

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Immortalis

NATHALIE GRAY

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Immortalis

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IMMORTALIS

Nathalie Gray

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Chapter One

"Up a notch?" the lab tech asked.

Danielle Lavoie nodded, biting down harder as she accelerated to keep up with the treadmill. The thick tube in her mouth coiled out toward the computer where an array of numerical indicators told her superiors just how fast she could go. She could go *fast*.

Her fists pumped rhythmically, became a blur at the bottom edge of her vision. The thump-thump of her feet against the rubber belt was the only sound in the testing room. She wasn't even winded yet.

"Fifteen Horse-power augmentation for speed and endurance," announced the lab tech, obviously impressed. He nodded as he pressed a finger to his earpiece, listening to orders from his unseen superiors. "You can slow down now, Lavoie. You passed."

You passed.

Years of preparation, months of training that killed or maimed about fifty candidates before her, days spent in surgery so her body would be prepared for the biotech enhancements she'd received...all of it resumed, condensed, distilled, in two one-syllable words. She slowed down, let her hands hang on either side of her then stepped off the machine. She'd *passed*.

Above her, through the observation bay window, she spotted some of the military brass shaking hands and patting one another on the shoulders. One nodded at her.

Danielle took the tube out of her mouth and handed it over to the lab tech. He was still staring at her like she'd sprouted antennas out of her skull. It was probably one of the few things she hadn't had done...antennas.

Everything else was there—a biosilk membrane covered her vulnerable abdominal cavity and the gaps between each rib, muscles laced with electroactive polymer for speed and strength, a wet-wired memory bank of fathomless capacity and the recent addition of a tactical night vision lens in her right eye. All she needed now was a bank machine welded up her—

"So, Lavoie, did they kick you out yet?"

She turned toward the door where the next candidate had just entered. She would've liked very much to add a few scars to his collection. He grinned.

"Not yet. But you would've known right away, because if they'd kicked *me* out, you would've been let go a long time ago."

Yuan's grin slipped off his narrow face. He said something in Cantonese before stepping up to the treadmill. A trace of aftershave and mint floated in his wake when he walked by her. "Whatever you say, Lavoie."

She stared as he removed his shirt and let the lab tech stick electrodes to his wiry chest and arms. Good thing they were on the same side—well, supposedly anyway—otherwise she would've had a go at the arrogant little shit.

Danielle peeled her own electrodes off, maneuvered the meters of wires trailing her and readjusted her sports bra. No one was looking. No one ever did. To her colleagues' eyes, she had stopped being a woman a long time ago. Her olive green coveralls felt rough on her skin when she pulled them on, as did the running shoes. A wave of heat made her blow air through pursed lips. She wondered if the other candidates felt the same. As if she were on fire or something. Uncomfortable as hell.

"Are you staying for the show, Lavoie?" Yuan asked, his gaze on her ass when she turned and faced him. So someone *was* looking.

"There's nothing worth seeing here."

She left before he could find something else to reply. She'd had enough of him. He still acted as though she had no right to be there when she'd been top dog for most of the phases. Jealous little shrimp. And he still couldn't cope with the fact she was a woman and had kicked the butt of every last one on his team during initial training. After project Immortalis she hoped she wouldn't be assigned to missions anywhere near Yuan or she might misplace a few rounds...

"Congratulations, Sergeant Lavoie," a man said from down the hall. "Well done."

His dark uniform provided a sharp contrast to the white walls and spotless terrazzo floor as he walked toward her. His silver hair was slicked back in a perfectly smooth wave.

"General O'Leary," she said, bringing her heels together.

After a sloppy rendition of a salute, he drew near. Another politician in uniform...

"How do you feel? From what I just heard, you exceeded all our expectations." His Irish accent gave his words an appealing little lilt she'd always liked.

"Thank you, Sir. I feel fine."

He nodded. "Good, because full integration will happen tonight."

Danielle's heart skipped. "You found one?"

The general beamed, his teeth as shiny as his stars. "We've been tracking him for a while now. It took our full team of forensic accountants to sift through the decades of paperwork—hundreds of years worth of falsified records and fake archives. Not a very exciting way to catch one for sure, but it works. He's almost seven hundred years old, imagine. They're on their way right now."

Seven *hundred* years old.

Only six months ago, Danielle was still under the impression vampires only populated people's imagination, that there weren't any real, genuine, blood-sucking human beings out there. How wrong she'd been. And now she'd get to see one.

"I was going to meet them. You're welcome to assist if you'd like." He extended his hand toward the end of the hall where a set of steel double doors barred entry. She'd never been allowed anywhere near those doors before. Excitement tightened her jaws.

"Thank you, Sir. I will," Danielle replied, joining the general as he made his way to the doors.

Full integration. *Tonight.*

Her palms slicked with sweat. As the only woman among the candidates, she had—absolutely had—to succeed. No room for failure. With some luck, she'd be among the first in a new breed of super soldiers, enhanced with nanotechnology, faster, stronger, and soon, with this vampire's blood in their veins, practically immortal. The US-EU cooperation on this project would herald a new way to fight the enemy. Pride swelled her chest. Bad guys could run, but Danielle doubted they could hide. Not anymore. Not with soldiers like her on their tails.

After he slipped his ID card in, the decoder chimed and a tiny green light appeared. The doors opened to reveal a steel elevator. She followed O'Leary inside. Faint traces of people still lingered in the air—perfumes, coffee and shoes. Her enhancements had also included olfactory augmentation. She could smell folks coming well before she could hear them. Could be a good thing—or a very bad thing. The thought made her smile. With a lurch, the elevator went down to 4-U, the fourth underground level.

As soon as the doors opened, chaos greeted them.

"What's going on?" O'Leary demanded, like she could tell him something he didn't already know.

A fight, that's what.

Yells and crashes reverberated along the concrete wall. She and O'Leary both began to run toward the end of the corridor, identical to all others in the vast complex except for the 4-U placards screwed at regular intervals to the walls. She'd gotten lost several times in the sprawling underground compound built under the French Alps. A GPS might have been a nice addition to her wiring.

As the general pushed the swinging doors, a cacophony of sounds assaulted her keen, recently tweaked hearing. This had been some sort of waiting room with chrome and black plastic chairs and a water dispenser in a corner, but the place now looked like the saloon of a western movie after the cowboys had had their way with it. To their right through an empty doorway thrashed a clump of olive green uniforms, white lab coats, and in their churning midst, a blond man with something attached to his face. He dwarfed everyone by a good head.

O'Leary cursed as he rushed through the doorway, Danielle on his heels. She noticed the thick metal door had been ripped off its industrial-grade hinges.

"What's going on? Let me through!" the general roared above the rest as he entered the fray.

One of the soldiers, a stun gun in his bleeding hand, turned and wiped his brow. "The drug didn't hold, Sir, he woke up in the chopper."

"What do you mean it didn't hold," said a puffing man with a torn white lab coat. "Any one of those darts could down a rhino."

Through the mêlée, Danielle spotted the blond man struggling against at least five soldiers, his disheveled hair coming down over his face and hiding his eyes. He roared something before arching back, taking the cluster of soldiers down with him. The snarl of limbs and bodies tumbled to the floor. Someone cursed profusely.

Without thinking things through—her trademark—Danielle pushed past a startled general and shoved her way to the fore of the wrestling match. Behind her, she could hear him telling the others to give her some room.

She was using her newfound abilities in this way for the first time and tried to control them as best she could so she wouldn't injure anyone. She'd accidentally broken a doctor's wrist once, right after the operation, because she didn't know her own strength.

Amidst twisted limbs and torn uniforms, she reached the blond man—their vampire apparently—and closed a fist over his wool sweater collar. Through sheer brute force, she hoisted him up to his knees. She felt the electroactive polymer strain along her muscles, shielding her tendons from the abuse and grunted with the effort when she finally succeeded in extirpating him from the rest. The smell of his turtleneck reached her. The strong scent of the sea filled her nose. Turning him toward her, she realized with shock he'd had his hands tied behind his back the entire time. Yet he still managed to create all that chaos.

"Watch it!" one soldier called, aiming the stun gun at the vampire and firing.

Danielle barely had time to take her hand off before two tiny darts shot out and planted themselves in the man's chest and shoulder. A blue arc danced over his wide chest for a second. He didn't appear slowed down or incapacitated in the least.

But he did look angrier. *Much* angrier.

With a growl, he whipped his head sideways to look at her. The contraption on his face resembled a horse's bit, only in black polymer instead of metal and leather. Canine teeth the size of baby jalapenos gleamed menacingly. Danielle froze.

The hair had parted over his square face to reveal eyes the color of a stormy sea. She'd never seen eyes like those, the color, the intensity, the raw power. In that split second, Danielle saw death and fury in the strange eyes, only to be replaced with crystal-clear azure the next moment. He stared at her, right *through* her. Warmth seeped inside her entire body, right down to her hands. Now *this* was a man, a real man, and not some skinny, hair-tousled-just-so, pouting, centerfold boy in his underwear.

Suddenly, a feathered dart dug in his throat. His eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped against her chest. With others' help, she lowered him to the ground. But he was heavy!

"Jesus Christ," one of the American researchers said, running his sleeve over his bleeding mouth and looking at the soldier who'd just fired the tranquilizer. "We're in trouble. He'll never stay out long enough to get the all the blood we need."

As they argued over how best to keep the dangerous man sedated, Danielle crouched by his side and rolled him onto his back. A strong cleft chin, a mouth curved upward at the corners and laugh lines.

Laugh lines?

She'd expected...well, someone pale as death, with dark, slicked back hair, concave cheeks and a high collar. A vampire. Dracula. Not this. The guy looked like a hardy Scandinavian fisherman. A very cute one at that.

"What now?" she asked, standing.

The general's uniform still looked impeccable. "Now we take a sample of his blood. And if it's anything like we expect it to be, by tonight project Immortalis will be a complete success."

And he'll be dead, she thought somberly, looking down at the unconscious vampire.

She helped carry the heavy man down the corridor toward the elevator. He still had that awful thing in his mouth. Although she wouldn't take it off completely—like opening the cage to the tiger—she surreptitiously loosened the bit. Sometimes younger soldiers could follow orders a bit too zealously. She'd been guilty of such eagerness also, but now, well-established in her career and her thirties, she could tell when one needed to ease back a little.

As they waited, she wrapped an arm around his back so she could lean his weight against her chest instead of her arm. Even with the biotech modification she'd received, the guy still weighed enough to make her huff.

The elevator pinged and she wrapped both arms around the man's strong waist, like a bear hug but from behind, and shuffled forward a few steps. Another soldier squeezed in front and turned to help.

She gasped when the vampire spun on himself and kicked at the control panel while simultaneously clamping an arm down, trapping hers along his flank.

"Oh shit—"

The doors closed over the collective yell of surprise from the rest of the group.

While she strained against his muscled arm, a gunshot went out, dented the reinforced steel cabin. Then the soldier's weapon clattered to the floor. By the time she'd succeeded in pulling her arm out, the vampire was holding the soldier by the throat. He shook the bit out of his mouth, cursing. Despite the kicking and flailing, with the Army boots landing solid hits against his legs, the seemingly oblivious vampire hoisted the man off his feet and twisted his wrist. A sickening crunch signaled the man's death.

He just killed an elite special ops soldier. With one hand. Shit. She was in trouble.

Danielle elbowed the vampire in the lower back. He registered the hit with a small grunt. Using his much greater weight, he backpedaled and crushed her against the steel wall. She humphed.

All those expensive enhancements didn't even show against him as she pummeled his back with her fists. And when he snapped his head and hit her forehead with the

back of his skull, Danielle saw stars at the edges of her vision. Damn, he had a hard head.

Before she could stop him—like she could—the vampire fisted the emergency stop button. The cabin lurched to a complete stop. He spun incredibly fast for a guy his size, one considerable fist cocked back for a hell of a punch. This one would hurt like a bitch. But he froze in midair. Through his bangs his eyes flared with recognition and shock.

The guy had expected someone else obviously.

“I’ve never hit a woman, and I won’t start now,” he snarled, panting. “But I *am* getting out of here. No darts will help you this time.”

As much as her hardware listed all the possible submission strikes and chokeholds possible given the angle and proximity, Danielle forced her mind to clear and took a couple of deep breaths. She wouldn’t be strong-arming her way out of this mess, for sure. She willed the nanobots to calm down and stop pumping her system with adrenaline.

Yet something else vied for her attention—her body. Under the coveralls she was overheating. Danielle quickly analyzed her situation. A physical reaction was to be expected under the circumstances. She’d just used a great amount of muscle power and was stuck in an enclosed space with a very large, heat-producing person. No wonder she was hot.

But as soon as the initial assessment of her situation was over, another layer added itself to the mix—her body was pumping through her system massive amounts of sexual hormones and there wasn’t a damn thing she could do about it. A puff of heat drifted out of her coveralls collar. She could smell her own female scent.

The vampire withdrew to the opposite wall where he leaned back and raked fingers in his hair. His fangs glistened menacingly when he hissed and ripped the bit from around his neck. The thing fell at his feet. He cursed in a language she didn’t understand as he rubbed a bear paw of a hand over his chest where the darts had dug in earlier.

“I *hate* needles.”

Danielle just stared. If she wasn’t prepared to kill the man, she sure wasn’t about to help him escape. Project Immortalis needed his blood for the final phase—full integration. Years of training would go down the drain if she dropped the ball tonight. And *he* was the ball.

“This place is underground, right?”

Her Stare of Doom, as her men called it, didn’t seem to impress this one. He peeled his tall frame off the wall and advanced. Danielle just stared stubbornly when he drew near and planted his palm against the wall by her face.

“Which way is out? Up or down?”

The lights went out unexpectedly. They'd cut the power. She would've done the same in their situation, but right now *she* was the one stuck in a metal cage with a very angry-looking predator.

Danielle's tactical lens in her right eye relayed visuals in pixelated clumps, and when the vampire leaned into her and snarled, his fangs looked acid green. Beads of sweat rolled down her spine and lost themselves in the thick fabric of her coveralls. But as much as her training and bioengineered additions clamored for attack, she couldn't move a single polymer-laced muscle. She felt like a tiny wooden boat being tossed around the storming sea in his eyes. Maybe she'd drown in them.

"Do you have any idea what I could do to you?" His eyes had grown darker still.

"Do it."

His breathing rumbled with the regularity and strength of a steam engine when he tilted his cleft chin low and let his fangs graze the skin along her neck. Her own breathing caught in her throat. He must have meant for dread and horror. The guy looked like he weighed at least one hundred and ten kilograms. All of it compact, centuries-old muscle. Any woman sane of mind would be fainting right about now.

Then why had the throbbing in her sex intensified? A vampire was raking his teeth—*cancel my last, his fangs*—along her throat, and all she could think about was how good his lips would feel against hers and how his strong back would surely make for a vigorous fuck.

He planted his other hand on the wall over her shoulder, effectively trapping her in the loose enclosure of his muscular upper body. Salty sea and peppery smells wafted in from his wool sweater. She swallowed hard. Self-control had never ranked very high on her to-do list but this was just ridiculous. Everything was telling her to hit first and wonder about her treacherous body later. But something, *something*, kept her put.

His gaze on her face, the vampire curled his spine so he could bend down to her level. The heat from his arms sandwiched Danielle's face, forced a flush of excitement to her cheeks.

"This is no movie, if I bite you, you die."

"They'll replace me," she replied.

Her breath stirred strands of his hair, which looked, contrary to the mentioned "blond" her wet-wired memory bank listed, a pale shade of lime-green streaked with turquoise. Danielle shivered back the lust threatening her common sense.

He stared at her for a long time. "So you're replaceable to them? I don't envy you your life." When he said the last word, the fricative whistled between his fangs.

Metal connected against her shoulder blades before Danielle's systems registered movement. He crowded her against the wall. Her options flashed in a neat row in her brain...

Attack, not recommended.

Strategic pullback, impossible.

Course of action, computing.

Weren't those nanobots supposed to be X-times faster than her human brain? Even without the fancy hardware, her humble, jelly glob of a brain had already realized the shit she was in.

The heat emanating from him was filling her lens with patterns like crazy, green Chinese shadows. A bead of sweat rolled down her temple, followed a teasing course along her cheek then slid lower to her neck. With a deep rumble in his chest, he flicked his tongue and adeptly collected it. Danielle opened her mouth in a silent O. Serious heat spread from the place he touched.

"Aren't you going to stop me?" His deep voice reached the lowest frequency her hearing could pick up.

Control. *Control.* "We need you alive."

He scoffed. "And if you try to stop me, you'd kill me?"

His derision piqued her pride and she shoved him back with one hand. Anyone else would have flown across the elevator and hit the wall with a satisfying humph. Even *before* Project Immortalis. But this guy, he just rocked back a step.

"Impressive," he murmured. With a predatory smirk, he approached again and planted his feet on either side of hers. "Try again."

Using both hands she pressed hard against his chest, but this time he didn't move—not even a little bit. How much had they paid again for the nanotech? They should get a refund. She'd tell them...if she got out of there alive, that is.

Pride succeeding where her sense of duty had failed, Danielle used all her strength to shove him away from her. She snarled when he caught her hands in midair, entwined his fingers with hers then reversed his grip. Acute pain in her wrists forced Danielle on the tip of her toes.

"Now let me ask you again, which way is out? Up or down?" He leaned into her, filling her vision with his bright lime-green fangs as he bared them.

"Find out for yourself." Danielle closed her eyes and waited.

Situation report, systemic failure imminent.

Yeah, like I don't know that?

So, in other words, she couldn't kill him, she couldn't push him back. She couldn't even stop him from...

Kissing her?

His mouth pressed against hers, two tiny points poking in near the corners of her lips. She went down on her heels after he reversed his fists again and raised her hands above her head, shoulders width, then forced them against the wall. Cold stainless steel ground her knuckles.

When she opened her eyes, part of his face looked painted in olive green while shadows owned the other half. A jolt like electricity zipped down to her wet pussy. She wanted a good, hard ride bad enough to ask even a vampire.

Danielle opened her mouth to speak when a deafening boom reverberated in the stainless steel cabin. Sensory overload made her cringe. She growled a curse.

The guy put his hands to his ears and floundered back.

Now or never!

Danielle was reaching for the control panel when the doors were violently pried open with a mechanized pincerlike tool. The muzzle of a gun slid in the opening. Three shots fired in rapid succession.

With a humph, the vampire slumped back against the wall and slid into a sitting position, his hands splayed palms up, three darts protruding from his wide chest.

He looked up at her, his eyes rolling back in his head. "By Odin...I...hate needles."

His hair slid over his face when he hunched forward. This time he didn't get up again.

* * * * *

Bjorn woke up with a massive headache and a strange feeling of heaviness in his limbs. The stark neon light hurt his sensitive eyes so he kept them closed. At least he didn't have that awful thing in his mouth.

Of all the indignities...

He shifted subtly under the restraints. He lay on a gurney, naked from the waist up, with thick rubber-coated metal belts holding him down.

Then he remembered *her*. Warmth spread to his aching body. If only he'd had more time for a quick taste.

Someone worked on a computer nearby as clicks of the mouse and the CPU's fan reached his sensitive ears. Bjorn chanced a quick scan around. A white square room and a pair of armed soldiers standing beyond a thermoplastic pane with a glass-enclosed observation bay high overhead where an international assortment of military officers sat and talked. One of them must have spotted him for she nudged her colleague and soon all of them were staring down into his room.

The man at the computer pressed a hand to his ear as if listening then nodded before looking at Bjorn. His lab coat gleamed an expensive, immaculate, government-funded white. "Subject is awake."

Not patient, but *subject*.

Only then did Bjorn notice the needle in the crook of his elbow and the tube coming out of his arm. Dark red liquid coursed within as it disappeared below the edge of the gurney. His blood was being drained out of him!

Panic rose in waves and Bjorn began to struggle. The man behind the computer floundered off his chair, the wireless mouse falling against the tiled floor where it broke in several pieces.

"Faen heller! Get that thing out of me," Bjorn snarled as he scraped his arm against the belt. The needle tore his skin, bent in its plastic clip. Blood dribbled out of the puncture wound. He kicked with both feet, managed to loosen the strap holding his legs. He kicked again.

"Stop! Stop that!" The man rushed at Bjorn, both hands extended toward the tube where the needle had ripped out of the skin and dangled, still partly attached with adhesive tape.

Beyond the thermoplastic pane, both soldiers retrieved their handguns from their belts. One fished inside his uniform, hurriedly pulled something out.

The lab tech inside the room reached Bjorn just as the strap holding his chest gave. With a jerk, he bent in half and snapped his jaws around the man's shoulder. He shrieked in pain, blood splattered his white coat, dribbled into Bjorn's mouth, thick and warm.

"Argh! Hurry —"

The man's cry gurgled in his throat when Bjorn shook his head, lacerating his victim's shoulder.

After he snaked an arm past the belt, Bjorn wrapped it around the man's neck and brought him closer. When he sank his teeth deeper, bones crunched and splintered against his gums. A pathetic squeak and the lab tech collapsed against Bjorn, who let go and straightened. Blood dribbled down his chin and chest.

There has to be a way out of here. Dammit.

Barely a split second had elapsed from the time he attacked. A shrill alarm ripped the air, made him wince. The soldiers charged for the thermoplastic pane where a section slid aside to let them pass. They leveled their guns at him.

"Let him go."

"Stay away or I rip his head off!"

"Let him go. Now." The dry clack of the breechblock rang in the sterile room.

Bjorn kept the lab tech still against his chest, a job made increasingly easy with the weakening struggle and pitiable sobs. *"He'll die, is this what you want?"*

The second soldier pulled a smaller gun out of his pocket and leveled it at Bjorn. A feathered dart protruded from the chamber. Damn. These had downed him before and would undoubtedly do it again.

"This is the last warning." In the soldier's hands the gun shook, making it look as though the feathered dart was a tiny bird ruffling its wings.

