions. He came. He kept thrusting. One of the female vampires stood over her companion, who was on all fours receiving him, crushed her sex to his mouth and trapped him there by fistfuls of hair. And he fucked her with his tongue, fucked her friend with his cock while the nameless third fucked his ass with her fingers.

Yet the entire time all Helios could think about, all he could see, was the human female sleeping on his rug. His addiction. Perhaps his downfall.

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The sound of someone whimpering woke her. Dawn snapped her head up, shocked she'd fallen asleep. She felt as if she'd lost an important battle. Sitting on her heels, she rubbed her eyes. Something thick and heavy slipped from her shoulder. The vamp's coat? It still smelled of him, a mix of heady male scents and peppery mint. Like the tea he seemed to enjoy.

He'd put it on her while she slept? Why? The intimate gesture should've shocked her, confused her at least. It did neither. She was just glad he'd done it. It really was cold.

Across from her, Helios sat slumped in his chair, his eyes closed, his hands clenching and unclenching. Nightmare? It must have been terrible judging by his twitching body. Poor guy.

Her gut reaction surprised her. Why poor guy? He wasn't a "poor guy". He was a kidnapper, a criminal, worse...a vampire!

Except she couldn't help feeling sorry for him. When he shifted slightly, his head lolling to rest against one of the chair's high sides, the summoner clipped at his belt gleamed invitingly.

*Okay, you like making decisions, so here's a choice, Eindhoven – get to the handbag on the counter, unzip it then grab the summoner...or go for the vamp's instead.*

She'd rather use her own summoner, but being the fashion slave that she was, her handbag would make a racket if she tried to unzip it wide enough to slip her hand in. Designers had this habit of providing their shallow customers with flashy fashion accessories. In her case, a crispy, oh-so-gorgeous polymer compound handbag worth a fortune. And noisy as hell.

*His then.*

She wouldn't get another chance like this one.

Dawn stood slowly. For once, her knees didn't click. Because the chair was set on the other end of the thick rug, with its back against the wall and its two front legs on the carpet, Dawn had to cross the entire place, all seven paces of it. She counted. Her chest quivered with her rapid-but-silent breathing. At her sides, her hands jerked into fists

then straightened again. She shook them out to try to release the tension. When she stood right in front of his big feet—the guy must have worn size eighteen—she froze and waited.

Whatever dream plagued his subconscious had to be particularly nasty as his lip was curled in a half snarl, half grimace of pain while his eyeballs rolled up and down underneath his eyelids. A deep frown carved his smooth brow. His jagged fringe of hair had spilled over his face and shadowed his features even more. Dawn thought he looked utterly vulnerable sitting this way, prey to whatever monster hunted him and if the thought—quickly subdued—of caressing his head to make it all go away did cross her mind, she bit hard and focused on her task. She had to get out of there. He was dangerous.

*A danger to your sanity.*

But his dream must have switched gears because the whimpers ceased, the frown smoothed. To her complete shock Dawn noticed the vampire was getting excited. Very excited.

*So he is proportional. Hot damn.*

A substantial hard-on swelled his pant leg along the inside of his thigh and Dawn couldn't look at anything else. It'd always been a rampant joke among women to wonder if vampire males had been created perfect down there too, even if the notion of interspecies sex was a taboo subject—and an illegal practice. She'd been the first to wonder and joke about it. She didn't know about other vamps, but this one sure looked as if he'd been created with some great, great enthusiasm for life. Saliva pooled under her tongue. Her nipples hardened.

*Oh great timing. Just get the summoner.*

Dawn's breathing accentuated the opening of her shirt but she'd do it up later when she wasn't standing over a sleeping dragon. She reached out slowly, smoothly. When a wicked grin lifted a corner of his mouth, Dawn froze. No more monsters then? Naughty vamp.

With a sigh he mumbled a word. Dawn opened her mouth but stopped the exclamation of shock right before it left. What had he said?

A great intake of air swelled his muscular chest. Through the sweater tucked into his Army fatigues, his pectorals bulged enticingly. He murmured something, swallowed, repeated. "Dawn."

There it was again!

She hadn't dreamed it. The guy was saying her name during a...well...very pleasant dream. The urge to chuckle made her press her lips together. What was wrong with him? With her too? He'd kidnapped her then bitten her and was now having wet dreams about her? And she, not any smarter, was presently wishing she could see inside his head and maybe get to play too. Her brainwaves must have been flatlining.

To keep her balance, Dawn placed one foot between his and the other by the chair's leg then gradually bent over until she had to lean on one hand against an armrest. The leather creaked slightly. She froze, waited.

Helios' dream must have been getting exciting because he rolled his hips upward, his cock pressing hard against the pants and making Dawn salivate copiously. After a few deep breaths, she lowered her hand to his waist, studied the summoner before attempting to unclip it. She had to lean her head to do it and stopped breathing so he wouldn't feel her exhalations on his face or neck. He smelled nice, now that she was close enough to judge. Not cologne, more similar to a natural scent that tickled her senses. *He's hot, obviously smart and smells nice. Boy, isn't he just trouble on legs!*

After the initial inhalation that allowed her to smell him, she really stopped breathing altogether. Because he'd mentioned sentinels, she'd have to send a message from right here and not try to run away and alarm half the block and get hurt—or killed—in the process. Just send a quick text message then let the police come in and arrest them all.

Although an image of Helios being captured—with all the fanfare imaginable given his identity—didn't satisfy her one bit. They wouldn't kill him right away. In fact, Dawn suspected they wouldn't kill him at all. They'd tried once and he'd survived. No, she thought with her throat tightening. They'd keep him alive a long time, if only to study him and test serums and who knew what on this anomaly of a vampire. Hemosynthes would be right up there with everyone else too.

Nearly suspended over Helios, Dawn's fingers finally reached the summoner. She kept her gaze on his face. Just a little twist would undo the clip. He stirred, parted his mouth.

Then his eyes flared wide.

*Crap. Should've gone for the designer's crispy purse then.*

"Dawn," he said, clearly this time. The blue of his eyes shimmered like a pair of lapis-lazuli stones.

Before she could retract her hand, he grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her over him for a searing kiss. She landed sideways, kneeling half on, half off his lap. His erection poked her in the inner thigh. A steel rod that thing!

A hand behind her nape trapped her to his face, yet she couldn't manage to find the will to pull back. To even try. After the initial fire, his mouth softened, perfect lips traced hers, grazed her mouth from corner to corner then along her jaw, up her cheek. Dawn had her eyes closed. She didn't want to see the triumph in his eyes. It was enough that she felt like an imbecile for caving in on the first damned night.

"What were you doing bent over me?" he whispered against her mouth before preventing Dawn from answering by pressing his lips to hers. Just enough pressure to make it thrilling, yet not enough to poke her with his sharp teeth. The guy knew exactly what he was doing.

She opened her eyes to see him looking at her in astonishment and disbelief. But not in triumph. No smug smirk, no “gotcha” narrowing of the eyes. He looked as surprised as she felt that she’d stay there, kneeling between his thighs and not try to push away. He’d *kissed* her!

“You were having a nightmare.”

The pupils dilated suddenly, pushed the blue outward until there was nothing left but black and white. His nostrils flared. “I was.”

While she gripped the armrests to raise herself over his lap, Helios kissed her mouth, her face, her throat. Dawn closed her eyes. And as much as the notion of having a vampire kiss her should disgust her, she couldn’t, just could not, bring herself to feel anything but all-consuming lust, a burning need to have him touch her and to touch him in return. His hard body, his soft lips.

Stockholm Syndrome. Big time.

He looked into her eyes and seemed about to say something. Dawn crushed her mouth back against his to silence him. No talking. Words would mess it all up, would burst the bubble and force her to think, which might not be a good idea right at that instant since she was making out with a vampire...her kidnapper. Another reason to keep him busy was the summoner clipped at his belt.

*Keep telling yourself that.*

A soft moan left him when Dawn framed his face with her hands, which forced her heavily against him, and proceeded to kiss every portion of his perfect vampire face—and he had the softest skin on any man she’d kissed.

*That’s because he’s not one.*

Her hands shaking, she leaned her chin against his neck, using him for support, and unbuttoned her jacket all the way, each button revealing more and more of her cleavage, baring her deep-collared shirt and the sliver of satin bra that had seemed to make him lose it the last time. As shocking and outrageous as it could be, Dawn didn’t feel all that concerned she was using her feminine attributes to get something from him. Women did it all the time. Men too. Although she was old enough to recognize the blade of genuine arousal poking her—her own Sword of Damocles—and would do well to make sure she didn’t fall into her own trap. She was doing it for his benefit, so he’d forget to keep an eye on her.

*Yeah, right.*

She was presently pulling her shirt out of her tight pants and desperately wrestling out of her adjusted jacket...to get at the summoner. Only that. Nothing else. She was using him, his lust—and her own—for ulterior motives that had nothing to do with desire and everything to do with getting out.

*Mm-mm.*

As her mom used to do when a teenaged Dawn would come back with a harebrained lie about her whereabouts, she'd go "Mm-mm" with that disbelieving arch to her perfectly plucked eyebrow then leave it at that.

*Aw, fine, I am enjoying all of this, his hands, those wonderfully skilled hands, and his burning mouth. And I just can't wait to finally put to rest my theory about vampire males' supposed proportions. So sue me!*

The vampire placed his large, hot palm against the small of her back, pressed ever so slightly then went up under her shirt, tracing a path along her spine right up to the dawn of her skull. Heat followed in a tingly wake. The odd stimulation, now safely tucked in the "massively addictive" category, stiffened her nipples...even if the guy had not come anywhere near them.

Dawn nearly fainted with the jumble of impulses fighting for her brain's attention. Goodness, what was that? Panting hard, she drew back to stare at him.

"So it is true what they say about human females." His whisper stirred strands of platinum hair that had fallen over his eye. His high cheekbone gleamed with a shadow of a smirk.

She closed her eyes briefly when a rush of adrenaline spread. "W-what do they say about us?"

"That you are more receptive to the touch." While his hand followed her spine, his other toyed with the lapel of her parted jacket. "Humans' bone structure is much thinner than vampires', especially the spine. This allows for heightened sensations to be experienced by the spinal cord. Like these."

He did it again, brought his hand up her back, the pressure between a gentle rub and a massage—which she loved—and sparked another wave of impulses that tingled all the way to her heels. She couldn't stifle the moan his gesture elicited nor the arch of her back. Dawn realized she had her chin up high, exposing her throat to a vamp, one who'd already bitten her once, and snapped it down abruptly.

"I will not bite you again, Dawn. Not unless you give me reason to."

"A reason like what?"

"Like a request."

Who in their right mind would ask for that?

With her body fired as never before, Dawn admired his heaving chest, elected it to Most Marvelous Ever rank and vowed to kiss every square inch of it. But he'd have to lose the sweater first. As much as the black turtleneck suited him perfectly, she wanted to see skin. See it, touch it, kiss it. Ordinarily, she loved biting her boyfriends...but with this one, she was afraid to trigger a reciprocal reaction.

While he rubbed her spine up and down, each pass bringing her closer to one shameless groan of pleasure, Dawn tugged his sweater out of his pants and rolled it up until he got the hint and lifted his arms.

There could've been a choir of angelic voices with silver trumpets and it wouldn't have been as glorious as seeing his chest for the first second. And the second and third and fourth seconds too. Sinewy, covered in lean muscles that played under his bronzed skin, that torso, that belly—*oh my, that belly*—could have graced any fashion magazine on the planet and Dawn wondered why it didn't. It was so unfair to females everywhere, to be denied the sight of this dazzling specimen. But then again, he wasn't human and therefore didn't really count. How small-minded and...wrong this whole species thing was.

*That's a very poorly timed attack of morality you're having there. But I guess we can't control these things.*

Their breaths mixed when she bent over, leaned her chin against his while she snaked curled-in fingers down his chest and ribs, which made him come off the backrest to wrap his arms around her waist and hold her tight. The top of his head fit perfectly under her chin and Dawn closed her eyes to keep reality at bay. With her eyes tightly shut, she could imagine they weren't in some sort of factory tower, surrounded by nothing but concrete and steel, she could pretend she hadn't been kidnapped. One thing she couldn't, wouldn't, forget...that Helios was a vampire. Even if society drilled into people's heads it was wrong, through the tangled layer of propriety—and even legality—to kiss a vampire, this particular one, the First, Helios, felt abundantly good. More than good. Deep in her, it felt right.

So when Helios showed signs he was willing to take this further by slowing his kissing yet deepening it, by snaking his fingers along the closure of her bra, affectionately, almost reverently, Dawn didn't put forward any opposition. In fact, she was right there wanting into the guy's clothes. Reaching back, she flicked her bra open. Liberated, her breasts dropped, tingly and covered in goose bumps. She shivered in contentment. And arousal.

Helios pulled his mouth away to stare at her. "Why—"

Dawn put her entire hand against his mouth. She could feel the twin points digging in her palm. "If you talk, it's going to spoil everything. And I don't want this spoiled. Okay?"

Could he have looked more lost for words? His pupils enlarged then retracted like the circular windows in her office. The only thing missing was the set of steel shutters spreading outward like irises. The blue of his eyes reminded her of a clear day, except his shade had the extra sparkle so characteristic to his kind. The platinum of his eyelashes resembled velvety brushes and fanned outward in the thickest, longest, she'd seen on anyone. She'd never noticed that on other vamps. Were they all this gorgeous, this...perfect?

She would've stared at his eyes all night. That is, had she not been previously engaged in some very pleasant activity.

With a finger so gentle she barely felt it, he traced her mouth, the bridge of her nose, the arch of her eyebrows, all the while with his mouth parted that allowed a peek of his

tongue as it ran back and forth behind his upper front teeth. Dawn didn't think he did it on purpose, but she'd never seen someone acting in such a teasing way.

Inch by inch, his finger traced serpentine shapes lower on her neck, at the juncture of her collarbone, to which he seemed to pay particular attention before dipping inside her cleavage. Dawn leaned back over his lap, found her balance then slowly, her heart pounding like a badly tuned hyperactive metronome, she undid the buttons on her shirt. She started from the bottom. Helios' eyes flared for each subtle release. As did his nostrils. Finally, when she'd frothed herself—and him, judging by the rapid heaves of his wide chest—into complete and uninhibited lust, Dawn parted her shirt.

*"Dawn..."*

His murmur served as an accelerant to the fire spreading through her. As did the intense hunger shining in his eyes. He licked his lips. Those decadent, curved-just-right lips.

Keeping him enthralled by her nudity hadn't been in her plan, but what the hell. Dawn rolled her shoulders back and let the shirt fall. She then dipped a shoulder one at a time and let the loose bra straps fall to her elbows and was about to take it off entirely when he shook his head and hesitantly—god, was he shy—pinched the middle, right between the cups, and pulled it to him so it'd slide off her arms. A long sigh deflated his chest when the black bra hung limp in his fingers.

*Okay, this is different.*

The guy never looked once at her breasts, instead gazing up into her eyes. How personal. How intimate.

And it allowed her a great view into the guy's soul. Which did not play well with her plan. She didn't want to see the hurt there, the loneliness, and sure as hell didn't want to be caught in the electric blue abyss that was his gaze. Damn.

She couldn't remember seeing so much pain in someone's gaze. Dawn Eindhoven didn't pride herself in being attuned to her Feelings Antenna, the supposed feminine receiver in all women. It wasn't expected of her, neither was it beneficial to her job or her life. Hell, sometimes she couldn't remember which was supposed to take precedence over the other. Still, the ache in Helios' eyes cut through the many layers of detachment she'd accumulated over the years. It cut right through her objectivity, her tendency—or gift—for cynicism and her ability to discard anything and anyone not of value to her. In fact, Dawn knew it'd cut right to her heart.

*And to think Womack says I don't have one!*

Her boss had always said he'd hired her because she'd looked heartless during the interview. A trait they shared, the old jerk was proud to say. How flattering...

She swallowed hard. She would've forced the feelings down but knew herself too well to believe they'd go away. Letting something fester out of sight never did anyone any good. She was stubborn if nothing else and now she was in big trouble.

Helios carefully placed her bra on the armrest by her knee. "This was not supposed to happen."

“So it’s a problem then?”

“I did not say it was.”

“Good.”

A tender finger traced the space between her breasts before swerving to the left and coming up over an aching nipple. She wanted him with an acuity that frightened her. She couldn’t remember wanting another man—*which he’s not*—more than this. Then he stopped and put his hands back on the armrests.

*Excuse me?*

“Something wrong?”

Helios nodded. “I have not been...” he stopped, swallowed then planted his gaze on hers. “I have not been intimate in a very long time.”

“It doesn’t change anything.”

*I’m such a big liar.*

It changed everything. She was ready to make love—*whoa, rephrase this*—have sex with a centuries-old vampire, the hottest male she’d ever seen, and he was dropping this one at her feet. Why? To make her feel special, to gain an advantage? To make her trust him more, show a softer side of him? Well, it didn’t work on the trust part, but to deny she felt special would amount to saying she thought he was ugly.

“It should,” he countered, his wicked mouth glistening when he licked his lips, and seemed to force his gaze away from her with great difficulty.

“Fine, have it your way.”

Without warning, Dawn leaned over his face and kissed him hard. She gasped when a fang poked her in the bottom lip. The metallic tang of blood made her tongue contract. She knew he’d tasted it too.

His reaction was instantaneous. Dawn let out a great humph when her back connected against the floor—thank god for the rug—and the huge vampire settled on top of her, all smooth, burning skin. Any trace of doubt had left him. Helios looked as fired as she felt.

She’d woken a sleeping giant.

## Chapter Four

Helios was so relieved to realize it had only been a dream, that he had not gone out of his home to terrorize hapless humans or mate with those sentinels... He had not even left his chair. It meant he was still in control. At least a little bit. Dawn's blood had not made him a murdering beast after all. His relief had quickly shifted though to find the human bent over him. So close he could feel the heat of her skin. And now they were about to share something unbelievably personal, something he had not done in decades.

He filled his mouth, his hands with every part of her he could reach. The softest, palest skin between her breasts quickly became his favorite spot. He licked it, kissed it, blew softly to see the tiny hairs rise then he would lick them down again. By the humble light high between the steel I-beams, he could see Dawn enjoyed his touch very much, which surprised him to the highest degree. Should she not be leery of him, her kidnapper? A vampire? She did not seem to be. In fact, Dawn responded to his touch in ways he had never experienced before. Even if he had not had very many lovers of late—something he knew Artemis wanted to change—she had none of the female vampires' cool perfection or their rigidity. Soft yet resilient, smooth—so smooth—and cool, her skin provided a perfect contrast to his burning lips.

He was being intimate with a human...willingly. He should have been revolted at the mere thought of their naked bodies together. At least shocked. The last time he had been naked around a human still caused him nightmares.

When she combed her fingers in his hair, raked it back from his face so she could look at him, Helios felt strangely buoyed. Drunk.

As he knew they would, her legs felt lean and nimble when she entwined them with his own, and the contact all but made him want to take her then and there. But doing so felt rushed, felt as if he would be cheapening the passion that had stirred him out of his shell to reach tentative fingers toward something shiny and bright.

And dangerous.

But too late now, he was already holding it in his hands and if it stung him, he would be hurt. Deeply.

"We do not have to be enemies," he murmured against her breast. He ran two fingers over her nipple, watched it tighten temptingly, a pebble of flesh, a rosy button he longed to bite. He would not.

Dawn bumped her head back against the rug when he circled her nipple. "Then let me go."

"I cannot do that. I must get the entry codes first." Helios kissed her breast, lipped her nipple but did not take it into his mouth. Much too tempting.

"You know I can't, and even if I did..." She bit her bottom lip, arched slightly. "It wouldn't help you. Everything's locked down."

"Surely those are keys you could acquire." He licked her nipple, fought the urge to trap it between his lips. He would not want to let go if he did.

"Ahhh... Only m-my boss has the master set and I'm not breaking into his office for you guys. He'd kill me."

Fear wrapped a cold, clammy fist around his heart and pulled it down. Helios abruptly raised his face so he could look into her eyes. "Would he?"

She shrugged. "Look, don't put images of Womack in my head, it's...ugh. He's a slimy old bastard, if you know what I mean."

*And if he ever touches you, he will be a dead one.*

But Helios did not voice his vow for fear she would use it as leverage against him. He had learned to be wary of every human, even those as intoxicating as she.

Keeping his weight off her, he traced the space between her breasts with his tongue tapered into a narrow point. His teeth ached, felt loose. He could not give in. He would not bite her again.

As gently as he could given the difference in sizes, he wedged a thigh between hers, leaned on an elbow so he could free a hand and caress her as she ought to be caressed, to be cherished and tenderly...loved.

Helios could not remember ever saying the word, to himself or others.

His mouth now on hers, he ran a finger along her jaw, her throat, along her side and found the closure to her pants, which he flicked open with his thumb. Her skin felt cool against his when he lowered himself on top of her, snaked his hand into her pants and marveled at the silky quality of her hips. She gyrated while he pressed a hand to her mons and pushed it up against his palm. Her responses triggered massive arousal. He felt himself become even harder, painfully so. Another first. Nothing had ever awoken him so completely, so deeply, as this lithe human female.

Dawn moaned when he slipped the tips of his fingers along her cleft. Then it was his turn to voice his pleasure when she cupped his crotch and squeezed, her slender human hand barely long enough to contain him, which reminded him acutely of their size difference. Helios loved how light reflected in her jet black hair, how it glistened like ink, flowed outward from her high brow and fanned around her head. A halo of obsidian. He bent over until he could fill his face with her glorious mane, inhaled her scent, parted his lips and followed the long straight threads, the entire time his eyes closed so he could better savor Dawn, better savor the female so unlike any he had ever known. Deliberately slow, Helios curled his middle finger, followed the natural curve under her mons, parted her lips—so hot and moist. Dawn pushed against his hand. He dipped inside. She was tight.

She pumped against his finger, rhythmically, with a certain cadence and force that taught the way she enjoyed it. Helios gladly obliged. He loved the texture of her channel, supple, hot and so very wet. The ache in his jaw and teeth doubled. Searing, the pain knifed him in the gut.

Dawn humphed when he bore down on her, pulled her pants around her thighs one-handed while the other still pleased her.

"Hurry," she whispered before twisting out of her soaked panties. She began to work at his pants.

The belt.

Helios wrapped his hand over his precious summoner and slid it behind so she could not reach it, even if he now realized she had not meant to. Coming up on his knees, he unbuckled the belt, enjoyed that she watched him like a hawk would, hunger plain in her dark gaze, on her red shiny lips. Helios stood, pulled his boots and pants off then backed away so he could sit in his chair.

Hands gripped around the armrests, he widened his feet, let her fill her eyes with his naked form. His cock stood proudly, bobbing with his breath. "Come to me, Dawn."

He expected her not to. But she did.

Dawn stood so she too could kick out of her garments then took a tentative step toward him. A subtle radiance emanated from her pale skin. Helios could have gazed at her the rest of his life. Had he been an artist, he would have spent his lifetime trying to capture the essence of her, all the while knowing it was impossible yet yearning to make her his this way. Another step brought her barely a pace away.

"Turn around and kneel between my feet."

She arched an eyebrow, clearly irked by his demands. Helios grinned. His fangs broke the seal of his lips. How he hungered for her. The smile died right away.

"I will not hurt you, Dawn. I want to show you that I can pleasure you in ways you have never experienced. Unless you have been intimate with a vampire before..."

The thought vexed him. Jealousy? How inopportune and atypical of him.

She shook her head. "You're my first vampire." The tone was mocking even if her face looked serious.

With her eyes narrowed, she stepped between his feet, turned around and sat on her heels.

"Place your hands where mine are," Helios murmured against the nape of her neck. So slender and inviting.

She did as he instructed and now knelt between his feet with her back to him, her hands against the armrests, her spine straight.

Helios leaned over until his chin rested on top of her head then snaked both his hands down to her bottom, which he cupped simply for the pleasure of it. Then he curled the index, middle and ring fingers on his right hand, pressed against her coccyx then ran them upward like a rake. Up between her shoulder blades then stopped by her

nape, went back and repeated the process. With each, Dawn arched slightly and sighed. At the third pass, Helios added slightly more pressure. Over her shoulder, he could tell by the way her nipples had hardened into tight little pebbles that she enjoyed his touch very much. Exhilarated and proud, he brought his hand up along her spine several times, blowing on her nape, murmuring in her ears until Dawn's spine was arched back in a pronounced curve. Her hands shook.