Violent pounding against the observation window made Bjorn roll his eyes up. Utter chaos in the ranks. Everyone seemed to be talking at once. While some were on their cell phones, others merely stared in mute horror at the scene unfolding below their feet. One of the officers, the one pounding, was pointing at the dart gun wielder and shaking his head no with great emphasis.

Against him, the man's struggles weakened. Bjorn realized he only had a few minutes before his bargaining chip died. He stared at the soldiers. "If you let me go, I won't kill you."

Below his gurney, a growing crimson stain followed the grout in the tiled floor, with one rivulet snaking slowly toward the soldiers. One looked down, clearly horrified, and stepped back a pace. "Oh sweet Jesus, man."

His colleague's eyes flicked to the side for a split second. Someone was coming into the room for Bjorn could sense him. It was the one who'd indicated to the soldier not to shoot. He was high-ranking judging by the brass covering his shoulders.

"Killing my employees won't get you out of here," he said. His silver hair was slicked back with near-obsessive perfection. He indicated the man in Bjorn's arm. "Release him."

"Come any closer and I'll rip open his throat," Bjorn snarled.

"And then what?"

"Then someone else will have to come tie me down again."

Both soldiers blanched under their camouflage caps.

By the corner of his eye, he spotted two more people approaching, a smallish Asian man in his late-twenties and a Caucasian woman. *Her*. He remembered her. She was impossibly strong. And attractive. He always did have a weak spot for the muscular, Valkyrie type. A few minutes in the elevator with her had triggered a long dormant fire in his belly. Not that he could douse it anytime soon.

With the pair well in view, Bjorn pulled at his jeans leg, trying to slide a foot out from underneath the belt holding him. Against his chest, the man's weight accentuated, his arms had stopped flailing and his legs had buckled. Only Bjorn's arm was keeping him upright. Blood dribbled from the wound thick and dark, and under the harsh, bright light, glistened like ink. Several rivulets now snaked out in several directions on the floor. The high-ranking officer was standing right in one. He didn't seem to notice. Or to care.

"Look," the officer said. "You must let him go before this becomes more unpleasant for everyone."

Bjorn bared his fangs, let them rest against the man's neck. "Come and make me."

The pair entered the room. Both wore identical olive green coveralls with some logo on their upper arms and a numerical code embroidered on their chests. They also both looked military, in their stance and in the way they kept a cadence without realizing it. Bjorn had served in enough armies over the course of his life to recognize soldiers when he saw them. And these two, with straight faces and set jaws, didn't look like the kind who'd worked behind a desk their entire careers. He'd already tasted the violent methods from one of them, the woman, after she nearly broke his spine with her fists. That woman could *hit*.

"He's gonna die, Sir," the one holding the dart gun said. He swallowed hard, which made his Adam's apple bob enticingly.

Frustration flashed on the officer's face. With an imperious motion of his hand, he motioned for the twitchy soldier to stay put. "We have worked very hard to bring you here, sir. We spent years analyzing the records you left behind, the archives and records that didn't match. Spent years and much government money. Do you think a single casualty will prevent us from going on with our project?"

Disgust tightened Bjorn's throat. Nothing like a little bit of human compassion, right? So he'd been caught by a bunch of accountants. Some vampire killers. He finally freed his other arm. While he tried to pull his legs out from the restraints, he kept an eye on the pair, just to make sure they didn't try anything foolish.

But as he did so, Bjorn realized it was becoming increasingly difficult not to look at the female soldier. She could've been Mona Lisa's sister—a killing-machine version of her anyway. With brown hair pulled back in a no-nonsense French braid and striking dark eyes, she looked like she could inflict much damage. In her early thirties, he'd say, one meter seventy or eighty, she'd been graced with a muscular build and hips that strained the fabric of her baggy clothes. Except for the lack of armor, she could've been pulled right out of some pseudo-historical movie about a sexy Viking warrioress. He'd put her in the "built to last" section. And she'd smelled deliciously fresh and clean when he'd pretended to bite her. Her skin still made his lips tingle.

"Subdue him," the officer said to the pair.

Bjorn barely had time to snarl a curse when they charged him. He couldn't believe how fast they both were. He humphed when the Asian man collided against his chest, obviously not caring about the dying man in between who just slumped to the floor. A vicious punch to the throat sent the small soldier staggering back a few steps. While Bjorn dispatched him, the woman sidestepped her colleague and leaped right over the gurney, both feet tucked tightly under her, hands outstretched for balance. As she landed, she grabbed his upper arm with her. Bjorn grunted with pain when his entire arm felt as if it'd come out of its socket. What was she made of?

Having decided she was the more dangerous of the two, Bjorn twisted toward her, his hand already going for her throat. Then their eyes met. And he forgot everything else.

He could've been looking through a narrow tube for all he could see. He felt as though nothing else existed in the room but her face and her eyes, and that everything and everyone could go to hell for all he cared. Bjorn had seen good and bad, true evil, saintly patience, wars fought for greed and faith and dominance, but never had he seen what raged in the dark eyes of that woman—fire. Raw, untainted passion. She was a glorious goddess of war, a Greek Athena, a Roman Bellona, a female version of Thor. In that one moment, he would've followed her off a cliff.

She must have felt something too for she blinked a couple of times before releasing his arm.

A flash of blinding pain erupted behind his eyeballs. Bjorn flopped back against the gurney, dizzy, gagging, his neck throbbing painfully where the other soldier had hit him. He lunged blindly with his other arm, caught something, which he mechanically pulled toward his mouth. If he could only get his teeth in the little shit!

A vicious chop to the throat forced him to let go. He opened his eyes just in time to see an elbow coming for his face.

Oh this one's going to hurt.

In a blur, a hand shot out underneath the descending elbow and caught it in midair before it could cave his face in.

"Yuan, you moron, don't kill him." Her voice was surprisingly soft. She released her colleague's arm.

"Suck me, you bitch," the Yuan in question replied with a nasty half smile.

"You little rat, you don't talk like that to a lady."

A look of surprise and hatred rewarded Bjorn after he spoke likewise in Cantonese. He hadn't lived three quarters of a millennium and not picked up a few languages along the way.

"She's barely a woman."

"She's more woman than you'd know what to do with. And they're all ladies."

The woman grabbed Bjorn's arm and pinned it down along his flank. "All right, guys, back to English."

Yuan grabbed his other arm and forced it down harshly against the gurney while one of the armed soldiers faltered closer and tightened the belt around his legs. The other just stayed back and provided cover.

Pain radiated all the way down Bjorn's spine and shoulders. That Yuan may be small but he sure could inflict damage.

After the armed soldiers dragged the dying man outside the room and out into the hall, the officer shook his head sadly. He drew near the gurney but still remained a respectful two paces away. "Both of you report to the lab for your transfusions."

Bjorn stared hard. "Transfusions?"

"Yes, sir. Your blood will play the most important role in our quest for the ultimate weapon. A fine contribution you make, thank you."

Revulsion churned his insides. "You can't make biological weapons out of vampire blood, it's been tried before. It can't exist outside a host."

"That's why we're keeping it *inside* a host." The officer threw an oblique glance at both Yuan and the woman.

Bjorn felt his face sag. These two—and probably others like them—*were* the weapons. He looked at her, at this beautiful and untamed woman, this goddess of war, and knew she'd be dead within an hour of transfusion. "Vampirism is a virus. If they weren't born with it, do you know what their chances of surviving infection are?"

“Ah, I see you’re well-informed,” replied the officer, crossing his hands behind his back. “But we’ve already fixed that little problem. We’re not just pumping your blood into our enhanced candidates as is, no, we’ll do a bit of genetic tweaking here and there to make sure it’s one hundred percent compatible with what nature and our scientists gave them.”

Bjorn snorted. “So that’s your idea of a perfect weapon? Super soldiers? You think you’re the first one to think of it? They’re both going to die.”

In truth, he’d never heard of such a procedure. He’d heard of everything else—from biting to body-fluid exchange—but to splice his blood and make it more compatible...it sounded so crazy it just might work. How he longed for simpler times. He wondered which was less frightening—a pitchfork-and-torch-wielding mob or a roomful of scientists with a vial of his blood.

As they tied him back to the gurney, this time so tightly he could barely breathe, Bjorn kept staring at the woman, trying futilely to meet her gaze. But she avoided his, and soon they were out the door, leaving bloody footprints behind them. As she neared the doors beyond the thermoplastic pane, the woman turned and looked at him. Was it his imagination or did he just see regret flash in her dark eyes? He couldn’t be sure and before he had the chance to ponder this further, she turned away and left.

When a small army of people with lab coats entered, each holding an instrument or other, Bjorn’s hopes for escape shattered.

The pitchfork-and-torch mob. Definitely.

Chapter Two

Okay, what's going on? Danielle asked of herself as she lay on the gurney, waiting her turn for the transfusion.

She'd basically dropped the ball when that vampire had locked them in the elevator. She hadn't even been able to form a coherent thought, other than the carnal type, of course. There'd been plenty of those. As she'd been trying to subdue him, which had required all her enhancements and then some, part of her had been busy peeling the clothes off his strong back. How about that!

Maybe it was his uniqueness, how he'd been completely unlike what she'd expected that had thrown her off, had made her lose her legendary focus. Whatever it was, it could represent a problem for her. One she wasn't ready to divulge just yet. General O'Leary wouldn't make much of it, she suspected, but the rest—the *men*—she couldn't take the chance they would get their claws in something that juicy. She'd never hear the end of it. Pushing aside images of that bothersome vampire—and failing miserably—Danielle rested her head against the pillow.

To her right, Yuan rolled onto his side and propped his head against his hand. "So, Lavoie," he murmured, his black eyes like bits of coal. "Do you think we'll have a nice set of teeth like he has?" He laughed at his own joke the way he usually did. Moron.

They were four candidates per room. What were the chances she'd be stuck in his? Sighing, Danielle pretended he was a cockroach—and who talks to cockroaches, right?—while she crossed her hands behind her head and stared at the ceiling. The night vision lens caused a green tint in her right eye that made for a weird pattern on the white ceiling. Half of it was aqua.

Hissing something in his native tongue again, Yuan rolled back the other way so he could pester his other neighbor. Whatever that vampire had said when they were wrestling him back into his restraints, Yuan hadn't liked it one bit. She'd never seen him looking so angry. So the vampire could speak Cantonese. Ha.

A grin pulled her lips when she replayed the scene again, adding a few touches here and there. By the time the doctor was ready for her, her fantasy had evolved to the vampire breaking out of his bonds and coming for her. Yuan and everybody else weren't included in this fantasy. She'd let him pin her against the wall after a brief but valiant struggle then he'd kiss her and let those big hands of his roam free over her body. She liked big hands. Liked big guys, period. Shrimps like Yuan who she could break in half with one hand...they didn't do much for her.

"All right, Lavoie, are you ready?" O'Leary said over the doctor's shoulder. He brimmed with confidence and excitement.

She tried to share in his elation but kept seeing the vampire's face and how it would look when they'd be done with him. The thought left her feeling restless and cross. "I am, Sir."

Bending over, the doctor slid a needle in the plastic tube the lab techs had pre-inserted in her arm. Under her gurney, the machine pumping the blood mixture whirred softly into life as it rocked back and forth.

"Whoa," Danielle snarled, rubbing at her arm. "It burns like hell."

"It's the enzyme we had to splice it with, otherwise it would've been too strong. You should have seen the cells. I've never seen anything like it." The doctor stopped, shook his head in disbelief and awe. "There, it should only take a few minutes. We're going to inject a few milliliters for now and see how your body reacts." He nodded before going to Yuan and repeating the process.

After a smile for her benefit, O'Leary leaned into the doctor. "As soon as the threshold of integration is passed, we'll have to draw every single drop we can safely harvest. Then a drug-induced coma should keep him docile enough until he's replenished his own supply, which we'll draw again. We don't know when we'll get another one."

The thought of him lying indefinitely on a gurney, human blood being pumped into him while another tube drained him of his own didn't do anything for her.

Don't think about him, she told herself. It was hard to do. She could imagine him at the prow of a sturdy fishing boat or hoisting cages of lobster or something with his strong back and legs straining against the weight. Oh and what the hell, he wouldn't be wearing anything but jeans and boots. There. Much better. No sensible fisherman would venture out half dressed, but he wouldn't be in danger in her fantasy...she'd take really good care of him. Come to think of it, did vampires fish?

Danielle closed her eyes and let her mind float out to visions of a hardy Scandinavian fisherman looking out onto the cold North Sea and after a while, she just stopped trying to focus and let the fantasies take hold. She knew she was smiling and didn't care if anyone saw it.

Soon visions of the vampire lying dead, his blood drained out of him, burst her bubble. It was for the good of many, so that wars would be quick and surgical. No more blanket bombings and collateral damage, no more dead children in the streets. Soldiers like her would go in, take the target out and return to base. His blood would make things better, right?

Right?

* * * * *

She must have dozed off for Danielle woke with a start. Someone had screamed. No, *wailed* was more accurate. The needle in her arm was gone as was the machine under the candidates' gurneys. Man, who'd turned down the heat? She was freezing.

She leaned on an elbow and looked around. Yuan had his eyes closed. The other two were looking around as well. One seemed pale and in pain.

"What was that?" she asked, swinging her legs over the edge. Acute pain flared up her entire spine, right into her brain. Stars exploded in her vision.

People ran by past her door, talking animatedly. Another wail ripped the air, followed by another then another. The guy across from her began to moan, twisting in half and holding himself. Ignoring her own aches, Danielle slid to the floor and went to him. She felt like fire was coursing through her veins. Her teeth chattered.

"Hold on, all right...? I'm going to get someone."

She must have had a fever too, for she shivered in her sports bra and underwear, despite the temperature being at a constant twenty-three degrees Celsius everywhere in the complex. Her vision cloudy, as if she had her eyes open in a pool, Danielle stumbled toward the doorway. Neon light hurt her brain and she spilled into the corridor with a hand over her brow, trying the best she could to shield her sensitive eyes. Her teeth felt loose and her nails ached as though they'd been dipped in hot wax.

"Help," she called, looking both ways. There was nobody there. But she could hear people in the next room. So with her hand against the wall for support, she staggered onward and reached the next doorway. "Damn it, there's a guy in my room—"

Danielle leaned against the doorjamb and froze.

There were about twenty people in the room, all running around and talking at once, and blood was everywhere on the floor. One of the candidates was kneeling on his gurney, vomiting atrocious quantities of it, his T-shirt and underwear stained dark red. After a violent spasm, he collapsed onto his side. Across from him, another candidate lay on his back, his eyes vacantly staring up at the ceiling.

"We need help next door," she managed to say, using her sergeant voice. She coughed. Red bits splattered her hand. "Christ."

A violent shiver bent her in half. Danielle felt hands snaking under her armpits and pulling her backward.

"Hurry," O'Leary said behind her, "she's having it too." He cursed profusely as he hoisted her to him and dragged her back to her room. She could no longer control her legs and they violently shook under her.

One of her roommates had begun vomiting as well. He was leaning over the gurney, bright red splotches dribbling on the floor. He gurgled something, coughed then fell off and landed on his front where he lay very still.

"Sit down," the general said as he grabbed her shoulders and hoisted her back on her gurney.

A wave of nausea hit and Danielle felt her stomach cramp like a fist. She reached to O'Leary for support but he backed from her, horrified, and knocked into Yuan's gurney. Whirling around, he stumbled back against the wall. Strands of his silver hair spilled over his temple. "God, oh God," he kept repeating.

Then another wave of fire sliced through her abdomen and Danielle heard herself wailing as loud as the guys next door. Like someone was ramming a white-hot poker in her gut, the pain stabbed then abated for a split second before flaring up again but somewhere else. Violent spasms shook her entire frame when she tried to lie down.

Another voice joined the chorus. Yuan's. He twisted on his gurney, fell off and landed on all fours. He too began to heave violently but no blood gushed out as with the others.

"What's...happening?" Danielle asked, panting between the searing stabs in her belly.

General O'Leary ran out of the room without a backward glance.

And as she slipped toward the dark nothingness that loomed over her, Danielle's last thought was for the vampire with the hands of a fisherman.

* * * * *

She was drowning in fire. It got into her mouth, up her nose, in every orifice in her body. Her veins burst with it, her brain couldn't process it. Agony searing her tissues right down to the molecules, flared into a blazing sun. Then nothing.

* * * * *

Cold.

Awareness flooded her mind and body. Terrible clarity of her state and surroundings slowly seeped into her brain, and with it a single thought—protect him.

Who was *'him'*?

As though she hadn't breathed in a long while, a great gulp of air heaved Danielle's chest. She meant to sit but couldn't. Something was pressing against her chest and face. Something cold yet pliable. She tried to lift her hands but couldn't move them either. Whatever it was prevented her limbs from bending and had a cold strip down the middle that chafed her skin. Panic squeezed her throat. She couldn't give into it otherwise she'd go crazy.

Gritting her teeth against the gut-wrenching fear, Danielle punched up, right through the rubbery layer, which gave with the sound of crunching lettuce. Tearing it apart with both hands, she sat and looked around.

She was in a body bag.

And there were more around her.

All neatly lined against the wall with the feet ends sticking out so people could read the tags, there were nineteen other body bags like hers.

Another wave of panic forced Danielle to knuckle her eyes shut. This could *not* be happening. Why had they put her in a fucking body bag? Who'd do that? Crazy mother fu—

Unless...

She looked around again. After a short, futile debate, she leaned over and unzipped the one closest to her.

“Argh.”

Nausea gurgled up her throat and she hurriedly zipped the thing closed again. This one was very dead. Were they all dead then?

A ridiculous thought flashed across her mind. What if she were too? Danielle pressed a hand to her jugular and felt the rhythmic pulse against the pads of her fingers. Muttering a quick thanks to any god responsible for her good fortune, she extirpated her legs from the body bag and stood.

Now that she’d moved a little bit, she realized the pain had left. She noticed something else. Everything was clearer. The light fixtures on the ceilings, the electrical outlets along the wall, the overwhelming smell of blood and the rubber bags, every detail burned an imprint in her brain. Even sounds felt different, sharper. Flexing her hands and arms brought a sense of raw energy she’d never felt before, even after the surgeries. Is this what the researchers had expected? She felt as though she could leap over buildings and not break a sweat.

Then something pulled at her, right through her core, like it had attached itself to her navel, and were she to move too far away, her guts would be ripped out. The relentless itch of a missing limb. She turned toward the...the what? Feeling, instinct, what? She didn’t understand its meaning, but what she knew was this—it was calling. Urgently.

Protect him.

This time, the urge to protect him—whatever he was—nearly sent her into a mad rush through the doors. It took all her training to remain on the spot. With the euphoric effect of a strong drink, she felt the link spread to her whole body.

The vampire.

She had to protect the vampire, the one whose blood flowed in her veins, whose essence now formed part of her own. Her sire.

A faint sound alerted her raw senses. One of the bags shifted slightly, swelled in the middle before a lump poked sharply up near the top with a crunching sound. Danielle’s heart squeezed painfully with fright and horror. God, another one like her? They’d bagged the candidates before being sure?

A finger curled out of the opening, twisted, searched around. Danielle watched spellbound as the zipper crept down, each metal hook a distinct sound to her ears. When it was halfway down, a hand wrapped over one side and pulled the rest apart. A head of dark hair emerged then a wiry, naked torso. Yuan.

He looked at her. Confusion faded to distrust then triumph. Danielle felt she could read the man as never before. Not that she wanted to. Just her luck. A sense of alarm

shot through her heart with the intensity of a lightning strike. She narrowed her eyes at him.

Yuan coughed, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Lavoie...it figures."

Protect him.

The call throbbed demandingly inside her brain. And inside her body as well. Lust blazed when she pictured the vampire's large hands over her, his mouth on hers. Every fiber in her body wanted to rush to his side and break him out of his cell. Yet stabbing through her desire and primitive instinct for protection was Yuan. A sense of menace emanated from the lithe man.

"Would you look at that?" He looked around at the row of body bags.

Like in a horror movie with the possessed person glancing furtively while the heroine looked elsewhere, she felt Yuan's gaze on her, only to pretend obliviousness when she looked back.

Somehow, she couldn't sense a similar urge to protect the vampire from Yuan, only a deep, seething rage and a sense of feral combativeness. She winced when Yuan slipped out of the body bag and plodded over a dead colleague's form. His black sports boxers hugging his tight figure, he cracked his neck and jumped on the spot a few times. Danielle felt his restlessness, shared it as well, only hers emanated from a deeply female urge of protection, whereas his...she wasn't so sure. She tried smiling to hide her growing agitation.

"So we *did* get a nice set like his," Yuan said, grinning widely and running his tongue over his upper teeth.

Her first reaction was to dismiss his moronic behavior, but a flash of his teeth stopped her cold, froze the blood in her veins. He had them. Running her tongue over her own teeth confirmed it—she had fangs as well.

A subtle shift in his stance raised the fine hairs on her arms. "So," she asked, widening her stance. "What now?"

Yuan exploded into action. Whirling around, he charged at the double doors and blasted both off their hinges when he shouldered his way out.

Without understanding on a cerebral level, Danielle knew—she *knew*—Yuan was going for the vampire, and instinctively she understood he didn't have that urge to protect him. No, he wanted something else, to achieve supremacy, to kill the competition. Total monopoly.

Her naked feet squeaked on the terrazzo floor when she sprinted down the hall, and breaking several nails in the process, broke through the fire alarm metal cover and ripped it off the wall. Live wires fizzed and sputtered. At once a wail ripped the air rhythmically.

Ceramic joints and polymer muscles pumping impossibly fast, she made it to the doors before they had finished clattering against the floor. Yuan was already at the

elevator, thirty meters away but because she had activated the alarm, the doors were locked. He'd have to take the stairs. That'd give her a few seconds.

He might have been fast, but he wasn't as muscular nor was he as experienced as she was. Air whistled past her ears when she sprinted for him. He bolted for the emergency staircase a few paces to the left. She'd already figured he'd try to get there and had changed course accordingly.

When she caught up to Yuan, she merely tagged him on the shoulder at just the right angle and sent him careening into the brick wall. Chips of plaster and paint crackled and fell off. He whirled around, delivered a devastating chop that would've decapitated her...had she been there. Sneaky little shrimp.

Yuan wore no clothes except for his underwear so she couldn't use his clothing to grapple him. Feigning to go for his throat, Danielle reversed her grip and went for a submission strike. No use killing him when all she wanted to do was incapacitate him. Steeling her palm, she drove it in his solar plexus. He bent in half with a great humph of air.

Danielle grunted when he snapped back up and backhanded her. She never had time to raise her forearm when his elbow struck her right in the throat. Apparently, he had no qualms about killing blows. She needed to dispatch him fast, otherwise he'd find a way to keep her from her path. Or worse, he'd get there first. The thought needled her heart.

Protect him.

The urgency of the call nearly made Danielle release Yuan and go for it. Using her greater bulk, she wrapped both arms around his head and neck and pressed him against the wall.

Soldiers burst out of the ruined double doors, guns leveled in their direction. Horror deformed their faces as they skidded to a halt and began to backtrack away from Yuan and her. One said something in his radio. A crackled response announced more troops on the way. She couldn't afford to dispose of Yuan right then. So instead of bashing his head against the wall once for every stupid thing he'd ever said to her—which would have kept her up all night—she shoved him toward the stupefied soldiers and shouldered her way through the emergency exit.

Protect him. Hurry.

Cursing under her breath, Danielle leaped down the stairs four at a time. Grabbing the handrail, she lunged over it and landed on the next stairs down. A placard showed a bright red 4-U against yellow plastic—contrast that bothered her sensitive eyes—and she barreled through the door, taking the doorjamb with it. It clattered deafeningly to the ground.

"Sergeant Lavoie, put your hands up," a man said to her left.

She spun toward him, this obstacle who meant to prevent her from protecting her sire, and advanced on him and his shaking gun. He never had the time or the guts to

shoot before she ripped the weapon from his hands, hit him in the face with the butt and continued on her way as he slumped to the floor.

Pain radiated along her flank. She looked down in surprise to see a pair of darts protruding from her skin. She ripped them out and turned to the pair of soldiers who'd just emerged from the emergency door, one of them with the stun gun still pointed at her.

"Oh—"

She ended his sentence with her fist. His companion preferred to run and call for backup on his radio rather than face her. Smart man.

Suddenly the lights went out for a second before the emergency system kicked into service. Dirty yellow pot lights chased shadows down the corridor. To her heightened senses, the air became heavy, humid. So they'd cut the main power to keep her from reaching him, making sure every damn door would be locked. No matter. She was there already.

A stainless steel door with a tiny tempered glass slit afforded her a view of her sire's cell. He lay on a gurney, hooked to a tube connected to a machine. They hadn't begun because a couple of lab techs and doctors were poking around the computer and arguing. When she put her face very close to the glass strip, the vampire turned his head toward her. Their eyes met.

Her first reaction was lust. It blazed as though she'd been set on fire. All that glorious maleness, that quiet strength and those eyes the color of a clear autumn sky. Then after the initial carnal yearning came a deeper, more intense emotion—comprehension.

In that one second, she understood. Everything. Her role and his. How her life would forever be changed and how the link they shared would bind them until something final happened to either one.

A very real possibility if she didn't get him out of there. Now.

Not knowing, not caring, if her enhancements would withstand the shock, Danielle took a few steps back, aimed at the door then charged for it, leaping feet first. A muffled boom reverberated when she hit and it shook the door in its frame. Inside, she heard someone yelp in fright. Despite a deep depression in the middle of the door, it didn't give. She tried again. And again.

Inside, panicked voices rose in alarm. She spotted a soldier looking back at the door, his expression one of pure horror.

Grunting against the pain in her ankles, Danielle rammed the door again, and this time was rewarded by a show of sparks from the electrical sensor plates frying under the pressure. Yet the stainless steel door still stood its ground.

Protect him.

Danielle backed away several steps. She had to get him out of there. Her soul clamored for it. The link between them felt deeper and more complex than she'd ever experienced.

She was going to get him out of there alive if she had to demolish the whole damn place one brick at a time.

Chapter Three

Her presence beyond the door doubled the fire burning in his gut. Bjorn snarled and grunted as he fought against the belts holding him down. Around him, the trapped personnel ran or screamed or huddled in a corner near the intercom, futilely trying to call out for help. When the electricity had cut everything had locked down, even the computers, and total mayhem had descended in his cell. He was probably the calmer person here.

Another loud, muffled boom indicated she'd rammed the door again. He could feel the tremor in the gurney's metal frame. Whatever she was using to hit the door would take the whole thing down.

The air became humid and stuffy as the ventilation system had cut with the main power. The stench of fear overwhelmed everything else. Shadows twisted and crawled against the walls.

Finally! With a triumphant growl, he pulled an arm from under the strap. One of the white coats saw him and meant to approach but thought better of it when Bjorn made a swipe of his long arm.

Boom.

BOOM!

The last tremor produced a series of blinks from the emergency pot lights in the ceiling. The thermoplastic pane rattled in its frame. Bjorn looked up just in time to see the stainless steel door burst inward in a shower of sparks and dust.

Through it marched the one whose presence had elicited such a strong carnal reaction in him. She looked regal as she stepped over the debris and made a straight line for the thermoplastic wall. Her hair was in disarray and some blood stained her gray sports bra, but she was his goddess of war just the same, in all her glory.

"She's supposed to be dead, for Christ's sake. What does she want?" one doctor asked, pressing obsessively on the intercom button. "What does she *want*?"

"Me."

Bjorn's voice seemed to cut through the panic. The doctor looked at him, at the woman beyond the pane then back at Bjorn. "Cut him loose."

"But, sir," the lone soldier replied, making sure for the nth time his gun was loaded and cocked. "We can't let her leave—"

"I don't give a shit about the project! Look at her!" the doctor hollered as he rushed for Bjorn's gurney and began fiddling with the clasps. "She *died*, for Christ's sake, I was there. Every cell in her body fried. But she's...back." He undid one of the clasps holding Bjorn's arm. "She wants him, she can have him."

Obviously not about to be given orders by a civilian, the soldier pointed his gun at him. "Step away or I'll shoot."

"Fuck off."

The soldier shot. Bjorn cringed and averted his face when blood splattered his chest and face. The doctor slid to the ground, his head a mess of tissue and brain matter. Stunned silence accompanied the murder.

"Everybody calm down," the soldier went on, putting himself between Bjorn and the thermoplastic pane. "They're coming. It's all under control."

Beyond, the woman paced like a caged tiger, looking up and around for a place to break in. She must have grown tired of searching for she backed again, rolled her muscular shoulders then charged. A collective cry of alarm escaped the personnel when her feet collided against the clear pane and dislodged a section of it from its groove. Broken screws fell to the floor with small clicks only Bjorn could hear. Had she *kicked* the stainless steel door open?

"It's me she wants, untie me."

Nobody seemed to pay attention to him as they watched, transfixed, the woman's progress. So he went back to the belt the doctor had tried to undo, but the soldier must have spotted him by the corner of his eye for he leveled the gun right at his forehead. "Touch that again and I'll put a hole through your head."

Fear and adrenaline were making the man's face blotchy and sweaty. Not a good combination. Damn. Bjorn nodded slowly. "Whatever you say, man, just point that thing somewhere else."

A thunderous crash drowned even the alarm when the woman succeeded in taking down the thermoplastic wall. It came apart in sections as the nuts and bolts holding it together bent or broke. Before the soldier could even point his gun back at her, she crossed the distance in three impossibly fast steps and grabbed the man by the throat. His gun fell from his twitching hands. With barely a look for him, she threw the soldier sideways as if he weighed nothing more than a wet towel. He crashed against the concrete wall where a crack shaped like a spiderweb irised out.

Methodically she bent over Bjorn and ripped the straps out of its anchors, one by one. He tried to keep his mouth closed when she did this. *What* was she made of?

"Stay where you are," she said to one of the lab techs behind her who'd crept toward the demolished door. He froze.

Bjorn slid off the gurney, looked around for his things neatly piled on a chair in a corner. He hurriedly put them on.

"This way," she said without turning.

He followed her over the debris and disassembled thermoplastic sections, through the minefield of live electrical wires that was the room beyond and out into the darkened corridor. When she took off running, Bjorn made sure not to lose her. She was *fast*.

Her naked feet squeaked when they rounded a corner and made for a very wide door at the end. Black and yellow placards indicated some sort of transport bay beyond. The smell of diesel fuel and exhaust fumes assaulted him when they stepped in what looked like an underground docking bay. Trucks were parked while a few rumbled at idle near the wall. Drivers had undoubtedly abandoned everything when the alarm had been given. Huge cylinders along the ceiling provided ventilation to the cavernous garage. The power seemed fine here.

"There," she pointed to one idling Army tractor-trailer.

As the woman sprinted for it, a group of soldiers barged out from behind a cluster of yellow forklifts. One of them only wore underwear. That Asian soldier he'd seen earlier. Yuan.

"Stop!" someone yelled, but the woman never even slowed.

Bjorn cringed when bullets ricocheted off the cement floor and rock walls. The sounds reverberated like thunder inside the garage. Leaping the last two or three meters, the woman grabbed the cab door and ripped it open. She turned to help Bjorn get in but a well-aimed bullet forced him to veer off and skid around the back of the tractor truck. Dodging bullets, Bjorn climbed in the passenger door and slammed it closed.

"Shit."

"What?" he asked, checking behind when the bullets stopped coming.

"I can't drive these things." She looked lost for the first time since he'd met her.

Bjorn scooted toward the driver side. "I can. Move over."

When she did, sliding her solid behind across his lap, a jolt of electricity stabbed at his groin. Without thinking, he grabbed both her hips and squeezed tight. Nothing stirred his blood like a pair of solid, curvy hips. He loved being able to squeeze his women's hips and fill his hands with their delicious curves—and he had big hands. Conversely, nothing killed his lust faster than feeling bones and joints under his touch. And this woman here had to have the finest ass he'd seen in a long time. They didn't make them this sturdy anymore. In this age of chicken-boned nymphs, real women were a rarity. But before he could dwell on her fine figure, she was off him and sitting in the passenger seat.

A split second later, the door was yanked opened.

"I'm not done with you yet," Yuan sneered, hanging by his hands on the bent window frame.

As he climbed on the foothold and grabbed the woman by an arm, Bjorn shifted the truck into gear. A violent jerk shook all three of them.

Shit, a double-clutch!

Yuan cursed in Cantonese. "You can't take him!"

He tugged the woman by the arm, trying to propel her out of the cab. She snarled while she wedged her leg over the side of her seat to keep from being pulled outside. "I *am* taking him!"

After kicking the clutch twice and wrestling the stick back into gear, Bjorn put all his considerable weight on the accelerator. With the howl of a wounded beast, the engine roared into life at too many rotations per minute. He shifted gears right away. Beside him, the woman punched Yuan in the face. But he held on.

The driver-side door opened, but before whoever was trying to get in could do so, Bjorn twisted in his seat and kicked it wide. With a yell the man fell off. Bjorn changed gears again, reaching dangerous speed in the underground garage. His door flapped uselessly, its closing mechanism busted.

Some light filtered in around the corner of a wide, rock tunnel and he aimed the truck for it. A few soldiers made a halfhearted attempt at playing chicken with the multi-ton getaway vehicle. When he gunned the engine, they jumped aside.

The fight was still going on for supremacy of the passenger seat.

"Hang on!" Bjorn screamed over the deafening roar of the engine in the tunnel.

If she heard him, she didn't let it show as she continued pounding away at Yuan, who returned blow for blow.

While still accelerating, Bjorn swerved toward the rock wall, hoping to dislodge their unwanted passenger this way. Rocky outcroppings loomed dangerously close. He gave a mighty twist of the steering wheel. Contact. Amid of shower of sparks, the truck grated against the wall. With a strangled yell, Yuan was ripped off the truck's side along with the dented door. In his mirror, Bjorn spotted him rolling several times before flopping onto his back. He didn't get up again. The door slid for several meters before wobbling to a stop.

He wrestled the truck away from the wall and back between the lines. Okay, time for the seat belt. He fastened it with one hand. By the corner of his eye, he saw that she was bleeding from the nose. "Are you all right?"

"*Oui.*"

After he maneuvered a tight turn in the tunnel, Bjorn looked at her again. She was pale. She nodded slowly before slumping forward against the dashboard.

"Shit."

With one hand on the wheel, Bjorn managed to flop her back up against the seat and buckle her seat belt. Her head lolled toward him and her mouth opened partly. He nearly crashed the truck when he saw the pointy ends of two tiny fangs in her mouth.

Holy mother of...a vampire!

No wonder he could feel her presence well before she got to his door. She'd been infected into a *vampire*. Yet there was something about her he'd never felt with others of his kind. She didn't feel *normal*. So she'd been infected, but with some mutated

compound of his blood as the doctor had said. Who would put themselves through this?

Before he could ponder this any further, a black hole up ahead announced he'd cleared the mountain tunnel. As he expected, when the truck shot out of the tunnel and into the deepest night, company already waited for them. He couldn't count them all, but he knew several choppers zoomed by for their pitiless light beams swept the road and forest. Some ground vehicles formed a line across the road. Bjorn gritted his teeth. If they wanted his blood, by Odin, they'd have to scoop it off the ground. He wasn't going to make it easy for them.

With a roar, Bjorn put his foot to the metal. The truck lurched forward at top speed, and with the sharp decline in the road as it snaked down the mountain, gained enough momentum to make him howl a quick laugh. He was going to die, no doubt about it. But it'd be a hell of a show.

After a quick look at her—his unconscious Athena—he locked his elbows and aimed for the roadblock. At the last second, he squeezed his eyes shut and grinned.

* * * * *

Wind in her face and arrhythmic bouncing woke Danielle. She snapped her head up, looked around.

"Sorry for the breeze. It couldn't be helped."

The "breeze" in question came from the busted-out windshield. Beyond the ruined windshield, only crumpled metal hinted there was once a hood. She turned toward the driver side and gasped. Blood covered Bjorn's face and hands. But he was grinning.

"What happened, did we run into a tank?" She straightened in her seat and winced. Her ankles hurt and her throat was parched.

"Something like that."

Steam and a godawful smell wafted out from under the twisted hood. Danielle realized they were in the woods, on what she hoped was a road but could've been a hare trail for all the room there was on either side. If she reached out of the cab, she could've touched the tree trunks, never mind the branches, which grated and clawed at the truck.

She looked through the back window. "How come they're not behind us?"

"Because they need light. I don't."

Only then did she notice the greenish tint in her right eye. The tactical night vision lens the doctors had installed worked like magic. She could see everything, even fallen leaves littering the ground.

"Where are the choppers?"

Bjorn rolled his thick shoulders like they were sore. "Back where I left them. I went down the road with the lights on then switched them off and backtracked to where I saw a road forking off."

Danielle took a moment to look at him. He really did look like a Scandinavian fisherman, especially with his wavy blond hair and beige wool sweater. Through his jeans, his thick, muscled thigh rippled when he pulled his foot off the accelerator to avoid an obstacle then bulged when he braked. And those hands, well... Danielle felt a blush of lust rising to her cheeks. Through the sports bra, her hunger showed plainly enough.

As if he could sense it, Bjorn glanced her way before leaning forward and cursing. Danielle noticed the small red light that had triggered his anger.

"We're running out of gas."

And so was she. She felt so thirsty she'd even drink ginger ale.

"We'll have to walk the rest of the way."

"The way where?"

"To where I was going before your bosses got me."

Even with her night vision lens tinting everything green, she could see Bjorn's clear blue eyes had turned darker.

Her bosses. Project Immortalis. It could've been someone else's life for all the association she felt to it. Danielle extended a hand in front of her and clenched a fist. In her veins, nanotech was working its microscopic ass off giving her every movement more strength and endurance. Yet despite the enhancements, she knew it was Bjorn's blood that caused much of the added energy, that sense of invulnerability. Like liquid fire was being pumped in her veins. His blood too had been laced with nanotech on top of its natural vampiric properties before being injected into her. So she'd received twice the biotech additions plus the potent genetic materiel of a vampire. The power was intoxicating. A drug.

"They'll never stop looking for you, you realize that," he said softly. "I'm just a vampire, but you, you're unique, you're the first of a whole new breed."

"They can come."

He seemed surprised by her curt response. He turned toward her. His gaze went down, followed her chest, belly and thighs before sliding back up. He grinned. "I've never been rescued by a woman in her underwear."

Wrestling between smiling and remaining the cool-headed soldier she'd always been, Danielle shrugged and waved him away. "No problem, since it was my boss who put you there in the first place."

She didn't mention the call throbbing persistently in her head and body, demanding that she protect him, shield him. Her sire.

"Yeah, your boss ruined my transaction."

She arched an eyebrow.

"I was coming to France to sell one of my houses. In Dijon. My lawyers probably think I changed my mind now. They'll charge me a fortune."

My houses. My lawyers. Plural?

Then she remembered O'Leary had mentioned how it'd taken a team of forensic accountants to dig through the vampire's affairs, tying loose ends to geographical locations. They'd probably been able to pinpoint his location using bank and civic records. Not exactly how they did it in movies.

A loud grunt erupted from the truck before it lurched and sputtered steam. He cursed and punched the steering wheel once. "Well," he said, looking up and closing his eyes briefly, "I hope they did something to the soles of your feet because we'll have to walk."

After a brief series of sputtering burps, the truck died. The sudden silence pressed in on Danielle's eardrums. She climbed out of the cab and stood by the truck, looking up through the dark canopy of rustling leaves. No choppers in view. Not even the sound of their blades. They must have been far behind. She couldn't tell how far from the underground complex they'd traveled, save that by judging from the terrain, they weren't in the mountains anymore.

A subtle tension prickled the fine hairs on her arms. Danielle looked up to see the vampire coming around the front of the truck. As he did, his hand slid over the bumper for a second or two, which sent a long frisson down Danielle's spine. She could well imagine hands like those going down her side, over her hip then down her thigh. The heat and the rough skin would be a perfect combination. Even back in the elevator, before the transfusion, she would've given back all her hardware just to keep kissing him. Some soldier.

His disheveled hair hung over his eyes and cheeks. He raked it back when he stood near her and looked down. Blood had caked and dried over his face. Now that she could see him upright and not wrestling with a snarl of soldiers, tied down to a gurney or sitting in the truck, Danielle realized the guy must have been hovering near the two-meter mark. He also surpassed her own muscular build by far with the thickness of his shoulders. And his wasn't the lean, gym-produced-six-pack-abs type of physique but more the lumberjack category. Her favorite. And him a vampire! Ha.

"What?" he asked, his mouth curving at one corner. A tiny glistening point broke the seal of his lips. His fang. Danielle couldn't help but stare.

"You have them now too. I guess you've already noticed."

She nodded, running her tongue over her upper teeth. The movement must have triggered something in him for his nostrils flared, his lip twitched. He leaned closer. Some flyaway hair brushed against her forehead and Danielle swore the ground had shifted under her feet. Smells from his wool sweater floated to her and resisting the urge to bury her face in it and sniff to her heart's content proved more difficult than she could ever have imagined.

"I don't know your name," he murmured against her temple.

"Danielle."

"Bjorn." The R rolled in the back of his mouth.

She shouldn't be thinking about his mouth. "We should move. We can't stay here."

"So what now? Are we on the same team or should I worry about you trying to turn me in? Guilt makes people do crazy things."

The mere thought appalled her. Turn him in? Every nanobot in her would gladly give its circuit board to keep him alive. And even if the thought did occur to her to go back and blow the whole damn place up—and his stolen blood with it—Danielle realized the odds were stacked against her ten high and three deep.

"I don't change my mind. When I do something, I live with it."

He arched an eyebrow. "You live with it...and does anyone else live with it as well?"

"I don't force my choices on anyone else."

He nodded, seemingly content with her answer. Or content about the implications...that she was single.

Now there was a refreshing reaction. When she told people about her being single at thirty-four, they usually either looked sorry for her or wore that expression she hated so much, like she'd just told them she didn't have long to live. Was celibacy such a crime? Were one-night stands so bad? She enjoyed living by herself, even if sometimes waking up beside a smart, good-looking man proved satisfying. What could she bring to a long-term relationship anyway? She barely had time to unpack before being called out for another mission, and with project *Immortalis* gobbling up all her time and energy, she hadn't dated in the last year. Still, it was a *choice*. Hers to make and she'd made it.

"Let's move before the sun comes up." He straightened and took a big breath.

"Oh shit, I forgot, the light."

Her nature and the ramifications surfaced. No light. How was she going to go about life if she couldn't get out during the day? How would she get the tools she'd need to defend herself? How would she protect *him*? The last thought made her ball fists.

Bjorn laughed. He quickly sobered then checked around. "I'm not going to catch fire."

"But I thought...well, you know, the whole sunlight thing." She hissed to demonstrate her point.

Bjorn shook his head. "And the crucifix, the running water, our supposed obsession with counting small things, the black cape—ah, and my all-time favorite—changing into a bat. Did I forget anything?"

"You forgot about the stake."

"Oh yeah," he replied, making the motion of stabbing himself in the chest. His fist colliding with his pectoral resounded like a hollow barrel. "Well, that would kill *anyone*."

She stared at his wide chest, pictured it without the sweater. Nice. *Back to reality, please.*

His proximity interfered with her ability to think clearly, to sort out the tangled layers of trust and that overwhelming urge to take any bullet meant for him. Although she'd never experienced it before, she knew what it was—animal instinct. The female wanting to protect her mate. And mating was the one thing on her mind right then. Dirty old girl.

Raising her face to his, she stared at him until he got the message. And did he ever.

With a curl of his upper lip, he crowded her against the truck until the back of her thighs pressed against the tire.