"You enjoy my touch?" he whispered through her hair. His fingers raked up her spine. She shivered violently.

"Yes."

"Would you want me to caress you lower?"

Dawn turned around to look at him. "Lower...?"

Helios replied with his first two fingers. He licked them, reached below her coccyx then pressed them against her vulva, did not stay there but instead collected her juices, which he smeared back to her anus. "There."

She "mm-ed" then let her head roll back until it rested against one of the armrests. He used the utmost care when he rubbed around her nether hole, circles increasingly smaller, closer to her core, closer to the wrinkled bud, which he entered with his middle finger. Her reaction was instantaneous. The spine arched, the chin lifted up high, the throaty moan seemed to go on forever. While he pleased her this way, he reached over her shoulder and cupped a breast.

He penetrated her slowly, tenderly, with precision and smoothness, then he did it with more urgency, followed her rising keens, her shivering body, the swelling of her breasts. She was biting her lips, making them even redder. Her eyes were tightly shut. More than moans now, but sharp little cries accompanied his entry. Helios made his hands more demanding.

"Ohhh."

One of her hands started to slip from the armrest. Helios put it back then returned to caressing her breast. His other hand never stopped moving.

Biting his lip against the massive arousal threatening his judgment, Helios stabbed his finger in, trapped her breast, rolled her nipple. Dawn accentuated the tight C in her spine then let out a long whimper. Helios knew she had climaxed, could feel the tightening around the finger fucking her. So he thrust. Her whimper turned into a crescendo of cries. He thought he could recognize his name. This pleased him enormously but also threatened his prudence. If he let go, he might hurt her. Or more aptly, he might hurt himself. His budding attachment for the human female loomed over his head. Dawn was gyrating now, bucking up and down against his hand so he would take her harder.

When he exited her to gather more juices—which were in abundance—she collapsed on her elbows, offering him a stunning view of her distended pussy and anus, all rosy and glistening, so inviting.

The next second, Helios had his large hands clutched around her hips and his cock poised for a brutal taking that never came. At the last possible second, he bit his cheek hard, tasted blood on his tongue, then slid into her welcoming flesh gently, slowly. She cried out, threw her head back. Muscles played along her lean back and shoulders. He envisioned himself slamming into her like a battering ram would. But the bestial impulse safely remained in his head. Where it ought to be.

"Helioss..." She twisted to look at him. "I want you to take me."

He had to close his eyes to sever the vision of her ass spread wide, her sex stretched around his huge vampire cock, so much larger than human males'. He slid in, retreated.

"Take me," she growled with a toss of her long hair.

His hands dug deeper than he intended but he could not loosen them, nor could he unlock his jaws. Hunger for her flesh, her blood, pounded in his balls, his head. Helios blinked, shook his head.

Dawn extended her arms in front and gave a mighty push backward that all but speared her to him. Helios growled.

"I said," Dawn said through clenched teeth, "that I want you to take me. So take me."

He did.

A haze of carnality descended over him, clouded his vision with crimson. His hands pitiless on Dawn's hips, he rammed himself as hard as he could. The clack of skin against skin. Her glistening pussy. Her rosy anus. His cock burning, plundering, stretching, the end of her channel with each powerful push. His name on her lips, hers in his throat, filling his home, his head. His heart.

Helios took Dawn as he had never taken a female before. His voice soon joined hers, a backbeat to her high-pitched keens. He came violently. His seed, barren as a frozen steppe, shot out in burning jets.

The burn triggered by his massive member tightened her entry painfully, but deeper in he filled her nicely, as though he'd been built for her. Dawn let out one mighty cry when she climaxed again and even if moaning his name wouldn't rank on her most assertive and female-on-top moments, it sure felt good. That name was meant to be moaned.

The pounding decelerated, diminished in force as well and left her pleasantly sore and tingly. Dawn collapsed on her front, panting, wheezing.

Helios pulled out slowly, caressed her butt for a while then she felt him standing. When his large coat settled over her back, she turned her head, studied his expression then leaned on an elbow.

"You're going to have to let me go eventually, Helios."

He shook his head. "I am patient. I can wait."

To her shock, he went back to his chair, collapsed more than sat and closed his eyes. His wide chest rose and fell quickly. His bronzed skin glistened with sweat, his glans with cum. Despite the cold, Dawn could tell he was hot. So was she.

“What now?” she asked, rolling to her side to look at her strange kidnapper.

“We sleep.”

“I thought you said you didn’t need much sleep.”

A shadow of a smile rounded a cheekbone. “I do now.”

So he did, fell asleep right there with his cock still straight up.

The strangeness of the situation created a jumble of emotions for Dawn. She wanted to go back home, back to work and to her life, yet she couldn’t deny the crazy, twisted attraction she felt for Helios.

*What a messed-up thing we have.*

\* \* \* \* \*

When she woke the next day to cold gray light poking timidly through a small crack in the placarded window, she noticed Helios was gone. Her clothes wrestled on in record time, she ventured near the door just as it opened. Damn!

He had food for her. She wondered if he had “eaten” that day. They bathed in his humble bathroom—contraband water system...one of many in the city, no doubt—each in turn, a heavy silence between them. Dawn couldn’t reconcile the fiery lover of the night before with the stoic vampire sitting in his chair that day. He barely looked at her. And a tic regularly pulled at his eyelid.

Evening settled in. She’d sat against the wall, slept by fits and now was completely awake—in more ways than one. She felt naked without her lipstick and wished she could just throw herself at this gorgeous piece of maleness barely ten feet from her. But that’d mean something she wasn’t ready to admit to herself.

If she was horny as hell, Helios on the contrary looked feverish and tight. He only wore his pants and boots, and that belt she so wanted to get close to. The summoner gleamed at his waist. His turtleneck was draped over the back of his chair, which didn’t help her scattered wits at all. Dawn wondered what was wrong with him. Trying not to worry for him proved impossible and after a while, she just crossed her arms and stared.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong or not?”

“I am hungry.”

“Then go eat something...someone. Er. Yeah.”

Helios narrowed his eyes. “I have fed.”

“So where’s the problem?”

“My problem sits in front of me.”

Dawn snorted a laugh. "I'll remind you that I didn't ask to come here." Not that being there wasn't making her happy in some deviant way she'd never admit in public!

"I need to get inside Hemosynthec, Dawn. I need it urgently. I am patient, determined and growing desperate. Not a combination conducive to good health for anyone involved."

She buttoned her jacket all the way up and crossed her arms. She was getting cold again. "I can't help you."

"You *will not* help me. You *choose* not to. And to add to my predicament, I seem to have lost my objectivity along the way. Last night was not supposed to happen."

She knew he didn't mean to hurt her, that he was only trying to tell her he'd slip up and wouldn't again, but the words cut anyway. Dawn gathered herself to her full height and stared. "Well, that's not something I'm about to apologize for. I enjoyed it, so did you, and that's that."

He gripped the armrests and leaned forward. His eyes blazed. "Do you not see the real problem? I did enjoy it, Dawn. More than you can ever know. And I want to have you again, take you right here and now on that floor." His gaze traveled the length of her. "I cannot let it happen again."

*'Kay. Why does that sting so badly?*

Someone was using her favorite weapon—blunt truth—against her. "Why can't you let it happen again?" And when had she become so damn needy?

He threw his hands up and sank back in his chair. "You are a drug to me, I cannot shake the thirst. I am starting to fear that I will never have enough. Can you possibly imagine how frightening it is for me to feel so dependent on a human?"

"Obviously not."

"What if I cannot satiate my thirst with any other blood? What if no one else will do?" He hooked some loose piece of hair behind his ear. His hand shook. "What if I cannot stop...go too far and...?"

She swallowed. "You wouldn't."

He stared straight at her. "Would you put your life as guarantee?"

"Sorry, don't take it personally, but I'm not the most trusting person." Dawn shrugged then quickly added, "Nothing to do with you being a vampire or anything."

"I would not trust myself even if you did. And it cuts right through my chest."

*That's your ticket home right here, woman. Use it.*

Dawn crossed the distance between them, bent over so she could put her hands over his on the armrests. He stared up into her face. A section of serrated bangs spilled over his eye. His mouth glistened alluringly.

"Some things are worth getting cut for," she said under her breath then kissed him on the cheek. Then the other. He blinked rapidly, took a deep breath and seemed about to say something.

She gasped when he wrapped his long arms around her waist and bent her against him. So her spine wouldn't snap in half, Dawn straddled his muscled thighs.

His kiss began slow and tender then grew into a burning, deep exploration. His fangs poked her lip. She moaned against his mouth, sucked his tongue and dueled with it using her own.

"Stop it," he said against her lips, nibbled them, licked them.

"You first."

He groaned.

"That's what I thought."

A moan of absolute contentment left her when Helios snaked his hand in the back of her jacket and ran it up along her backbone, did that spine-tingling thing he'd done the night before. She arched back, closed her eyes. Something hot and wet flicked the space between her collarbones, up her throat, underneath her chin, and while his hand continued to travel up and down, up and down, Helios began to rake his fangs along her jaw from earlobe to earlobe. A terrible hunger clenched her sex. Painful spasms constricted the walls of her vagina and Dawn realized with shock she'd never wanted a lover more than she wanted Helios.

To alleviate some of the pressure coiling inside her, she rolled her pelvis. Helios responded by pushing a thigh up against her sex, lowering it then pressing back up again. His hand on her back raked harder now. The intense stimulation forced her to grind herself against his thigh.

*No shame, woman.*

Dawn wrapped her arms around his head, murmuring his name under her breath. Unsure how she could've guessed, Dawn realized Helios was looking at her and she lowered her face to meet his gaze. Fire burned in the electric blue orbs or what was left of the irises.

He squeezed his other hand in front underneath her jacket and shirt—it could barely fit under the adjusted garments—and managed to find a nipple to rub between his fingers. Ohh. Lust blazed a path along her spine. "I want to have you again," he whispered.

"Mmm, me too."

"We are in trouble then."

"You bet."

"We should not be doing this." A deep kiss interrupted her heartbeat. "I should be..." He kissed her again. "Forcing you to take me up there." Another deep kiss that ended with a sharp little bite on her bottom lip. "You are human."

"As I've said," Dawn replied, fisting all that silky hair and forcing him to her cleavage. "You're male and I'm female, and that's that."

He sighed against her throat. "I wish—"

The door unexpectedly burst open.

“Crap!”

A male vampire with short hair charged in. He skidded to a halt, looked *pissed* to see Helios and she so occupied. Disgust twisted his chiseled features.

Helios merely stopped caressing her back and turned toward the intruder. “I will not tolerate such behavior from you, Dorian. When I come off this chair, you would do well to be long gone.”

“It’s a raid, First,” snapped the clearly younger vampire. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his bomber jacket. “They’re coming this way!”

A broken bowline, Helios snapped to standing while managing not to topple her off his lap but sent her instead sliding gently to her feet. He must have been a great dancer. Did vampires dance?

*Not after their twenty-hour shift at the mine they don’t.*

Awww, Hell’s Bitch was growing a conscience. How touching.

“Where?” Helios asked, not bothering to put his turtleneck back on and instead going for his cloak. “To the docks. Now.”

“They’re all there, except for the four I sent as scouts. One of them saw the riot police shuttles landing a few blocks up north.”

Dawn hurriedly rearranged her jacket and shirt under that Dorian guy’s hard stare. A repulsed sort of curl lifted his upper lip. She crossed her hands over her front and waited.

Dorian nodded. “They’re—”

The sound of a gunfight drowned the rest of his words. To her shock, Helios’ first reaction was to extend an arm in front of her. “Take her out of here. I’ll deal with the raid.”

“No!”

Why did she just blurt this out? What did it matter which vampire took her to safety?

And which would remain to face danger.

Helios turned his bronzed face to her, stared for a moment before snapping his chin toward Dorian. “Should something happen to her, Hemosynthec would forever be closed to us. All rogue vampires would die. But you would be first, and not of hunger. Understood?”

Dorian nodded, meant to grab her wrist, but she pulled it away with a “don’t you dare” stare that must have stolen the wind from his sail for he snarled something and turned on his heels.

“My handbag.”

Dawn rushed to it, shouldered it and zipped the closure tight. After slipping her feet in her cold and damp heels, she followed Dorian out the door where a slap of wind nearly toppled her from the precarious perch on which they stood.

“The Tower Bridge,” she murmured. *That’s where he lives. Good to know.*

Before she left the broken parapet and followed Dorian over some slick, foot-wide gangway she swore would be her end, Dawn turned to look at Helios as he stood alone in his cold, bare home and thought she’d never seen anything so damn poignant as his tall, dark silhouette. His gaze never left hers. The urge to wave and give an “it’s going to be all right” grin was strong. What a strange compulsion.

Lack of blood to the brain. Obviously.

Then quicker than she’d seen anyone move, Helios rushed out of his home, put one giant booted foot on the parapet and leaped over it, his coat flapping like giant black wings.

He’d jumped off the tower!

She gasped and nearly lost her grip on the wire that served as a handrail. She looked down into the street, praying she hadn’t just witnessed the guy committing suicide and fearing she’d see him broken and sprawled on the snowy concrete, but instead spotted the large vampire land on both feet then sprint away.

Holy shit.

Dorian proved a silent and demanding guide as he rushed from alley to alley, from broken-down shuttle to garbage pile. Dawn followed as quickly as she could, slipping often in her stupid heels.

“Keep up, human,” he snarled at one time.

While she kept her precious – extra precious now – handbag securely under an arm, she made a rude gesture at his back. “You think I had this in mind when I got dressed?”

He didn’t reply, only extended his arm so she’d stop. Dawn nearly stepped on his heels when he crouched by the corner of a building. He put a finger in front of his pursed lips. But the dark look he gave her was deterrent enough. She craned her neck over his wide shoulder and spotted a squad of police officers in full riot gear. They padded up the street two by two, guns never pointed at the same thing for more than a second.

*Helios needs me alive.*

Too bad.

A sudden and unexpected calm descended on her. She was already out into the deserted street by the time she heard Dorian’s hissed command that she “come back here, you stinking human”.

“Oh officers, I’m so glad,” she called out loudly, right away digging in her handbag for her ID and proffering the red plastic strip in front of her. She kept her other hand well in view in case she’d startled them, which was unlikely given their trade.

All eight gun muzzles turned toward her. “Stop there, ma’am. We’ll come to you.”

She didn’t hear a thing coming from behind her. *Take that, you filthy little shit.*

The officer took her ID, turned it around a couple of times under the pharos’ bluish light and pronounced it genuine. “What are you doing here, Miss Eindhoven? It’s

dangerous." He gave her a once-over that would've cost him a few strips of skin if they'd been anywhere else but here. As it was, she felt too glad to be visually undressed by a police officer to bitch about it.

"I missed the last sky-train home, sir, and then I got lost trying to take shortcuts. I'm so cold, you wouldn't believe."

"Oh I believe you," he replied, giving her one last pronounced look down to her heels then motioned for someone behind him. A female officer jogged forward and stopped right in front of Dawn.

"Escort the lady to the nearest sky-tube exit then report back on the double."

"What are you looking for?" Dawn asked as she squeezed her handbag with both hands.

"Vamps. There's a nest here somewhere. It's a dangerous neighborhood, ma'am."

Her heart skipped at least two beats. Despite the cold, a wave of heat flared out of her jacket. "Oh? I didn't see anyone at all and I've been walking around for hours." She even threw in a dramatic wince as she twisted her ankle.

He arched his eyebrow, cursed then turned to his team. "Stand down. We might have received wrong intel about this."

"Good night, officers," Dawn said with the fakest, toothiest smile.

He nodded in return.

While the nice officer took her to the tube exit—which wasn't as far as she'd expected...she was so lost, for real—Dawn refrained from looking back or up at the Tower Bridge poking over the nearest buildings. All she'd wanted was to get out of his house and safely back to hers. She didn't want trouble and least of all, she didn't want the sort of weight on her conscience his arrest would cause. The image of Helios standing alone in his cold, barren home still made her throat tight.

When they'd reached the tube exit—such a glorious stainless steel and clear thermoplastic tower that stabbed into the night sky—Dawn slipped her ID into the stained and worn slot. No chime announced the booth was coming for her. Must have been broken. It wouldn't fly on the upper walkways to have a broken tube chime. Different neighborhoods—and strata—different standards. Dawn was starting to notice a lot of double standards popping in at the least opportune moment. And the more she saw, the less she liked.

While the officer stood with her back turned to Dawn, she entered the booth, pivoted and nodded a split second before the thick stainless steel doors closed. With a lurch, the booth lifted high over the slums into which she'd ventured, high over Tower Bridge and the Thames. Dawn couldn't see any light coming from the lone remaining tower. Was he gone? Where?

Alone in the safety of the booth, Dawn let out a long sigh. She leaned against the wall, her knees trembling, her hands even worse. Heat radiated from her neck to her mouth at the memory of his lips there. His hands along her back. That had felt so good.

Unlike what she felt now. A traitor.

For in the chaos of Dorian's arrival and Helios' hurried dressing, Dawn had taken something of his, something that was now safely nestled in her handbag. And as much as she'd thought her deed had been born of fear and panic – which it partly was – she'd snatched it from his belt with a jumble of ulterior motives in mind as well. Some of them made sense, such as her using the item to bring Helios' budding movement to a halt. They had to be stopped. It couldn't go on.

Yet some other reasons for taking the item made very, very little sense. The twisted hope he'd be coming back for it was a good example. But he wouldn't be able to, not where she lived, in an exclusive, secured area far above the city streets.

Dawn pulled Helios' summoner out of her handbag and cradled it in her palms like she would a wounded bird.

## Chapter Five

*"I'm being transferred back to Earth," Delong announced one morning as he reported for his shift. "You gonna miss me, vamp?"*

*Helios stood back from the plastic crate he was working on, preparing charges and making sure everything would detonate in precise order. Because he had worked there longer than anyone else, Helios was considered somewhat of a magician when it came to placing charges, especially those requiring finesse and precision. He was so relieved to see the nasty human go that he forgot his place and faced Delong. Looked him in the eye.*

*The first strike caught him by surprise. As large as he was, the human was fast as well. Baton strikes hit Helios' hands, which he had wrapped around his head to protect his skull, on his shoulders, his back. When the hail of hits had abated, Delong, panting hard, knelt beside Helios, gripped his hair and yanked up so he would look at him again.*

*"Maybe a few days in the hole would do you good, huh? Couple of days without the enzyme, whadya think, vamp?"*

*Helios felt blood dribbling down his split lip and couldn't resist the urge to suck at it. Delong's face screwed into a grimace. "You're such disgusting freaks. Get up."*

*Then the human made a terrible mistake. He stood and turned his back on Helios.*

Helios shook his head. The dark turn of his thoughts seemed to make the wind more biting, the snow colder. His loneliness more acute.

Wind bit his knuckles as he gripped the slippery metal lip covering the roof's edge, crouched behind the thick safeguard. Wet snow clung to his bangs and dripped onto his face. Yet he stayed perfectly immobile. His view of the Tower Bridge proved perfect. He would see them coming from two blocks at least. And they would come. Anytime now.

When another hour had passed, he rolled his shoulders and switched legs. His hunger was knifing him again. Would it ever cease?

The police had raided the neighborhood next to his, the sound of gunfire keeping him on edge for the better part of the night. Yet it had not spilled anywhere near his compound. What was keeping them? With his summoner, they would know exactly where to find him. And his caches of depth charges.

A wave of heat tickled his nape. Dorian had lost her. Anger stirred deep beneath the surface. He had not given in to his anger in many years. Since his escape in fact, and would not now. But the temptation to punish Dorian had been strong, especially since his fellow vampire seemed to think she was not important to them. She was.

*To me.*

Helios sighed. The heat of her lips still tingled on his. When everything else was endlessly cold, bare and dark, she had been a blade of dazzling light, hot to the touch and keen of mind. Dawn Eindhoven had come into his life as a blinding spring sunray, melted some of the frost then had vanished to let winter claim him again.

“And left with my summoner,” he growled. A thin ribbon of breath curled in front of his face.

Not just his mouth remembered the feel of the human female, his cock too. And she had been just as responsive as the rampant vampire joke wanted it to be. Her skin, her lean back, her breasts blooming from the tailored jacket and shirt. With a shake of his head that dislodged strands of hair, Helios stood and looked above at the upper walkways, which resembled clear horizontal tubes with concrete poured along the bottom, wondering where she was. Had she not given the summoner to the police? Would they not be raiding his compound tonight? Unless they were preparing themselves.

*What are they waiting for?*

A jumble of emotions assailed him. As much as he was being irrational and unwise, he missed the human female already. Only a handful of hours had passed since he had last seen her, standing on the parapet behind Dorian, the wind tossing her black hair back from her face. Then she had left, had severed the fragile thread linking them – visually at least – and Helios had felt so utterly, hopelessly...

“Alone.”

“As we all are,” a female voice replied.

He turned to see Artemis and Dorian, both looking at him with expressions that spanned the entire spectrum, from open affection to seething rage.

Helios required several deep breaths to calm himself. Dorian had lost her. Arrogant, careless fool. What if his negligence had cost Dawn her life instead? The thought of her dying... It was too painful to contemplate.

Dorian shoved his hands in his pockets. “You should have let me force her. She would have talked.”

By his side, Artemis threw him a menacing glare.

“How old are you, Dorian?”

“You know how –”

“How old?” Helios repeated, coming closer. *Control is paramount.* His mantra did not seem to calm him this time. She could have been killed.

“Twenty-four.”

“Remember your place.”

“My place?” Dorian demanded, puffing great clouds of breath in the freezing air. “My place should be there.” He pointed above their heads, where the sky-trains and upper walkways gleamed like shooting stars. “As their equal! I should be walking

among them, working and eating and *living*. These fucking monkeys think they're gods! They'll have to face us eventually. I'll *make* them face us."

"And they will—"

"When, Helios? When exactly are we going to take our place? We could've dealt them a crushing blow already." Dorian threw his hands up and spat a vile curse. "They won't listen if we don't force them to."

Underneath her thick felt cape, Artemis crossed her arms with a shake of her head. "You're out of line, Dorian. First will tell us when the time is right."

"I don't want to wait anymore!" he growled, showing his particularly wicked set of fangs. "I'm sick of waiting and playing nice. I'm sick of seeing my kind going without the basic necessities. I want to feed freely as you do!"

Helios nodded. "And you will. But we must—"

"WHEN?! Huh? When? We're starving! Maybe you were too busy playing with your human whore to notice but things—"

Dorian never had time to finish.

Helios' hand had closed over the smaller vampire's throat in a flesh and bone crusher and sent him flying sideways, through the low brick wall separating the building on which they stood from the next. Dorian's flight crashed to a halt against a concrete wall thirty feet away. He slid to the ground, crouched on a knee, looking momentarily stunned. Some of the mortar had cracked and peeled off in a gray shower behind him. A brick fell off to land with a muffled thud in the inch-thick snow. He picked himself up right away.

"Oh now you show your real face?" he taunted, spitting blood and crouching. "The great First has stirred from his perch, ladies and gentlemen! Behold!"

He rushed for Helios.

Showing surprising strength, he slammed so hard and fast, Dorian nearly tackled him. Snow flew when the pair went waltzing across the roof, barreled into a furnace booth, crushing a corner of corrugated steel under the violence of the crash. Unbalanced, they toppled over the ledge and fell twenty feet below on a small shed, which they neatly demolished. By the corner of his eye, Helios spotted Artemis leaping to join them.

"You're acting like fools!"

But Helios was past listening to Artemis' sensible words. He grabbed Dorian's jacket in both hands, twirled once and sent him crashing against an abandoned church's wrought iron fence, which moaned then buckled, broke off at the hinges and fell under the vampire's weight. Helios was already standing over the supine Dorian, seizing his collar to bring him up by the time the younger vampire had humphed.

Something yanked him back by the coat. He shoved the offender away.

Helios used his great reach to encircle the younger vampire's shoulders and force him up to his mouth. With a growl, he bit him but missed the throat. Nylon shredded between his teeth, cut his gums.

"First! Dorian!" Artemis interposed herself with an arm and most of her upper body between the two males, tried to separate them but was unable to tear Helios' fists from the bomber jacket. "Stop it!"

Howling in rage, Dorian fisted Helios' coat and threw himself back and over, forcing them all to roll head over heels. Snow flew in all directions. Helios' coat ripped opened with a loud, dry sound, each button flying out to leave his chest and belly denuded to winter's icy bite.

They charged right back at one another again. Amid swirling snow and Artemis' yells, both male vampires went on the attack. Despite Dorian's speed and impressive force, Helios surpassed the other by a full head and at least fifty pounds. When the young vampire barreled into him, he was waiting. A quick sidestep and a twist brought him right behind the charging bull. He grabbed a fistful of bomber jacket, gave a violent tug that unbalanced Dorian, whose feet flew in front of him. To show he was past tolerance, Helios hoisted him off the ground, let him dangle impotently before bringing him to his face. But he did not sink his fangs into Dorian as he had wanted to only a few seconds before. Already anger had abated and disappointment settled in.

"We'll never be free if we fight one another!" snarled Artemis as she drew near and put her arm over Helios' wrist, the one holding Dorian.

"Leave," Helios said to the vampire male before dropping him and taking a step away.

"We can't hide forever, Helios," Dorian spat over his shoulder as he marched over the broken fence, twisted metal rods under his feet. The bottom section clattered against the concrete sidewalk and sent snow flying out in mini twisters.

Helios panted slightly, looked down at his ruined coat, his bare chest, then raked his hands in his hair. Despair threatened to send him over the edge. As much as hearing Dorian calling Dawn a whore had enraged him to his core, the young vampire had been right. Helios had been too busy making love to the human female to notice that he had let a perfect opportunity pass. When had his world started falling apart? His supporters were growing increasingly more restless and he could not blame them. Yet this all pained him.

Then again, the most acute pain resided not in his "movement" and its lack of success but at the hollowness left by the human female's departure. And her betrayal. She had taken his edge. Another human had once again taken from him, stolen something of his.

"First?" Artemis said, putting a tentative hand over his denuded pectoral.

He stared at it, wanted it gone, but did not talk or move. Nor did he try to stop Artemis when she caressed his chest, his belly. To his shame, he was instantly hard. She looked down, seemed to notice his reaction.

Wind whistled a forlorn tune around the deserted churchyard and sent drifts of snow into dark corners created by the ancient architectural style. He was so cold.

Artemis' hot hand gently stroked his chest, up to his neck, then low again right over his belt. An erection he wished he could subdue swelled the Army fatigues along his inner thigh. He did not look into the female vampire's eyes for he knew the affection blazing in them, had often wished for it to be gone or for her to hide it better. He felt nothing for Artemis.

*Perhaps I should.*

She was a vampire at least, not a human, and he should feel drawn to her. Artemis was beautiful and strong, smart enough to try to separate two brutish males when they had so few allies. He ought to feel something for her, his supporter, his kind. A fellow vampire.

His heart breaking, Helios reached out tentatively, thumbed her chin. She drew closer by a step. He could smell her feminine scent. She was aroused. So was his body. Only he feared it was not in response to her but to someone else.

She cupped his erection in her long hand. Heat seeped through the thick cloth and warmed his balls. He was so cold. How he craved for the heat of a female companion.

*She stole from you. Forget her.*

Her pupils dilated, Artemis raised her chin to his. She was going to kiss him.

*Let her. Better yet, you kiss her.*

As much as he tried to focus on the female vampire, another image juxtaposed itself over reality, that of a human female with the blackest hair and smoothest skin. His loss, the feeling of emptiness and the bitter chill numbing his limbs, the jagged pain created by her escape seared him, triggered a series of sharp twinges of pain to flare in his chest. For a second, he feared collapsing.

He could not stop Artemis when she slipped her hand into his pants, fisted his penis and caressed it, nor did he do anything else but close his eyes as she kissed his neck, licked it, nibbled it.

As with his bizarre dream of the night prior, he had his mouth and hands all over her in the span of a second. She ferociously returned his attentions. In flashes he watched, as though it were not himself but someone else, as they stumbled back against the old structure's stone wall, tugged each other's clothes off, pulled each other's hair, bit each other's mouth and face and neck.

His fingers were in her pants, claiming her, pumping, one then two at a time. Her hand became a vise around his shaft. With her free hand, Artemis quickly twisted her pants past her knees. The heat of her sex and inner thighs created honey-scented steam to rise into his face, get into his nose, cloud his brain.

Helios snarled as she pulled his pants down, hooked a leg around his waist. Then up against the brick wall he pushed her, pinned her, ripped her shirt up around her upraised arms. Cold made her nipples dark and tight. He bit one.

Her breasts, her pussy, he was claiming it all, filling his mouth and hands with each while she did the same to him. Yet the emptiness only rang that much more loudly. A cracked bell in a winter night.

He was fucking Artemis before he knew she had removed her pants completely. Deep into her, hard, fast. He thrust. She received, she claimed. Skin, bronzed perfection. Her pale hair. Pitiless fingernails tilling his back. The smell of her sex, the taste of it. His incoherent snarls, his silent ache. Thrusts—demanding, violent. Pain, shame, loss and climax all mixed into one. He said the one word that would make it all better, would tie all the loose ends into which his life had disintegrated. It was a name and sounded like a new beginning.

The unmistakable sound clacked with the sudden violence of a thunderclap. Skin on skin. A violent slap. One whole side of his face stinging, Helios recoiled, stumbled back a few steps. His pants were down around his knees in a most disgraceful reminder of his weakness.

Artemis was angrily pulling her clothes back in a semblance of order. She glared at him. Hurt and fury tightened her mouth. Her hands shook. "My name isn't Dawn!"

She stormed by, vibrant blue eyes killing Helios a hundred times and left him to his misery.

A great cry deflated his chest. He was spinning. Downward, deeper into all-encompassing darkness. An abyss of cold and ache for the one. A murderous urge to drown his sorrow overwhelmed him. And it frightened Helios. Because he knew this time it was not a dream.

It came in flashes. With a veil of crimson over it all.

The man was on his knees, supplicating, whimpering yet Helios would show no mercy. He had forgotten the meaning of the word, the very notion of compassion and pity. Humans had hurt him. He would hurt humans. Simple. Clear. A precise blade.

It was easy to lift the man up by his coat lapels and shred his throat. Arterial blood, its flow muddled by the slivers of flesh and tendons, spilled from the flawed seal he tried to apply to the skin. It flowed onto his chin, below his jaw and all over his chest. Its warmth the only thing real in his deadened state. Dying of cold would not be more painful as the feeling of loss ringing through him.

He sucked hard, crinkled his nose at the heady male essence flowing down his throat. So unlike the sweet nectar haunting him. Harder, he drew the man's life force out and when the arms stopped flailing, the legs thrashing, Helios tossed the man aside, sent him rolling on the snowy ground and stared in awe at the crimson stain linking their feet in a parody of dance-step prints.

The first time he had taken a human, that odious guard named Delong, Helios had made a mess of things because he had no idea how to feed on a person. But as soon as he had sunk his fangs into the guard's thick neck, as soon as the first maladroit spurt of blood had hit the roof of his mouth, Helios had clamped down and had sucked, sucked harder until skin and tendons gave and someone shot a stunner at him. The

punishment should have killed him. Such a tiny cell. Unlike nowadays, there had been no live feed of his punishment, only a doctor and a trio of guards who looked as horrified as the doctor appeared fascinated. He had lasted eighteen days. Eighteen hellish days without sustenance. In the end, the doctor had made the guards open the cell so he could finish him with an injection.

Helios could see it clearly...

*Blood everywhere on the cell walls, the screams, the sound of gunshots. Helios feeding violently like a beast then the cold of night as he ran away. His body had already started to repair itself, as it always did, nanobots breaking down foreign substances like bullets and toxins then neutralizing active compounds to eliminate them afterward. Bullets hurt much more than baton strikes though, even if nothing short of a hail of them would kill him.*

*He felt as if he ran for years. Then dreams of vengeance had turned into a hunt for his creators, those still alive anyway. He had caught them all, the mad scientists, the ruthless financiers, the numb and detached politicians. They had all paid for creating his kind and letting their charges be treated so badly. For being irresponsible, callous gods, he had killed them all. Little old men, frail and tasting of bitter blood. In the end, the very last one, the head researcher...his father in some twisted way, had asked why. Why?*

*"For creating a race damned from the start," Helios had replied as he had watched his "father's" blood seep from between gnarled fingers.*

Helios snarled, knuckled his eyes, knocked against things in the night. He took another human, this one sitting in a steaming gutter, obviously in the throes of a drug stupor, a needle still dangling from the crook of his arm. The chemical tang, sadly not bringing the oblivion he sought, passed into Helios' mouth, his bloodstream, cramped his jaws to the point he had to tear away from the young man. His throat a horrible mess, he slumped to the ground without having opened an eye.

Through it all, fear loomed large over Helios and tickled the back of his neck with its cold tentacles, sought to suck his strength out and leave nothing but regret behind. How could he do these things? Surely he was going mad. Dawn's blood had not been a drug after all, but a poison and it was now killing him.

Or worse yet. If he did not take his fill of all these other humans, he would not satiate the thirst quickly enough and would try to find her. He knew where she lived, had found her once. He could do it again. In his state...she would never survive such feeding.

*How many are you willing to sacrifice to shield her?*

As many as needed.

Helios took another, an older human female who tasted of spices. Then a pair of young women with plastic purses and heels too high for their welfare. While one squealed and tried to tug free of his one-handed grip, he fed on her companion but from behind this time and reduced the nape of her neck to a mangle of flesh and bones.

His chest and belly slick with the blood of many, Helios wrapped his arms around her shaking frame, murmured soothing words in her ears until she had collapsed against him, pressed her back against his odiously erect cock. Then he let her fall so he could take her companion. A piercing shriek stabbed at his brain when Helios gathered her in his arms, jumped atop a broad brick-and-mortar fence then crouched on the snowy ridge, knowing he must have resembled a monstrous raven from a distance, with his black coat opened on either side like broken wings. In a last desperate attempt to escape, the young woman put her palm against his mouth and pushed him at arm's length. It did not work. It could never have worked.

His heart beat like a war drum as Helios leaned forward, used his greater reach and strength to buckle her weak arm. She dropped her hand to her chest. He sank his fangs in to the gums. She gasped, squeaked pitifully then grew silent while he sucked the life out of her.

Another human female engaged his senses.

Dawn's hands going over his chest, her sinewy legs around his waist, the way her eyes gleamed with the liquid depth of obsidian. Helios squeezed his eyes shut.

*Do not give in. It would kill her. You would kill her just as you do this woman in your arms.*

Moisture between the skin of the human's jaw and that of his cheek surprised him. Blood? Still drawing from her neck, he spared a hand and ran a finger along his cheekbone. The liquid was clear. Helios pulled back, avoided the human's vacant gaze and stared with shock at the wet tips of his fingers.

Those were tears.

He realized with shock he had been crying the entire time he fed on her. More tears flowed down his cheeks. He gently laid the young woman along the top of the fence, crossed her arms over her chest so they would not dangle on either side. Such an ignominious way to die. Would parents worry about her? Did she have children herself?

*Forget it. Forget her. For your sanity, forget it all...just feed. Make them pay. All of them.*

With a choked growl, Helios looked at himself and wished he had not.

A drunkard, high on blood and agony and rage, Helios stumbled off the fence and across the street. He had to make the pain go away. It would drive him insane.

"Dawn."

He heard his voice murmur her name but could not remember speaking. Was he dreaming then?

*Please, let this all be a dream.*

What he had done...the unspeakable things he could remember doing and those he could not...

*They brought it on themselves. They made me the way I am.*

It suited them to make vampires strong and aggressive, suited their plans for expansion and for a tough, maintenance-free labor force. They had unwittingly made a weapon, one slowly turning against its creators.

Blinding pain seared the back of his brain. Helios palmed his eyes. For the first time in his long life, Helios could not control the thirst. Perhaps it was a genetic glitch complementary to his unique nature, of being the first flawed trial of a species, he was not sure. All he knew was that as much as he had deprived himself, survived on a starvation diet, a simple taste of *her* had been enough to unmake him and send him spiraling into freefall.

Dawn Eindhoven. She possessed the two things he wanted most right now. One of which was his by rights, the neutralizer to free his kind, and the other...

The second thing he would just take.

Wind whipped his hair back from his face as Helios stood on the ledge of an old high-rise, hideous cement creatures snarled silently at the sky. He wondered what purpose those had served. He looked up at the upper walkways, could almost distinguish the clean and warm and oblivious humans strolling, talking, unaware of the menace lurking just below their feet.

Dorian was right. The time to hide was over.

Groggy, Helios grabbed one of the steel beams crisscrossing the ledge and linking this building to the next then the next. Gradually he was climbing up London's underbelly, his mind a kaleidoscope of crimson snow and dirty sky. He panted hard, slipped enough times to chafe even his resilient skin. The drug in one of the humans must have been potent indeed to affect him so. A burning thirst forced him to take chances. Many chances.

Helios did not mind. For the agony of her absence far surpassed the danger of his capture. Slaving away in the lunar mines, his back bent for twenty hours a day, living on starvation rations of that hated enzyme...nothing compared to the thirst in his throat, the hollowness in his chest. The Dawn-shaped hole.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Where the hell were you?" Womack demanded from behind his mammoth desk. The thing could've made a perfect conference table. Sun spilled into his all-glass office, stabbed her right in the brain.

Despite the blinding light, Dawn held the older man's pale gaze while he stood and circled the table so he could shake a stack of plastic sheets under her nose. "All offers, Eindhoven. They've been coming in since all day yesterday. But you weren't there. The day Hemosynthec bent them all in half and fucked every other corporation in the ass and my top exec is NOT THERE!" The sheets of plastic went flying.

She'd always thought his theatrics were funny in a way, especially since the guy resembled a proper British gentleman, right down to the silver hair and tweed jacket.

But as soon as Womack opened his mouth, the spell burst. Foul in several languages, his mouth had made people jump from windows.

"Top execs get sick too, sir." Her alibi for going missing for a day. A day spent either making love to a vamp or having a staring contest with him. She still wasn't sure who'd won.

"I had the Goons check in on you," he snapped, coming up right under her nose. "You weren't at home."

The Goons. A quartet of hired security specialists, armed to the teeth at all times, all of them "ex-somethings". Dawn shrugged. Her adjusted shirt brushed against her breasts, a teasing reminder of the previous day's activities. She missed the vamp's big hands. "I was in bed, flipping them the bird but I guess they couldn't see me."

Womack's mouth quivered in a sardonic grin. "You're such a bitch, Eindhoven. All legs and mouth and no heart." He shook his head then motioned for her to join him on the sofa.

She resisted the urge to pick up the sheets of plastic. Not only to show Womack he couldn't push her buttons so easily but also because she normally wouldn't have picked them up. Charming lady that she was. But she did want to see those offers. Badly. Some of them must have been good to get Womack so damn pissed off at the delay.

The gray wool of her close-fitting suit creaked when she sat, crossed her legs and admired her freshly painted toes through the heeled sandals. Blood red. She rubbed the side of her neck. She didn't miss just his hands.

"Hakamo and Jeffreys," Womack began, pointing at the floor where the blue plastic sheets lay. "They're in there. Seven-digit offer. So is NSG Group, the cheap bastards." The electric color reminded her of Helios' eyes.

*Crap. Give it up already.*

"So you want to sell it and not manufacture it?" She shook her head.

"We're already at maximum capacity and I'm not hiring more workers."

The old argument.

Womack fished inside his jacket, retrieved his ever-present pack of gum and offered one to her. She took a strip, put it in her mouth while making sure she wouldn't mess her lipstick. "Did Hakamo say how soon they intend to start production?"

"They don't intend to."

"What?!"

*Whoa, cool down.*

That had come out much too strong and Womack noticed.

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You don't look too well. If you're getting sick again, I'll fire your ass, you hear?"

"They won't market it...?"

He shook his head. "They intend to buy the tech from us then keep it hidden in their deepest drawer at Hakamo-Fuckers-HQ. So does NSG. That neutralizer has them worried like chickens and a farmer wearing a strap-on dick."

A sensation of having cold water poured down the back of her shirt made Dawn sit straighter. The other pharmaceutical giants didn't want to manufacture the neutralizer but sit on the technology, choke it in other words. That product would never see the light of day.

*And Helios who wants it to free his kind.*

Dawn rubbed her palm against her thigh, the sudden feeling she was dirty making her tight and pissed off, but at the same time, she realized she couldn't do anything. Not that she wanted to. Hell no. Womack really would kill her. Send the Goons after her ass. Or more plausibly, fire her and ruin her chances at finding another job anywhere else in London. Anywhere else period. His connections ran far and deep.

"Is there a problem, Eindhoven?" Womack demanded, checking his fingernails and blowing on them. "You're puke green and sweating like a pig."

"What, Mr. Womack, are you worried about me? I didn't know you were a bleeding-heart philanthropist."

He laughed. "You had me worried for a while... Which reminds me, have you heard anything about those murders last night? Well, officially they never happened, but one of the mailroom boys – can't remember the fucker's name, the one with the red hair – anyway, he says his sister works at police central and that their morgue is filling up fast."

"Nature's way of controlling population," Dawn replied with a fake smile. *They want to sit on the neutralizer, not market it.* She sighed in spite of herself. Helios' vamps. Poor buggers.

"Nature had nothing to do with it. They say it's a rogue vamp. A big one judging from the bite marks and the damage. Red Head says it was an abattoir down there. And in a line that ends right under our feet too, because the last one happened near Trafalgar Square."

Primeval fear clutched her heart with a cold, wet glove and squeezed it hard. She cleared her throat. Helios' summoner hidden in her home...

"You know what," Dawn said, rising and tucking a strand of hair back behind her ear. "I still don't feel good. I think I'll go home early today."

"Like hell you will. You're staying right here and going through these with the bottom feeders. I want them in order of profit then by timeframe. Be sick on your own time."

"You're a mean old man."

"All part of my charm, Eindhoven." He pointed at the door.

Without thinking, she crouched and reassembled the loose sheets, gathered them in a hand then stood. She realized too late what she'd just done, the major slip she'd made

when she saw Womack staring at her, his wizened eyes narrowed, his mouth a straight line. She returned his stare then left his office while making sure to clack her heels as loudly as possible.

Big slip-up. Damn.

Dawn had never, ever, shown a dent in her armor. Especially in front of him. Ordinarily, she would've had one of the clerks come in and gather the sheets for her, never do it herself. The suspicious old man would know something wasn't right with her. He'd ask questions, have her followed. One of the Goons' background was in surveillance apparently, some sort of pseudo-spy or something to that effect. She'd hired him a few years ago and couldn't remember well. Anyway, she knew how her boss worked, what made his mind spin in a downward spiral. And to see her acting so strangely after she'd disappeared for a day—she held no delusions that he'd believed her illness story—would make the old bastard look at her through a magnifying glass. There was blood in the water and Womack was circling.

*Nice analogy, genius girl.*

An abattoir...

Was it even Helios?

But how many other vamps would fit under the "large" and "rogue" category?

The rest of the day passed in a blur of numbers and legalese, coffee and summoner calls, so much so that by the time she was leaving the building, Dawn shook badly and walked with the tight gait of fear and paranoia. Every corner, every shadow, held a large angry vamp with fangs the size of her baby fingers and eyes that could cut her in half.

*I'll get rid of it.*

With the summoner gone, he'd leave her alone.

*No, you imbecile. He won't know it's gone for real, won't believe a word you say, even if you're trying to convince him the Earth is sort of round and that snow is cold.*

Why should he believe her anyway? She'd already stolen his summoner, screwed him in more than one way and now would be part of the machine that killed the technology his kind desperately needed to achieve independence. To live, period.

*He hates your guts.*

Dawn swallowed hard as she entered the large elevator, all gleaming mirrors and steel, filled with suits and employees. No vamps here.

*No, of course not, vamps would take the stairs. Not that they're allowed outside the factories.*

Dawn had never stopped to realize, to fully appreciate the true depth of her society's cleft. Vamps had a raw deal on many levels. They couldn't procreate, were in fact all created sterile, they didn't live past forty because of the slow-released toxin inside the enzyme humans fed them, they couldn't vote, couldn't be in public places without a human escort, weren't allowed to create unions up on the orbiting factories.

She'd heard the horror stories coming out of those places, knew the urban legends as anyone else did but had always dumped it at the foot of misguided socialism and its logic-deficient followers. She wasn't too sure anymore. Helios had mentioned in passing what he'd lived through during his forty years working in lunar mines.

*What do I care what he says!*

She joined the throngs of other well-dressed humans such as herself on their way home, walking and talking and laughing as they ambled or walked with purpose or just stood and spoke in their shiny summoners...while below their feet, a doomed race toiled and died, with the few human sympathizers to pass them some contraband enzyme once in a while to keep them strong enough to survive. Barely. A race of sub-people. Damned.

Dawn stopped so abruptly a pair of suits collided with her, didn't even register her presence as they continued their conversation and climbed up the few steps to the sky-train station.

*Not a good time to be having a rebirth! A large angry vamp might be after my ass. Definitely my ass. Har har.*

Still, she was part of the demented machine. She was a spoke in this wheel of injustice and geneticization, a wheel that she suspected was rattling in its well and would be coming off the wagon sooner than people expected. Sooner than humans expected.

Dawn was standing inside her building's foyer when she came out of her musings and other dark ruminations. Guilt, which had never been an issue with her, was presently making it hard to rationalize her job, her way of life. She shook her head, slid her ID in the access panel and rode the elevator to the sixtieth and last floor in one of the most secured and exclusive buildings in London. Compared to the place Helios called home—despite the historical cachet—with its cold draft and poor plumbing, her home felt more like a castle than anything else. Another double standard that left her chewing her bottom lip.

Her darkened apartment greeted her like a silent, slightly ascetic friend. As she walked along the ceramic tiled corridor, Dawn set her handbag on the narrow table, took her jacket off and let it drop where it may, shoes too. The muted colors and minimalist décor left her feeling depressed.

She smelled him before she saw him.

## Chapter Six

Dawn's heart stopped beating for a full three seconds, she could swear to it!

She'd frozen in the doorway leading to her living room when she'd first smelled outside air floating around her place then started sweating when she spotted Helios sitting in her white suede armchair, his large hands wrapped around the armrests. Like he did at home.

*His home, not mine. We share nothing.*

He was a mess.

Helios' hair was clumped in red and blond strands. He had no shirt, only his coat parted over his wide chest where glistened enough blood Dawn feared for a moment it was all his own and that he'd bled to death in her home. In the semidarkness and amid his bloodied and smeared face, his eyes burned like blue neon lights. He was staring vacantly at the floor in front of his feet. But he breathed.

*Thank god, he breathes.*

Her gut reaction shocked her. He'd kidnapped her, bitten her, was undoubtedly here to finish the job. She shouldn't care if he breathed or not.

*Denial doesn't suit you, woman. Too old for it.*

"H-Helios...?"

She took one step into the room, her hands numb and clammy. When she reached the area rug where brownish boot prints led to the white chair, she clasped her hands in front of her. "How did you get in?"

Still Helios stared at his feet.

Saliva pooled under her tongue and for a second she feared either passing out or vomiting. Either would be extremely ill-timed and deadly. Not to mention embarrassing as hell.

Now that she could see him clearly, she noticed downward streaks along his cheeks and knew what these were. Remorse welled in her eyes. "I'm sorry."

His gaze snapped up to her face. Dawn gasped when he stood abruptly and couldn't backpedal fast enough to get away. He gripped her by an arm and brought her close to his face. "So am I."

Helios bared his fangs and dove for her neck. Paralyzing fear gave way to survival instinct and Dawn punched him in the groin as hard as she could. He grunted, loosened his hold on her arm. She twisted out of it.

And she ran.

Across the living room, back up the corridor, desperate to reach the door. A pace away, no more.