"Don't look at me that way unless you mean it," he snarled.

She'd never before allowed a man to be this pushy with her. But there *was* a titillating angle to his strong will. For the first time in her life, she doubted she could best someone if it came to a confrontation. The thought rolled in her mind for a second. Lust flared to dangerous proportions. To out-of-control proportions in fact. She wanted him to take her hard and fast, and she wanted it now.

"I mean it."

His mouth landed on hers and demandingly captured her lips, her tongue. He could capture her whole being if she could do anything about it and ride her all night too. Urgency pulsated down low in her belly. With a sound half moan, half cry, she reached up high and arched against him.

"Tell me you want it."

When she didn't answer, Bjorn roughly grabbed her hips and jammed his pelvis against her. Danielle flinched when a jolt of electricity zipped through her chest.

"Tell me."

Two sharp points grazed her throat. His hands felt exactly how she'd imagined they would as he gripped her hips and shoved himself against her. A delicious mixture of rough skin and quiet strength shredded the last bits of self-control still clinging to her supposed tactical brain. The nanobots must be sleeping.

"If you don't tell me how bad you want me to fuck you, then I won't." He pulled away. His lips glistened when he ran his tongue over them.

Danielle grabbed a fistful of his sweater and pulled him back to her. "I don't need to tell you," she said, her other hand snaking down between his thighs and gathering his impressive erection in a fist.

"Get back in," he said against her neck.

She hoisted herself back into the cab and slid back to the driver side. Bjorn climbed in after her, his size dwarfing hers. Some heat still wafted into the cab from the steaming engine. When he bent to kiss her, Danielle wrapped her arms around his neck and forced him down onto her.

"You're asking for trouble, *Madame*," he murmured against her jaw. His breathing caught in his throat when she tilted her hips up to meet his.

After she wrapped her legs around his thighs and held him still, he let his weight bear down on her, eliciting a pleasant feeling of possession and control. She finally succumbed to the temptation and buried her face in his sweater. Raw wool mixed with his scent filled her nose. Just divine.

Urgently, she snaked a hand under his hard belly and tugged at the buttons on his jeans. She smiled to herself when her hand encountered no further barrier as she slid inside. No underwear. His member strained the jeans along his inner thigh. She fisted it. *Whoa.*

Bjorn gathered her braid in one hand and used it to force her face away. His fangs felt sharp and menacingly erotic against her feverish skin and Danielle arched back like a bowstring. She didn't care if he bit her. But he didn't.

Squeezing out of his jeans, he pulled back slightly and braced his knees against the seat. "Take that off."

Danielle slid her underwear down and pulled a foot out. Bjorn took a moment to look down at her, his fangs clearly visible when he grinned wolfishly. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to bruise that delicious body. But I did warn you."

Hanging heavy between his thighs, his thickly veined cock glistened acid-green in her lens. She meant to reach for it, but Bjorn grabbed her hand and forced it back against the steering wheel.

"Hold on to something," he said, his voice deep with feral intensity.

Danielle wrapped the seat belt several times around her fist and gripped the steering wheel tight with the other. She gritted her teeth and hoped he'd ram that thing in her hard enough to shake the damn truck, and she didn't care what that made of her. She wanted a quick, hard fuck, and he looked ready to give it.

When Bjorn slid his hand under her waist and pulled hard, her back left the seat and she became suspended a few centimeters off the canvas. His big hand full of his cock, he guided it near her pussy but only rubbed it back and forth along her cleft. Goddamn tease.

"Come on," she urged, tilting her hips to trap him.

His fangs glistened when he snarled her name. He shoved in. The force of his thrust drove the air from her. A cry of wonderment and encouragement left her. His huge cock stretched her delightfully taut, every vein and rib a delicious bulge rubbing against her swollen clit.

"Harder."

Ceramic joints and polymer-laced muscles bulged in her arms and thighs when she cramped all over, she then let her head loll back and took in his savage lovemaking. She smiled when the truck rocked with Bjorn's pounding. Just perfect.

A gasp of pleasure escaped her when Bjorn yanked the sports bra over her breasts and gorged on a nipple. The thing was already throbbing, but when he put his lips and

tongue to it, it positively erupted. And when his teeth trapped it, Danielle moaned his name.

"Say it again."

She did, louder.

"Again."

Danielle cried out Bjorn's name just as a cramp of pleasure tightened her around him. She undulated with it, twisted against the seat belt, let go of the steering wheel to grab at the stick shift, which bent like cheap plastic.

A violent thrust made Danielle groan. Another spasm tightened her pussy around his thick member, made her knees want to clamp together and trap whatever stood in between. Near-painful stimulation along the frontal wall forced her sex and belly into clenching tremors. An orgasm hit her with the force of a brick wall. She exhaled a mangled scream.

Bjorn's violence receded by increments until his thrusts became slow and leisurely. At one point he pushed all the way in, the tip of his broad shaft reaching deep, then he stopped. His hair hung over his face. Below the blond bangs, his mouth stretched into a wide, feral smile. He let her rest back against the seat and squeezed her hips with both hands. "I knew you were built to last."

A blush of spent adrenaline and the remnants of his powerful handling warmed her face. He pulled himself back in his jeans and sat on the passenger side.

"*Whew.*" He leaned back and took a few deep breaths.

Instead of the euphoric post-sex feeling one would expect to get from such a momentous ride, Danielle itched to move, to run. "We should go."

He turned his head toward her and the intensity of his eyes nearly scared her. "What's the hurry? I'm not done yet."

"We can't stay here. They'll find us eventually." And him dead was triggering all kinds of combat reactions. Danielle could barely contain the spike of energy.

"Slave driver," he muttered as he jumped to the ground.

Danielle rearranged her underwear and bra and followed him outside, ignoring his hand to help her get off. She was seriously thirsty now. For some idiotic reason, she felt like laughing. Nervous laughter, no doubt. The thing was, she'd never had that before.

She stepped in front of him and made for the narrow trail leading away from the truck. God, she was just desperate for a drink.

"I could carry you," he offered from behind her. "You have no shoes."

"Then give me your shoes and I'll carry *you*."

His laughter made her roll her eyes.

Storm clouds, shreds of brown and purple against an inky sky rolled in from the north and brought with them a cooler wind. Danielle forced her body not to quiver with

all the energy swelling her veins. She wanted to run, jump, fuck again, fight. She felt the way a junkie in withdrawal looked – twitchy, restless, hypersensitive.

A breeze carried a muffled rumbling that alerted her keen senses. She scanned the area to her right through the trees and spotted a river rushing down a gentle decline. Thirst beyond her control forced her feet in that direction.

“Where are you going?” Bjorn demanded, following her through the dense thicket and in between boulders.

The scintillating water called to her with a siren’s song. Danielle accelerated until she realized she was running for it. Fire boiled in her throat, in her belly. She had to drink. Now.

Heavy footfalls indicated Bjorn was on her heels. “Hey...”

Past caring about purification tablets, boiling water and having the runs for days, Danielle used a pair of large rocks for support and dropped to her knees so she could stick her whole face right in the frigid, rushing water. It flowed up her nose, flooded her mouth. She drank and drank. But the fire still burned. She drank more. A strong pair of hands pulled her back by the shoulders.

“That’s enough now,” Bjorn said firmly. He pulled her up to her knees.

Danielle sputtered, snarled, tried to pull away. “I’m not done.”

She needed so much more. But already her belly ached with the weight of all that water. When they were young, she’d had her baby brother howling with laughter – she’d drink her fill then roll her belly so it’d make a sloshing sound.

“Just another sip. I feel like I’m on fire.” She was just so thirsty.

Bjorn crouched by her side, wrapped his hands on either side of her face and forced her to look at him. “I’m thirsty too, Danielle. But water will never be enough. It’s not that kind of thirst.”

Chapter Four

The look on her face wiped away any lingering trace of fuzzy after-sex in him. From the way her dark eyes flared, he knew he'd just reminded her of her new nature. She'd need to feed and soon. It'd been a couple of hours since she'd been altered. No telling the sort of effects it'd have on her already enhanced body.

Bjorn crouched and ran water over his face to clean the dried blood. "How far from civilization is that complex?"

She looked with longing at the scintillating water then shook her head. "About twenty-one clicks." She pointed to his forehead. "Is it deep?"

"It'll heal in a few hours. We need wheels."

She agreed with a nod. "If we follow that trail, we're bound to get somewhere."

With Bjorn bringing the rear, they returned to the road and walked down its narrow and twisting length for several kilometers. The forest had become thin with a field of high grass rustling by their side.

"What's your guesstimate?" Bjorn asked very close behind her. Gray sports underwear with a wide elastic cinched her glorious figure. That V-shaped back, that solid ass, which fit his hands perfectly... He already wanted her again.

"Another hour or so."

A swollen moon peeked out from between jagged peaks to their left and Danielle lurched forward into a slow jog when she spotted a small cluster of houses across the field, but Bjorn held her back by an arm.

"We need to be discreet about this."

She nodded, the tight expression on her face and the beads of sweat indicating quite the contrary. The hunger was probably twisting her gut like a knife.

Bjorn remembered his own first great hunger, back when he'd reached puberty and discovered his tastes varied greatly from that of his siblings. He'd been with a girl then, sharing a private moment in her father's barn when he'd mock-bitten her on the shoulder. That night, he'd spent hours dreaming about the red mark he'd left on her fair skin. As months went by and his hunger grew to dangerous proportions, he'd had no other choice but to yield to the temptation. His teeth having grown alarmingly, which forced him to keep his mouth closed most of the time to keep rumors down to a minimum—he was already target for enough of them because of his inordinate stamina and size—Bjorn had gone to that girl again and bitten her. But that time he'd done it for real. Blood had flowed into his mouth like ruby-colored honey. Without his really meaning to he'd drained her. She died in his arms. Since that time, he'd learned to choose his provender more carefully. He also learned that one was generally born with

the vampiric virus, rarely became infected through a bite and that it manifested itself right after puberty.

“...leave their keys in their cars.”

Bjorn shook his head. “It’s a small village. They must leave their keys in all the time.”

Field gave way to cobbled streets in the dramatic transition so typical of European rural communities—one second wild countryside, the next paved streets and flowerbeds.

Bjorn rushed for a tiny car parked by the side of the road along a vine-covered rock wall. Peeking inside, he saw that whoever owned it hadn’t left the keys in. So much for his theory. Danielle tried the door and sighed when it opened.

“Get in,” he said, opening the driver-side door and folding his long legs under the steering wheel. The driver must have been either an elf or a child. He pulled the seat back as far as it went. “Fiat” gleamed mischievously back at him from the steering column. He grunted as he reached under the dashboard and tore out the vinyl covering. Fiddling around for a second, he pulled out a bunch of wires and plastic couplings.

“You know how to hotwire a car?” Danielle asked, clearly shocked.

“You learn a couple of things when you get to be a few hundreds years old.”

Ah, right there. He found a pair of matching color wires, used the sharp edge of the discarded hood section and broke through the polymer tubing. After crossing the live wires, the engine sputtered to life. A few more tries and it rumbled rhythmically.

He drove out of the nameless little village as fast as their little stolen car could go—a whole earth-shattering seventy-five kilometers an hour. Bjorn sighed. Why couldn’t it have been a Porsche?

Beside him, Danielle looked taut but calm as she crossed her arms and leaned against the window.

“You’ll need to feed before long.”

She nodded.

“I’ll show you how.”

He felt her gaze on him as he drove hunched over the wheel, fingers pinched over the crossed wires and hoping for a bit of wind to help them along. They needed all the help they could get with the little Fiat. The woman could probably run faster than this. The first city they’d come across, he’d park the car somewhere discreet—the thing could fit in his back pocket—and find them someone to feed off. Then he’d fuck her again, but this time he’d make it last. She wouldn’t just scream his name, she’d moan it for hours.

Yet at the same time, she was a vampire like him, *from* him. He hadn’t sired many vampires in his life—only two and both were thankfully long dead—as one never knew what sort of monster one created. His other two sired had been young women, both imbued with a singular joy in life. Unfortunately, the great thirst had turned the first one into a frenzied creature, reckless and dangerous, one he’d had to kill. The other, his

second sired, became so greedy for blood that she was caught and burned for a witch. He'd been maniacally careful afterward not to try to create himself a life companion. But those mad scientists had stolen his blood, sired others without his consent. And now he was stuck with the consequences.

Anger spiked in his heart. How the hell had he gotten himself embroiled in a military project of that magnitude? He didn't want spawns.

The word stopped him. Danielle wasn't spawn. She wasn't some byproduct of his...she was his Athena, his war goddess.

Bjorn yawned. His goddess of war apparently didn't partake in small talk. He'd fall asleep soon. "You speak English well. Where did you learn?"

"My mom was American. She met dad during a college trip in France. She moved here not long after she got home. We kept traveling back and forth and that's how I learned."

"Were your parents in the military as well?"

A quick laugh made him want to pull over and start kissing her.

"God, no. Teachers, both of them. History. I'm quite the oddity in my family. I get bored easily so I had to find something to keep me focused. Extreme sports, two jobs, school. Then I signed up...*that* kept me plenty busy."

"Is this why you joined such an extreme program? Because you were bored."

She threw him a menacing look. "No. Because I like to push myself, that's all. Why not give more when you know you can, you know?" She exhaled a long tight breath. "Where did you learn English?"

"England, back when the accent wasn't cool."

A tired grin lifted the corners of her mouth. Yearning shot through his groin. *Change the subject.* "Are they still alive, your parents?"

She shook her head. "And...oh sorry."

She'd obviously meant to ask if his were alive. "I severed all links with my family a long time ago."

Dawn light greeted them when they crested over a hill and down into a lush green vale. Smells from recently tilled fields filled the car. She shifted in the tiny seat, withdrew against the window before bending in half, her arms wrapped over herself. Her dark hair escaped her French braid and spilled over her face, hiding her expression.

"What's the pain like?"

His concern for her surprised him. This link they shared was unlike anything he'd ever felt. If something happened to this woman, he wasn't sure he'd revert to his old carefree self. And this scared him he had to admit.

"It's burning." She tried valiantly to keep the stoic mask on, but he could see the pain in her eyes when she looked at him. Tough cookie. "It's like I've swallowed gas and it caught fire."

Bjorn gritted his teeth. Already. She'd skipped several stages of the hunger. She shouldn't be feeling the burn right away. It usually took weeks without sustenance for the burn to be that painful, the fire to be as intense as what she just described. Whatever they had done to his blood had accelerated the feeding process. Not a good thing when he came to ponder on it.

Lights from a smallish city farther down the vale forced his gaze back to the road. They entered the dormant city a little before five a.m. Traffic lights hadn't yet been turned back on and flashed yellow at every corner. Bjorn found a secluded spot behind a factory. Above them, a thick brick tower spat gray smoke.

Danielle got out of the car and jumped in place a few times. She looked tired yet wound up. Goose bumps covered her belly and thighs, at which Bjorn tried mightily not to stare. Concentration would prove impossible if he started looking at her too long. Already his cock stiffened, ready for another bout. But she needed to feed first, otherwise all sorts of nastiness would ensue—terrible cramps, spasms, symptoms much like withdrawal from a powerful drug, only these ended with the person trying to chew open their own flesh so they could feed. Not a pretty sight.

"Stay here. Do *not* move."

She looked ready to argue. After a while she nodded and resumed jumping on the spot. He'd better get the hell out of there before the sight of her bouncing breasts drove all sane thought away. It was enough all he wanted to do was push her against the car and take her hard and fast. Make her his.

It wasn't long before he found the perfect person for her. A young man stood near a car, surreptitiously looking both ways before he spun around and fiddled at the window with a metal strip. He was doing it all wrong too. Bjorn sighed.

Without sound, Bjorn stalked across the street and stood right behind the young man before his shadow fell over his target. By the tightening of his shoulders, Bjorn knew the young man had sensed him. A quick punch to the temple took care of any alarm he might have raised.

The man slung over his shoulder, Bjorn rushed back to where he'd left the car. All she needed to do now was feed—he'd take care of the rest. Bjorn readjusted his hold on the man's hips as he crossed the street. No one had helped him with his first time—well, not the very first time, the one where he'd accidentally drained the young woman—and it'd been hell. The person had screamed the entire time. Nothing killed appetite more than a shrieking, thrashing meal. Looking around, he rounded the corner of the factory and scanned the vacant lot. The tiny car looked like it was sulking in a corner.

Danielle was gone.

"Shit."

After lowering the young man to the ground behind the protruding access door to the tower, Bjorn sprinted back up the street. His senses extended to their limits, he caught a very faint trace of her smell. She only wore underwear, for Christ's sake! She

might as well have been a one-woman fanfare going down the street. Dread tightened his throat. If she were caught like this... He wouldn't be able to help her.

By the corner of his eye, he spotted her rounding the corner of the next street over. How could she run that fast! He took off after her, his own impressive abilities taking him within a few meters of the corner, but by that time he knew there was something wrong. The smell of blood assaulted him like someone had wrapped a scarf over his face. Skidding on the cobbles, Bjorn cleared the building just as Danielle knelt beside a man whom she cradled in her arms as she sucked at his neck. Blood flowed freely from him. It was already too late. Bjorn swore.

Danielle must not have heard him approach for she continued feeding, tiny, wet sounds made Bjorn wince when she worked her jaw like a suckling baby would. From the awkward position of the man's head, he was dead.

"Stop."

Bjorn knelt beside her and yanked her hand from around the man's shoulder. He slumped lower over her lap. Blood dribbled onto her chin when she whirled on him and cursed.

"You can't feed from the dead."

He pulled the man away from her and laid him down by the wall. Someone would find him any moment now. They had to hurry the hell out of there. *Faen heller.*

"Come." He seized her wrist before wiping her mouth with his palm.

She was still wild-eyed and panting. As if she were drunk, she staggered and leaned dangerously far to one side. He caught her just as she would have fallen.

"Shit, what happened?"

"There's no time," he replied, hoisting her against him and going back to the car as fast as he could. Her feet dragged the entire time.

After he strapped her in, he got the old car running again and tried his best not to break any speed limit as they escaped the small city. Such a grisly murder would be the talk of the entire province. Anger at her reckless behavior made him want to shake her. Why hadn't she just fucking waited!

"I told you to *wait* for me."

She didn't reply, just stared straight ahead. Guilt was probably eating at her already. Bjorn shook his head. She didn't know any of this, couldn't grasp in a single night what he'd needed years to understand. He'd have to keep her in his sight from now on—not only for others' safety but for her own as well.

Odin knew what a dangerous woman like her—made even more so with his unintentional help—would do. He was probably the only person able to get through to her...and even then, he wasn't so sure anymore.

* * * * *

The salty taste of blood still lingered in her mouth. Danielle tried to gather enough saliva to spit but ended up swallowing it every time, as if the thought of wasting a single drop appalled her. Not one to wallow in self-recrimination and guilt, she still found it difficult to understand how she could have done what she had...and not feel a thing about it. Save for the initial panicked reaction, after Bjorn had pulled her off the man, Danielle hadn't been able to feel much of anything. She dug deep in her heart, did a situation report on herself.

Why didn't I wait for Bjorn? Because she had to feed *now* and didn't want to wait for him to hand it to her like she was weak. Weakness got one's men and oneself killed. So she'd gone ahead and attacked the first person she'd met. Simple as that.

Why don't I feel any repulsion at my action? She'd just killed a guy with her *teeth*. Blood had long ago lost its power over her as had death. She'd spilled a lot of the first and brushed on several occasions with the second. So with blood and death out of the way, what else remained? The reason.

Did I have to kill him? Now this was her only problem. She hadn't meant to kill him outright, only put him out. She'd lost control when she caught him and spun him around. With the thirst clawing at her, she'd rushed her movements and snapped his neck. Unfortunate. Disturbing. And avoidable. Next time she'd use more restraint.

Still though, Danielle couldn't help but think about how humans found sustenance themselves as a species. Nobody went around asking cows permission to kill them, cut them up and eat them? Nobody attended church and asked forgiveness for being part of a collective who hunted other animals for food. Did the panther wallow in self-doubt and walk around in guilt-induced circles? No, he didn't. He hunted because he was a hunter and that was what hunters did. Why would she ask herself these questions then?

She wouldn't.

Danielle wrapped that little bit of self-knowledge in lots of brown, nondescript paper and tucked it at the far back of her mind. She wouldn't need it anytime soon.

Beside her, Bjorn shifted uncomfortably in the cramped driver seat. How he had ever fit those legs under the tiny steering wheel escaped her. His knees poked up on either side of it. If she'd had any sense of humor—which she didn't, according to all who knew her—she would've laughed. As it was, Danielle just smiled.

"I could drive for a while," she offered.

"We need to get you clothes first. If you drive, you won't be able to scoot down to hide." A smirk pulled at his lips. He cleared his throat then threw a quick peek at her. "I'll go get them from the store. Size...?"

"Think double digits."

He nodded.

When they did reach the next city of Dijon, one she knew a little bit, Bjorn stopped at the bank first to get some money. He emerged from the ATM lobby with a thick wad of cash, which he shoved in his front pocket. Only a vampire would flash that much money around. In the car, Danielle just shook her head.

The store at which they stopped carried the usual polyester garments cut for twelve year olds. Danielle crossed her arms and waited as Bjorn pulled his sweater off, turned it inside out and put it on again, hiding the little specks of dried blood. He got out of the car, tried the door only to discover it was locked. Someone was inside though, and after he waved and offered a big grin, the woman came over to open. He readily entered into a deep conversation with her. To her shock, Danielle gritted her teeth with jealousy when the attendant smiled and put a proprietary hand over Bjorn's forearm. How dare she, that bitch! They spent a long while choosing clothes together, putting them on the counter and going back for more. Danielle was still enjoying violent fantasies about the insolent woman by the time Bjorn came back to the car laden with plastic shopping bags instead of the fancy paper ones shown in the movies.

"I hope they're pants," she snapped.