*Get to the door.*

A great weight tackled her. She fell on her knees with Helios' long arms encircled around her shoulders, his body softening the fall slightly. Her shirt twisted out of her pants, she thought she heard something ripping behind her and winced when he rolled on top and pinned her arms under her body. His gorgeous hair hung around his face, but gorgeous no more for the blood and whatever else matted it. Veins snaked along his eyes, gave him the look of a junkie. That decadent mouth of his quivered when he slowly curled his upper lip, denuded his big white teeth—*fangs, woman, those are fangs.*

"You have something that belongs to me, Dawn." He pulled the collar of her shirt sideways, the first two buttons popping with small clicks, and exposed her shoulder. "I want it back."

If fear had given way to instincts, these now turned into anger. She winced at the pain in her arms, his great weight forcing her to breathe quick, shallow breaths. "You're hurting me."

He froze. Helios' eyes closed for a few seconds, reopened filled with moisture. He blinked several times. "I... Forgive me."

Gently for a guy his size, he raised himself on his hands, released her and sat with his back against the wall, his knees high so he could rest his elbows against them. When he cradled his face with them, Dawn noticed his bloodied hands shook violently.

As much as she'd been about to give him one epic tongue-lashing, Dawn kept her mouth shut while she climbed to her knees and sat on her heels. *Some messed-up relationship we have.*

Yet the sight of him, clearly unguarded, vulnerable, must have done something to her because she couldn't remember the last time a slew of protective feelings had clouded her judgment the way they did now.

"I am lost," he whispered through his parted fingers.

*Don't start bawling, Eindhoven, don't you dare.*

She stood and tapped his shoulder. "Come on. I'll help you clean up, okay."

Helios didn't meet her gaze when he followed her into her impeccable bathroom—something told her it was about to change—and as she tugged his coat back over his shoulders and undid his belt, he stared stubbornly at the floor between his feet. His bangs hid his expression. Dawn was glad in a way for she didn't think seeing the pain in his eyes would help clear her mind. She unclipped his boots—definitely size eighteen—and pulled his pants down around his ankles. The last time she'd seen his penis, it'd been glorious and proud, pointing up and glistening. Now it hung placidly, dormant. Beaten.

"Here," she said, pushing him toward the corner of the all-white marble room that served as a shower. "Stand there."

She fisted the chrome lever and instantly hot water hissed out of ceiling jets. Dawn's clothes were a ruined mess of smelly wool by the time she'd washed the giant, silent vampire, slicked his hair back from his face and made sure she didn't miss a spot. She wanted to smile when his cock showed signs of alertness but didn't. Not with the guy's gaze riveted to the floor tiles.

After she retrieved one of the large bath towels, a fortune of soft white synthetic cotton right there, Dawn draped his shoulders and rubbed him briskly, his chest, his waist and legs then his hair. She noticed he must have thought the floor tiles were getting boring for he looked up, stared her right in the eyes. She felt gauged, weighed and assessed. For some reason she'd rather not dwell on right now, she hoped she'd passed whatever test.

"Why do you do this?" he murmured.

Water droplets glistened along his eyelashes, like rings of diamonds surrounding a pair of sapphires. Hell he was traffic-stopping.

"Guilt, Helios, it's all about the guilt." She tried a small grin, ended up coughing and looking away.

His hand felt hot when he cupped her chin and angled her face so she'd see his. "Guilt over what?"

"Not now, okay. We'll talk, but not now."

"Now is all we have, Dawn."

"That's not true," she snapped, shocked at the force she put in her retort. She patted the hand holding her chin. "I'll throw your clothes in the wash then get some coffee in us. Then we'll talk."

Her mind and body in a vortex of confusing, conflicting emotions and impulses, Dawn escorted him to her bedroom, decorated in beige and gray that looked so blah compared to his platinum hair and bronzed skin, sat him on the bed then returned to gather the mess of clothes strewn on the floor. After she stripped her wet clothes and put on a robe, she started the washing machine, prepared coffee and returned with a pair of mugs to find Helios in the exact same position she'd left him in.

*That's a low-maintenance patient.*

"This is going to perk you right up. Half a cup of sugar, just the way it's supposed to be enjoyed." She proffered a mug at the same time her brain screamed, *STOP, YOU IMBECILE!*

Helios merely looked at her, an expression of vague amusement on his chiseled face. "You keep blood in your bar for vampire guests?"

"Er...argh, for Pete's sake. I'm so sorry."

*Stupid, stupid.*

He reached for one of the mugs. She gave it to him and watched him take a small sip. The flare to his nostrils told her he didn't like coffee. She had nothing else warm to give him. He looked so cold.

The vampires' plight and the very inopportune guilt associated with it returned a hundredfold, especially since she played a role in the whole thing, but most of all because of the man sitting beside her in her bedroom. Everything had always been black or white. Dawn was shocked to notice there was a hell of a large gray band in the middle. She didn't know what to do with all that murky gray!

*Whoa, you've just referred to a centuries-old vampire as "man". Not vampire, not vamp. But man. Reality to Eindhoven, we're losing contact.*

Dawn took a deep breath, looked at Helios and figuratively just threw herself into the lake. She hoped she wouldn't hit rocks. "They want to quash it. The neutralizer, I mean, they want to buy it from Hemosynthec so they can sit on it and pretend it doesn't exist."

Helios' eyes flashed for a brief moment. Hanging heavy over his thighs, his cock noticeably hardened. Dawn tried valiantly not to look at it...too much.

"What will you do about it?"

"Me?" Dawn retorted, already coming up with plenty of good reasons to let the sleeping sabertooth tiger lie.

"You." He spread his knees an inch or so, muscled thighs rippling with the movement. "What will you do about it?"

For a second, the patch of platinum hair around his bronze-colored shaft occupied all her neurons before she tore her gaze away and set it on his mouth. Even worse when a woman is trying to focus.

*Is a sudden onset of pre-menopausal hot flashes hitting me or is it getting hot in here?*

The robe felt heavy and dumb. "I'm not sure what I can do, not that I would if I could."

He continued staring at her. He must have been running his tongue back and forth behind his teeth again for she saw flickers of it here and there, a bump in his cheek then the other. Strands of his hair were drying and fluffing up from the rest and prompted a tingly shiver to arch her spine. She still remembered his hand there.

Helios shook his head. "How can you sleep at night?"

"I can't. Not since I left your bed...rug."

What the hell.

Dawn leaned over and kissed him. Though he clearly enjoyed himself, returned the kiss and breathed hard, he didn't move a muscle.

Oh she'd have to do it all, wouldn't she?

Standing in front of him, her mouth never leaving his, Dawn slipped her robe off, ran her hands over his hard front, marveling at the heat and smoothness of it, wishing she could spend days and nights touching him while at the same time realizing she couldn't. It wasn't allowed. They weren't even supposed to kiss, let alone enjoy brain-melting sex the way they had. And were about to again.

Well, that sucks.

How unfair and moronic that whole species thing.

Her hands reached lower than her mouth did, to his sides and waist where his navel quivered with each shallow breath, his skin gleaming in the faint light offered by the skylight overhead and that haloed his head in a surreal, bluish light. He sighed when she caressed his penis, fingered its glossy tip, collected the drop of pre-cum and licked it off the pad of her index finger. Dawn gripped his shaft, a bold and harsh grasp, a forceful reminder of how their bodies could communicate tenderly or brutally then she released it, kissed the underside of his glans, waited to see if he preferred this gentler attention instead. He did. His eyes closed, his face angled downward.

She applied a string of quick kisses to his shaft, all along and around it, took particular care when she reached the underside and licked the thin line, which parted the glans. Each ridge and vein she kissed. Each angle she covered. Each wrinkle and fold in his sac she teased until his balls had constricted and hardened. Dawn grinned.

Was there anything better than making love to this vampire? Dawn doubted so.

She took his cock into her mouth, wrapped her lips and pressed, used her tongue to cover her bottom teeth so she could sink down the length of him. Red lipstick smeared his skin. He was large, well-proportioned, so hot. Dawn regretted not having taken the time to pleasure him this way the last time she'd had a chance. What she'd missed!

While she pushed downward with her hand, she pulled up with her mouth, let her fist join her lips then sank both to the base of him. Again—faster, harder. With as much noise as she could too. Sucking noises, moans, skin against skin, wet sounds. She loved those sounds. Especially with him.

Contractions of pleasure tightened the skin around his member, raised goose bumps over his legs, which trembled, twitched and nearly made her abandon his penis so she could bite the insides of his thighs, those delicious pillars of bronze—god that made her want to go...grr! She wanted to bite him, till his skin, squeeze and hug him.

But first, his cock.

She knew he was about to release. When he seemed to grow more alert and wrapped his hand over her shoulder, gave a slight push to pry her off him, she anchored her fist and mouth to his glans, rubbed and kneaded his balls with her other hand. A stifled groan indicated his imminent climax. And she let him. Welcomed him.

Much more heady and piquant than men's, his semen surged at the back of her throat in keen, hot spurts. She felt the vibrato of his orgasm pass through her lips and swallowed the surprising amount of cum with pride and thrill.

His hand was moth-light when he stroked the top of her head, the nape of her neck, a shoulder. Some of his caresses were so light Dawn could barely feel anything except for the heat of his skin against hers. A violent shiver shook her. She released Helios, looked up.

And forgot there existed a world outside of this room, a potential war of ideology about to start, she forgot there were two different species coexisting with difficulty, the difference in classes and genetic makeup. Dawn forgot everything as she felt herself

being pulled into the abyss of his gaze and what she saw there, posted clearly, a bold advertisement in electric blue, bronze and blond. Love.

She had to sit or risk falling over on her ass, which would so kill the moment.

Helios helped her to her feet then to the bed. "Is something wrong?"

She shook her head.

His hands were tender when he placed them over her shoulders and pushed back until she lay on the mattress, her knees apart, legs dangling over the edge. He kissed her everywhere, between the breasts most of all then lower, on either side of her sex, which compelled Dawn to arch and twist so his mouth wouldn't stray, but he must have had other ideas for he kept going, past her knees then stopped at her ankles. His tongue felt like a satin ribbon against the top of her foot, around her ankle, up her calf.

Helios sat at the foot of the bed, taking her leg with him. Fingers long and skilled grasped the back of her knee, his other palm cupped her calf and supported the weight of her entire leg. He kissed her foot everywhere, tenderly, as though he were afraid to break the fragile thing in his hands, then his touch and kisses grew bolder, more passionate, triggered massive arousal, which contracted her sex, a flower fearing rain. Sharp points touched the skin of her ankle.

Dawn gasped, looked at him while she put her other foot against his chest and meant to push. "Helios..."

His fangs gleamed quietly, resting against her flesh. He was staring at her.

For a long moment, only their eyes spoke. Dawn removed her foot from his chest and nodded.

She could swear there were tears in his eyes.

Helios pressed his fangs deeper. She felt her skin puncture like that of a grape. The wet sounds his mouth made closed Dawn's eyes, took her high and far, a swelling wave of ecstasy lifting her up toward the sky to float in a swirling red haze of pounding heartbeat and carnality. She wanted him. Acutely.

Not relinquishing his grip on her ankle, Helios reached up between her legs, slowly but inexorably, compelled Dawn to wait for his fingers when they'd finally touch her sex, the place that hungered to be sucked and licked and fucked.

"I..." She bit her knuckles. "Oh."

He only needed to make contact with her lips that she moaned her pleasure at him. His finger rubbed in slow circles then slid in. Rapture shot through Dawn's body with the suddenness of an electrical jolt. She cried out.

Her vampire lover was crushing his face to her pussy the next instant and sucked her spilled pleasure in burning draws. He took her with his mouth, his fingers, front and back. While he used his whole tongue to lick her, his finger demanded she let him in and he pushed one inside her ass, slipped out, collected more juices then returned to his former activity.

"Oh this is good," she moaned, head lolling side to side. "It's good."

“Spread yourself for me.”

She reached between her legs and pulled her lips apart so he’d eat her more deeply, which he did.

“Oh that’s it, yes.”

The top of his blond head reminded her of the vision she’d had when she’d first met him. And it was just as incredible as her fantasy, better even. And she could fantasize!

“Pull yourself wider,” he murmured against her vulva. “Wider.”

She did, stretched herself, rolled her pelvis with each of his burning sucks, each of his languorous passes in her anus, each of the great waves crashing onto her, sending her mind rolling and spinning, lost, found again then spiraling upward to a burning climax.

She bit her bottom lip and came like a bomb.

Helios stabbed both tongue and fingers in hard.

Dawn throbbed and cramped, wanted to roll on top but couldn’t move for the spasms racking her body.

“Roll over,” he urged with a hand on her vulva. The heat of his palm seeped through and Dawn couldn’t move for a full minute as she rode the last ripples.

“I want you.” She couldn’t recognize the whiny voice that had just said that.

“You already have me.”

He helped her roll onto her front, snaked both hands up along her inner thighs and lifted her up so high she whooped in spite of herself. Helios was so tall and strong that he was able to stand by the bed with her upside down, suspended by the waist in his arms. Her pussy was right against his face. She didn’t know what else to do other than wrap her legs around his shoulders and fist his cock, which hung heavy right over—or under—her head. The novel position quickly made the blood accumulate in her head but she didn’t give a shit, not with the loud, deep tongue-fucking he was giving her. Whoa!

So she wouldn’t be left with nothing to do—except coming and screaming like a banshee—Dawn angled his member up to her and licked what she could reach of it. Soon she couldn’t even focus on the glorious shaft and just hung limply while he pushed his whole face against her cleft. She was so wet!

“Mmm, Dawn,” he kept murmuring, in turn ramming his tongue in her and sucking at her clit. When he changed entries and grazed her anus with his fangs, she yelped in both shock and thrill.

Before she could savor the unusual bliss, Helios deposited her on the bed. Blood rushed back to the rest of her and she saw stars.

Quickly followed by a whole cluster of fizzing galaxies when he parted her cheeks and rammed fingers into her. She didn’t know how many, only that there was more than one for sure. Stretched to the burning point, all she could do was climax.

Like a rag doll, he flipped her around so she'd lie supine for him, stood between her knees, his eyes on her pussy. He grabbed her by the hips, flexed those delicious pectorals and hoisted her to his hips.

When Helios anchored her thighs on either side of his waist, hands securely clutched at her hips to keep her from sliding down, she spread wide for him, fully bloomed, welcomed him and embraced his flesh with her own.

Pale hair spilled over his shoulders when he curled his spine. His great cock nudged her folds. She was so wet, she literally dribbled, coated her cleft to her coccyx. Their gazes met and locked.

His initial thrust was affectionate, as tender as possible given his great size, then he grabbed her hips harder, dug his fingers in and took her deeper, curved her spine under the force of his push, arched her back until only her head rested against the mattress. She cried his name, moaned it, filled her mouth with it and ran her tongue over her lips for the sweet taste of it. He raised her knees over his shoulders. Her bones creaked in protest. She didn't care.

She murmured requests at him, demands and pleas. "Take me, Helios, fuck me."

He did.

So slowly she could feel each vein and ridge rubbing against her stretched entry and then violently she swore he'd rip right through her, Helios stabbed and thrust, took her with an elated look on his face then harder, his eyes narrowing, his lip curling upward with each forceful shove. He knelt on the edge of the bed, which creaked in protest.

While his sex branded hers, he relinquished her hip and claimed a breast, which he squeezed, cupped, elevated like an offering. Her nipple was rolled, pinched, rolled again. Then the other breast succumbed to his fiery touch. She moaned and whimpered his name, past being embarrassed at her needy behavior. And anyway, she did need him.

"Christ, man, take me!" she finally snarled at him after she'd come for the nth time.

Instead he bit his lower lip and rubbed a thumb on her nether hole in a circular motion, tenderly, and while he began to fuck her hard, more demandingly than she'd ever had it done to her, he claimed her ass just as rigorously. After a while, Helios slowed his dual piston-like motions.

The sudden tenderness triggered a high of emotions. For a split second, she wondered what life would be like with a vampire. Where would they live? Up above or down below?

"Come back to me," he murmured a few inches from her face. His next thrust helped her get back to the here and now right quick.

So forceful, so large, he handled his member with the precision and utmost care of someone who had not done it often but who was so attuned to his lover that it didn't matter. Helios' lovemaking felt so right.

Dawn came violently, loudly, repeatedly. After she thought she couldn't anymore, that her body would shut down, Helios fucked her into a frenzy yet again until a great languor came over her and she knew she had nothing else to give.

Sweaty, panting, Helios lay by her side and caressed her quivering belly. "I will be here when you wake."

The remark must have done something to her numb body for Dawn felt her eyelids becoming heavy, too heavy to support.

## Chapter Seven

Helios watched her sleep. She lay on her back, a hand resting on his by her side, the other tucked under her head. There was a little mole under her arm and another near her hip. Small imperfections only humans could have. Vampires were devoid of any marking, blemish or fault because of the healing properties of self-reproducing nanobots incessantly repairing damaged tissues. They were built to last only weren't allowed to do so. Except in his unique case, where no slow-release toxin was killing him.

*What a surprising path I have ventured on.*

He had made love to a human female with his mouth. And she had taken his seed inside of hers. There could be no deeper exchange than this. Her human flesh had felt so moist and tender, so unlike female vampires' resilient skin. Dawn had tempted him to his very core. He had wanted to bite her sex, sink his fangs. But then again, he had.

The sweetness of her blood still tasted on his tongue. He had vowed never to bite her again. Despite his near-demented hunger for it.

Comprehension slowly surfaced into his consciousness, even if he suspected his heart of having understood a long time ago. He had fallen in love with a human. He knew now why he could not seem to get enough of her blood. It was not just the nectar in her veins he wanted, thirsted for so acutely, it was *her*. Dawn. The reason he had degenerated into an ogre was that he could not live with the idea of never having her near him again.

And now, she had let him into her home, had cared for him in his darkest moment. What a fitting name she had. Dawn. She was for him a true dawn, a new beginning.

And her implicit acceptance of his bite by removing her foot and nodding had calmed his mind and body, enough that he had even allowed himself the luxury of marking her delicately. He had not licked her clean so the nanotechnology in his saliva and lymphatic system would not transfer into her flesh and mend it. He wanted a sign of his passage to remain, just as she had made one in him. He had not meant for Dawn to see how much he cared for her. A mistake that just might kill him. Although her short absence had been a little death unto itself. A painful one.

Which reminded him of the decision he had reached while she fell asleep. He could not ask her to get the keys to her laboratories. It was too dangerous. What if her masters caught her?

*Her masters. He snorted mentally. They trained you well, these monkeys.*

Helios visually explored her as the minutes turned into an hour then two. Eyelashes cast velvety fan-shaped shadows on her cheeks and he was ashamed of calling her kind

monkeys. Not all of them were bad. Not all of them were like that human guard Delong. Helios bit down hard.

Her eyes flickered then opened. She saw him and arched an eyebrow. "I thought I'd been dreaming."

The murderous thoughts associated with his past evaporated. "Dream or nightmare?"

"Dream, definitely. Good one too."

"We must talk now. I cannot stay up here for long."

"I know." She sat cross-legged, offering him a spectacular view of her sex. He tore his gaze away so he could focus.

He hated himself for killing the moment. For the span of a spark his body had hummed, his heart soared. But if he were to free his kind from slavery and early death, he had to sacrifice his personal needs. For now.

"I will breach the building security without the keys. It is high time I came out of the shadows."

Her eyes flared in the semidarkness. "Are you out of your mind? You'll get killed or worse..."

"And that worries you?"

"Of course it does. You think I'd make love to you if I didn't care? What, human girls are easy?"

That she would use those words, "love", "care", when referring to him warmed him like a sliver of sun touching his chest would. All the more reason to act without her help or even knowledge.

"I will gather my kind, those able to fight, and we will attack Hemosynthe. I would advise against being there that day."

She shook her head several times. "Not a good plan. Actually as plans go, this one sucks. I have a better one. I'll get the neutralizer myself. No use getting just the keys then giving them to you only to waste time trying to get you inside the damned place. I'm already in."

It was Helios' turn to shake his head emphatically. The more he thought of Dawn getting caught... Human sympathizers ran as much risk as rogue vampires and the sentences were just as harsh. Death. "It is —"

"Don't you tell me it's too dangerous."

"It is too much to ask from you. It is not your fight and your masters would immediately suspect someone high-ranking. It could filter up to you."

"Not my fight? It's everyone's fight. Plus, I doubt anyone will care who did what when vampires start coming out of factories and stop needing humans for food."

The irony of her words seemed to have caught on. She looked up at the ceiling. "You know what I meant."

"Vampires will need neither humans nor their enzyme to survive. Emancipation."

"And it'll be a bloodbath all the way there."

Helios could not dispute her remark. It would be a bloodbath and he would stand right at the forefront of it.

"I will need my summoner."

"I'm keeping it as insurance."

Anger bubbled closer to the surface. Helios took a deep breath. "You are taking a dangerous stand."

"It's my only insurance you won't do something stupid like letting Womack or some other whack job get their claws into you. You get near Hemosynthec and I flush your summoner down the toilet. And I don't mean figuratively."

His hand was already around her wrist before he had thought things through. "Do not ever try to control me, human," he snarled.

Her eyes flashed. Yet she did not try to yank her arm away as he would have expected. "I'm not trying to control you, I'm trying to love you, you big dumb *vamp*."

The unpredictability of her behavior stilled him. But the words made him want to rush outside and make snow angels. He could not remember ever feeling so...happy.

Helios never would have thought this possible, that he could learn to enjoy a human's company, to grow fond of a woman and her diamond-hard, multi-faceted mind, and that in his long, cold, lonely life, he would find someone with whom he was willing to share himself, learn to trust. If nothing but his kind's plight had been important to him, Dawn Eindhoven had changed it all. And he would never be the same...he would be better for it.

He loosened his hand on her wrist, rubbed with his thumb the little bone there. "Forgive my haste," he said, leaning back against the wall and raising his arm so she could nestle against him. The heat of her body seeped into his, made him smile unguardedly. Another first.

She chuckled. "You're supposed to tell me 'I love you too, darling' or something like that."

"No words I know are adequate to tell you what is here." He pressed his palm to his chest. "But I will tell you this, as lengthy as my life has been, I have not started living until I met you. And at the risk of sounding melodramatic, losing you will kill me...and many more besides."

She straightened. "Don't talk like that. Man, that's a mood killer. You were doing so well."

Her attempt at mockery and humor did not dislodge the lump in his throat. He was over two hundred years old, she not even forty. Unless they found a way to transfer the self-reproducing nanobots in quantities large enough for the human body to assimilate, he had another fifty years with her, if that. But if she would have him, then he would cherish those precious few years, would make love to her passionately while her body

was young and resilient then tenderly as she grew grayer, as one would caress a flower in full bloom, velvety petals the most vibrant yet fragile. Then she would slip from his fingers and he would be alone once more. The thought sank his hopes.

Enough of this.

Helios kissed the top of her head and patted her hip. "I must leave, Dawn. Believe me, I would rather remain here and make love to you all night."

"Then do."

Instead he kissed her. Tenderly, slowly, letting his lips and mouth convey all the things left unsaid, all those words lovers said to one another, words that could never encompass even a sliver of what he felt for this human female, reach the unplumbed depths and breadth of his passion for her but he still tried.

Arousal pushed him closer to the edge. He wanted to take her again then for Dawn to take him in return. He caressed her smooth skin, her breasts and belly. Helios was not able to restrain either her or himself when he rolled on top of her, fingers demanding, claiming, slipping inside her sex while his mouth clamped against hers. He tormented her flesh, circled her clitoris, retreated, made her arch her hips for more, held back until he felt her anger rising, her desperation sharpening, then delivered. They rolled again. She ended on top, sat astride his thighs—as regal as a queen on her throne—then fisted his penis in a firm grip, leaving more than half poking above her hand. Fire already burned at the base of his cock and demanded he take her then and there. Urgently. For as he had told her, all they had was right now.

"Do you want me as a man or vampire?"

She stopped driving her fist up and down and stared. "There's a difference?"

"A profound difference, Dawn. I have not heard of it done to a human before."

"Do it." She wolfed his glans down her throat, pumped once then released it to quiver feverishly.

He grabbed her wrist and pushed her on her front so he could roll over and trap her lithe form underneath his. Coming up on an elbow, he snaked his hand between her cheeks, followed the slick cleft until he reached her sex, already drenched and blooming for him. Like petals, her vulva blossomed thick, invitingly warm and moist for his finger, then clenched around his digit like those carnivorous plants, milked and fisted him. Dawn's backside rolled upward. She moaned.

"Not a man," he murmured, leaning over her back to keep himself propped up on an elbow.

"A vampire, Helios. That's what I want you as. A vamp."

"How can you trust me? I am not one of yours."

"Just do it."

Her pale skin seemed to glow in the moonlight offered by the skylight above their heads. Her shoulders shook.

"Pull your hair to the side."

She reached back behind her head, gathered her black hair in a hand and pulled it to her right, exposing the nape of her neck and jaw. Despite the gloom, his vampire senses perceived her pulse, the heat of her flesh.

Helios added another finger and slowly stretched her sex, slid in easily for her liquid silk coating the channel. "If you want me this way, you must spread your legs wide."

Her cleft glistened. The urge to sink his face and fangs in it pushed him almost over the edge.

After she had done so, he wedged his pelvis right against her backside, his cock swollen to the point of pain, his thighs trembling, his eyes narrowed. She would take him as a vampire. How he loved her.

With her human spine so fragile and receptive, he knew that she would feel every tiny sensation, faint and light as he made them, she would feel it all.

The tip of his tongue traced the vertebrae from mid-back to nape and undoubtedly fired tingly messages to her brain, which would transmit the appropriate responses to the rest of her body, something for which he waited anxiously. He heard her grind her teeth.

"Do not fight it, Dawn, let me see it."

When a slight tremor rippled under her skin, he knew he had achieved his goal. So he licked her again. The heat of his tongue contrasted against her cool skin. Fingers in her sex a counter cadence to his mouth, he surrendered to the pull of her pulse, the freshness of her body, the silk of her spilled hair, which looked so much like glistening ink in the gloom. More than lust pushed him, tenderness, passion, devotion. He wanted to make her his.

"This is so good," she murmured against the mattress. "Mmm."

"Are you ready to receive me?"

"Yes."

While he thrust his fingers deeper, as deep as he dared, Helios leaned onto her slender back, their forms surprisingly well espoused despite the difference in height and girth. His chin brushed against her nape. She smelled of femininity, of luxuriance, of life and vibrancy.

"Are you sure, Dawn?"

She nodded once.

The tip of his cock pressed against her folds. He curled his lip, denuded his fangs.

As a vampire.

His spine sharply curving inward at both ends, he claimed Dawn doubly.

A cry left them both, exultant, intense, an exclamation of their pleasure but also of everything one meant for the other. Their voices filled the room just as her blood filled his mouth and his seed filled her channel. A complete circle. But this time, he did not

draw for he was not feeding but celebrating their union, claiming Dawn as his just as she received his essence and claimed it as hers.

The force of his thrust had pushed him flat on his front, his legs nestled between hers, his cock sheathed. Helios felt at home.

A home he had to leave. Now. He should already be gone. What if they were found this way?

Helios licked the twin wounds a few times to release enough nanobots to close them. He wished he could stay. In truth, he would never get enough of her intoxicating nectar. Filled with regret and already feeling the chill of loneliness creeping back inside him, Helios pulled out of her and kissed her shoulder.

"I must leave. It is dangerous for both of us."

"Mmm, I know. You want to wash up first?"

Helios kissed her shoulder, her spine. "I would never willingly wash away the scent and taste of you."

He felt her rise in body temperature and surmised she must have liked hearing this. Pride swelled his chest.

A moan left her as she turned to face him. "Give me two days, Helios, okay? I'll get you your neutralizer."

He shook his head. "I could not live with myself should something happen to you. I will gather my kind."

"Two days, come on. You've waited a million years. What's a day or two?" Her eyes flashed. She appeared angry.

Helios wanted to smile. Such beauty and spirit. He wished he could have met her earlier. Much earlier. But then again, she would have been human just the same, and he, a vampire.

"You have today."

The unrealistic deadline would help him convince Dawn of her plan's folly or at least give her too little time to even try. He could not protect her while she was among her kind. Helios felt so powerless. A snarl rumbled in his chest.

"Today?!"

He nodded.

"Fine. Today. I'll get the damn thing. And I'll make you earn it too."

"Agreed."

Had he just trusted a human with his life and his kind's future? The shock made him sit on the edge of the bed and rake his hair back. He did trust Dawn Eindhoven. How uncharacteristic of him. The First, the largest, most feared vampire ever created, a myth, a rogue, out of control, preying on his creators, had about-faced and decided to trust a human. Not only trust. To love one.

For even if he had subdued it for over a century and a half and even sometimes had pretended it was not there, she had tamed the beast inside him in a matter of days. Or more aptly, *he* had tamed the beast *because* of her.

“I trust you with my life and the lives of every vampire yet to be freed, Dawn. Should you betray that kind of trust...”

He could not even bring himself to think of the consequences. All would be lost, himself first.

Dawn stood, slipped her robe back on and tied the belt. “I won’t lie to you, Helios. I’m not doing it for them or ‘the cause’. I don’t like the notion that my society is built on the blood of dead or dying vampires, but that’s how it is. I can’t change it. But it’s vital to you and that makes it a priority for me. So I’ll get that neutralizer and I’ll even help you manufacture it. I know people, they’d help. Once your guys have it though, I better see a lot of you.” She bounced her eyebrows at him.

Had the freedom of his kind not been at stake, Helios would have smiled.

She helped him retrieve his clothes—still warm from the dryer—and the rest of his things. He was standing on the balcony—his way in—within a few minutes. She had her arms crossed to ward off the stinging wind. He gathered her in his arms, kissed her forehead then stepped away, kicked a leg over the railing. The sight of her cold and alone outside her home drove a spike in his chest. How similarly he felt.

“Today, Dawn, then I will return to claim my summoner. Please be safe. For your sake and that of everyone in this city.”

A snort of laughter created thin tendrils of breath in the wintry night. “What, you’re going to level the city or something?”

“Yes.”

He heard her gasp when he turned toward the five-hundred-foot drop, passed his other leg beyond the railing and let go. His coat whipped up on either side of his tucked-in elbows and fretted loudly as he plunged to the terrace several floors down. He landed in a geyser of snow and a deep tremor. He stepped over that railing and repeated the process until he stood on the very last tier, the one before the bottommost walkways and last “barrier” between the upper strata and his own, lowly world.

Making sure no one could see him leaping over the balustrade of the steel and concrete bridge, Helios dangled by the hands, swung a couple of times to achieve enough momentum to reach the steel beams along the underbelly of the sky-bridge then let go.

His keen senses on full alert, he landed nimbly, grabbed the closest beam and kicked a leg back hard and high a split second later. A muffled humph announced he had hit the intruder. A dark form plummeted to the concrete street a hundred feet below. He leaped after it, landed ten or so paces from it.

Helios was already baring his fangs when he spotted Dorian picking himself up off the ground and dusting his bomber jacket.

“Following me is foolish at the best of times,” Helios snarled, crouching, “but tonight it is positively deadly.”

Dorian put both hands in front of him in a call for peace. “Artemis told me to make sure you were all right, despite what you did to her.”

A stitch of shame poked him. Helios straightened.

Dorian’s short hair rustled in the wind. He narrowed his eyes and moved closer. “That’s where she lives, your human?” He looked up between the sky-bridges where arches filled with purple and brown, pre-dawn light. Daylight was approaching fast. He should not have stayed so long. He missed her already.

Helios waited to see if Dorian would be unwise enough to comment further. But the younger vampire only shook his head, as though in disbelief and something else that drove a blade of anger in his awakening heart. Disgust. His younger companion did not understand.

“You may tell Artemis that I am safe.”

“She’d rather you tell her yourself.”

Helios sighed. He had never intended to hurt his trusted supporter nor had he set out to murder a dozen humans. He bore them no ill will, not individually anyway. It was their society, the one that allowed this slavery to exist, that he wanted to destroy. It pained and shamed him greatly to have used indiscriminate violence against humans when he accused them of the same and even more to have treated his trusted Artemis so badly. But the hurt had been so deep. It had made him desperate.

“She’d forgive you,” Dorian remarked caustically.

“I know she would. That is why I would never ask for it. Some things cannot be forgiven and that is one of them. She will learn to live with her pain and I with my guilt and regrets. One of a thousand regrets.”

A blade of light stabbed in between the highest spires and hit one of the sky-trains’ tracks at an angle, creating a rainbow in the sparkling snow.

He looked up. In less than twelve hours, he would be back at Dawn’s house to either claim the summoner and the neutralizer or start a chain of events that would result in just the type of violence he had spent so long avoiding.

“Why are you still here?” he asked Dorian, unable to excuse what he had called Dawn. The awful word still tasted sour at the back of his mouth.

“Why are you here at all?” Dorian shot back.

“My affairs do not concern you nor do my whereabouts.”

“They do concern me and Artemis and everyone else who counts on you. We’re starving, dying, while...” He took a deep breath. “We can’t wait anymore.”

Despite the younger vampire’s veiled threat, he could not find it in himself to be angry with Dorian. He hated human society as much as any other vampire – more, he thought sometimes, albeit in a calmer, more seething fashion – and wanted to topple the brutal regime keeping his kind under its heel. But he had never resorted to wholesale,

mass violence nor would he begin. The depth charges were not meant or set up to take life but for the nighttime destruction of deserted buildings. Yet he was an expert blaster, not a seer, so yes, he realized, there would be some loss of life, but it would be minimal. Or as minimal as he could possibly make it. Helios slid his hands in the pockets of his coat. "Are you moving against me?"

The gentle tone of voice must have portended more danger than any yelling fit for Dorian swallowed noticeably and shook his head.

"We move tomorrow. Rally our kind."

The pair of blue orbs could not possibly have flared any wider. "What?"

"You wanted to fight the humans, Dorian? Kill as many as you could? In a day, it may come to it."

Dark delight twisted the other's handsome features. He licked his bottom lip. "Why wait for tomorrow? Why not today? The sun isn't fully up yet, we'd still have the element of surprise."

Helios looked up at the mammoth building casting its monstrous shadow over Trafalgar Square and felt his whole countenance change. He tried to subdue the elation merely looking at her home brought him. He stared back at Dorian in time to catch the thinly veiled revulsion deforming the angular features.

"She will get the neutralizer for us. Today. If she fails..."

Helios had to stop to hide the depth of his pain just saying the words. Should she fail, it would mean one of two things, each more horrible than the other. Either she had betrayed him and would bring the authorities to his doorstep or worse—much, much worse—she had been caught and punished.

"You trusted her with this?" Dorian looked too shocked to be angry. He opened his mouth to speak, nothing came out, then tried again. "A human?"

"In two hundred years, I have met no human like her," Helios replied, drawing near Dorian and putting a hand over the smaller vampire's shoulder. "Show patience for once. Do not be so hasty to shed human blood for I fear if it comes to that, our own will flow just as copiously."

"How will we know if she succeeded or not?"

"We will return tonight and claim the neutralizer. While you wait here, I will go to her and retrieve it. If she has succeeded, I will make a copy for your summoner and we will separate in case we are followed. Within weeks, we should have manufactured enough to start a chain reaction no one will be able to stop."

Dorian did not look convinced. "What if she can't get it?"

"Then your dream will have come true. As will have my nightmare."

## Chapter Eight

For some reason, Dawn felt the need to dress for success that morning. She still rang from her encounter with Helios. Her entire body quivered for his as did her heart. She missed him already. How pathetic. So she used her closet to get a fix of positive energy.

One of Hemosynthe's preferred courier services had a booth right by the office building's front door. A uniformed young man on a red scooter turned to look at her as she walked by. His barely there goatee needed a trim. She knew she should've been able to name him—he'd delivered countless parcels for her in the past—but couldn't. She winked at him. He winked back.

A small group of security guards stood by the building's corner, looking back toward the entrance and seemingly deep in conversation. She couldn't help the stitch of fear poking her. They didn't seem to notice her, for which she was glad enough to jig.

She smoothed her gray wool pants as she stepped inside Hemosynthe's lobby, winked at the pair of security guards sitting behind their gleaming counter—she had to act normally after all—and stormed for the elevator, heels clacking and cutting a swath through the few employees making their way to work. She was very early as usual, wore her trademark “Hell's Bitch” smirk as usual and cut in front of everybody else with an assortment of jokes and diversions. As usual. What wasn't usual was the fear choking her. She hid it well, she knew she did, but still. Today wasn't a good day to show an iota of difference. Not unless she wanted Womack to come circling even closer. She'd already made a faux pas by going missing and lying about it afterward then another by picking those files off the floor after one of his usual fits. If she showed any odd behavior—not gracing the building with her special brand of caustic humor for example—he'd be sure to arch an eyebrow. And Womack's eyebrows had sent more than one career down the drain. So she wouldn't change a thing until she had the neutralizer in hand then she'd quit. Give up the nasty job and its nasty boss. She'd send her curriculum vitae to lowly law firms if she had to, hell, to anyone. But she wouldn't be part of the pharmaceutical world that was for sure.

Or even better, she'd remain in the pharmaceutical world but start her own rival company. *Yeah, take that in the teeth, you old fart.* She'd start her own ethical company to manufacture the neutralizer. Vampires would work for her but as a paid workforce. She could already see it, Helios as foreman, guiding his kind and taking care of the day-to-day operations while she'd be in the office, receiving news crews and showing them around, telling them about her revolutionary company. Dawn was already juggling numbers, enjoying the satisfying crunch of lining up all those zeroes.

*But before Helios and you get to choose office colors, you have to get that damn thing.*

She squeezed her handbag tighter. Before getting off the sky-train, she'd bought a disposable – and untraceable – summoner and had also brought Helios'. Nothing else in the handbag. Oh except for a bunch of credits and her ID card. If things turned to crap, she'd be making her way to ground level faster than one could say "industrial espionage". She'd need cash to last a while.

She swallowed hard. *It's time for Hell's Bitch to get onto the stage.*

The elevator pinged and she stepped out onto the carpeted deserted hallway – no other exec ever showed up this early – a designer-suit-clad, killer-red-lipstick-wearing dorsal fin aiming for an inflatable dinghy. Womack's office was her goal. And Dawn Eindhoven could be as hard-ass and pig-headed as any CEO she knew. Hell, she could fake it pretty good at golf and cigar smoking too. And today she had a goal in mind, a target in her sight and heaven help those who stood in her way!

Pumped as never before, Dawn reached the double glass doors, took a deep breath and pushed them in. Womack's all-glass-and-steel office gleamed quietly in the dormant lights. Even the windows were irised shut. One of the side doors, the one leading to his private archive room, was ajar. A thin ray of light knifed out and reached almost to her foot. A rhythmic sound coming from beyond that door froze her in the doorway. Something was knocking against a hard surface. She padded in, kept the glass doors from whooshing closed by putting her handbag in the embrasure then she tiptoed – damn heels – to the corner of the office and listened. Another sound accompanied the first and made her shake her head. Panting. Who could be screwing at six a.m. in Womack's office? It sure as hell couldn't be him, the old bastard. But when she put her eye against the jamb, a scene that ranked high on her personal Eww Scale made her nose crinkle. Womack had a woman she couldn't recognize leaning facedown on a pulled-out drawer and was enthusiastically fucking her. Both were naked.

"...say it, Eindhoven. I want to hear it," Womack snarled with a pronounced thrust into the woman.

She cried out, "Like a vampire, fuck me like a vamp."

Then Womack leaned over and bit the woman on the shoulder.

Dawn stood petrified. Stupefied.

*Nooo.*

She'd experienced that scene before. She had lived it only a few hours ago.

Dawn didn't know how she managed to back away from the narrow door without bawling her eyes out or screaming hysterically or giving the dirty pair an earful, nor did she waste a single second locating the wall panel which hid the access codes for some of the more sensitive areas. It was already opened, with most of the activators off. The labs' offices were then accessible? But then again, she didn't want access to the actual labs, only to their front end where the offices and workstations were situated.

*Thankyouthankyouthankyouth.*

Just in case, she grabbed the actual physical key, more like a plastic token than anything else, in a shaking fist. Her heart felt literally in her throat. A vicious urge to pee cramped her thighs.

How had Womack known about that? In her own bedroom!

Trying to look as normal as she could under the circumstances—Womack was fucking a woman but calling her Eindhoven while reenacting what she'd shared with Helios in her home—she stepped onto the restricted elevator by her office and went down four floors to the labs' level. Because they tended to stay late at night working, none of the techs or researchers ever reported in early. For the first time in her life, she was deadly afraid to meet someone, anyone, and hoped to hell the place was deserted. It was.

*Okay, get the thing and go. Jesus, just go.*

Dawn remembered the electrified plate at the last moment. She knew it wouldn't be active right now, not during working hours with people coming in, but just in case, she stood back against the wall as she slid the key's slim plastic edge in the slot, half expecting to hear that low hum like those power towers across the river.

The doors clicked. Within their core, between the two layers of frosted, tempered glass, tiny horizontal slats like those antique Venetian blinds rotated half a turn and went from opaque white to clear so people coming both ways would see through.

Dawn pulled a door just wide enough to squeeze through. Her heart beat so hard it hurt.

*Calm down, woman. Wouldn't that be grand to have a heart attack right in the middle of this!*

Sweaty, clammy from heels to shirt collar, she ran-walked to the nearest console and activated it. Womack's access panel had been opened, most of the codes deactivated and she hadn't been electrified trying to get it. This whole espionage thing was a success already. Ha.

No three seconds had ever felt so long, as though each second dragged for an hour. Shaking violently now, she rolled the cursor to the files tab, clicked then entered her security clearance, login and PIN. The screen filled with a smiling fake blonde—oh god, a vamp chick wannabe!—with the largest, fakest breasts she'd ever seen. Vamp chicks didn't have boobs like that. Come on. Ugh. Then folders appeared one by one onto the screen. The research director, in true geek fashion, had named the file she wanted The Money Shot.

*Okay, time to download this and get the hell out of here.*

A moan struggled up her throat as she wrestled her disposable summoner into the slot and downloaded the file. When it was done, not even ten seconds later, she stared at Triple E Vampie and noted the slightly befuddled expression. She looked exactly the way Dawn imagined herself right now. A bit confused, not quite sure if what she was doing was right but looking good while doing it all the same.

It had been so simple so far.

*Too simple.*

Dawn looked around at the empty workstations, the cooler in a corner with magnetized family photos and instant soup packets piled on top in a faux wicker basket.

Nothing this important should be that simple.

She was too old, too cynical, to believe she was being lucky. Oh crap. Crap, crap, CRAP. They were baiting her. *Nothing to be done about it now, Eindhoven.* Dawn looked back at the now-see-through doors, swallowed, pulled her summoner out of the slot then slowly slid it back into her handbag, which she zipped up.

That was when things turned ugly. Surprisingly quickly too.

One of the Goons appeared on the other side of the doors, pulled them wide and tut-tutted at her, his bearded face making the large and muscular man resemble a grizzly bear in a blue suit. The lights went on when he ran his finger along the plastic panel.

She swiveled in her seat so fast one of her shoes came off. She frantically slid her foot back in.

"You're in early, aren't you?" she snapped. *Best defense is offense. Best defense is offense.* The mantra wasn't helping at all. Best defense is getting the hell out of trouble before it gets too big!

"Miss Eindhoven, why don't you follow me," Grizzly Bear said.

Dawn knew her eyes must have been the size of bridge tokens. Handbag clutched against her chest, she tried to stand but slumped back into the chair. *I can't feel my legs. I can't feel anything.*

"Follow you where?" she replied with a fake, sardonic grin. "Are you hitting on me or something?"

"Mr. Womack sends me, ma'am. Please don't make trouble."

Dawn tried to pry her fingers off the handbag just long enough to make sure the zipper was closed all the way. Her hand shook as if she needed a hit of something. "Ah, Womack sends you. What does he want?"

"You can discuss that with him, ma'am. My job is to get you there."

*Take you there, you hirsute jerk.*

Instead of bolting as her instincts clamored, Dawn finally found the strength to stand, regroup and face the large man as he held the door for her, his expression not hostile, not friendly either, just business. As if catching the company's second most powerful exec in flagrant contravention of every protocol was commonplace. She shivered. A gag reflex made her swallow repeatedly.

"Come this way, ma'am."

She nodded, was about to join him in the doorway when an image flashed in her numb brain.

Helios suspended in a testing tank with tubes coming out of him. She had his summoner on her. With it, they'd find him quickly. Because he was the first, hell, the First, they'd want to test him, learn why he was so damn different, so large, so...long-lived. He'd die. No way in hell anyone would survive the tests required to learn all those things. Actually no, they'd make sure he'd live.

*Then get rid of it, you imbecile.*

She had to get rid of the summoner, get it back to him somehow.

Four steps separated her from Grizzly Bear. After one step, Dawn's mind was made. *He's not getting my handbag without a fight.*

Two steps remaining. *I won't be responsible for the death of every rogue vampire in town.*

One last step before she entered the man's reach. *I'm not losing Helios.*

As much as it burned her to resort to the typical female ploy, she did. Feigning a bitchy nervous breakdown and pathetic, imminent loss of consciousness, Dawn pitched forward and took a chair and half the stuff resting on the closest desk with her. She fell down hard. But it dislodged Grizzly from the doorway. She'd have one chance.

Fisting the first thing she could reach, a brass plaque with the name Albertine Neuville in tacky gold cursives—nerves were great for catching small details, she never would've remembered such a mouthful any other time—Dawn floundered as she pretended to stand.

Grizzly Bear bent over, reached for her arm.

She swung.

The plaque made a funny noise when it hit his skull. A celery stalk breaking. He wasn't knocked out by any means but it did give her a second to hightail it out of the lab. She whirled around, pushed against the doors as they slowly closed, the hydraulic system working like magic—dammit—and locked the man in with a lightning-quick punch to the access panel. There indeed was a low hum when the plate under the carpet charged up. She jumped back, hit the wall behind her.

Just in time to see Grizzly charge for the doors. But instead of unlocking them, he grabbed a chair and brought it up above his head.

What the hell he is doing? Didn't he have the code?

*Of course not, you idiot.*

Security had access to everything but the labs. Only lab personnel, top execs with industrial espionage schemes and Womack were allowed to get inside the labs.

Dawn yelped and leaped sideways when it was clear the guy didn't intend to just break the glass with the chair legs but throw the whole damn thing at the doors. It bumped against the tempered glass, created a spiderweb pattern.

Dawn didn't wait to see how many hits would be needed to take down the glass doors. She kicked off her shoes and ran.

Back toward the elevator, panting, near panic, only to swerve at the last possible moment when it pinged and Goons number two and three marched out and made for

the lab into which she'd just locked their colleague. A thunderous crash indicated he'd busted through the glass. And a roar told her he'd stepped out onto the electrified plate.

She'd fire his ass if she were still gainfully employed here. Incompetent cretin.

The stairs proved relatively easy to tackle without her killer heels. Naked feet squeaking on the polished granite floor, she took them four by four, fear and adrenaline propelling her upward much faster than she would've thought herself capable of. A placard reading Lobby in bold black letters against a stainless steel background caused her hopes to fly off the chart. She just might make it outside. With the early morning rush hour and the thickening crowd in the business sector, she'd stand a chance of losing them. She reached the door, pulled it in by an inch or so and peeked out.

*I'm so screwed.*

The last Goon, the female, stood by the front doors, her hand at her hip and looking around with narrowed eyes. Dawn only noticed then how tall the bitch was. No way she'd outrun that pair of legs. She swallowed, closed the door and knocked her temple against a protuberance on the wall. Cursing, she turned toward the offender and felt a nasty smile rise to her lips. Desperation was making her giggly. Hysteria, nervous collapse...they were breathing down her neck. If she were allowed a trial, she'd plead insanity. It wouldn't be far from the truth.

*Keep it together. Helios needs you focused.*

She used the corner of her handbag to break the small glass case. Hell's Bitch wasn't going to make it easy for them. She was pissed, desperate and barefooted.

*Here we go.*

When the wail of the fire alarm ripped through the stairwell and the lobby—in the entire Hemosynthec building—Dawn rushed out of her hiding place and followed the others as they spilled out of elevators or spun right around as they came into the building, coffee cups in hands, summoners stuck to their ears. She heard yelling and cursing and she hoped, she prayed, it wasn't directed at her.