He stopped trying to cram the bags behind the seats and just stared at her. Danielle arched an eyebrow and stared back. His eyes looked so young for someone so old. Not old, *ancient*. Centuries. She traced with her gaze the laugh lines on either side of his mouth and the blond stubble covering his cleft chin and strong jaw. His nose had once been broken.

"I know you saved me from hours of enjoyment at the hands of Doctor Frankenstein and Company, but you *could* show a bit more gratitude."

Her heart skipped. She swallowed hard and looked away.

Bjorn sat in stiff silence and drove through town to a posh neighborhood where houses looked more like small castles than anything else. A large park with a duck pond stretched across several blocks opposite the street. A foursome of geese rushed up by the wrought iron fence and quacked their warning at Danielle, letting her know she was entering Goose Domain at her own risk. Danielle stared at a couple walking their dog. They held hands and talked.

Bjorn got out, ripped the hatchback door open and pulled the bags out. Long strides took him to a thick-cleated door with a wrought iron hoop for handle. After fishing keys out of his jeans pocket, he unlocked the door and pushed it in then checked both ways before motioning with his chin that she could come too.

Still angry by his rebuke, Danielle stomped inside the foyer and crossed her arms. The place was sparsely furnished but magnificent. Lacquered trunks from China, Turkish rugs and sturdy, old-fashioned Scandinavian furniture...she liked his place a lot.

"I'll get rid of the 'getaway car' while you settle in. Might I suggest a shower?"

"They'll track us here right away. They probably have your address."

He shook his head. "This is under a woman's name. Even their nosey accountants won't find it for a good while. And by the time they do, I'll have sold it already."

A woman.

His eyes still didn't show the sparkle she'd come to expect. Damn, she'd screwed up big time. She looked down at herself and cringed. Blood stained her underwear and

sports bra. It covered her arms as well. Unless she did a better job at this whole vampire thing, she'd be in jail within the week. Or back at the lab. This time, she'd be on the other side of the glass.

Danielle realized with shock she hadn't even given a single thought to O'Leary and his project, to Yuan and the rest, who had undoubtedly gone back to the drawing board and designed another procedure. They still had a bit of Bjorn's blood left. A feeling of ownership tightened her jaw — this was her sire's blood they had.

That protection thing again. She shook her head. From what she'd seen, he could take very good care of himself. Even had a house with a *woman*.

The thought needled her pride.

"So," she said to give herself something to say and not look like the idiot she felt. "Any underground rooms filled with weapons I should know about?"

He didn't smile. "The only underground room is my wine cellar and you're not using *that* as your command post."

So much for trying to make peace.

When Bjorn closed the door behind him without another word, Danielle grabbed as many bags as she could and carried them down the hall toward the kitchen. She dumped them pell-mell on the gleaming floor and continued her tour of Bjorn's house. A chef would've cried. But why did a vampire need a *kitchen*? Ah yes, his woman. Stainless steel appliances, granite countertops, the works. And in a corner a dormant laptop, its little green light blinking like a one-eyed robotic beetle.

As she went around the huge house, absurdly looking for signs of a female occupant, she started to realize it could as well have been a small fortress. Motion sensors near windows and doors leading outside, an expensive-looking security system throughout the house with control panels in most rooms. When she found the bathroom, Danielle swore she heard a choir of angelic voices give a single, crystal-clear note. Now, this was a *bathroom*.

Black marble walls, anthracite ceramic tiles, and there, in all its glorious, glistening perfection...a steam shower.

Bra and panties went flying and landed directly in the wastebasket in a corner. She'd wrap a towel around herself after she was done and get some clothes from the bags in the kitchen. That shower could *not* wait. Not even for clothes. Grabbing a bar of soap from a fancy dish on the counter, Danielle opened the glass door with only one grubby finger so she wouldn't mess the gleaming handle and stepped inside the small room. Ten people could easily have fit here. For a second she wondered if he'd taken many showers with his woman. Jealousy reared its pointy little head.

After spending some time trying to figure out the set of knobs and levers, she got the shower going but not the steam. Better than nothing. She scrubbed her body with the bar of soap, hair too, rinsed then stayed under the powerful hot jets. Cramps in her neck loosened. God, that was good.

Movement along her peripheral vision made her ball her fists. Shit, she hadn't locked the door.

Stupid, stupid, *stupid*.

Right away, her enhanced systems checked and rechecked with her memory bank as intrusion alerts flashed in her brain. Was it the woman, maybe? Was she another vampire? Could she perhaps kill the bitch and splatter her guts around the place?

Ceramic joints creaked when she tensed. She widened her stance, trying to see through the rivulets of water along the glass wall and the fog of steam gathering in the bathroom. Someone was approaching. A big someone. Bjorn.

Naked.

Their gazes met through the beaded glass. He drew near but didn't enter. Tight muscles strapped his solid frame while a long, blond strip of body hair she hadn't noticed before separated his chest and belly in halves. Hanging heavy between his thighs, his cock looked carved from solid pink marble.

"Did you already shower?"

She nodded.

"Do it again."

Danielle would've rather he done it and felt self-conscious and clumsy under his scrutiny. She hadn't even shaved her legs and all those tiny puncture wounds from the microsurgeries she'd undergone embarrassed her. But pride, ever-present pride, forced her outside her comfort zone. Again. She couldn't count the times when she'd done something reckless or foolish—or like right now, something exhilarating and scary—just because she was too damn proud to admit her unease.

Holding his gaze stubbornly with her own, she proffered the bar of soap so he'd see it clearly as she let it glide down her shoulder and arm then back up and down between her breasts. All the while her hand shook.

"And that fine ass too," Bjorn said. The word "fine" revealed his glistening canine teeth.

Turning sideways, Danielle rubbed her hip in circular motions while her gaze went down the length of him. Yearning for his thick cock throbbed imperiously behind her clit. Their quick but aggressive fuck had left her wondering what the guy could do when he had plenty of room to maneuver.

Closing her eyes, she snaked her hand down between her thighs. Oh right there. Soap made her skin slippery and soft, very much unlike its regular state when no amount of cream would work. Her thumb rubbed along her cleft, produced a sharp little jab of excitement. Could she come with him looking at her this way? She ran her finger again, this time pressed enough so her knuckle parted her lips. Slowly, her gaze on the tile between her feet, Danielle skimmed the pad of her thumb against her pulsating clit, every pass a bit more pronounced than its predecessor, until she began to rub that thing like a genie would come out of it. She was getting closer.

She looked up to find Bjorn a centimeter from the glass. His lips parted, his eyes narrowed. He panted hard, looked ready to explode.

"Come here," she snarled through gritted teeth.

He shook his head. "Keep going."

Frustration gave way to wonderment when her pleasure intensified. A fiery cluster of needles poked at her pussy and Danielle gasped. Damn, she was close.

"Stand in the middle," Bjorn said, opening the door.

His intensity, his sheer size, reminded Danielle of a predator stalking into the shower with her. She backed away.

Bjorn nodded. "Don't move." He fisted one of the knobs and powerful jets of steam hissed into life.

Tiny droplets clung to her body, separated clusters of soap bubbles and forced them downward over her feverish skin. Even the light touch of lather was enough to stimulate her twitching nerves.

When he closed the door behind him, his shoulder bulging with the movement, Bjorn took a single step into the shower. A tiny step, but one so imbued with raw power and masculinity Danielle almost came on the spot. Without touching, Bjorn circled her until he'd done a complete rotation. The entire time his gaze caressed her, bound her, penetrated her. He extended a hand for the soap. She meant to give it to him.

He shook his head, his hair becoming heavier and separating under the steam's effect. "No," he said, his voice so low she had to strain to hear him. "You did such a good job, you're going to wash me too."

"Yeah, but I want you *now*. I'll wash you after."

She took a step toward him with the full intention of fucking him right there and then, even if she had to pin him down to do it.

With more speed than she'd seen him use so far, he grabbed her wrist and held it tight. "You got off easy the last time. Not this time. Now *scrub*."

Her first reaction was to cross her arms and give him the Stare of Doom. That silliness quickly passed though. This magnificent specimen of maleness wanted her to scrub him down, wanted her to run her hands all over his statuesque body. Tough life.

So Danielle lathered her hands and began with his thick neck and shoulders. Had she had any nails worthy of that name, she would've made ribbons of the skin on his back. But she had to compensate by pressing the pads of her fingers into his flesh and feel for the iron-hard muscles underneath. This wasn't the lean or wiry build of a gym aficionado, but of a man who'd worked hard his whole life. She wondered what sort of jobs he'd held over the years. Except hardy Scandinavian fisherman. Danielle grinned.

Soap frothed into creamy thickness rendered his skin a glorious and gleaming playground for her hands, and Danielle made sure she didn't miss a single square centimeter of it. After his shoulders came his chest, which she rubbed hard just for the

sheer pleasure of seeing his pectorals twitch with restrained energy. Her gaze on his, she pinched one of his nipples. He just bared his fangs at her.

She went down his front, rubbed his hard belly and flanks, the whole time resisting the urge to wrap her arms around his strong middle and give him a big, sticky hug. Her hands tingling with anticipation, Danielle gathered his hefty cock in a loose fist and weighed it up a couple of times.

"My, my," she said. "All that for me?"

Bjorn's eyes flared. "Oh you little...now you're going to have to work hard for it."

"Oh yeah?" She pumped once.

A snarl escaped him but he widened his stance and stared down at her. "Yeah."

While she washed his industrial-sized rod, she kept her other hand wrapped tightly around his balls, which she squeezed every once in a while. No man had ever taken that for long. But Bjorn did. He just looked at her with all the seriousness in the world, his lip occasionally twitching up over a fang, but otherwise in complete control over his reactions. Talk about self-discipline.

But as she scrubbed his thighs and butt—as glorious as she'd ever seen—Danielle's own needs began to demand some attention. A pulsating ache started in her clit, spread to her cleft until even her nipples throbbed for his touch. She finished him, let the bar of soap drop and ran her hands along his hips and sides.

"I'm all done," she announced. But when she went for his member, Bjorn shifted sideways.

"I said you'd have to work for it."

She nodded, grinning, playing along. "And I did."

He smiled menacingly. "Oh you think so, do you?"

The grin slid off her face. Tease. "Am I going to have to force myself on you?"

He backed into the jets of hot water, his eyes never leaving hers. Soap rinsed off him in shredding white strips, which pooled around his feet before sliding down the drain. His big hands ran over his pectorals and belly then lower to that monstrous erection against which she wanted to skewer herself. He beckoned her.

Danielle joined him under the water, ready for that brutal attention of his but snarled when he leaned against the wall and crossed his arms.

"Now," he said, "It's time for the real work."

Chapter Five

Bjorn watched the assortment of reactions his words produced. She looked successively ready to kick his ass, stomp her foot and barge out of the shower. But she stayed. He grinned inwardly at this small triumph. She had to learn self-control or she wouldn't last a month as a vampire.

Reaching out, he clamped his hand over one of her tight, little breasts. She really did have that renaissance beauty going for her, only hers was a more muscular, killing-machine version. He should know, he had been there. He'd given up on ever seeing such beauty again. Wide shoulders and hips, both of which were unfortunately out of fashion nowadays, and firm little breasts crowned with orchid-pink areolas. Bjorn sighed.

Danielle parted her lips, hissed in pleasure. So she enjoyed this, did she? Trapping the rock-hard nipple between the base of his thumb and his index finger, Bjorn tightened until he could tell her pain threshold loomed near. With the compressed nipple firmly locked in, he curled down and flicked the tip of his tongue at it, knowing hypersensitive nerve endings would sting delectably. She rewarded him with a long moan through her nose. So he did it again. And again.

By the fourth or fifth flick, Danielle's fists trembled by her sides. He released her nipple where he knew it'd throb for yet a few seconds before her brain would flood her system with numbing endorphins.

She grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled herself up to his mouth, which she kissed hard.

With a smile he knew would make her want to kick his ass, he forced her hands away then down behind her back. Her chest heaved. Bjorn bore down on it. Soon his lips had reduced both her nipples to tight, rock-hard garnets. But when she looked as if she were having a bit too much fun, he released her.

"Hey..."

Bjorn turned off the steam jets then the water. Silence settled into the shower. He turned back to her, hooked a finger at her. While he sat on the marble ledge and spread his feet, he maneuvered her so she'd stand between his knees.

By Odin, she was gorgeous. All that hip! He grabbed them and squeezed, a rumble in his throat. Curling his lip, he raked his teeth along her hip, down her muscled thighs, up in between. He burned to sink his fangs in, pierce the tough, healthy skin. But he couldn't afford such luxury. Not ever, unless he felt something deeper than mere thirst. Instead, he tapered his tongue and lashed her glistening sex. Danielle panted.

When her hips began to gyrate, Bjorn stopped. Oh but she would have to learn about patience. She'd have to master the fine art of honing a lover's blade, just how he'd learned it. Danielle didn't know it, but she was about have her first lesson in self-discipline, a lesson he was dying to give.

She threw her head back. "Argh, what do I have to do to get fucked around here."

He leaned back against the wall. His gaze held hers while he spread his feet outward and cupped his meaty cock in his palm. "Watch out for the teeth."

After a full two seconds with her mouth opened in a silent O, Danielle nodded defiantly before kneeling between his thighs. Her hands were rough when she grabbed his dick and pointed it up. With extreme slowness, she ran the tip of her tongue from the base right up to the tip. Bjorn had to bite down hard to focus. Who was teaching whom now?

"Oh you liked that, did you?" She smiled triumphantly and repeated the process in reverse order then went back up again.

His dick throbbed right down to the balls. Bjorn took a deep breath. Then another one. When she wrapped her lips over his glans and slid down, he meant to jump up from the bench but caught himself in time and just twitched with the aborted movement. She was good. She was very good.

"What's that scar?" she asked, pointing to the rather large incision under his scrotum.

"Vasectomy. Circa 1902."

"I didn't know...well, you guys can have kids?"

"You mean 'us' guys'. Why not? Vampirism is a virus, not an infertility problem." Figuring his life wouldn't be kid-friendly, he'd had it done as soon as he'd heard about the cutting-edge procedure. He should've waited another fifty years.

She looked at the scar again and winced. "Ouch."

"Indeed. Now back to our present time."

His cock disappeared once again down her throat. Bjorn couldn't believe she'd taken him all in. He'd seldom been swallowed in so deeply. When he thought he was in perfect control of the situation, Bjorn realized he was in fact sliding fast despite his most enthusiastic backpedaling. Drawing on centuries of prudence, he closed his eyes and let Danielle do her best. *Whew*. That'd been close. He knew he wore a satisfied smirk but couldn't hide the pleasure she was giving him. She was just so damn –

He gasped in pain and shock when a burning sensation pricked his inner thigh. Bjorn looked down to see Danielle covering her mouth with her hand. Her eyes were round like coins. Yet a feral glint laced her dark gaze. He knew that one very well. The hunger was clawing at her already. And she had yielded to it.

"You *bit* me?"

She didn't reply, just stared at the pearl of blood beading on his skin. Now that the initial reaction had passed, his own hunger nearly shredded his composure. He

couldn't let her have free rein this way or she'd pull him down with her. He'd already learned that harsh lesson a long time ago after he'd killed a friend. Vampires could never, ever, afford to lose control and had to master their responses, especially one as dangerous as she, with all the high tech she carried around in her body.

He felt his own resolve straining against the urge to bite. Danielle triggered in him so many damn emotions—all-consuming lust, awe, jealousy, reverence. She was his Athena, his goddess of war. Yet as a vampire, he had sired her. It was *his* blood in her veins, his blood that had been stolen from him. And she'd just done it again.

"You need to learn."

He jumped to his feet, grabbed her hands and forced them over her head. With a humph, he sandwiched her against the shower wall and his body, knowing his erection dug painfully in her belly.

She fought back. Did she ever!

Yet despite what he could recognize as genetically enhanced strength—no one had ever made him work so damn hard—Bjorn pinned Danielle, entwined his fingers in hers and ground her knuckles against the wall. He'd been interrupted once before in the elevator. There wouldn't be anyone to fire at him this time.

"You never, *ever*, bite your sire," he snarled close to her throat, "unless it's granted to you. And it wasn't." The man in him fought a losing battle against the vampire struggling to get free, to sink his own fangs in the impudent woman. A vein throbbed at her neck. The call of a siren.

"I didn't mean to...I just...*shit*." She growled when he pressed the tip of his canine teeth against her skin, which gave on one side.

A tiny drop of blood seeped along his lip. The reaction was immediate. Bjorn spread her feet wide with his, planted his heels solidly against the tiled floor then crouched lower until his cock nudged her sex. She stopped trying to fight him off.

"Unless I grant it to you, you won't bite me again." Then he stood.

Danielle squeezed her eyes shut, arched into him as he drove deep and hard, took her off the floor and impaled her to him. Suspended against his erection, she sucked her bottom lip in and groaned while Bjorn twisted his hips, stretched her taut and crushed her in ever-widening circular motions. A cry left Danielle then another, longer. His name came out garbled. When a long, plaintive moan tore out of her, Bjorn knew she was ready for his lesson.

"Will you bite me again without my permission?" he whispered in her ear.

As he pulled out and let her sink to the floor she shook her head, tried to twist her hips so he'd drive into her again. But he wouldn't. Not yet.

Bjorn released her hands so he could slide a finger in her. She was impossibly wet and hot. He yearned to fuck her again and again until she begged him to stop. He wanted her on her knees, on her back, straddling him. No matter. They'd try them all.

But first, hierarchy had to be established – seven-hundred-year-old vampire sire on top, day-old one underneath.

Rings of her impending orgasm clutched around him. But he wasn't ready to let her come. Mercilessly, he slid his finger in and out while his other hand grabbed her breast, pinched her nipple. He followed her grinding motions for a while, giving her feverish body some of what it yearned for, but when he could feel her about to lose it, Bjorn regretfully abandoned her pussy so he could force her down on her knees facing him. She was no longer offering any resistance. Because if she had, he'd probably be on his ass.

So the lesson was finally sinking in? A wave of pride and male dominance and heart-swelling warmth engulfed him. He knelt in front of her.

"You don't bite your sire except if it's been granted to you," he said, spreading her knees wide with his.

"You *wait* when he tells you to," he added, using his hand to rub her dripping sex back to front. Danielle mewled, let her head fall back and planted her hands far behind her ankles, effectively opening herself up for his taking. Bjorn grinned triumphantly. Lesson learned.

"And when your sire wants to hear his name, you scream it for him."

He scooped her up with one arm around her lower back and brought her up on his lap. Juices dribbled along his cock when he stabbed between her hips. His seed exploded out of him.

Like a battle cry, his name rang out in the shower stall.

Danielle's lungs emptied in quick successions as she cried out his name, each time more forceful than the last. A whip of fire lashed at her inside and out. Her vampiric nature searing her nerve endings with hypersensitivity until even the tiniest sensation assaulted her body, she hurtled into a downward spiral of ecstasy like a surfer lost in a monstrous wave. Then when she thought she could endure no more, the fire subsided, the wave collapsed. Danielle let Bjorn lower her gently down onto the floor. She sighed.

"My Athena."

The whispered name stabbed at her gut. He'd just called her by another woman's name. But instead of confronting him, the way she would've done any other time with any other man, Danielle just closed her eyes and willed the growing sadness away. The guy was seven hundred years old – he was allowed to have had a life before her. Even if it meant she wouldn't get to keep him for long. Some things she just couldn't control.

The bite came back to her. Strike two. She had one fuck up left then she'd be out.

Bjorn lay down beside her, leaned on an elbow. "So, what now?"

"Well, you don't waste any time."

"Life is too short to waste time."

Danielle stared, trying to see if he was laughing at her. *Life is short?* “Funny from a guy who was there when they invented the musket,” she replied, rolling onto her stomach.

Bjorn shook his head. A hint of a smile pulled his lips sideways. “No, actually the early musket was already invented. But I *did* see the first flushing toilet.”

She laughed before she could stifle it.

Bjorn barked a quick, hearty laugh and grabbed her thigh. “By Odin, I love your body.”

Danielle nodded in pretend accord. “Oh yeah. It’s very nice, all of it.”

He rolled his eyes. “Not you too. What is it with this century? Where—*when*—I come from, skinny wasn’t a good thing, and when your bones showed, you were dying.”

His reference to the past unsettled her for a split second. Would she live that long as well? Would she be around when soldiers like her—weaponized half-breed vampires—would be legions? When wars would last mere hours? She wondered if she’d live to see the colonization of Mars and if she would over the long years bury friend after friend? Her thoughts turned to him and that primal urge to protect him flared. What if she died before he did? Or worse...the other way around?

“You can’t think that far into the future,” he said.

Danielle closed her eyes so she could sever the visual link she had with him. Her right eye had been relaying a green-on-green report of his heat pattern and she couldn’t concentrate on anything else but his gently glowing dick. How the hell had he known what she was thinking about? Think that far into the future. *Did* she have a future? And did it include him? The weight of that last thought settled in the pit of her stomach. He was trying to let her off gently.

She snorted. “Vampires read minds too?”

She heard him take a deep breath. *Uh-ho*. He sounded like he was readying for either a very long speech—something she doubted from the stoic man—or he was about to share with her a piece of news that could break her heart.

“Look at me.”

So she could see the message before he transmitted? No. If he were blowing her off, he’d have to say it. She wouldn’t let him get the message across by body language. “Just say what you want to say.”

“Danielle,” he said, his voice much deeper, his tone hammer-hard. “Look at me.”

Acid green and aqua greeted her visual cortex in pixelated segments as she opened her eyes and stared at Bjorn.

“You’ll have to learn to take each day one at a time. If you don’t, you’ll end up dead or in an asylum, unable to feed for years on end. And believe me, you don’t want that to happen to you.”

“Oh because it did to you, right?”

His scowl deepened. "I once spent a decade strapped to a bed with a needle in my arm, yes. So I know, all right? And I don't want it to happen to you. I'll help, but it has to come from you."