Against all her hopes, she reached the front steps, crowded with people unsure how far they should back away from the entrance, as if safety took a backseat when weighed against their in-baskets. The female Goon in her sight the entire time, Dawn backed down the steps, to the very last one before she turned around and ran for the courier guy on his scooter.

Someone shouted her name.

*Crap!*

"Hey," she called to him. "Hurry!"

She stood right against him, their chests touching. He grinned wide despite his obvious shock. After she shoved her handbag in his chest, she leaned in to his ear. "Take this to the Tower Bridge. There are enough credits in there to make it worth the trip, believe me. But if you take anything else, you'll die. You understand?"

“Tower Bridge? No one lives there,” he replied, taking her purse and shoving it into his vinyl delivery tote bag.

“A man lives there. And he’ll know if you took anything other than credits from my purse. He’s about seven feet tall and already pissed off, so don’t mess with him, okay? If you’re caught before you get there, you’d be dead too. Now go. Go!”

He gunned the engine, lifted about a foot or so from the ground and took off.

Without looking back, Dawn ran the opposite way. She didn’t make it far. Something yanked her back by the collar of her jacket. Her feet flew up in front of her and she landed on the concrete walkway with about two hundred people—her employees—looking on. Rolled unceremoniously onto her front and cuffed, Dawn remained impassive as she was hoisted back up by the female Goon and another security agent. One from the lobby.

“Mr. Womack wants to see you, ma’am,” the female guard said with a sort of fancy hold on Dawn’s wrist.

It hurt like a bitch so Dawn didn’t try anything funny with her. If only she had a brass plaque to dent the bitch’s forehead.

“Yeah, I’m sure he wants to see me, the old bastard,” she snarled just for good measure.

While the pair led her to the elevator, Dawn, chin high, eyes set forward, snubbed her surroundings and her prospects. If she were lucky, later on today she might reach the police station in one piece. But that’d be after Womack’s “meeting”.

But Helios would probably be safe now. She held on to that hope. She’d need it to face what was coming her way.

\* \* \* \* \*

While Dorian gathered their kind, all seventy-eight of them, and what human sympathizers he could find, Helios locked himself in his home. He needed to think, to reevaluate the turn his life had taken since meeting Dawn Eindhoven. No other human—no other being—had affected him the way she had. He no longer wanted to embrace the shadows, live in solitude and detachment. He yearned, thirsted, for life. With her. It stung him deeply how his kind and he may be preparing for war when he had this newfound outlook on life.

Although he had fed and killed many humans, some of them innocents, using mass violence had always been the last resort for him. Reconciling his violent behavior with his hope for peaceful coexistence with humans had never been easy, but with Dawn and the feelings she instilled, Helios thought he could see light at the end of the tunnel. He would no longer kill after he fed. Unless absolutely necessary to protect Dawn’s or his own life, he would make sure to only take the least amount necessary to survive. After his kind was freed, he would find a way to feed the way they did, using the

neutralizer or perhaps a modified version of it that would suit his unique genetic makeup.

Helios retrieved a thick black sweater from his trunk, pulled it on then donned his coat. He lamented masking the smell of Dawn on his body but could not afford to walk around bare-chested. After adjusting the Army fatigues and belt, he stepped back into the cold winter dawn and made his way to the docks.

Already some vampires milled about, waiting for him. He had no speech prepared for them, nothing to say other than to ask for patience, to give their newest ally a chance to do her deed. But he needed to prepare them in case Dawn failed. A twinge of pain made him press a palm to his chest.

Amid whispered conversations and expectant faces, Helios jumped atop his usual platform, an old sea container from the days when London used to be a thriving port city and walked to the edge. He knew he made a singular dramatic sight, thus perched twenty feet above their heads, his coat fretting on either side of him, his large size rendered even more threatening given the difference in height.

"As you all know by now we have a new ally," he began, pointing at the upper strata gleaming above their heads and blocking much of the timid light. His voice carried well in the cold air. A gust of wind wrapped his coat around his widespread legs. He spotted Dorian right below and tipped his chin. "A new ally able and willing to secure for us that which we have sought long and hard. A cure!"

A wave of cheers squeezed his heart. If they only knew the risks associated with their triumph, the cost of failure.

"She is working right now to obtain the neutralizer our kind will use to gain their freedom. No longer will you feed in the palm of a human hand!"

Another round of applause and calls for immediate action.

Helios raised his hands. Silence instantly accompanied his gesture. "But first, we must let our new ally work. Patience has been our..."

A disturbance started at the back of the small crowd and rippled onward until Artemis cleaved a path through the massed bodies, emerging not long after with a young human male in tow. Dorian joined them immediately. The red of the young human's uniform gleamed like blood. He was trying to pull something out of a tote bag slung around his shoulder but a very distrustful Dorian kept shaking the young man and trying to keep the bag out of his reach.

"Who is he?" Helios demanded.

Artemis retrieved the bag from the young man and after giving Helios a sad shake of her head, flung it up to him. He caught it, opened the flap and peeked inside.

His heart stopped.

And when it resumed, a buzzing sound accompanied the thunderous rush of blood inside his ears. Hands shaking, he pulled out a handbag he knew well and discarded the other item. He could not even remember what it had been. His attention, his entire

consciousness could only focus on the one item in his hands, a handbag made of black polymer and cream-colored stitching. Chic, elegant. Dawn's.

"Where did you get this?" he heard his voice asking, the gentle tone as ominous as the split second silence between lightning and thunder.

"She gave it t-t-to me," the young human said, his eyes huge in his narrow face. "She said to give it to some guy who lives in the Tower Bridge—I swear I didn't take anything else but the regular fare. I left everything else, man!"

"He's not a man, fool," Dorian replied with a rough shake of the human's arm.

Fingers numb and cold, Helios unzipped the handbag, slipped his hand—so large and incongruous—and retrieved his summoner. But another was inside. He took it as well, thumbed the screen.

A single file blinked on, a tiny acid green file folder gleaming like glowworms. There it was, his kind's future, their freedom, a chance for a better life. She had done it.

But the price...

Helios felt the tears welling. "Let him go," he murmured. His voice broke when he cleared his throat.

Artemis followed his command first then Dorian as well. The human turned tail and rushed out between rows of sea containers.

Helios clicked the summoner off and returned it to Dawn's handbag. Energy left him like a tiny flame under a strong draft. He sank to one knee. Whispers rose from the gathered people. Someone said something.

*Dawn is dead.*

Helios looked out to them, met their expectant gazes turned upward at him, waiting, confused, hopeful, when all he wanted to do was hide in the deepest hole and never come out again. Such pain he had never felt, even at the hands of his masters during his years in the lunar mines, even during Delong's attentions and degrading treatment. Nothing had ever hurt him so much.

He had read somewhere about the supposed five stages of grief. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Ha. Whoever had come up with these clean, clinical terms had not born the loss knifing him now. They had not suffered. He felt none of the "stages" passing through him, no denial—Dawn was lost to him—or bargaining, what would he bargain for anyway? No sense of depression pulled at him, closed insidious fingers around his heart. And certainly no acceptance visited him. That left one. Anger. But the minds behind those five stages had misnamed it. Anger was too sterilized, insipid. For what presently filled his gut had nothing to do with annoyance or resentment, had none of rage's energy or even fury's sense of righteousness.

What Helios experienced had surely emerged from the bowels of the earth, had plagued the dreams of countless millions before him, caused wars of thought and religion, contaminated the minds of good men, spewed poisonous whispers, skewed

realities and masked life until only itself remained. A void, an abyss. A sterile, frozen steppe.

Revenge.

He wanted them to *pay*.

All of them. Every single human up there would taste his pain, if only a tiny sliver for he could not even imagine the depths of it. Nor did he want to know. Madness waited there.

A sense of great calm enveloped him, more frightening than any fit of rage. Helios stood. The closest vampires below his feet took a few steps back. Something seemed to have scared them. He walked off his perch, landed mid-stride and never stopped. He heard them fall into step behind him, the silent procession snaking out between rusty and decayed sea containers until he had reached the closest sky-tube exit. It glistened under melting snowflakes. Graffiti covered the stainless steel booth and the first twenty or so feet of clear thermoplastic tube.

Reverently, he dug into Dawn's handbag, already cold and stiff, and produced the ID card. He gave to Artemis the handbag with the disposable summoner still in it. "The cure is in this bag, bought with a life. Guard it well."

She took it, her large eyes welling. "I'm sorry, First..."

"So will they be."

He swiped the card along the access panel and waited for the elevator to drop to ground level. When the light blinked green and the stained doors slid apart, he gave the ID to Dorian. "This concerns no one else but me. Stay here, assist Artemis in leading them, freeing them."

"Where are you going, First?" Dorian asked, again referring to Helios by his "rank", something he had stopped during the last couple of days. The rift was mending. Helios was glad for it.

"I bided my time while in the lunar mines," he said, his voice gravelly and flat. "I kept my mouth shut, my eyes downcast. I did not say a word while they punished me, starved me for days. I refrained from using the means I had at my disposal in the hopes of finding a peaceful solution. No more." Helios looked at his summoner cradled in his palm. "They should not have taken Dawn away from me. Now I have nothing to lose."

Dorian put his hand on Helios' forearm. "I'm coming with—"

"No. They need you here. You will make sure they listen to Artemis and follow her lead. And I do not intend to come back."

Helios stepped inside the booth, did not turn around to face the doors or the allies he left behind. The doors slid closed on Artemis' choked sobs.

Neither touched him. He had told them the truth. Humans had taken much from him but never his hope because he had never held any. Until the day he had met Dawn. Now that they had taken her away from him, nothing remained. Nothing but revenge. He longed to spill their blood, as much as he could, and for as long as he was capable.

But most importantly, he wanted to get to Hemosynthec and deal personally with Dawn's masters. Those unfortunate souls would not die quickly with the rest but long afterward.

They had killed the one thing he loved.

He reached the first of the upper walkways. The tube pinged, the doors slid open. Humans stood in a small group, waiting to get on. Before they could flee, Helios grabbed a handful—he knew not how many neither did he care—pulled them inside the booth with him then kicked at the controls.

The doors slid shut over frantic screams and curses.

He fed on them savagely, without mercy or thought while waiting to reach the next level. Blood arced inside the stainless steel cabin in crimson bow-like patterns, screams filled it, dulled and muffled in his buzzing ears. He found no pleasure ripping them apart. Pleasure meant life when all he had left was the abyss staring back at him. He sank his fangs in a man's throat while he fisted others' jackets or collars, switched victims every few seconds, disposed of one to corner another, feed then toss him or her aside in his search for the next. They could not run very far nor could they hide. Blood covered the industrial-grade rubber floor, filled the tiny grooves between each tile and accumulated inside imperfections. The stench of urine, fear and death was strong.

When a ping heralded the next level, Helios repeated the process until he stood knee-deep in dead or dying humans in shiny shoes and ruined suits, in spilled coffee cups and torn-open attaché cases, which spilled their contents like gutted fish.

He finally reached the uppermost level where Hemosynthec and other large corporation buildings stabbed upward in blades of crystal and steel. Snow, so pristine, twinkled outside the walkways and settled on the clear ceilings covering them, transformed the large sky-tubes into mammoth snakes of concrete and crystal that ran between buildings and bridges, over lower buildings and among established shuttle routes. But he could tell they had been warned. News channels had commandeered most giant advertisement screens along buildings and flashed scenes of chaos from the lower levels. They knew he was coming. Good.

The ping of arrival. The doors opened. A hail of bullets thudded along the interior cabin. Most merely grazed him. That or he could not feel them entering his body. No matter, for his nanobots would quickly neutralize the foreign objects, break them down and expel them. Unless humans caused terrible damage to his body, he would not die. Vampires were immune to diseases...after all, what good was a sick workforce? He was cursed to longevity.

The trio of police officers gasped in unison when Helios charged out of the elevator and barreled into them, taking all three down under the span of his outstretched arms. He ripped the throat of the first, let him roll away and futilely try to stem the flow of blood. The second and third flew high and far when Helios grabbed them by the belts and flung them out of his way. Then he pulled his summoner from his belt, activated one of the caches.

An explosion rumbled somewhere underfoot. The concrete walkway quivered, the clear ceiling shuddered and shook snow off. Mass chaos greeted the first detonation, which triggered a stampede away from him and down toward the large gleaming boulevard suspended between buildings. Leaves from the synthetic trees planted along the graceful, arched bridge fell in clumps. Screams, sirens.

Helios thumbed another file. A second explosion rumbled. Closer this time. The walkway vibrated, steel cables holding its roof in place twanged and snapped like twigs. He began walking toward his ultimate goal a few blocks ahead. The all-glass building glittered. A spire-shaped sapphire shielding those who had taken Dawn away from him. They were inside.

He paid no heed to the few humans who stopped and stared at him as he advanced up the now-swaying bridge, crossed halfway then intercepted a suit-wearing man who ran too close to him. Helios distinctly heard bones snap when he grabbed the human in a one-arm bear hug and mechanically brought him to his mouth. Fangs tore the dark skin, ripped the shirt and tie. Arterial blood still arced as Helios let the man fall. More screams as humans desperately tried to get out of his way, run on either side of him, but as far as they could now, far from the giant vampire on a killing rampage. His summoner was covered in blood. He wiped it on his pant leg, never stopping his slow but inexorable progress. He thumbed another file. The third explosion sounded much closer and shredded upward from underneath one of the lateral sky-bridges, sending concrete debris and snapping one whole side of its supporting structure. It tipped sideways, spilled humans and things down into the void of his world far below. Ordinarily, he would have been horrified at the senseless loss of life. Not today. He barely saw any of it.

A fourth and fifth explosion destroyed the closest buildings' façades, brought a hail of broken glass to rain on the transparent ceiling over his head, demolished large sections of it and allowed the winter wind to howl into the sky-bridge and toss smaller fragments around. Because it was weakened, the rest of the bridge's thermoplastic ceiling collapsed in sections that toppled over and below the concrete walkway. He hoped his kind had taken refuge from the deluge of debris falling to the ground.

Now free to get in closer, news videobots buzzed overhead like metal carrion birds as they sent every juicy morsel back to the masses, some of them still undoubtedly in their warm beds far from downtown London's destruction.

A group of pale-haired, bronze-skinned people spilled out of a corporate building to his left, its bottommost two hundred feet a giant, windowless block of concrete and built on the grounds once occupied by the National Gallery over three centuries before. He slowed to watch them run by. One of them, a very gaunt male, met his gaze, stumbled and fell. Helios stopped then and helped the young vampire stand.

"First?"

Helios nodded. "The cure is found. Go down to ground level and ask for Artemis. She will be your leader. Tell every vampire you know."

Nodding, the young vampire ran away, rejoined his group.

Helios tapped the screen on his summoner and resumed marching forward. This time, he had to leap-frog in a zigzag to avoid the falling bits of building landing on the walkway and taking good chunks of it to the ground five hundred feet below. Riot police sirens could be heard getting closer, the distinctive sound familiar for their regular raids down below. He started running.

Hemosynthec stood barely a block away now. He noticed they had placed security guards around the perimeter and along the walkway leading to the building.

More dead humans.

The emptiness inside swelled like an infected abscess, throbbing, feverish, ready to burst. They would die. Helios realized he would die that day as well. And he did not care.

## Chapter Nine

By the time they took her back up to Womack's office, he was fully dressed, for which Dawn thanked every deity in the book. The sight of his droopy, naked ass would haunt her for...however many hours she had left to live.

Grizzly Bear was there as well, a red mark shaped like a corner in the middle of his forehead. He scowled at her.

"Eindhoven, Christ, what the fuck did you think you were doing?" Womack marched for her, cocked his hand back to deliver one hell of a stinging bitch slap. Dawn saw stars. Crap, the old bugger still had some wire to him.

"Sit her ass down over there," he added, indicating one of the visitors' chairs in front of his mammoth desk. "And make sure the cuffs are holding. Sneaky cunt."

Grizzly Bear helped with that and gave an enthusiastic tug on the vinyl straps around her wrists. The burn flared up her arms. She humphed when he "drove" her by the nape and pushed her into the chair.

Womack pinched the bridge of his nose. "That nitwit at the lab says you had time to download the file. Where is it now?"

Dawn offered him her best Hell's Bitch smirk.

"Don't make me search you, Eindhoven. I'm just itching to." She spotted the lump in his pants. Eww!

"I don't have it anymore. He does."

Womack cursed. "That big vamp from the video?"

Ah, um, yes, the video. She wondered how long her place had been wired.

"Where is he now?"

Her shrug didn't seem to please him for he stalked forward, grabbed a fistful of shirt and with surprising strength, hoisted her partly off the chair and closer to his face. "Where. Is. He. Eindhoven? I'm past being the kind older gentleman."

"When were you a kind older gentleman?" she retorted with a grin that turned into a grimace when Womack started searching her, beginning with the inside of her shirt. His hands were rough and maladroit as he raided her breasts underneath her jacket and shirt, down her pants when he pushed her against the desk and pinned her there with his hips. She clamped her mouth shut and took the abuse. She'd saved Helios and freed his kind—*don't give a damn about that*—and it was all that counted. Womack could do whatever he wanted. It no longer mattered.

Yanked back into her chair, Dawn blew hair from her face and stared at her boss, who panted and started pacing around and kicking things. A wastebasket flew into the archives next door, followed by the ashtray.

“Mr. Womack,” said the female Goon, a summoner stuck to her ear. “You should watch this. It’s on every channel.”

With a narrowed glare at Dawn, Womack stomped to the large wall-mounted video screen and turned it on. Devastation, carnage. The images stopped her heart for a full three seconds. A ten-second piece of footage kept being replayed over and over, with a female news anchor’s smooth voice narrating the destruction.

In the name of...

The surreal quality of the footage left her slack-jawed. Always the same images. A giant black-clad vampire emerging from a sky-tube exit and taking down a trio of police officers, blood everywhere, bullets causing sparks on the stainless steel booth, chaos all around. People falling over themselves to get out of his way.

“Oh shit.”

Dawn didn’t know who’d just spoken but it pretty much summed up the situation.

Helios had never looked more like the predator he was as he stalked forward along the uppermost walkway, calmly dispatching anyone in his path, feeding and killing with method and poise. As much as the bloody images should’ve disgusted her, they only reaffirmed her love for him. God he was magnificent! A pale-haired, fanged angel of death.

The first tremor rumbled under the floor, traversed the room then rippled through Womack’s wall-to-ceiling glass walls.

Womack looked at her. “What the fuck was that?”

“I don’t know,” she breathed in reply.

He must have believed her for he rushed to the windows and looked down. “Go place guards around the entrance. I don’t want that vamp anywhere near Hemosynthec. And post a team by the lab doors too, in case some corporate fucker gets any ideas.”

A giant puff of smoke rose between neighboring buildings. If she craned her neck, Dawn could see the wide boulevard far below their level and could tell it’d swayed just by the way people – no bigger than tiny, suit-wearing ants – massed on one side then on the other. She gasped when entire sections of sky-bridges, clear ceiling and some concrete too started coming apart and falling to the ground far below.

Grizzly Bear and the female Goon rushed out of the office, leaving only one security guard, who looked as though he’d rather chew bees than be in Womack’s office. Dawn shared the feeling.

“He’s coming here,” she murmured, shaking her head.

Why the hell was he coming here? He already had the damn neutralizer. She’d lost a very expensive pair of shoes getting it to him, not to mention her designer handbag

and a good chunk of credits in it. But he was putting his nice tight ass in danger...for what, huh? Crap.

"Give me your gun," Womack snarled, his hand proffered behind him while his face was still pressed against the glass. "Hurry, you cretin."

The guard relinquished his service gun then backed all the way to the door. His expression betrayed him a split second before he yanked one of the glass doors open and rushed out.

Womack whirled around when he heard the door opening. "Come back!" He hurried around the mammoth desk, cursed then threw his hands up. "Remind me to fire the incompetent fool, Eindhoven. Meanwhile, we're getting the hell out of here."

Dawn flinched when he grabbed a lapel of her jacket and yanked her to her feet. Tugging her behind him, Womack was almost reaching the door when a deep tremor shook the entire building. Like ice chips, the glass exterior wall disintegrated into twinkling shards. Both cried out in shock. Dawn twisted and crouched when a gust of wind blew inside the office, threw things to the ground, tossed sheets of plastic around before sucking them outside and out of sight.

"Christ," Womack snarled. His hand was merciless when he gripped her by the back of the hair and pulled her upright.

Dawn had had just about enough and aimed a good kick at his knee. The old bastard growled in obvious pain when his leg buckled but he cocked his arm back, the pommel of the gun gleaming for a second. Dawn barely had time to squeeze her eyes shut. Stars exploded behind her eyelids. Something warm and wet dribbled down her cheek.

"Don't try anything else, you cow, or I won't be as nice. Now move!"

The sound of sirens and the smell of smoke reached them as they emerged into the deserted hallway. At its end, numbers glowed green and in chronological order from top to bottom. Probably Grizzly Bear and the female Goon reaching the lobby. Dawn's feet were cold and bleeding—she must have walked through broken glass without realizing it—as Womack propelled her forward and past him so he could jam the muzzle of the gun in her ribs and push her onward.

"Where are we going anyway, Womack? It's all over." Her wrists burned.

"I've worked too long and too fucking hard to leave without the neutralizer. I'm sure I'll be able to sell it before your vamp friends figure out a way to manufacture it. By that time, I'll be on extended vacation far from here. I've always wanted to visit India."

The symbols above the elevator steel doors stopped at L.

A series of muffled shudders created an assortment of little sounds from offices left opened and deserted. Dawn felt them under her soles. Before Womack could reach for the black plastic pane and call the elevator, the numbers began to flash from left to right. One, two, three. They resembled tiny lime-green beetles on some varsity precision gymnastics squad adopting different positions. The elevator was coming back up.

But they hadn't called it.

Womack came up by her side, scratched his chin nervously. The numbers grew, reached the twenties, thirties, forties. The last number, the last floor – theirs – seemed as if it waited impatiently at the end of the row.

Dawn's heart beat madly. Had Grizzly Bear found Helios? Oh god, what if they'd shot him? Or were bringing him back with them? She took a step away from the steel doors, afraid it'd be empty, even more afraid it'd be occupied. As the numbers rose, the green flash traveled toward the right.

Womack got his hand on the back of her jacket again and yanked her backward several paces. She wondered if he realized he muttered the word "fuck" obsessively. Fear filled her gut as they backpedaled all the way to his office. Womack aimed the gun at the steel doors and waited. Only three black dots then it would reach their floor. A ping broke the tense silence. Dawn readied herself for...

*I don't even know what for!*

The doors slid apart to reveal a roiling mass of smoke and debris. A lump detached itself from the rest, was ejected from the elevator, catapulted and landed in an ungainly heap in the middle of the corridor. A good thirty feet from the steel doors.

Womack pointed his gun at the mass. "What in the bloody...argh, hell."

Dawn recognized him. The security guard, the one whose gun Womack held in his hand. His head was barely attached to the rest of him. Blood made his shredded uniform shiny and dark. A moan came from the elevator. Another figure, this one upright, stumbled out. Grizzly Bear, his front and arms lacerated, his throat a ruined mess, collapsed onto his knees, tried futilely to stifle the red torrent sullyng his crispy white shirt then crumpled like an empty jacket.

Through the smoke and electrical shower of sparks, a tall silhouette drew near the doors, stooped so it could step under the jamb and onto the carpeted hallway. Dawn could scarcely believe her eyes. If Helios had been a mess when he'd shown up at her apartment, bloody and half coherent, he presently looked as though someone had dipped him in red paint then put a giant food mixer to him. Only his eyes hadn't changed and glowed like neon lights through his tousled bangs. He marched toward Womack and her with measured, steady paces.

"Stay where you are, vamp!" Womack yelled, pointing the gun at Helios. But he shook so badly Dawn doubted he'd manage to hit anything important.

Still Helios advanced. His gaze settled on her face. She'd never seen anything so eerily beautiful, so dramatic and menacing. She couldn't move a muscle.

"I said keep the fuck away!" He fired the gun once. A tiny eruption blistered the carpet a good ten feet in front of Helios.

Dawn yelped in horror.

Helios didn't even seem to hear. Or to care. His large body seemed to fill the hallway. Bloody boot prints on the pale gray carpet trailed in his wake. His coat was

opened in front to reveal a torn black sweater. Both his large hands looked cut and bleeding. Dawn's heart swelled. Just as her fear did. If he kept getting closer, even the old bastard would find a way to put a bullet in him.

Something grabbed her by the hair. "What the hell—"

Her boss pushed her hard, backward against the doors to his office, which whooshed open to let her through. "Shut up!"

Dawn backpedaled several paces but stopped when the wall where glass panes should have been gaped only five or so paces to her right. Wind whistled a forlorn tune. Snow had accumulated in the corners. She wished she had her arms free at least. Cramps tightened her calves and belly and panic threatened to make her start running around in crazy circles. She needed to pee badly.

On the video screen, the female news anchor was interviewing an "expert" on vampires, some guy with a bad comb-over. In a small square below his face, Helios' arrival onto the walkway kept being replayed. Dawn shut the images out.

The office doors had only begun to close when Helios pushed them wide and entered. Slowly, deliberately. No outward sign of violence or anger except for his eyes, which were narrowed and focused on her boss.

Before she could do anything—like curse and flinch impotently—Womack jammed the gun in her armpit.

"Ouch, shit!"

As if someone had pressed "Stop" on a remote, Helios froze in mid-stride. His eyes grew larger. The whites a stark contrast to the bronzed and bloodied skin.

*Crap.*

She'd been so worried about what Womack might do to Helios that she'd forgotten about herself and how the sneaky old bugger would try to use her to get at the vampire. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"That's better," Womack snarled, driving the gun harder in her flesh. "Step over here so I can see you better."

His hands hanging loosely by his sides, Helios stepped sideways, kept his back along the wall, his gaze never leaving her boss's. He stood right against the screen, where the expert was answering questions about how vampires were "technically not really sentient beings, Jennie, well, not in the classical sense of the word anyway".

*Imbecile.*

"My, my," Womack said, whistled. "You are a large specimen. That birthing tank must have been closer to a cistern—you're what, seven feet tall? What year were you born? Be honest now. No First bullshit."

"March 2313. Batch One."

Womack stared hard, flicked his gaze at Dawn then back at Helios. "You really are convincing, vamp. But then again, I've seen the size of your *enthusiasm!*" He turned to

Dawn, grinned his lopsided one, the one she particularly detested. "And they say vamps don't have a sense of humor."

Helios straightened to his considerable height. The top of his head reached above the large glass doors. Animal magnetism emanated, dripped, from him. As did the danger. A very large, fanged predator. At the bottom of the screen, he kept killing those three cops over and over while the expert pontificated about such and such genetic component. Dawn would've liked to see how the moron would enjoy trading places with Womack.

"Now tell me who your master is so I can ruin him."

"I killed my masters long ago. My name is Helios. I am the First."

Dawn didn't like the sudden glint of delight in the older man's eyes. She'd seen that look often enough to recognize trouble. Greed was rearing its pointy little head. Fear's glacial fingers squeezed her stomach and pulled it down.

"Let us go, Womack," Dawn snapped, trying to hide her terror under a mask of frustration and anger. "Get your neutralizer and just leave."

He shook his head. That glint still danced in his eyes, burned even brighter. "You know what, I believe you, vamp. The First. Can you imagine how much Hakamo would pay to get their hands on a piece of this?" He hooked his thumb at Helios as though he were talking about a hunk of meat that didn't have fangs large enough to rip someone's arm off.

He spoke as though Helios were a beast.

Dawn snorted. *Keep it cool*, she chanted mentally. "Let us go and you might keep all your limbs, okay?" She took a step toward Helios but Womack shook his head.

"You're staying right there, Eindhoven. It's not about you anymore. Fuck, I love this. The real First, imagine! But I wouldn't sell you to the first whore on the corner. No, I'd make sure to keep them circling—"

"Look, Womack," Dawn interrupted with a big show of rolling her eyes and taking a step toward the doors and Helios. "I've had enough of this. I'm cold and pissed off so—"

Womack fired at her feet. She flinched, leaped back a step. "Are you nuts?!"

"Shut the hell up, I can't count while you're running your trap."

Helios had taken a step forward, violently trembling all over, his eyes killing the old bastard where he stood. "If you harm Dawn..."

The old man turned narrowed eyes to the vampire. "You mean like this?" He fired at her feet again.

To her undying shame, she yelped like a girl and backed up against the desk, knocked aside a dish of candy. She could hardly feel her hands anymore. Despite her better judgment, she looked at Helios if only to make herself feel better. Big mistake.

Fear flashed in his ancient gaze. Fear as old as the world. Fear of loss, of loneliness, of waking one morning to realize life has passed by and has left nothing but ashes in its wake.

“You’ll be a nice vamp for me, won’t you, Helios? Because if you’re not, I’m putting a bullet through her sharp little brain. Do we understand each other?”

Helios nodded his assent. No bravado, no posturing. As much as his fate would undoubtedly be ghastly – Womack intended to sell him, for Pete’s sake – it seemed as if the fear of losing her was worse. The pain in his eyes melted her heart. Just as it ratcheted her blood pressure. Rage fizzed in her gut.

That creepy old bastard.

Dawn turned narrowed eyes back toward Womack and was satisfied to see alarm in his expression, in the way he swallowed a bit too hard, averted his gaze a bit too quickly. He smoothed his sleeve, adjusted his glasses to hide his response. He was good but not that good. She’d cowed him. Even for a second.

Riots seemed to be erupting all over the city for the newscast abruptly cut the “expert” off to show a large crowd of mostly vampires but with humans interspersed in them, spilling into the streets, out of tube exits, from buildings. Some had their fists in the air. A large crowd looked as if it were in the business district. Not far from Hemosynthec then. If only Helios would’ve brought his vicious-looking pal Dorian.

“It’s too late, Womack. Look at them. They’re free. With the neutralizer, they won’t need people like you anymore.”

“People like us, my dear. Like us. I don’t remember you complaining about the salary I paid you to keep my ship nice and steady. Well, that is, until you started fucking around. Literally.” Her boss shook his head. “I never would’ve tagged you as a scream queen.”

“You dirty old bastard, how long has my house been wired?”

“From day one, my dear. Oh don’t you play the bloody virgin with me, not after I’ve seen you suck a vamp’s dick.”

Helios took a step forward.

“Nah-ah,” he waved his gun at Helios. “Step back. I’ve seen your wingspan. Better yet, let’s get the fuck out of here. We’ll take care of Mister the First here, find him a nice safe place to wait while I froth my future investors into a rabid mating ball like the snakes they are.”

*No way. He’s not taking him from me. No. Fucking. Way.*

Dawn Eindhoven had never been afraid of much. But the prospect of losing Helios – hell, the mere thought of what awaited him – left her on the verge of mental collapse. She could feel desperation gnawing at her spirit like a rat on a bone.

*He’s not taking him away from me.*

When Womack approached, the gun pointing at her and no longer at Helios, Dawn knew she had to either act now or spend the rest of her life in regret. She put all her

weight into it, all her rage and fear and pain at seeing Helios exploited as he'd been before he escaped. With a snarl curling her lip, Dawn bent over and shouldered Womack right in the stomach. He went stumbling backward, struck his foot against one of the wheels on his chair and fired at the ceiling. The older man windmilled once, toppled out through the broken windows.

"Take that you old –"

Dawn's triumph turned to shock then to horror.

Womack's hand reaching for her. A violent jerk against her jacket, forcing her back. Too far.

Glass crunching under her naked feet. Burning.

Helios' horror-stricken expression, his bellow as he rushed forward with both hands outstretched.

Wind hitting the back of her head. Eerie silence except for the wind whistling.

Then the sensation of falling backward. Luckily she fainted right after the windowsill flashed upward in her field of vision.

## Chapter Ten

A great cold stole over him. Biting, raw. Hopelessness. Helios had not known it was possible such feeling could exist. The fear nearly drove him mad.

As if he were watching a video in slow motion, he heard and saw every detail—the old human male’s hand fisting the back of Dawn’s jacket, the crunching of glass beneath her naked feet, the squeak of the chair when she knocked against it then the look of shock in her eyes as she tumbled backward and through the gaping windows. Fell outside into the swirling snow.

If she died, he would be lost forever.

Helios had never moved so quickly. He had never before tested the utmost limits of his vampire body. Even back in the lunar mines or his escape from prison, he had not pushed his coil to the breaking point as he did now when he rushed to the window without thought for himself or anything other than Dawn.

He leaped outside feet first.

To his amazement, the pair’s fall had been slowed by their bumping against narrow ledges protruding from the building’s façade. They resembled broken marionettes tumbling head over heels. Because his fall came unhindered and free, Helios hurtled past Dawn, fisted her clothes and yanked her to him. She must have been knocked unconscious by one of the ledges. The human male had not for he screamed all the way down.

Wind whistled in his ears. His coat flapped angrily. Snowflakes felt like razorblades against his exposed skin.

Desperate to save the one bright thing in his long life, Helios gathered Dawn close to him, made sure his feet and legs would take the violent impact then braced for it.

Through a tiered roof—a sort of eating place with chairs and tables—he smashed with a shower of broken glass and twisted metal strips through a terrace filled with synthetic flora, each crash slowing their descent but a whisper away from breaking his body, then he glanced off a concrete ledge, which ripped a grunt of agony from him then finally onto the roof of a relatively soft metal booth the size of a large shuttle. Screams and chaos greeted him. People ran madly.

Hellish pain radiated up his legs, which had buckled under the force of the landing, and flared along his lower back. Frantically, Helios patted his precious charge, searching for broken bones, cuts or injuries. Except for the soles of her feet and a few minor cuts here and there, Dawn looked unhurt if disheveled and still unconscious. Helios managed to extirpate himself from the twisted remnants of a courier service’s

booth and landed on the walkway proper. His heels burned like fever. But he knew he was unhurt, only bruised.

Around him humans stopped running or yelling to stare incredulously. Some pointed up, clearly awed, while others merely gaped at the strange sight of Helios falling from the sky with a woman in his arms. He ignored them all. Keeping her upright with an arm, he ripped the vinyl strips holding her hands back, took his coat off so he could wrap it around her slender form before scooping her up behind the knees. He must have made an odd sight, a half-naked vampire covered in blood and bruises carrying a human female in his arms as though she were the most precious jewel of all.

“Stay where you are!”

A pair of police officers, uniforms in disarray, pushed their way to the front of the thickening crowd. One pointed a gun at Helios. The other held a stunner in a shaking fist. Helios noticed not everyone seemed relieved at their arrival. Hostility narrowed eyes, tightened mouths. This shocked Helios. Why would they not find comfort in their own security forces?

He shook his head. “Let me pass. I bear you no ill will.”

“Drop the woman and step away,” one officer said. His chest rose and fell quickly. Fear was obviously making him twitchy.

Helios’ heart sank. “I have laid waste to a city to save this woman. Do you think you two could stop me?”

A rapidly rising disturbance made the taller humans turn their heads back. A cleft appeared in the pressed bodies. Helios had never felt so relieved to see Dorian.

“I suggest you take the First’s cordial offer. I won’t be so nice.” He leveled a gun at the startled pair.

Behind Dorian, Artemis emerged, put her hand on his shoulder and murmured something in his ear. Her gaze was on Helios. Dorian lowered his gun and nodded, clearly frustrated.

Whispers of “the First” floated around him. He wished Dorian had not revealed his identity. Now greed at the reward for his capture would make humans tempt his patience. He had precious little left. In his arms, Dawn stirred. He held her closer, pressed a tender kiss to the top of her head.

“This woman means more to me than my own life, humans,” he said, spreading his sore feet wider. “You cannot imagine to what lengths I would go to protect her, to what depths I would sink if I lost her. She is my light and I will fight for her. So I will say it one last time. Let us pass.”

Even though either officer could have shot at him, neither did. To his complete shock, the crowd parted as if a giant invisible hand had gently divided the bodies and created a wide V for him to step into. Helios spotted many human sympathizers he recognized by face and vampires—some of them carrying weapons, others merely scowling threateningly. Slowly, he backed away from the police, never turning his back on them. A woman nodded at him. Then another wiped his nose. A pair of humans

huddled, the female crying in the male's arms. Helios did not know what to make of this sudden shift in mentality. Surely he was misjudging their facial expressions, their body language. Surely, surely, these humans did not *care*.

"We've secured a couple of tube exits," Dorian said by his side. He lowered his gaze to Dawn, shook his head. "It's right around the corner."

"We should go back below," Artemis said. She pulled her felt cape tighter around her neck. "Follow us, First."

Dorian by her side, Artemis and the armed vampires and human sympathizers leading the way, Helios crossed the length of the walkway unchallenged, the stares of many following him but never once meeting his.

The sky-tube exit gleamed invitingly when he emerged into a large covered plaza where still more vampires and humans milled, talked or stood around looking ill-at-ease or scared. He had changed their way of life, even if this had never been his first goal. All he had wanted to do was to avenge Dawn, whom he had thought dead. And out of his fury had come change. How strange.

Helios sighed in relief as the steel doors opened to let him in. By his side stood his two closest...friends, he perhaps should now call Artemis and Dorian.

He felt Dawn shifting against his chest and looked down to see her staring back up at him. She looked groggy.

"I want to go home."

A stitch of pain flared in his heart. He thought she would have wanted the shelter of his compound, of his company.

"Of course. I will bring you to your house."

A scowl marred her forehead. She shook her head weakly. "I said home, vamp. The bridge."

Helios realized his smile must have been a shock to Artemis and Dorian, who had probably never seen it before. He nodded. "Home."

"You won't mind carrying me a bit more, right? My feet are killing me." Dawn closed her eyes.

The way to his compound felt like a dream. Dawn's warmth through the clothes was the only thing that felt real to him. Or important. Dorian tried several times to talk about the change that had occurred, their new way of life, the neutralizer. Helios would shrug or nod. Had he not spent over a century and a half fighting the current, trying to free his kind? But the fear of losing one precious life, Dawn's, had put things into perspective for him. He no longer wished to lead his kind to a brighter future. All he wanted was a quiet existence with the love of his life, Dawn. A human.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn had never woken to such complete silence before. No alarm clock, coffee machine or life outside her window. Even with the height of her apartment, she'd

always heard the whirr of the shuttles below or the deep hum of faraway planes. Nor had she ever come to completely naked. She opened her eyes. Then it came back to her. Everything. The horror, the fear. The near fall. But Helios had caught her before she fell. Good thing vampires were quick for she would've plummeted all the way down and made a nice splatter at the base of the Hemosynthec building.

She jerked up.

Helios, who'd been sitting in his black leather chair, contemplating something along the ceiling, instantly stood and approached the bed in which she lay. There hadn't been one the last time she'd been in Helios' home. Judging by the footboard, it was the old-fashioned kind made of wrought iron. Despite the flaking white paint, Dawn thought it was pretty cute as far as antiques went. She preferred modern lines.

"Are you in pain?"

"My head." She remembered Womack's smacking her across the face with the butt of his gun and touched tentative fingers to her eyebrow.

"It is healed."

Healed? "How long was I out?"

"A few hours. Because of nanotechnology, my lymphatic system and salivary glands have curative properties."

So clinical. "You can heal with your spit?"

*Such finesse, Dawn. Attagirl.*

"Had you not wondered why you bore no marks after I had bitten you?"

"Well, yes, but you know, I was busy. So what did you do, lick me?"

He nodded.

The image of his licking her temple tightened her belly.

"Was I hurt anywhere else?"

Helios must have caught on to the double entendre for he arched an eyebrow, his lips suddenly all she could look at.

"Your feet."

Oh had he...licked her feet?

He nodded, smirking now, probably guessing her chain of thought.

"Anywhere else?"

"Fortunately, no."

"You mean unfortunately."

He averted his gaze, tucked the cover tighter under her butt.

She shook her head. Cotton sheets? A wool blanket? Where had Helios found all that stuff, in a museum? Real, natural fibers! So strange compared to their synthetic reproductions. She was glad nonetheless and lay back, pulling the blanket up with a long sigh.

"I'm glad to wake up here."

He sat against the edge of the bed, which creaked plaintively.

"Don't bust the bedframe. I'm not sleeping on your rug again."

Helios shook his head. "I am pleased to see you are back to normal."

Dawn noticed he wore something other than black for a change and was stunned speechless at the way the blue of his sweater highlighted the same electric hue as his eyes. Whoa.

"That's nice," she remarked after a bit more gawking—a woman could do that for a while with a guy such as him—and pointed in his general direction with her chin. "Suits you well." She cleared her throat. "Did I miss all the fun?"

"It is almost seven in the evening now. Would you like to feed?"

She snorted a laugh. "We say 'eat', us humans, you know. Not, er, feed."

"I had a human acquaintance prepare a meal for you."

He stood—the bed groaned its thanks—silently padded to the counter and retrieved a small tray. When he brought it to her, she noticed it looked to be made of bamboo and held a bowl of greenish soup, crackers and cheese. She went for it and ate the whole thing under his intense, vigilant gaze.

"You're lucky the bowl is too hard for me to chew," she said after she licked her lips and rubbed her fingers above the tray.

"You scared me," Helios said after a long sigh. A flash of fury darkened his eyes and for an instant Dawn was reminded again of how truly terrifying Helios had been when he'd come looking for her. Terrifying for others, no doubt, but breathtaking and magnificent to her.

"I thought they had taken you from me. The pain was—"

"The best eating place in town, here. Should open a restaurant—"

"I still do not remember anything before reaching Hemosynthec. And when you fell—"

She cleared her throat with a fake laugh. "I'd recommend it to all my friends—"

"Do my words mean nothing to you?" Helios demanded.

"What can I tell you, Helios, dammit? I don't do well with feelings, never have. I don't even know how to just...say *it*."

"And do you think baring my soul is easy for me? I was not created to have any feelings at all. Let alone to love a human."

*There it is. The L word.*

Now that it was out in the open, Dawn felt silly for trying to weasel out of saying it. She shrugged. "I'm sorry for being such a big coward. I've never felt anything close to this." She clutched at the blanket over her chest and pressed her fist to her heart. "I love you so much it hurts. Right here. And unless you can lick it all better, then I guess I'll have to learn to live with it."

As if clouds had parted to reveal a brilliant sun, Helios' face went from deep scowl to smile. He grinned so widely, showed so many teeth all at once that Dawn could only stare like an idiot would. He had nice teeth too, not just big and stark white but regular and just, well, perfect. She noticed for the first time his bottom canines were also larger and pointier than the rest, as were the top ones. Four fangs then, not just two. Made sense, come to think of it.

"I doubt I can 'lick it all better'," he murmured, sobering at once. An intense glint replaced the sparkle in his eyes when he leaned over her. "But I can try."

Dawn pretended not to be affected by the lust in his gaze, nor by hers knifing her gut. "I'd like that, but I'm afraid I wouldn't be very much fun right now. There's not a muscle that doesn't hurt."

"You would have to do nothing but lie in bed and be the precious gem you are."

"Precious gem, huh? Keep going."

Now it was her turn to grin. The guy had a way with words. Much better than her usual boyfriends and their "hey, baby" or even the occasional "honey" when they felt imaginative and hoped for a blowjob.

Helios knelt by her bed, his raised kneecap still visible because of his height. After leaning on an elbow, he rested his chin on a fist and traced the contour of her body over the blanket, creating instant heat to pool high between her legs.

"I want to talk long into the night, spend days just walking with you, cherish every angle of you, every tender alcove, every hard swell, I want to watch how light brushes your skin and shadows veil your forms. I want to taste you, touch you, love you, Dawn. I want to watch how shivers raise your flesh, how pleasure darkens your eyes then I want to start all over again. As long as you will have me, I will be there."

Dawn didn't know how she managed not to become a complete fool and start blubbering incoherently in her hands. Her throat was so tight, she feared for a moment she'd started to hyperventilate. She'd never, ever, had a man bare his soul this way to her, never heard those words and damn it if she wanted it all. All of his caresses, all of his body. All of his love.

"I think I have a little bit of a hurt right here," she said, pointing to the back of her hand.

Playing along, his pupils dilated so wide all of the blue was gone, Helios gently flicked his tongue for a quick, careful lick.

Shivers pebbled her skin all over. "And here too." She pointed to her shoulder.

He licked it tenderly.

Dawn knew she grinned like an imbecile but didn't care. "Oh and this one hurts, ooohh."

A long frisson accompanied Helios' mouth as he pressed it to the dawn of her throat, at the juncture of her collarbones, a frisson that spread to her nipples and a sex growing slicker by the second.

“What about here?” he asked as he put the pad of his index finger against her chin. “Any pain here?”

Theatrical hand to forehead. “Great, great pain. Oh yes.”

A nibble, a lick.

Helios ran his thumb along her bottom lip. “And here?”

Dawn nodded.

She swore she saw fireworks when he pressed his mouth to hers, softly brushed side to side then concentrated on each lip in turn, seemingly in no hurry to move on and kiss better the rest of her. A rest that clamored for his attention.

He pulled away so he could look at her. Dawn, without really knowing why, smiled wide. He hadn’t said anything funny, neither had she for that matter. Why did she feel so happy all of a sudden? Was this it, love with a capital L? It was great!

Dawn snaked her hands up so she could rake his hair back but he shook his head. “I want you to lie very still and let me love you.” He grabbed her wrists and firmly pressed them on either side of her head.

She watched as he straightened, pulled the sweater up over his head to offer her a dazzling view of his muscular build, his perfect vampire body and if she’d always thought Helios was gorgeous—no one could deny this, vampire-friendly or not—the sight of him now made her want to sigh. Statuesque. No other word.

His scent reached her. A mix of musk and peppery mint. The dual thuds of his big boots made her shake her head when he kicked them off. She’d have to check inside and see exactly what size he wore. They must have been a foot and a half long.

Through the sheet, Helios caressed her belly and hip, up in circles then downward in serpentine shapes, only to go back to her breasts, teasing the nipples through the thin fabric until Dawn had to clamp her teeth. He ran the tips of his fingers along her side, over her hipbone then followed the contour of her thigh, his long arm extending well past the knee. He retraced his steps, only this time, he dipped underneath the sheet. The heat of his skin against her made her gasp. He was so hot. In every sense of the word.

“Do you enjoy this?” he asked with a shadow of satisfied grin on his perfect mouth.

“What woman wouldn’t?”

When his fingers reached the juncture of her thighs, Dawn parted them slightly. He grinned openly this time. The lump of his hand underneath the sheet provided even more stimulant to her already-fired senses. Up and down the lump moved, accompanying heat searing her skin. Helios dipped between her thighs, found her sex and began to rub slowly back and forth with one finger only along her lips, teasing the tender flesh poking from within. Moisture seeped from her throbbing folds. She grinned and curled her tongue out at him.

He must not have noticed for he closed his eyes, serious and focused on his task, and accentuated the pressure until his finger had parted her sex to torment her clit. She moaned in appreciation.

The angle changed, as did the cadence. Longer strokes, harder too. Helios sank his finger in her, rubbed back out completely, slid in again. She rolled her pelvis to meet his hand, so hot and skilled. He stayed there for hours, she was sure, caressing her sex, fingering her, bringing her close then closer, but never over the edge. She was so near to coming that every nerve ending felt on fire. She tingled all over.

His finger slicked with her juices, Helios pulled his hand out from underneath the sheet, exposed her breasts so he could circle her nipples and smear her honey all around before claiming each in turn with his mouth. While he held one pebble between his lips, Dawn could feel him flicking his tongue at it. To her shock, Dawn arched back and climaxed.

“Hold on to the headboard,” he whispered, changed nipples.

Dawn did, clawed at the wrought iron bars and clung to them hard enough to lift her upper body off the mattress.

Helios repeated the process with her other nipple, trapped it, flicked it then watched her as another wave unfurled low in her belly and spread to her thighs in a warm ripple effect. Hot damn.

The sheet slid off below her hips, exposed her sex. Oh was he...?

“Yesss.”

With a grin as wicked as it was sparkling, he dove for her pussy and pushed her thighs outward with his hands, her nether lips wide with his thumbs and the flesh protecting her clit high with his tongue. She let go of a bar to fist his hair but he trapped her wrist, brought it back up over her head.

“I said do not move.”