The hunger already carved at her. She couldn't link two clear thoughts. Through the fog of pain, she snarled, "You'll come check on me a couple of times a century? That's nice of you."

Lashing out was the only way she knew how to deal with the snarl of emotions choking her up. She couldn't very well look him in the eye and declare her undying love—her *undead* love—for the guy! Anyway, she didn't love him per se. His blood flowed in her system, sending all kinds of false alarms to her nanofriends, making it look like she'd cry herself to sleep for weeks after he'd walk out of her life. Danielle Lavoie had dumped and *been* dumped enough times to spot the "let's be friend" pep talk *before* it actually happened.

She stood and stepped over his legs on her way out of the steam room. After grabbing a dark gray towel from a rolled pyramid and wrapping it around herself, she bent over the sink and turned the cold water on. After a few seconds, she drank the icy water in long gulps, right out of the spigot. But the thirst wouldn't go away. It wasn't that kind of thirst, he'd said. Shit, she'd have to live with this all her life?

Bjorn loomed over her when she straightened and made for the door.

"I wasn't finished," he said, wrapped his bear paw of a hand over her upper arm.

A slew of warning messages flashed across her digitized brain, sent powerful adrenaline shots down to her limbs and heart. Polymer-laced muscles twitched with the sudden influx of energy. A split second later, unable to abort the preset response, Danielle whirled around and knocked Bjorn's hand off her. His hand went flying high behind him and strained the thick muscles on his chest.

Her disproportionate reaction shocked her. But at the same time, a giddy sense of power engulfed her. She could beat the shit out of anyone, could take whatever she wanted and no one would be able to stop her.

"Don't ever touch me like that again," she threw over her shoulder as she stormed out of the bathroom. She expected Bjorn to pounce on her—perversely hoped for another lesson—but he never moved.

In the kitchen, she found the bags of clothes he'd bought for her, which she'd unceremoniously dumped on the floor so she could sniff around his house. Danielle sifted through their contents. He'd bought all these things for her with *his* money. Guilt and wounded pride needled her into action. Ripping tags off with her teeth, which worked like a charm for this, Danielle slipped on a pair of jeans that fit perfectly, a T-shirt at least a size too small and tennis shoes directly on her naked feet. He'd even bought a leather jacket. Black of course. Good taste too. She slipped it on, sniffed the animal hide under the chemicals and colors, and bared her brand-new fangs. After she repaid Bjorn, she'd set out on her own. No use tagging along behind a man who'd treat her like a baby sister.

Some clouds covered the bright autumn sun when she stepped outside and slammed the door behind her. Keeping her sensitive eyes downcast, she shoved her hands in her pockets and made her way down the street. The hunger burned low in her throat. She ached everywhere...even her teeth hurt and felt loose. Running her tongue over her upper teeth, Danielle grinned at a passerby and turned to see if he was looking at her.

He wasn't.

Anger and disappointment nearly made her tag him. She stopped herself. Bjorn's lesson still burned brightly. Lust flared. God, she missed him already. She wouldn't mind having him teach her something new every day. What she didn't need was someone helping her get in touch with her inner vampire. She hadn't given him much of a chance to explain. Then again, why would she have? He probably felt as relieved as anything to have had the problem taken off his lap.

Danielle spent the rest of the day meandering along Dijon's historical streets before happening on the one that lined the other side of the park with the foursome of attack geese. If it weren't for the trees, she would've been able to see Bjorn's house.

No, his *woman's* house.

Jealousy narrowed its shifty little eyes at her. She could be such a bitch sometimes. She sat on one of the benches and stared in the distance.

Dusk settled below the tree line. Still Danielle sat. A sense of "calm before the storm" tightened her muscles. Like she was waiting. A female jogger with a shiny purple suit ran past. Not very smart for a lone female jogger to be...

Danielle sat up straighter. Hell, she was doing the same, not being very smart, a lone female sitting on a park bench and all that.

What was she waiting for? Him? No, she couldn't sense anything coming from Bjorn or any hint that he was near. Would she if he did? Probably. Danielle crossed a leg over the other and angled her pelvis so she sat only on one cheek. Leaning her elbow against the backrest, she watched as the trees turned into dark, brooding shapes, the section of pond she could see into an inky trap while evening slipped to night and the air cooled noticeably. Then it hit her. She wasn't waiting. She was *baiting*.

The realization of what she was doing hit her like a fist in the solar plexus. The vampire half in her swelled in pride, saying *let the fuckers come*, just as the soldier half shrank at the tactical stupidity of such move. One didn't go looking for trouble! Utter recklessness, sheer idiocy. Only newbies with the common sense of a butter knife would make himself or herself a target. But she was, wasn't she? She wanted someone to come mess with her.

A particularly sharp pang of hunger made her grit her teeth. She had to feed again. This time though she'd use restraint. As much as she hated to admit it, Bjorn's lesson in self-control had sunk in. In every way. Danielle licked her dried lips. If she didn't move soon, she'd seriously consider drinking from that pond. The geese wouldn't be happy.

The thought made her smile. Danielle stood just as two men emerged up ahead on the sinuous trail. The pair sent her hypersensitive nerves in alarm overload. Trouble on legs. Yet instead of making a run for it, knowing she'd be out of their reach within seconds, Danielle chose to stay in their view, even slipped her thumbs in the back pockets of her jeans and walked up the path toward the main trail.

"Hey, how are you?" one of them asked, his dark little eyes going from her loose hair to her too-small white T-shirt under the opened jacket then down to her snug jeans.

The other man, much bigger and not bad-looking grinned as if he thought his companion was that funny cousin nobody liked to talk about. Body heat around their necks, armpits and crotches shone bright lime-green in her lens. They were both agitated.

Her threat analysis took a split second — *if it comes to it, get the big one first, go for his throat in case he's packing then I'll reverse my stance and kick the smaller one in the balls*. Her style had never been the fancy, martial art movie thing, more the dirty street fighting with anything and everything allowed. It wasn't pretty, it wouldn't win any demo contests, but it could put a guy out of order within seconds. *The whole point, right?*

Danielle pulled her thumbs out of her pockets. "I'm fine, guys, just taking a walk."

"Be careful. You never know these days," the big one said with a wink.

Ha.

Then two things went horribly wrong. One, the first pulled a gun and aimed it at her. Second, the big one smiled wide, showing a set of very sharp-looking canine teeth. Vampires.

Shit.

Chapter Six

Bjorn sat alone at the counter and toyed with his unfinished glass of wine. He usually enjoyed wine, savored every drop, and often shared it with friends and lovers alike. Vampires, unlike what superstitions and twisted historical reports maintained, didn't feed exclusively on blood. They could ingest most organic fluids like wine, juice or milk—which he abhorred—but nothing synthetic like colas or cocktails. In fact, he knew of some vampires who fed on people only when nothing else would satiate the thirst, whereas he chose human nectar instead of the less nourishing fluids most of the times, which didn't mean he lacked a palate for wine. White wine was his favorite by far, for its pale color and honeyed tang.

Tonight though, after Danielle's sudden departure, Bjorn barely tasted the golden liquid. He could've been drinking piss and not notice the difference.

He hadn't even tried to stop her. He could have. Easily. Well, maybe not *that* easily, but still. Yet he'd let her go without lifting a finger. Deep down inside he knew why. *Too much of a coward to make her stay.* Not because she might have kicked his ass—which she could have. Instead, he'd watched Danielle leave his life because had she refused to stay—after his asking—it would've crushed him. Why take chances, right?

With a snort of self-disgust, he toasted to his cowardice and drained his glass. Bjorn pushed the bottle of wine away and rolled his sore shoulders. But what a ride! He grinned in spite of his pain. Or because of it. She'd entered his life with thunder on her heels and had left it with a bang.

Rubbing his bare chest, Bjorn went to the dormant laptop and activated it. When the logo appeared, he typed his password and went on the Net to read the news. They were bound to have caused a stir in the little city, what with a man nearly decapitated. He clicked on his favorites and accessed the news site. Bjorn gasped.

"Dammit."

A large color picture in a column to the right with the sensational headline "Infectious Soldier Goes on Rampage—Kills Seven" drew his immediate attention. Danielle's stern expression in the military mug-shot-like photo played right along the article's angle. No doubt the brass had chosen it carefully. She *looked* dangerous.

Bjorn read the whole thing twice before the words could sink in. She was wanted for questioning, to say the least. She'd been seen leaving the scenes of four different murder sites in cities he knew she hadn't been in lately because she'd spent the night stuck in a Fiat with him. Liars. Military brass never changed.

He read on, shaking his head the entire time. Those who happened to spot her were to call a special hotline, not the police directly, who had transferred the investigation to the military powers. She was considered armed, extremely dangerous and unstable

because of the “disease” she carried. The virus was supposedly deadly to anyone who came in close contact.

“Close contact. Ha, the only true thing so far,” he snarled.

An earnest-looking specialist from the French *Centre des Maladies Contagieuses* urged people to stay away. And so on and so forth. The only thing missing was a price on her head. He didn’t doubt a second there was one. But nothing on him. Not even an “accomplice” or “getaway driver” tag or anything. Not that they could mention she was traveling with a seven-hundred-year-old vampire. Still, they had banked for public hysteria by having someone from the Contagious Diseases Center add credibility and implicit menace to their claims. He could well imagine the apocalyptic visions the CDC triggered in people’s psyche—military doctors in biohazard suits, quarantine tents, the whole deal. The best way to isolate and capture her.

With a long sigh, Bjorn leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling.

He’d been expecting something like this, although not to the degree it’d been taken. A mention in some newspapers, a missing person ad, *something*. But not this! Her bosses really wanted her back at all costs. Who were those seven people she’d supposedly killed? There *was* one, not mentioned in the news at that. They didn’t even mention the little village north where Danielle had fed.

Bjorn nodded in silent understanding. He’d seen it before. Her bosses wouldn’t want people to know exactly where she was or had done, they didn’t want journalists digging around, police officers asking questions about the bite mark. They wanted to portray her as a murderess, not a monster. Murderers made the headlines for a week, but monsters stayed in the public psyche for years. Her bosses wouldn’t want that.

Then, as the initial reaction of disbelief and shock faded, a sense of dread overwhelmed everything else. They didn’t need him anymore. Bjorn cursed. He’d been so arrogant to think they’d want more of his blood. Why would they when they could get *her*? She had the vampire blood, had survived full integration, thrived even, and embodied success for their project in all its frightening details. They knew she’d never work for them again. But they no longer needed her participation. They meant to catch her alive so she’d become the new donor. They’d drain *her* for her blood. Not him.

Bjorn slapped the laptop closed and muttered curses on his way to the bedroom. He realized with shock he’d spoken the old form of Norse, a language he hadn’t heard aloud in centuries.

He should’ve made her stay.

Should have forced her if need be.

If she died, it’d be because of him.

Should have...could have...if. Useless words.

If only for the selfish reason to not draw attention to himself, he bitterly regretted not convincing her to stay with him, at least until they’d figured a way to get out of France. Attention wasn’t good for a vampire, any vampire.

But as soon as the self-interested thought crossed his mind, Bjorn pushed it aside. He should've made her stay because he *wanted* her to stay. Hell, he missed her already.

Rummaging around his drawers, he found an old blue T-shirt he'd forgotten he had and pulled it on, followed by another turtleneck sweater, this one dark gray. Running his hands over his front, Bjorn's mind teased him with flashes of their lovemaking in the shower. Danielle's Viking warriorress body, her muscled thighs and shoulders. His cock stirred against the button-fly.

No need to get excited, he thought to himself. *We're not getting attention anytime soon.*

First, he'd need to find her. Then came the task of reeling her in...and if she didn't want to, this could be problematic. Bjorn laughed at himself. Problematic, such a pretty word – near impossible was more to the point. Painful. Loud.

Danielle *had* to get out of France. The porous, post-European Union borders could become hermetic in an instant to two fugitives, especially when one of them happened to make the news. Any form of transportation save the train or a car would be dangerous. Thank Odin for the Internet – he could buy tickets online. Then they could change Danielle's appearance and get on a train – no planes as they required passports – to somewhere far. But they needed to move fast. That very night.

He put together a quick backpack. Some clothes for him, some for her. Toiletries. Money...a lot of it. He loathed leaving his collection of wines behind, but he could always come back later or have his lawyers ship it to his new address. When the military commandos had jumped him, he'd been in France to sell this house anyway so all he'd have to do now was handle it by untraceable, well-paid proxy. He may even be able to convince Danielle to move in with him at least temporarily. With even more luck, she'd let him visit once in a while.

Another jolt of lust rushed through him, but his yearning for her body shifted subtly, the change imperceptible but to his old, old soul. Adrenaline, the excitement of their escape alone didn't explain the sudden feeling of urgency tightening his grip on the backpack's handles nor could it be responsible for the growing lump in his chest. He could deny it no more, could no longer belittle his attachment as mere lust. He was falling for her.

Without looking back, Bjorn rushed out of his house, which he'd owned for a very long time. He had to make a quick stop at the pharmacy first to get a few things then he would roam the city, sensing for her.

Bjorn walked as fast as he could without looking like he was chasing something...or that something chased him. Once he reached the pharmacy, he went directly to the hair products and made his choice. A while later, as he was walking out of the store, he looked up just in time to see a police car go slowly by. Both occupants scanned the sidewalks, obviously looking for someone in particular.

His heart beating madly, avoiding the car, Bjorn retraced his steps to the park and was rounding the corner when he stopped dead.

A faint notion tugged at the back of his brain, like an important message forgotten in the rush of delivery. The nylon creaked when he squeezed his fist tighter. The air smelled of cool autumn night and the sky looked painted with a madman's brush in purples and browns. Bjorn tilted his head slightly, sniffed the air. Trouble. Blood. Only one plausible cause for such combination...

"Danielle."

* * * * *

The one with the gun grinned like he'd just found a wad of cash lying around on the street. One of his fangs was crooked. In her right eye, his teeth gleamed like lime-colored icicles.

Adrenaline rushed through her system. She widened her stance. "So, guys, what do you want?"

She kept her gaze on the piece. A 9mm handgun, worn smooth at the handle. The thug's preferred choice of weapon. She wanted to laugh. The last gun she'd handled, which wasn't a week ago, would've made this thing look like the farce it was. Were it not for the fact that a *vampire* held it, she had half a mind to slap it out of the guy's hand and kick his ass just for insulting her. The little prick.

A spasm of hunger twisted her gut. Jesus, she better feed soon.

"What we want?" asked the big one. "You're funny. Didn't you see our teeth? Don't you know what we are?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, sure I saw the dentition. So what?"

That seemed to take some wind out of the smaller one's sail. He threw an oblique glance at his partner. The gun wavered ever so slightly in his hand. Heat patterns flared around his neck. "We're *vampires*, woman."

Danielle felt like saying, "Oooh *vampires*. I thought you were just some pair of morons with bad teeth."

Then a notion intruded upon her strategizing.

For fuck's sake...

They must not have realized she was a vampire too. Couldn't they sense her or something? Unless only a sire and his—his what?—"sired" shared a bond? Any other vampire wouldn't feel her coming, just as she hadn't known until they showed some teeth?

That meant she had the element of surprise on her side. The options swirled in her tactical mind. Submission strikes would be easy on Small Guy and he had the gun, but Big Guy, she'd have to be careful. He had more reach. Definitely number one when hurting time came around.

With Bjorn's blood and nanotech pumping her, Danielle could barely contain the energy, the sheer exhilaration consuming her. Her tongue itched, her gums too. She

realized her hands shook. Sweat beaded at her temples. Christ, she wanted to take on an army, leap over buildings, run and fuck and laugh. All at the same time.

Big Guy took a step forward, his expression still friendly even if he looked ready to pounce on her. "So *what?* You're one mouthy thing. I'll have fun ripping your throat out."

Ceramic joints creaked when Danielle tightened her fists. "Yeah, me too."

She bared her own fangs.

In her tactical night vision lens, both abruptly turned bright yellow-green with body heat.

She kicked the gun out of Small Guy's hand before he even blinked. Unfortunately, that left the big one with room and time to maneuver. He was on her within a split second, wrapping his thick arms around her waist and trying to sink his teeth in her neck. With a snarl, she kneed him in the groin, was rewarded with a tight hiss of pain.

"Get her," Big Guy snarled as he grabbed her leather jacket and tried to kick the legs from under her, partly succeeded.

Floundering to find purchase, Danielle gripped Small Guy's bomber jacket and felt it tear as she hoisted him up to her mouth. Baring her teeth, she sank them in his exposed throat. Blood flowed on her tongue, thick and hot.

"She's biting me!" he hollered, clawing at her arm.

Pain flared in her lower back when Big Guy punched her. Heat from the blow spread to her entire back. He could *hit*. She dropped the other one and turned on Big Guy. A wicked set of canine teeth were coming at her fast. Danielle raised her arm and barely avoided having her throat ripped open. Fangs shredded the leather and sliced her skin. She pushed him back.

In their struggle they'd moved closer to the pond. Out of the corner of her lens, she spotted Small Guy crouch and run his hands around on the ground. The gun.

Polymer-laced muscles screaming against the sudden surge of energy, she closed an iron fist over the big one's collar of his leather jacket and twisted. He punched her in the stomach. The hit barely registered against the biosilk covering her vulnerable abdominal cavity. He must have sensed the difference as well because for a split second he froze and stared at her, disbelief on his face.

She was about to dispatch Big Guy when he used his much greater bulk and shoved her back. Danielle flew several meters up and back, landed squarely in the pond amid a geyser of foam and ripped-out flora. Glacial water seeped in her mouth, flowed up her nose. Sputtering, sinking down to her thighs in the cold sludge, she charged back up the bank.

Big Guy never had time to raise his hand as she reached him impossibly fast and spun him around. His skin shredded under the force of her bite. His life force spurted out rhythmically with much more intensity than she'd expected. Danielle hurriedly fed as he slumped against her.

A loud bang ripped the night. Water exploded upward in a thin jet right by her leg.

Up on the bank, the other vampire was aiming again. The little shit was firing at her!

Another shot rang out and the big vampire's body jerked. God, the guy was firing through his friend to get at her.

Yet he was too heavy for her to use as shield. She had to let him go. At the risk of damaging her articulations, Danielle jerked back, nanotech firing warnings at her brain, then slewed to her left and avoided another bullet. This one zipped past her shoulder.

Danielle leaped back over to her right thinking that if she could just get back on the bank, she'd be able to move quicker. Somewhere in the distance, she heard a siren. The police would be here any moment. Damn.

His bomber jacket covered in bright green blood, Small Guy took aim again. Danielle whirled, hoping to clear the latest shot again.

A large pair of hands reached out from behind the vampire and wrapped themselves around his shoulders. A blond head appeared and sank against his neck. He screamed, his legs buckling.

Bjorn.

In her lens, bright lemonade-green blood dribbled down the smaller vampire's front. She rushed out of the freezing water and took a few tentative steps toward the bank. Nanotech still fired warnings at her but her vampire half, her instinctive half, took over and doused her system with a growing sense of calm. Stepping around the large vampire floating facedown in the pond she approached, panting, as Bjorn let Small Guy slump down at his feet.

"Follow me," Bjorn said curtly, turning around and retrieving a backpack from against a tree.

Danielle did, dread and embarrassment piercing her budding excitement. He was saving her ass after she'd made a mess of things. Again.

The siren's wail intensified. Tiny flashes of blue light announced the emergency crew's immediate arrival. Bjorn began to run, Danielle hot on his heels. They remained among the trees, avoiding the paths and circumvented the pond to the farthest part of the park where they veered sharply up along a narrow alley, the entire time neither spoke a word.

A low portico to their left afforded ample cover and Bjorn rushed into it. When he turned toward her, his face burned bright yellow. Not good. He looked like a wild-haired, pixelated demon.

"What the *hell* were you thinking?"

His voice filled the enclosed space, pressed in against her eardrums. She slipped her thumbs inside the back pockets of her jeans and stared at the wall.

"Look," she began, "I fucked up. I thought I could take on the world."

Bjorn rushed at her and looked as if he meant to grab her by the shoulders but seemed to rethink his response and instead balled two very large, shaking fists. "Bullets *can* kill us, woman. And they don't even need to be silver."

"I've taken care of myself all my life, Bjorn. I don't need a baby-sitter."

"A baby-sitter?" he snarled. "No, what you need is a fucking leash. You have to learn to control the hunger or it will control you. And believe me, you don't want that."

The words sliced right across her heart. She stared guns – no, *bazookas* – at him then shrugged. "Fine then, if I'm too dangerous to be around, leave. I'm not keeping you."

He shook his head emphatically. "Oh no, you're not going to jettison me that easily. You're not in this alone anymore. I'm stuck in this mess with you, whether you like it or not."

"Get *unstuck*."

He threw his hands up and stalked back and forth in front of her. "You're just impossible! Your bosses put your picture on the news. You're a wanted killer. A *killer*, Danielle. And now this..." Bjorn stopped pacing, stared at her hard then stood right in front of her. "*Faen heller*, Danielle, you could've been killed."

Anger overwhelmed her senses. "What do you care!" she yelled.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd yelled for real, not just to scare the younger soldiers. And Danielle discovered that once she'd started, she couldn't stop. Like a dam had been breached. She stabbed an accusing index finger into his chest.

"Why don't you go back to your *woman* and both of you can live happily ever after? Don't bother with me, big guy, I can take care of myself!"

"What woman?" he demanded, putting his fists on his hips and cocking his head to one side. "What are you talking about? I just came here to sell my house, dammit, so I can move back north, to the sea."

Tears intruded upon her rage and Danielle angrily knuckled them away. "Don't you change the subject!"

Bjorn cursed. "*WHAT WOMAN?*"

"The one whose name you were moaning when you were fucking me."

Cooler aqua and turquoise replaced the bright yellow-green, descended on his face in increments. His eyes flared wide. "*What?*"

To her eternal frustration, he looked sincere. So he was a good liar, had had plenty of time to practice...so what?