Writhing and moaning, Dawn received his mouth, his lips and tongue. Sharp points announced he’d pressed his fangs against her sensitive flesh. She looked down to catch him staring back up at her. But he didn’t bite her. She wasn’t sure she should feel relieved or disappointed by this.

“Writhe for me, Dawn. Show me how you enjoy my touch.”

Dawn closed her eyes so she could focus. Looking at his face, his perfect, bronzed face, took the edge off her own pleasure. It was selfish but what the hell. She’d make it worth his while later on. But for now, it was her turn. Ladies’ night!

She rolled her pelvis, twisted, gyrated in figure eights, made sure she met each of his tongue thrusts. What began as a moan quickly turned into a rising whimper then an outright cry of bliss. Helios stretched her sex wider and licked in great wide passes. He changed tactics and attacked her burning clit, drew it in, flicked his tongue so hard Dawn whimpered on the edge of pain. Then a furious climax triggered a spike of adrenaline. She made a grab for his hair again and crushed his face to her, trembling thighs trapping him.

From underneath, he gripped her knees, forced them high and wide and just stared at her. She felt her vulva constricting, clenching, great spasms in a burning ring. She wanted him acutely, painfully.

“Come on.”

He shook his head. “I want to watch you like this. Opened. Ready.”

“You can watch another time. I’m seizing up here.”

“Patience, Dawn.”

Muscles rippled when he knelt one leg on the mattress so he could use his forearm and keep her knees elevated while his other hand caressed her exposed butt. Helios put his entire hand against her vulva but kept his thumb pointing downward for a slow rub of her anus that did wonders to the tingly sensations along her sex.

“Patience is for – ahh.”

She’d come again. Without precursor. No warning, nothing.

While she rode the wave, he stood up with one knee still on the bed and holding both of hers up with a forearm, he tugged his belt off, reached inside his Army fatigues to free his cock. The sight of such a glorious, bronzed shaft made Dawn lick her lips. But not as much as when Helios fisted himself and rubbed his glans all over her backside and cleft. She was so wet that he was able to trail her honey all around before zeroing in. She only had time to humph.

Helios took her. Not hard, but very, very deep. It seemed as though he would sink in forever. Each ridge and vein prompting glorious little spikes of pleasure under her clit. She wished he’d release her legs so she could wrap them around his waist. But he kept her put, knees raised over her chest, his sinewy forearm right against the crooks of them while he sank in, pulled out almost to the tip and pushed back again. In his complete focus, skin gleaming, eyes semi-closed, lips set, chin forward, he resembled a bronze statue come to life.

Helios leaned over, grabbed the headboard, which drove his cock even deeper. “Dawn,” he whispered through his teeth.

“Ohh...my.”

The bed creaked under his weight. Then rattled when he thrust in. “Dawn, my love.” He was pounding himself into her now – forcefully, hurriedly, with energy that bordered on desperation.

He released her knees so he could grasp the iron bedframe with both hands and use them as anchors to push and claim and drive himself in to the balls. She felt them slamming against her. And she loved it. His abandon meant one thing to Dawn. He trusted her. He’d let his guard down and trusted in her ability to take him on, despite the differences, or perhaps because of them. So she opened wide and received his brutal lovemaking, received all of his cock, all of his love.

Dawn didn't know how long they shared their bodies with one another, only that when Helios finally collapsed on top of her, sweaty and panting, she managed to roll over him so she could straddle his waist.

"You didn't come?"

"I am saving energy for later."

"Oh? Later? What's later?"

"I must address my kind. There is much work to be done and they will need guidance. I am hoping for a peaceful resolution."

"Says the guy who blew up half the city."

He didn't mirror her grin. "I am not proud of what I have done... I thought I had lost you. All I wanted was revenge. But you are safe with me now."

"You know, I gave up my very satisfying job for your thing down here. So what do I do now? Hey, I know, I'll be your campaign organizer. Believe me, you need some organization over here. And when we start meeting all those cutthroats and Old Boys, you'll want me to be the mouthpiece. It's that or me as your bouncer. I can stare a guy right off his chair. And you haven't seen me spin circles around lawyers. Ha."

Helios stroked her knee. "I am glad to have you on my side."

"You have no idea."

"You are formidable, breathtaking and so humble."

Was that a joke? An actual har-har joke? "Yeah, I know. How long do we have until you speak to them?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Have I not at least made a dent in your appetite?"

"Oh you made a big dent," she replied as she worked on pulling his pants down. "But I'm all for immediate gratification."

She quickly got rid of his pants. Bothersome things!

Kissing him everywhere on his shiny body, it was only when she reached his knees that Dawn spotted the horrible bruises on both his ankles and heels. Good god what had caused that?

"What happened to your legs?" She blew air on an ankle, not knowing how else to make it better. His big toe poked up.

"Your master's office was quite high."

"What do you mean, Womack's office is high? You caught me first, right?"

He shook his head.

Dawn couldn't wrap her brain around this one. He could *not* have caught her after she'd fallen out. It was impossible. A nice little drop of fifteen hundred feet told her that.

"You... Nooo. You jumped?"

Pain and fear flashed for a split second in the electric blue eyes. He extended a hand so he could caress her thigh. "I could not lose you again."

“So you jumped out a fucking window?!”

The force of her remark seemed to take him by surprise. Took her by surprise too.

“You could’ve been killed. I’m... Helios. It was my own stupidity that made me try to take Womack down, but you were nice and safe across the room. Why on Earth would you jump out of a window that’s a million feet high? Christ!”

He cocked his head. “Is it fear that makes you lash out at me this way? Fear that you could have lost something valuable?”

“Well, duh.”

For some inane reason, Helios seemed satisfied—and proud, go figure that one out—that she’d get all bitchy over his little stunt.

She rubbed her face with shaking hands. He’d jumped out of Womack’s office to catch her. For her.

“Helios, please, please, don’t ever do stuff like that again. You’re going to kill me. Not to mention give me white hair. I won’t like you very much if I have heart attacks left and right.”

A proud lift of his chin told her he wouldn’t listen. “There is nothing I would not do to keep you safe. Jumping out of a window seemed a small price to pay if it saved you.”

Dawn shook her head. Men. Vampires. Males of every species!

Now that anger had vented itself out, a deep sense of protectiveness engulfed her and this she had no idea how to tackle except to gently caress his bruised legs, kiss and blow on the awful black and blue marks, murmuring soothing words that made not one iota of sense but made her feel a whole lot better. He didn’t seem to mind as he lay on his back, hands crossed behind his head, an expression of sublime peace smoothing his usually sharp features.

He looked...happy.

*Wow. I can do that?*

## Chapter Eleven

Helios held his hand out to Dawn as she climbed up the sea container. His “podium”. Wind tossed her black hair back from her face, revealed the determination in her sharp features, the resolute set of her chin, the way her eyes were narrowed and scanning people below them. This was a woman used to tackling large crowds. Never had there been so many gathered at the old docks. Helios was glad. And with Dawn’s presence at his side, he felt a new vigor for life.

Artemis and Dorian, both on the container as well, as per Helios’ request, made room for them. He caught the subtle look Artemis threw at the human in their midst but could not detect animosity for which he was relieved. For if Artemis ever looked at Dawn in a way he deemed threatening, she would have to die. No one who wanted to harm this woman would be allowed to live.

“Don’t let them see you sweat,” Dawn murmured with a dark grin and a wink. She took a step back and waited behind with Artemis and Dorian.

Helios faced the crowd. “Thank you for coming in such large numbers! As a free people!”

A roar of applause answered him. Cold morning wind whipped hair in his face, wrapped his coat around his legs. He noticed children in attendance for the first time. Human children, brought by their parents. He smiled at one, who hid her face in her father’s jacket.

“Production has begun this morning. As we speak, the first batch of neutralizer is being prepared for mass distribution. By the end of the week, those who have volunteered to test it will be allowed to do so.”

Cheers and hands raised by those wishing to volunteer. He noticed almost every vampire had his or her hand raised while humans clapped and nodded.

“All of this is possible because of the action of one. One brave person risked everything to secure the neutralizer. She willingly jeopardized her own life—”

A lump prevented him from completing his sentence. Helios lowered his gaze, cleared his throat. But he was not ashamed. This was not weakness but a testament of his feelings for Dawn.

Without looking back, for the sight of her would make a blabbering fool of him, Helios extended his opened hand and waited for hers. The heat of her hand when she slid it in his made him close his eyes against the flood of impulses wrestling with logic. He wanted nothing more than to hold her, kiss her, make love to her right here, right now.

Helios drew Dawn by his side, raised her hand to his lips for a tender kiss. “This is the person we must thank for delivering vampires, for unlocking our future—” He took a deep breath. “And for unlocking my heart. Dawn Eindhoven, the woman I love. A human.”

The smile tugging his mouth felt so strange and new. He let the crowd cheer and whoop to their hearts’ content, which produced a very pretty blush to Dawn’s fair cheeks. He would make sure to torment her about it later.

“Get ready for change, people,” Dawn said loudly. “Because I’m stubborn, I have a big mouth and I don’t take no for an answer!” Turning to Helios, she nodded, murmuring, “All yours, vamp.”

He had never heard her use that tone of voice before, so strong and firm, and he had to admit that this human, albeit physically smaller and weaker, he would not want to cross. And the word “vamp”, one he used to dislike heartily—DeLong had always called him vamp—one that dredged a slew of unhappy memories, had taken on a whole new set of connotations because in her mouth it was not an insult but an invitation.

The urge to make love to her tightened his cock against his leg.

They had to get back home. Now.

“And now!” He waited until the noise had abated. “Now that we are entering a new era for both our kinds, vampires and humans together, we will need leadership, ambassadors to the world above.” He pointed up at the gleaming sky-bridges and sparkling buildings. “My friends Artemis and Dorian will be your leaders. They too sacrificed much to see this day come.”

Helios wrapped his arm around Dawn’s shoulders and stepped back so Artemis and Dorian, both looking shocked but pleased as well, could step forward.

“And where are you going to be, First?” a female vampire asked. Her hair was gathered in a thick ponytail.

Helios noticed she stood very, very close to a human male. This, more than any conference or news coverage—requests had begun to rain on them to meet everyone from political parties to CEOs and religious leaders—warmed Helios’ heart. The schism had already begun to close. That or the bridge had been there from the beginning but so well hidden no one had been able to see it.

“I will be busy,” he replied deadpan.

Dawn gave him an elbow in the ribs.

Under renewed cheers and applause, Helios used the stairs to climb off the container out of respect for Dawn, whose human legs would not make his usual dismount possible.

While Artemis addressed the crowd and shared the more logistical details, Helios led Dawn back to the Tower Bridge, her hand warm and comforting in his own, much larger one.

As they walked, he noticed how many more people milled about the streets, the sidewalks. It had been so quiet before. So dead. No more. Life was coming back to the ground level, something even he had not seen in his lifetime. It felt strange to walk out in the open and during daytime. He had been forced to come out only at night and never so freely.

Dawn stepped around a half-frozen puddle. "Dorian came to me this morning while you were organizing things. I think he came to apologize but it came out a bit sideways, if you know what I mean."

"Did he insult you?" Heat rose to his cheeks.

"No, no, he was good. He said 'not every human is bad, I guess'. I could tell it was hurting him." Dawn snorted a laugh. "And he said that other cities have been liberated. I can't wait to see someone do something about those factories up there. And the mines." She threw him a slanted look.

"Artemis was also in the mines. She has already taken steps to make sure they are freed."

"What about you? You were there long before her. It must have been bad."

"It was."

A jumble of images, of memories long pushed under the surface assailed him. The twenty-hour shifts, the back-breaking labor, the failing environment settings and cheap repairs, the dust getting into every exposed orifice, the constant hunger. Besides the guards' cruelty – some of them, not all, but they had stood silent witnesses anyway – hunger had been the worst. The constant knifing in his gut from surviving on too-small portions. And the shame of having to feed from a pouch filled with saline solution and that damned enzyme. The disgrace.

"We'll get them out too, don't worry," Dawn said, patting his forearm with her other hand. "As I said, I have a big mouth. No one can ignore me for long. Speaking of mouth, I'm going to need my stuff. I can't walk around without my lipstick."

Helios grinned in spite of his chagrin and rage. Unflappable Dawn. Lust flared. "Do you know what I want to do? Right now?"

She chuckled when he wrapped his arms around her and pressed her lean form close to him. Leaning by her ear, he whispered, "I want to make love to you. Every which way you want. All day, all night."

She snaked her hands along his waist then cupped his crotch with one. He had to grit his teeth hard not to start pulling at her clothes and covering her body with kisses.

"I want you to make love to me like you did at my place." Her breath rose in ribbons. "Remember it?"

How could he forget?

"You are still weak from your fall. I would –"

She had clamped her fist over his crotch and squeezed. Vampires might have been stronger than humans, but males from both species were wired the same. He cringed.

“You call me weak one more time and I’ll show you what I can do.” She raised herself on the toes of her borrowed boots and a flash of teeth heralding her intent—biting him on the neck.

Instant thirst blazed through him. He cupped her backside and forced her hard against him, against the lump her handling had produced. “Be careful with me, Dawn. I might take you to your word.”

“I damn sure hope so, vamp.”

Oh the little...

Helios was unsure how they managed to reach the tower, except that when they did, he could barely thumb the code to his door on his summoner before Dawn dug at his sweater and yanked it up high so she could till his sides with her fingernails. In record time, Helios had discarded his coat, belt and boots and was frantically tugging at her clothes. The sound of stitching giving way made him growl in anticipation.

“Hurry, come on,” she breathed against his neck as she wrestled her shirt over her head—no time to unbutton it!

She kissed him hard, drew blood from both their bottom lips. A red veil descended on him. Helios lost any semblance of control. She wanted a vampire, she would get one.

Dawn let out a loud “argh” and began panting through her teeth when Helios seemed to go from excited lover to frenzied sex god. Yeah!

He almost exploded out of his clothes, sent them every which way and obviously wanted her to do the same as well as he tugged, yanked and generally made a big torn mess of her borrowed garments. They stood naked against one another in less time than was needed to say, “Oh my!”

When she looked up, Dawn saw that the blue of his eyes was all gone, pushed outward by the dilated pupils so characteristic of his kind and that gave him an air of predatory passion. This was going to be good.

Without a word, Helios spun her around and pushed her hair out of the way so he could kiss-lick her all along the neck and shoulder.

Dawn “mm-mmed” as she wrapped her arms back and caressed his muscled thighs. Twin points of fire lanced the skin on her shoulder. He’d bitten her. His hands demanding as he encircled her and trapped her breasts, he bit her again—harder, deeper. She gasped. Her nipples trapped in his fingers, rolled and squeezed mercilessly, he switched shoulders and bit her there too.

“Helios, Helios,” she kept murmuring. She didn’t care if he got a bad case of the fathead from her moaning his name. He deserved it.

He grabbed her hand and led her to the bed. Or so she thought. But he passed it, didn’t stop, and instead took her across the room to the narrow wrought iron stairs coiling up into the gloom. One hand he firmly planted on the handrail then the other.

Dawn made sure she didn't move a muscle and held on to the tubular railing, her back to it, facing a very large, very aroused vampire.

*Life is good, Eindhoven.*

He knelt in front of her, put her foot on the edge of the third step, which spread her thighs nice and wide. He was so close, she could feel his burning breath. His tongue curled out of a corner of his mouth, ran to the one opposite then stretched, tapered until it touched her along the bikini line. She shivered with anticipation.

He tongued her again, along the other side this time, slowly, lazily – he must have known she quivered with need for him. The tease!

His tongue then his fingers. Then his tongue again. Dawn closed her eyes and rested the back of her skull against the vertical rods connected to the rail.

With ruthless fingers, he spread then took her. She melted between the legs, spilled her honey, which he smeared all along her fissure before licking it clean. She felt stretched, explored, claimed. And she loved it.

Helios stood, so tall. "You wanted a vampire?" he whispered against her throat. He fisted her hair, forced her head back then covered her neck and shoulders with passionate kisses. Her feminine scent and his breath filled her nose, her mouth.

"Yesss."

His hard-on slid along her sex, pumped back and forth while he enclosed her in a rock-hard arm. With his free hand, he gripped her raised knee and forced it against the rails. She felt him curl his hips forward and knew what was coming. She bit down hard.

His thick glans stretched her until it burned as Helios pushed inside. His initial thrust wasn't as gentle as the last time. She'd obviously pushed him further than he'd been before. Dawn tilted her pelvis forward so she could take more of him.

"Come on, vamp, take me," she urged under her breath.

He did.

Helios thrust upward in a hard but precise shove. She hung on to the railing and arched like a bowline. Dawn didn't climax per se but the sheer vigor of his large cock and the heat of his whole body plastered against hers triggered a fever that pebbled the skin of her arms and legs.

"Harder," she urged through her teeth. "I know you want to."

He thrust upward again, hard enough to lift her heels. She bucked to meet him halfway when he retreated so he'd drive back in.

Dust dislodged from the old staircase floated in front of her under the force of Helios' vigor and settled on her knuckles in tiny black specks. Her panting blew them off right away.

After he pulled out to the glans, curled in and abandoned her knee so he could finger her clit, rub and rub in ever tightening circles, she squeezed her eyes shut and braced her elbows so she wouldn't miss a single ounce of his raw energy.

Helios pulled out abruptly.

“Hey!”

Dizzy, throbbing everywhere, Dawn gave him her best Hell’s Bitch Stare.

He stood there, panting hard, hands hanging on either side, his eyes darkened by shocks of long pale hair. With a fanged, lopsided grin, he pointed to the floor at his feet.

*All a vamp has to do is ask!*

For the first time in her life, Dawn got on her knees to suck a man’s cock. Something she had never, ever, considered doing for any of them. Except he wasn’t a man but a vampire. And she loved him.

The rug softened the impact of her kneecaps hitting the floor before she roughly fisted his shaft and ran her hand from tip to base. The skin stretched and glistened invitingly. He was so tall she had to angle it downward just to take him in halfway, retreat, tongue the tip then sink back deeper. The mix of masculine musk and female honey triggered a spike of raw energy that she channeled into her hands. He spread his feet wider when it became apparent she was going to suck him so hard he’d fall over.

She made sure he heard her too. “Mmm.”

Hands as counter beats, she followed the rhythm of his pulse – which she could feel under his cock, right against her palm – and for every two, she sucked him down. Two heartbeats, suck. Two heartbeats, pull back. Over and over.

He must have been getting excited for his heartbeat accelerated. So did her handling. Dawn was gliding “up” because of the angle, so fast now that she fisted one of his glorious cheeks and used it to bounce against his groin.

Fast. Faster.

His heartbeat quickened. Almost an uninterrupted throb. Salty pre-cum prompted a massive amount of honey and saliva to coat her up and down. She “mm-mmed” loudly, groaned, growled, made as much sucking noise as she could. With a violent buck of hips, he climaxed just as she was knocking her forehead against his lower belly. Liquid silk surged at the back of her throat in burning pulsations.

But instead of relaxing and taking things slowly, Helios pulled out of her – hell, he was still coming and wasting all of it – knelt in front of her and gathered her in his arms as he sat on his heels. His cock seemed to find its own way into her as she straddled his lap and sank deep. She whimpered when it rubbed her distended sex.

“Come on, vamp,” she urged, knowing she was pushing the poor guy’s buttons in so deep they’d get stuck.

“Are you sure,” he rolled a nipple, pinched it hard, “that you want to keep this up?”

“What? Too much for you?”

While he wrapped an arm around her waist, Helios clamped the back of her head – he had some big hands – and forced her to meet his gaze.

“You enjoy tormenting, mmm, Dawn?” He slowed his movement, retreated then pulled out entirely.

Dawn tried to rock forward to trap his cock but couldn't move for the implacable grip he had on her. "Don't stop now when it was getting so good."

"Two can play games."

Oh...

"Okay, okay, I'll stop calling you vamp. Just keep doing what you were doing, okay?" She licked her lips and readied for his lovemaking.

Which didn't come.

"Hey."

The back of her head going numb and only able to breathe from the top of her lungs, Dawn waited until Helios had had his fun at her expense. No man would ever make her run for him. But her body didn't care much for her ego and she felt all the juices his handling had caused trickling to coat their thighs. She squirmed, tried to recapture some of the rapidly cooling fire. His arm was like an iron band and wouldn't move. Her feet were getting cold.

"Come on, it's not funny anymore."

"I agree."

Instead of the furious pounding she so wanted right now, Helios bent over her throat and tenderly kissed her there.

"Come on, dammit. Like a vamp."

"No."

"What, 'no'? You get me all fired up and leave—"

Helios silenced her under his mouth. Burning, borderline violent, his lips and tongue left her panting, burning, hungering, for his love in so many ways she thought she was going insane with it.

He pulled away to stare at her. His lips glistened, bands of pink gold. "Now are you ready to receive me?"

She nodded.

A proud smile pulled the corner of his mouth. He spread his knees wider underneath hers.

*Oh come on, baby, come on.*

"Ahh!"

Simultaneously, Helios thrust his hips upward and sank his fangs in her throat.

Dawn's cry of pain-pleasure filled the large bare room. While he sucked, he pushed up against her, raised her knees off the floor with each powerful upward drive. She wrapped her legs around his waist. God, it burned. Everything—her sex, her throat. Her entire body.

Dawn arched back. "Yes, Helios, yes. Ah."

Up, up he drove himself, deeper than ever before, to the end of her. The combination of his bite and his claiming proved too much to endure and a violent

orgasm rocked her backward, which sent them tumbling around on the carpet, rolling once, twice, but never separating.

Long before she was done coming, Helios released her throat, licked her in long tender passes while the wave subsided, the fire burned down, the spasms tightening her pussy stopped. She was so wet, she felt herself dripping on him. A great languor washed over Dawn. A sigh deflated her.

He inspected his handiwork and seemed satisfied. "We will find a way to transfer enough of my nanotechnology to keep you well for a very long time."

"Mmm...I'm sure it's been tested before. If they give it to you, they must have tried it on humans."

"We will find a way."

Giddy with love and a serious case of the sleepies, Dawn closed her eyes and grinned. "That was... Oh man."

"Shh," Helios murmured in her ear.

Dawn could only moan and smile when he carried her to bed and managed to cram both their bodies onto the narrow affair. His feet stuck out between the footboard's rails. She wanted to chuckle but could hardly keep her eyelids open.

Sweat, his hair and both their essences connected them at the head, flank and legs. Dawn twisted around so she could lie on her side and draped a leg over his. "We need a bigger bed," she murmured. "And a heater."

"I will not allow myself this luxury often, Dawn."

"What luxury?" Couldn't they just sleep before sharing deep thoughts?

"You. Your blood. I refuse to feed on you continually. It is too special, too demanding. I fear I would become addicted."

"Why not? We feed off each other in other ways. I need you just like you need me. Whoa, look at me go, all soft and cuddly and lovey-dovey. I sound like a marriage counselor." She yawned.

"But we are not married," Helios replied.

Now that got her attention. She climbed up on an elbow to search his Sphinx-like expression. "Does it matter?"

"No. Vampires do not marry."

Oh.

Did it matter to her?

Um.

"But humans do." She wiggled an eyebrow.

"We would be the first ones."

"Mister First, would you take Miss Eindhoven to be blah, blah, blah...sounds nice."

Helios rolled his eyes.

“Well, it’s much better than what my coworkers called me. Do you know what I used to be called at work?”

“A very unkind name that will not be uttered in my presence. Not without consequences.”

“Nah, I made it up myself. It served me. Kept the Old Boys on their toes.”

“Humans are impossible.”

“And that’s what makes us so charming, right?” Dawn replied with a big grin and a horned-angel, puppy-dog look. “Right, vamp?”

A fanged smile was all the answer she needed.

## **About the Author**

I am a mother, spouse, older sister, writer, ex-soldier, high school drop-out, dog owner (or dog owned), half couch potato/half intermittent jogger, wannabe renovator and avid reader who watches too much television, sinks too much money in clothes, likes animals more than humans, recycles, wore braces, never downloads copyrighted stuff, was a nerd without the grades, has a belly laugh that turns heads in theaters, can't stand bullying, is mother hawk more than mother hen, votes even if candidates aren't that great and thinks formal education is highly overrated (probably because she has none).

Nathalie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

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