"I don't know, Alana, Ariana, A-something. You can't remember her name either? That's rich."

He shook his head, a smirk widening. A spike of anger made her want to punch the silly grin off his face. Never mind the whole sire thing and her urge to protect him. What she wanted right then was kick his ass...and pinch it, lick it. Kiss his soft mouth...

Danielle cursed inwardly. "Don't you laugh at me, Bjorn. Don't you dare!"

He rolled his eyes heavenward. "You're just not getting this, are you?"

"Obviously, I don't. Care to share the joke with the rest of the class?"

"A-the-na," Bjorn said, now beaming. "Athena...as in the Greek goddess of war."

Okay...she wasn't too sure just how to take this. He fantasized about a Greek goddess while he made love to real women...? Would she lose her mind too when she lived to be seven hundred years old? Maybe she'd have wet dreams about Ares. Hey, why not Zeus? Go for gold, right.

He sobered. "Athena is always portrayed as a tall, strong woman with dark hair. All her statues show her with that 'don't mess with the lady' attitude. That's what you reminded me of when I first saw you."

As abruptly as anger had surfaced, it dissipated and left behind a mixed stew of emotions ranging from embarrassment to relief and quite a bit of arousal. "So, Athana, that's me, right, not your other woman."

"*Athena*. Yes, she's you. What other woman?" He drew near, his entire countenance changing. "Are you jealous?"

Inside her too-small wet T-shirt, her nipples had hardened into pebbles. She shivered. "Har-har. Funny. The woman whose name the house is under. *That* other woman."

"I said the house is under a woman's name. I didn't say it is or ever was owned by a woman." Bjorn picked the lapel of her leather jacket and pulled it outward slightly. His gaze fell to her breasts. "Mm. I don't have a woman...well, I'm not sure if I do."

Teasingly, she left her thumbs in her back pockets, knowing it accentuated her breasts as they strained under the thin layer of cotton, perversely hoping it gave him all sorts of ideas. Another shiver raced down her shoulders and arms. His lesson came back to her mind in all its glorious detail. Some ride!

"Would you like to have one?" she asked offhandedly.

The thought crossed her about the very real plausibility of him saying no. What if he didn't want a woman, just casual sex once in a while? Could she settle for that? A quick scan of his pixelated, green-and-green face in her lens confirmed her suspicions – no, she wouldn't settle for casual sex. She wanted, for the first time in her thirty-four years, to have a man by her side every night, and have him be there when she woke.

What she felt wasn't the blazing, all-consuming love books and movies waffled about. Instead with her, it was a slow heat that burned low in her heart, the kind that could withstand anything, that could last a long, long time. She wanted Bjorn for the entire journey, not just for a quick layover.

Her heartbeat increased dramatically, something not even Project Immortalis' doctors could achieve. And she wasn't even moving.

"I do want a woman. Not just *any* one, but *the* one."

The backpack made a ruffling sound when he dropped it and wrapped his hands behind her butt and squeezed it hard. Lifting her up against him, he bent down and let

his mouth rest against hers. "But she'd have to want me back just as hard, just as long. Can she do that?"

"She can."

Danielle kissed him.

Her hands shook as she snaked them under his sweater and along his soft flanks. Broad muscles rippled under her fingers when he scooped her up by the butt cheeks and pulled her hard against him. A hard lump pressing against her belly broadcasted his growing excitement.

"So where are we going now, all packed? *If* I'm coming with you, of course."

"*If* you're coming? Unless you want me to tie you up and carry you the whole way, you'd *better* come with me." His breath smelled of mouthwash. "I booked tickets to my birth country Norway. Have you ever seen the North Sea?"

She shook her head. "When do we leave?"

Beaming now, Bjorn checked his watch. "At eleven-thirty, that's less than an hour away." He leaned over so his lips touched hers. His tongue teased her mouth, retreated then flicked out again.

She growled with exhilaration. "Plenty of time."

One by one she undid the buttons holding his thick member captive and slid her hand into the warm recess she'd created. Hot and burning, his cock filled her fist as she heaved it out. She meant to go down on one knee and fill her mouth with him but Bjorn prevented her.

"No time," he said, his tone urgent and tight. He tugged her T-shirt up, his teeth flashing as he uncovered an aching nipple.

Danielle groaned when he raked his teeth along the cleft between her breasts. Displaying impressive self-knowledge of his strength, Bjorn pressed just hard enough to cause her skin to pebble, but not enough to actually pierce it. This was what she'd intended to do back in the steam room, but she'd succumbed to the temptation and bit him instead. She wouldn't be doing *that* again. Or maybe she would...

When Bjorn urgently tugged at the zipper of her jeans, she stopped writhing against him so he could get it down. His hand felt hot and demanding, his fingers assertive as he parted her and slid in. A moan escaped Danielle. She hadn't realized she was so wet. Her clit throbbed achingly. She wanted him now.

He nibbled her lobe. "We have to be quick."

With a nod, she yanked his jeans down, did the same for hers. The good thing about not wearing underwear...it made sex quick and easy, especially if a couple were being hounded by the police.

Grinning wide, Bjorn cradled his thick member as he guided it up to her soaked cleft. Pure thrill tingled along her spine. This was going to be good. Her sex already clenched in anticipation of the brutal pounding it'd soon get.

"Are you –?"

The loud wail of a siren drowned the rest of his words. Both of them froze in the act, the tip of his shaft just barely nudging her swollen lips, teasing mercilessly. Bjorn looked at her. Frustration reduced his mouth to a thin line.

He didn't need to say a word. Danielle sighed. "Let's get the hell out of here."

As they pulled their respective garments back in place another siren sounded somewhere in the distance, followed by another. Cursing under her breath, she followed Bjorn back out of the portico and up along the rest of the narrow alley. They emerged on a wider street where lights glowed faintly above deserted sidewalks and empty terraces with rattan chairs piled high.

"There," he motioned across the street, to a sign reading "*Gare*" with a yellow arrow against a green background. The contrast created a bright blotch in her lens.

Trying to look as inconspicuous as they could, they hurried down the sidewalk and looked around as they began to cross the street.

A subtle feeling at the back of her head tightened her walk, accelerated her pulse. She knew that feeling, remembered its contour clearly, but couldn't pinpoint its core. Then another layer joined the first—alarm bells went off in her mechanized brain as imminent threat shifted from her to something else. *Someone* else. Bjorn.

Direct threat – assessed.

Danger – deemed imminent.

Counteroffensive measures – appointed.

Throughout her memory bank, files containing combat training and flowcharts zipped in and out of the root directory—what action to be taken, when and under what circumstances. How could O'Leary have caught up to her? They were bound to catch up to her sometime, but she'd just hoped it wouldn't have been so damn soon.

Adrenaline levels spiked as she caught, thanks to her enhanced hearing, a very distinct noise, one she'd heard for years as she'd performed the action herself—the sound of a sniper rifle being delicately cocked. *Don't look up, don't let them know you heard it.*

She grabbed Bjorn's arm and pretended to be the amorous couple. In his ear, she murmured "You wouldn't have a gun in that bag, by any chance?"

He shook his head no, kissed the top of her head. "I heard it too."

Only twenty paces before they reached the other side of the street. She forced a grin. "When I tell you to."

Bjorn coughed, made to reach for his bag.

"NOW!"

Both exploded onward as they sprinted across the street. A few centimeters behind them, a string of tiny eruptions blistered the cobbles with tiny pockmarks. Only the puff-puff of the sniper-silenced rifle indicated someone was firing at them. Danielle covered her head with a hand as they charged up against the relative safety of the

building and under a stone bridge spanning the street. More shots tagged their journey, some of them extremely close. Shit.

The snipers didn't mean to kill, otherwise Danielle and Bjorn would both be dead. She'd been part of that team long enough to realize they were missing on purpose. She was being herded. Like a sheep to slaughter.

A street to their left looked deceptively open, wide enough for them both to run abreast. Very convenient. Too convenient. O'Leary's men wanted her to go this way. Well, she wasn't following orders anymore, was she?

"Stay with me," she snarled as she doubled her pace, her arms becoming a blur as she pumped them with all she had.

By her side, Bjorn managed to keep up but panted hard. To her right, she spotted the train station gleaming chrome and glass between a row of parking posts and cement booths. Her razor-sharp vision focused on a large digital clock mounted above one of the posts. 23:12 gleamed blood red. Nothing could stop a French train, not even police. If they could board it, they'd be safe for a while. Until the next stop when the station would be crawling with soldiers. But she'd deal with that when—if—she got there.

Keeping to a zigzag pattern, they leaped from booth to booth, stopping only long enough between each to get their bearings as they made their way to the train station, a tantalizing twenty meters away. Danielle cleared the parking lot, swept with her gaze for any sign of body heat but found none.

Bright neon light greeted them as they burst out onto the cement platform. Only a handful of people were about. Flopping her jacket collar higher so it hid her hair, Danielle scanned the numbers. Three trains were coming in within a minute of each other. Perfect.

"Which one's ours?"

Bjorn scanned the station with his gaze. "Number four, train seven-four-three-one."

A deep rumble announced the first train's arrival. Platform five.

"Let's go," she urged, tugging on his sleeve.

With a knowing grin, Bjorn preceded her to the underground stairs, taking them four by four. Her new tennis shoes squeaked as she sprinted down the corridor, past large yellow ticket machines plastered with provocative posters of women and perfume. Up the stairs on the other side, around a corner, then they emerged onto platform five just as the train stopped. A handful of people already waited to get on. The doors slid apart. A group of young women spilled out, noisily lugging backpacks. A small dog yapped loudly behind them.

Danielle got on then ran the deserted aisle down to the next wagon. Hermetic doors swooshed outward to let her pass.

"Get down."

The weight of Bjorn's hand between her shoulder blades dropped Danielle like a stone.

"They're right outside," he went on, crouched below the backrest's edge. "Keep going."

Like a Russian dancer, she bounced forward, crouched very low, until she reached another wagon. Behind them, someone opened the door leading up to the second level. A pair of startled attendants skidded to a halt. Their gazes zeroed in on Danielle. Before she could stop him, one reached to his belt and flicked his two-way radio on.

"C'est elle," he said hurriedly. "C'est la femme qui est recherchée!"

Yeah, that'd be me, the "wanted woman".

Shit.

Chapter Seven

Danielle was reaching up to grab his radio and yank it off his belt when a small, dry detonation snapped not far behind. The attendant jerked, blood spreading on his gray uniform shirt. His colleague whirled around, brought his own radio up to his mouth but never had time to use it. Another shot, this one hitting its target directly between the eyes. Blood and brain matter sprayed the top of the backrests closest to him. He joined his companion on the floor. At the other end of the wagon, a soldier in black uniform and balaclava lithely took position behind a seat and aimed at them.

“Quickly!”

Bjorn pulled her by the collar and backpedaled toward the narrow staircase leading up. Stepping over the two dead attendants, Bjorn clawed up to the train’s second level and rushed to a small niche along the outside wall where the symbol of an emergency stop—a black stick person running toward a red rectangle—glistened behind a thermoplastic panel.

A lurch announced the train was leaving. Danielle cursed. This was supposed to be their decoy, not the train they would ride for real. She didn’t even know where it was going.

“We need to get off this thing before our real train leaves.” He checked his silver and gold watch. “We have four minutes at the most.” He reached for the emergency stop.

“If we trigger that thing, the train will stop and they’ll know we’re no longer on it.” Danielle eyed the emergency trapdoor leading to the outside and a twelve-foot drop to the concrete platform. She could probably bust it open without triggering the emergency stop, which only worked one time out of two anyway. Maybe they’d get lucky.

A well-aimed kick to the hinges took the thing squarely off. Cheap stuff this. Bjorn caught the trapdoor before it clattered to the ground and warned the soldier down below. Night sky poked in through the square. No siren ripped the air. So luck was on her side for once.

“Come on,” she said, pulling herself up into the opening then out.

Good thing the train wasn’t going fast yet. She jumped out of the moving train and onto the platform. She landed both feet together and rolled once, coming up crouched and ready to kick butt.

Bjorn’s blond head poked through the opening before he too squeezed himself out then off the train. He landed heavily, his thick, muscled legs absorbing the impact. God

he looked good this way, slightly bent over, his arms splayed out for balance, his hair in his face. Desire tightened her belly.

So far, so good, she told herself as they ran across the platform, retraced their steps back underground to number four. The train was already coming into the station when they reached the boarding area, walking along the brick wall and scanning the place. Only a handful of passengers milled about. A couple, two lone men and a family with a German Shepherd.

"Let's climb in only when the doors are closing," Bjorn said, his gaze never resting more than a second on the same spot.

Danielle agreed with a nod. They made quite the team. Affection for her companion—her sire—flared and didn't do any good calming her lust either. She'd give anything to impale herself on him again. She shook her head. *Focus*.

With minutes ticking away like molasses, she watched for signs of trouble but detected none. The platform was soon deserted as the last of the passengers boarded the night train to Hamburg. A whistle announced the train's imminent departure. The doors were closing.

Danielle burst forward, grabbed one of the doors just as it was meeting its twin in the middle. She forced it back, but only by a few centimeters so the sensors wouldn't pick it up and open all the doors. After squeezing in, she held it for Bjorn who had to walk fast to keep up with the train's momentum. Finally, both knelt by the doors so no one would see them from outside through the glass upper panel.

"I think we made it," Danielle said, looking around the empty wagon.

Bjorn only shrugged. "I don't know. I hope."

They crossed several empty wagons on their way to the first-class section—Bjorn had splurged on their getaway. While Danielle pretended to tie her shoe, the attendant punched Bjorn's tickets then moved on without a word. Finally, their compartment came up. Bjorn slid the door so she could get in first. The beds were already pulled down from the wall and setup for their occupants. Nothing beat first class.

"Which bed do you want?" he asked, dropping the backpack and peeking inside their tiny bathroom.

Danielle leaned back against the door and locked it. "I'll take whichever one you take."

His crooked smile mirrored her own as he approached, his outstretched hands touching both sides of their compartment.

"Quite the wingspan you have," she remarked, hooking her thumbs in her back pockets and leaning her head against the door.

"How long until we reach Hamburg?"

Bjorn curled his spine so his face hovered a hair away from Danielle's. "Six hours and thirty-two minutes."

She laughed. "Precise. How about we invest the change to get a shower then keep the six hours to get dirty again."

Now it was his turn to laugh. "I thought you had no sense of humor. Good idea. I stink."

She sneaked under one of his arms and peeked in the bathroom. "Okay, we have to fly solo for this mission. And I'm going first. Beauty over age and all that."

His slap on her butt stung like hell and made her wish for more. "Not yet. There's something we must do first."

After rummaging in his backpack, Bjorn sat on one of the beds and began to scrupulously read the back of a hair-color box—some blonde bombshell whipping her long hair back.

Danielle snorted. "I never would've guessed."

"It's not for me, it's for you."

He beamed when Danielle snorted again, taking the box and sniffing at it disdainfully. The forty-kilo nymph looked like she was having a good time, had the whole half-smile, languorous-eyes thing going.

"I'm not blonde material."

"You'll be now," he replied, taking the box back and opening it. "I've done it several times. I know how it works."

After she took her jacket off, she sat on the floor between Bjorn's feet. As he tried to wrestle his bear paws into the tiny plastic gloves, she crossed her legs and waited. After a curse in a language she couldn't recognize, the gloves went flying across the cabin where one stuck to the bathroom wall. When he mixed the bottles, a reek like an entire drum of toxic waste had been dumped in the compartment filled the enclosed space.

"Argh," she said, clamping a hand over her mouth and nose. "That stinks."

"You have to suffer to be beautiful," Bjorn replied absently as he massaged the white cream into her hair. Jesus, it burned.

"We have to wait forty minutes," he announced before going to the bathroom to wash his hands. His watch beeped when he set the alarm.

Danielle sat on the bed. "Is it supposed to burn?"

He nodded, looking like he was having way too much fun with this whole thing. His blue eyes sparkled.

Silence settled in the compartment. Danielle crossed her ankle over her knee and picked at the hem of her jeans, occasionally glancing at him as he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. An impressive hump at the juncture of his thighs caught her eyes right away. She shifted uncomfortably. God, she wanted him.

"Control, Danielle," Bjorn said without opening his eyes. A smirk played at the corner of his mouth.

"You're lucky I have a chemical spill to deal with, otherwise you'd be peeling me off you with a scraper."

The urge to touch her hair and scratch her head forced Danielle to sit on her hands. She was getting bored and restless. "So," she said, picking her words as she went. "Why are we going to Norway?"

"One, they don't have extradition laws with France. Two, I like it there, so I thought you might too. It's clean and big."

"I like big."

He ignored her not-so-subtle remark.

"How long has it been since you've been back home?" Danielle was asking just for the pleasure of hearing his voice, as the feeling of "home" had never been a big thing for her. She'd joined the military right after school. Had he ever been married, she wondered. Kids?

"I go back as often as I can."

"Ever been married?" *Oooh, Danielle, subtle.*

He grinned. "Yes, actually. Twice. Unless you were a man of the cloth or a knight, you pretty much had to marry to avoid questions. My first wife died quite young. Pneumonia. The second died at the venerable age of fifty-two...well, venerable back in the fourteen hundreds."

"Did they know...? Well, I guess they figured it out, the teeth, you know." The shock those poor women must have had.

"Not Aula, the first one, but Ingunn did. She was clever that one, and open-minded too. Remember it was back when deaf people were burned at the stake. I offered to move out so no one would notice how little I aged while she became older and gray. She wouldn't have it. So I stayed until she passed on. It was the least I could do."

Danielle tried not to be jealous. For God's sake, being jealous of a woman dead hundreds of years! She ventured a quick peek at him and caught him smirking. "What?"

"I didn't love her in the sense you're thinking about. I was comfortable, and knew that my secret was safe with her. You need that, someone to watch your back. You can't always do it all alone."

No, you can't, Danielle mentally agreed.

He closed his eyes again.

Danielle spent a minute or so trying to picture him in medieval clothes. He'd look damn good in armor, she was sure of it. Did he used to wear a horned hat? *And I bet he had a big sword.* A snort of laughter betrayed her. "Hey, I forgot to ask, how come you speak Chinese?"

"Cantonese," Bjorn replied. He shrugged. "I lived there for about ten years when Hong-Kong passed to the English. It's nice there, you'd like it."

"Is China clean and *big*?"

This time he did react to her double-entendre. Bjorn opened an eye. "Yes, it's very big." He straightened just as his watch beeped. "Saved by the bell."

While he helped keep her T-shirt in place, Danielle rinsed the foul-smelling mixture from her hair. She could see the ends of it, undeniably blonde, bordering on the platinum. "This is a lot lighter than I expected."

She took a look at her new self in the mirror and sniggered. Bjorn stood behind her, his head not fitting in the mirror so all she saw were his shoulders and arms, which he wrapped around her shoulders.

"It suits you. You'll fit right in when we get to Christiana."

"Where?"

"Oslo," he replied, gathering the empty color bottles and cramming them in the box, which he returned to the plastic bag and into his backpack. "It used to be called Christiana...a long time ago. I keep forgetting it changed names."

Giving her the most lascivious look ever, he kissed the air and closed the door so she could take a shower.

Danielle shook her head and smiled to her blonde reflection. "If they could see me now."

Taking a shower in a train was a feat in gymnastics at the best of times, even in first class. But for someone who stood taller than the average twelve year old, this was just ridiculous. She should've used one of the "lower" class showers. At least the toilet wouldn't have been right there behind her knees. Danielle bumped her elbows and hips so many times she stopped muttering curses at the many protuberances and after a while just took the abuse stoically. What waited for her on the other side of the flimsy door more than compensated for the discomfort.

After she was done, she used liberal amounts of the lotion provided for her by the train company and stepped out of the bathroom.

She couldn't even open the door all the way for Bjorn stood right there in the embrasure looking like the predator he could be. His gaze left a tight, hot wake as it went down her naked body.

"The things I'm going to do to you..." he snarled, his hands going for her hips.

Danielle twisted away and out of his reach. "Shower. You stink."

Muttering under his breath, Bjorn created a quiver in the doorframe when he snapped it closed. The sound of water on at maximum made her smile. She was sitting on the bed when the door opened again and he stalked out.

She raised her chin. "You sure you didn't miss a spot?"

Water still beaded from his skin, dripped from his hair. "Come *here*."

Silhouetted against the backlight of the bathroom, his massive frame reminded Danielle of oak trees—ancient, steady. A jab of lust tightened her belly and sex at the sight of his erection hanging heavy between his muscled thighs and at the way the

drops of waters snaked down his muscled figure. In her right eye, they resembled tiny lime-green diamonds. She vowed to lick every single one of them.

A bit of soap still clung to his unshaven neck as he wrapped his thick arms around her shoulders and squeezed hard. "I'll kill anyone who hurts you, Danielle, I swear it. I'll rip open their throat and feed on their blood while they're still conscious and watching."

A shiver made the fine hair on her legs stand up. She believed every word. "I don't think it'll come to that."

Bjorn pulled away and stared hard at her. "But if it does, I want you to know I'll kill for you, and would gladly die as well."

The usually clear azure eyes darkened to stormy gray with the intensity of his pledge. A tremor grew at his cleft chin then rose to his bottom lip. Danielle realized he was shaking, which caused water droplets to glide down locks of his hair and fall on his wide shoulders. Was he *crying*?

Nobody had ever said anything like that to her and it left her with a mixed bag of feelings. Pride, fear, affection and alarm—they all filled her gut in rapid succession, until the first came back and the whole thing started again. A Ferris wheel of emotions gone out of control, one which wouldn't stop.

"No, no, no." She shook her head, still shocked to see blonde strands on her shoulders. "Don't talk like that. There won't be any seven-hundred-years-old vampires dying on my watch. Now," she added, snaking her hands down and pinching his delicious butt. "What were all those things you wanted to do to me?"

She watched the moment of his deep anguish fading, in the way his eyes cleared, his lips parted, and how his hands felt smooth and deliberate on either side of her face. He kissed her softly.

"You're special to me, Danielle."

His accent and fangs made the word sound like "shpayshial".

"Show me how special," she retorted as she pressed herself against his chest and thighs.

He started slow, as if he were afraid she'd break or disappear in a puff of smoke, then little by little his mouth and hands grew more demanding until he squeezed and rubbed her skin enough to create heat patterns in her lens.

He sucked her bottom lip into his mouth, nibbled it, bared his teeth while he held it trapped before releasing it and repeating the process with her upper lip. The slightly bitter taste of soap made her salivate as she licked his throat, paying particular attention to the spot where his jugular pulsed under her lips. He froze when she let her canine teeth graze lightly against his skin.

"It's my turn to teach you something about control," she murmured in his ear.

Bjorn pulled away to stare at her as she grabbed his hand and planted it firmly against the wall. She did the same for his other hand. His palms left acid-green heat marks on the vinyl wallpaper.

"If you're so good at controlling yourself, you're going to stay like this until I tell you otherwise."

"I can't move?"

"No."

Bjorn looked up at the ceiling—which wasn't very far above his head—and muttered something in what she assumed was Norwegian.

"The same to you."

A feral smile curled his upper lip. The sight of those gleaming fangs nearly made her forget she wanted to take this slow, meant to teach him a thing or two about taking charge and self-discipline, give that vampire a lesson he wouldn't soon forget. With any luck, he'd have a lesson for *her* as well. The prospect made her lick her lips.

While he watched her like a hawk, she circled him and stood behind his back, forced his head forward when he made to turn so he could follow her progress.

Her tongue began a slow, torturous journey from the nape of his strong neck down his muscled, V-shaped back, his flanks along which beads of water still glistened then farther at the dawn of his round cheeks—a journey that crystallized her opinion he had the nicest ass she'd ever seen in her life. Just tight enough, but with some meat she could grab. Glorious.

A muscle twitched behind his thigh.

"Too much for you?" she asked teasingly, flicking her tongue at the juncture of his cheeks.

"Do your worst, *Madame*."

Do her worst, huh?

From behind him, Danielle slid an arm right up between his thighs and cupped his cock. A hiss announced she was doing good work. While pumping him slowly, she resumed her teasing path and nibbled the back of his thighs and calves, paying particular attention to the thin, sensitive skin at the crook of his knees. While she crouched down at his feet she relinquished his cock, circled back in front of him before straightening slowly, working with her tongue and lips until she had reached his meaty cock, which hung low between his broad thighs. A glistening sheen covered the glans. With a grin she wolfed it down. No ifs, buts or whys.

Bjorn exhaled a long breath. "*Ah mi Gud...*"

She didn't speak Norwegian but she got that one.

Danielle spotted one of his hands beginning to slide lower on the wall, leaving in its wake an acid-green heat mark that gradually dissipated as it reached ambient temperature. His belly flexed with spasms.

Pulling away, she looked up to see he had his head bent back. "You can't move, remember? Put that back where I placed it."

A growl rumbled in his chest but he planted his hand higher on the wall. "You wicked woman..."

The rest of his sentence died in his throat as she sheathed his cock in her throat again. She gave Bjorn her most enthusiastic performance. His testicles received the same treatment as she sucked and licked them into tight balls jolting instinctively with her handling. Violent shudders shook Bjorn's thighs and pectorals. He was fighting it. She had to give him credit. Any other guy would've exploded by now.

Knowing when to quit ahead, Danielle released his phallus before she had to pick Bjorn up off the floor. A thought crossed her mind. She'd tried it a couple of years ago and only ended up laughing too hard to keep going, but perhaps it'd work with Bjorn. They had time. And she felt like trying something new.

"Don't you move a muscle," she warned as she stood and backed a step. "All you get to do is watch. You hear?"

His gaze riveted to hers, Danielle placed a hand over his shoulder and used it to step on the parallel beds, one foot on each, and straightened until she stood a bit taller than Bjorn, both legs spread wide. From this vantage point with her breasts practically right in his face, he looked even better. His blond hair looked like silk from up there. And his face, well, oh my. All that maleness shaking for her made her feel beautiful and powerful and ready to give one hell of a show. She really *did* feel like that Greek goddess now...whatever her name was. A-something. Ariana?

"You move a single muscle on that gorgeous body and show's over."

He nodded slowly, his penetrating gaze on her face, his hands now balled into fists, and she thought he really, *really* looked like a predator ready to pounce. Not that she'd mind. Only she wanted to show him a thing or two first.

As she flipped some of that white-gold-colored hair—she was a *blonde*—over her face and neck, Danielle let one hand go down to her flank, slowly, lightly, the pads of her fingers barely touching. In her lens, her goose-bumped skin looked pebbled with tiny, pale green dots.

"Do you like to watch?"

A pair of gleaming, baby jalapeno-sized fangs answered her.

Following the train's movement, Danielle began to rock slightly side to side, her hand reaching down lower between her thighs and cupping her sex. Her other hand she wrapped around his neck to steady herself.

Using three fingers to part her lips, she slid one over her throbbing clit and circled a few times. His burning gaze slid along her neck, breasts and belly then down to her hand. She could swear she actually felt it rake on her skin the entire way down.

Her juices seeped between her fingers and she rubbed them around her crease before going back to her clit and beginning a slow rub. Her toes dug in the mattresses. She doubted she could come like this, standing up spread-eagle, but it'd be close.

She leaned in close to Bjorn's face, very close. "Enjoying the show?"

Looking back up at her face, he demonstrated just how much he was enjoying by licking his upper lip devilishly slow from one corner to the opposite. The sight gave her chills of pleasure. That tongue...she was going to get it up her pussy if she had to tie him down first.

Inching closer still, she stopped only when she could feel his body heat on her skin. A mere centimeter separated them. Oh but he was struggling now. On either wall, his fists clenched and unclenched sporadically. His panting soon filled the tiny compartment.

Taking the tease act to the next level, Danielle allowed her breasts to come within a hair of his mouth but retreated at the last second, leaving him with his lips parted over thin air.

"Would you like a taste?"

"Danielle." Her name sounded like a warning.

She smiled triumphantly. Self-control, huh?

"So," she said, leaning over his shoulder and flicking his lobe. "Would you?"

"Yes."

"Just a taste, Bjorn, no more."

She let him suck at her breast hard enough to make her toes curl up. After a few seconds she pulled away, achy and satisfied. Her hand against her pussy worked harder now and produced tiny but sharp little twinges of pleasure. She hissed between her teeth when the urge to impale herself against him nearly overwhelmed her. But she held on.

"Fuck, man, you make me so wet," she snarled, giving her clit a fierce stroke.

He closed his eyes briefly, as if to draw inner strength from somewhere deep within him. "You've no idea how close you are to getting in trouble."

Danielle snorted. "Am I?"

A pronounced lurch in the train made Danielle lose her balance and lean forward against Bjorn, yet she still stood on the beds on either side of the tiny cabin. His mouth avidly captured a nipple, which he sucked hard. But she quickly regained her equilibrium and pushed out at arm's length.

"Oh you moved," she murmured in false sadness, sliding her finger over her drenched cleft. She was wet enough to take in anything, even his massive erection. "That's too bad, show's over now."

She only pretended to step down from the beds. But he moved so fast that he caught her around the waist and trapped her chest over his face before she'd moved her second leg.

"Oh no," he snarled as he seized an aching nipple in his lips and tugged. "The show's only just begun."

By Odin, he'd never had to work so damn hard to stay in control before. This bold, beautiful woman would unmake him!

While she still stood on the beds, Bjorn trapped both wrists behind her, gathered them in one of his hands then greedily gorged on her throat and breasts, reducing that entire area to shivering, saliva-drenched flesh. The intense heat of her skin provided such a pleasant contrast to the cooler ambient air that it caused his lips to tingle delightfully.

"You thought you could make me lose my cool, did you?" he asked between licks.

She grinned wide. "*You moved.*"

He had.

"You lost your cool. I won."

She looked too satisfied to bear. Perhaps another lesson was in order.

"*Faen heller*, I'll show *you* cool," he said.

"'Fen heler', what does that mean? You keep saying it."

"You don't want to know."

The feral intensity of her eyes heated his already burning skin. All he could think about was her, all his body clamored for was hers. His whole psyche felt reduced to a single, overriding thought—sink inside her tight, resilient flesh. As for his heart, well, it'd stopped being his to master a long time ago. He could pretend to be in full control, but when it came to Danielle, he'd have more chance trying to stop a river from flowing than keeping himself from yearning for her.

She looked down at him while he worked her breasts with his mouth and free hand. She didn't even try to free her wrists, only stood there a head or so above him. She was ready for his lesson. The vampire sire in him would've howled in pride at her willingness to let him dominate her, but the man part, his principal half, realized it was more than willingness Danielle presently showed—it was trust. She trusted him. And to Bjorn Follesdaal, the centuries-old vampire who'd only ever sired two others, this represented a special, fragile gift, the offering of one's soul for the other to receive or not and the implicit reliance that came with it. In a blaze of passion, Bjorn vowed anew how he'd gladly die before he let any harm befall his Athena.

With her wrists tightly behind her in one hand, he bent lower in front of her until his mouth reached her pelvis, which he forced toward him by pressing his palm against her backside. She arched toward his face until his chin rubbed her mons. Her narrow strip of ebony curls gleamed invitingly. Her belly and thighs shook under the strain of remaining upright on the beds while her hands were behind her back. Bjorn enjoyed the sight of her straining to please him, to hold the pose he'd made her adopt. Lust stabbed at his back, wanted to push his cock up her right this instant.

Bjorn released her backside and grabbed at her hip instead. "Have I told you how much I love your body?"

She didn't reply, only let her head fall to her shoulder.

"Answer me," he said after giving the glistening folds peeking out of her a good flick.

"Yes, you have," she hissed.

"Do you know why I love this solid figure you've been graced with?" Another flick, this one parted her lips slightly.

"Oh..." She stopped when a spasm noticeably shook her. "No."

Bjorn lashed out with his tongue at the swollen pearl squeezed in between her lips before he replied. "Because—" another lash "—I can fuck you as hard as I can and you'll still be able to walk the next day."

A snort of laughter erupted from her. As though she were afraid to have wounded his manly pride—which she hadn't—she looked down and winced. "Sorry."

"Don't worry, I'll make sure to test my theory on you. We'll see how you walk come morning."

A long sigh deflated her chest when Bjorn used his thumb to stretch her high. Distended flesh gleamed an invitation at him and he dove for it. Her thigh muscles bulged on either side of his face, her toes dug in the blankets. But standing spread as she was, he knew she couldn't do anything else but gyrate subtly against his mouth, which she did, and arch even farther back.

Keeping her wrists securely against her lower back and making sure she didn't topple over, Bjorn nudged a thigh out wider and spread his tongue wide against her trembling cleft. In a long and rough swipe, he licked her from lips to mons. Juices seeped out onto his tongue. Her scent filled his nostrils when he bared his fangs and pressed them against the sensitive flesh of her inner thigh, almost up by her vulva.

The first sign of the hunger reared its little head. He could bite her then and there and she couldn't do anything to stop him. She trusted him and had let her guard down. Bjorn felt his lip curl up over his canine teeth. A tiny bite, just a tiny one...

"You remember, you bit me here?" he whispered, his jaw working mechanically to close on the juicy morsel. By Odin, she'd be the tastiest flesh yet. He knew it.

An excited gasp rewarded his vampire pride. She was willing!

Crimson and opaque, a veil descended over his consciousness, as if he'd been dipped upside down in a bucket of blood, and filled his heart with a feral longing that threatened his good judgment. He wanted to bite her so badly it twisted his entrails. Knowing he was tempting fate—but at the same time trusting in his ability and her implicit trust in them—Bjorn teased her quivering skin with the points of his canine teeth. Trapping her engorged clit and a good portion of her vulva between his teeth, he pressed the canines just hard enough to force the gleaming pearl out of its shell.

"Bjorn," she moaned, thrusting her pelvis at him.

A fever-like heat descended on him. It filled his throbbing head with images of her willingly pushing her skin against his fangs so they'd pierce it, filling his mouth with her precious essence.

Growling low in his chest, Bjorn gripped her thigh hard. The hunger responded in kind around his will, trapping it in its unyielding clutches. Another millimeter deeper his teeth sank.

Her scent entered his wide-open mouth, tickled his tongue, which quivered and snaked out of its own volition. In a pounding rhythm, his heart beat hard against his chest.

An image flashed in his narrowing sliver of consciousness. *Danielle busting down the stainless steel door to his cell with electrical sparks showering her shoulders and hair while she stood for a second scanning the room.*

He'd fallen in love with her at that very moment.

The hunger subsided. Bjorn knew he'd won over it. Again. But he knew the worst had yet to come. The real test, the one so many vampires couldn't pass, the crucible of self-restraint that crushed them, loomed dark over his soul. If he failed it, Danielle would die. And if she died, so would he. By his own hand if need be.

He retreated slightly. "You see, my love, that's how you control the hunger. You tempt it, you call it by its name and toy with it until you think you must sink your fangs before it kills you. Then you let it all wash over you. But when you think it's over, that's when it strikes the hardest."

Bjorn felt it with the acuity of a knife in the chest—something to which he could personally attest. By Odin, it'd kill him this time!

The hunger, it was coming...hard.

He groaned when the spike in hunger stabbed at his jaw and throat, burned his guts and muscles, compelled him to rend her flesh and drink from her thick, fiery blood. Surely he'd live for a thousand years with such potent nectar in his veins!

But Bjorn didn't yield. It subsided once again, this time for good.

Shaking but master once more, he drew back, looked up into her sweaty face.

"You'll have to learn to control the hunger...for your sake and mine."

A questioning look arched her eyebrow. She didn't even need to speak for him to understand her. "If you can't learn to control your hunger, it will kill you. And if you die, so will I."

She opened her mouth to speak but snapped it close. A nod confirmed she grasped the magnitude of his words. Were those tears he saw sparkling at the outer edges of her eyes? High time to change the subject then. With renewed energy, Bjorn released her wrists and stretched her as wide as he dared before stabbing his tongue at her sex. A loud moan rewarded his work.

"Let go," he enjoined her, letting his fingers drive his point home.

While rubbing her clit with a thumb, he inserted his middle finger, marveled at the tightness of her flesh then proceeded to slide in and out, very slowly but pressing firmly against the frontal end of her drenched cleft. She was so wet. His cock demanded a bit of the action. He denied this hunger as well, but knew it would be sated soon enough.

Chapter Eight

After the thrill and fear of Bjorn's near bite abated, Danielle's sexual hunger ratcheted up a notch. She hadn't believed until now the stories of how people couldn't—literally *couldn't*—keep their hands to themselves and had always attributed it to weakness of character. She believed it now.

Every fiber in her enhanced frame demanded, ached, yearned, for Bjorn in ways that both frightened and excited her. She wanted him now, forever, here and everywhere. She itched for that brutal lovemaking he'd so deliciously dispensed before. As he feasted on her still, Danielle raked her nails over his shoulders, hoping to elicit a response.

She watched the muscles twitch and ripple and noticed only now the tan line around his neck. A vampire with a tan line...how about that!

The orgasm hit so abruptly she yelped. Like a flag unfurling in a strong gust, pleasure fanned out in fiery rings and when she cramped her legs and arms, she swore the ceramic joints would pop out of their sockets. Her chest swelled with a moan, which she let out through her nose as her jaws felt welded together. She came again within a few seconds.

Bjorn placed a hand over her shoulder. "Come down on me."

Her legs buckled under the intensity of his touch and her orgasm. But she wanted him hard, much harder than what she knew he intended. So instead of coming off the beds slowly, she squatted right on top of his cock then wrapped a leg around his hips. His eyes flared wide. His broad glans stretched her taut as the downward momentum continued, burning rings of near pain radiating out to her thighs, until the length of him completely penetrated Danielle. Impaled is what she had wanted and what she became.

He opened his mouth in a silent O before letting out one long breath. She thought she could hear the faint trace of her name in that exhalation.

As much as she enjoyed his meaty cock up to the hilt, the satisfaction didn't feel as complete as having his entire weight bear down on her.

"On the floor," she urged. "Come on."

Air left her in a great humph when Bjorn practically collapsed on his knees with her still connected to him, both legs now wrapped around his middle, and let them both fall down, at the last second cushioning the landing with his arm. One hundred and ten kilograms of man crushed her to the carpeted floor. Countless feet had treaded there, and countless knees, elbows and butts had landed and rubbed there too. Danielle was past caring what had happened in the compartment. All she wanted was Bjorn thrusting into her as if his life depended on his vigor.

And perhaps it did, for he slipped out fast only to stab back in like a freight train. She cried out. He thrust again, a tremendous shove that drove her up a fair distance before she latched on with her legs and arms. Nanobots working their microscopic butts off, Danielle weathered the storm of Bjorn's lovemaking with her teeth clenched the entire time and a cry struggling up her throat. When finally another salvo of orgasms hit her, she was kicking Bjorn's thighs so hard in the back of her mind she knew he'd be bruised for days. Just as in the steam shower, his name exploded out of her.

A red veil descended onto her eyesight, and not only in her right eye. Hunger the likes of which she'd never experienced—even her recent bout with the vampiric kind—engulfed her mind and body. All she could think about was Bjorn's exposed neck a mere hair from her mouth. His scent filled her nose and mouth as he pounded into her, always deeper and with a pronounced arc to his drive. A violent shudder announced he'd climaxed too. Danielle cradled his head when he heaved a shuddering sigh and collapsed onto her chest. Her yearning for his flesh only accentuated.

He was in her in more ways than she thought possible. His flesh was calling her. Biosilk tightened under her skin as a violent shiver coursed through Danielle and left her tactical night vision lens in a riot of green and yellow pixels to sort through.

Baring her fangs before she realized she had opened her mouth, Danielle lifted her head off the floor. Neck muscles rippled when Bjorn shifted his elbows. His head was down, his hair hung over his face. If she stuck her tongue out, she could taste him. Just a quick taste. Lick his sweat perhaps or tickle his skin with her tongue...sink her fangs in deep, gorge on his centuries-old essence and let it roll into her mouth in a crimson wave. He was so very close. So close.

No.

Danielle snapped her mouth shut and withdrew. Not him. *Never* him. Unless he granted it to her...which he hadn't.

He shook some hair out of his face and looked up, never knowing how close he'd just come. "Like I said, built to last."

"Funny." She punched him on the arm before parting his bangs to better look into his still stormy eyes. "You need a number two, sir."

Bjorn laughed before getting up on his knees. He offered his hand, which she accepted. "A clipper hasn't touched this head in a long time, and I don't think it will again. I like my hair the way it is."

After another quick shower they got dressed. Danielle had to bite some tags off her new clothes and muttered when she shook out some tiny shirt, which didn't button all the way up. She slipped her leather jacket back on and crossed her arms over the wide opening.

"You meant for that," she said, throwing the smirking Bjorn an oblique glance.

He placed his large hand over his heart. "I'm not like that."

"What is it with designers? Do they think women have no shoulders, that our arms just come out of our necks?"

A chuckle rumbled deep in his chest as he buttoned a dark gray shirt. His jeans went up right after with no underwear or socks. Danielle had to grit her teeth not to attack him again. Making a big show of it, he arched his butt back so his cock would fit in the jeans and fastened the buttons. To her chagrin, he let the shirt hang out over it all.

Checking his watch, he whistled. "Good workout. We only have an hour left."

The direness of their situation suddenly bore down on her. They stood up to their asses in shit, and it wasn't even theirs. Danielle tortured her memory bank for something she could use, anything, but the wet-wired gear had only been plugged in and programmed to receive massive amounts of data...data the docs hadn't had time to input before candidates started dying. One tiny, obscure file flashed quickly before she pushed it aside. Something bothered her. Danielle rubbed the back of her neck and closed her eyes. Again a tiny spark right up at the edge of her peripheral vision. With her eyes closed, she could see it better. A single word had been engraved on the wet-wired file—tracking. Three tiny dots blinked intermittently, indicating this file was active.

"Mon dieu!"

"You talking to your god is never good. What? Are you ill?"

She ignored Bjorn's voice, pressed her palm against her right eye so she could see better inside her eyelid.

Blinking, the three dots indicated activity when there shouldn't have been any. The docs hadn't programmed anything in there. Had they? That directory hadn't been activated. She accessed it, sifted through the empty files and found the one named "Tracking". A long series of coordinates filed from bottom to top, with the last entry showing the day's date and a time.

"What time is it?" she asked in a voice she couldn't recognize as her own. A scared voice.

"Half past four." A large, hot hand pressed against her shoulder. "Talk to me. What is it?"

A bright amber tag—apparently the best and most visible contrast for synthetic vision—showing "04:36:40" glowed with a perfidious kind of light. A snake's eyes before it struck.

"They've been tracking us, Bjorn," she whispered, feeling stupid, naïve...betrayed.

He said something in his language. She could well understand the nature of it.

"Can you get rid of it? Whatever it is?"

Project Immortalis had indeed equipped her brain with a self-activated cleaning program in case she contracted a virus. She isolated the file, dragged it to the garbage can like she would on her computer desktop, but the thing would pop back again, with another, even fresher GPS coordinate.

"Fuck and fuck," she snarled.

"Get rid of it, Danielle," Bjorn warned, his hand becoming heavier. "We'll never make it if you don't."

"I know, I'm trying. Let me think."

Her nanobots.

If she could somehow convince her microscopic friends that file was the enemy, perhaps they could neutralize it. *Worth a try because I have nothing else.*

Her jaws clenched, Danielle cramped every muscle in her, pushed every fiber to its limit, imagined all sorts of combat scenarios and got herself in a lather of adrenaline spikes. In her right eye, the tiny dots blinked more rapidly, as though it were sending an urgent message.

Sweat clammed her hands. It had to work. *Yeah, you little squealer, they're coming for you.*

Then one by one, the three little dots disappeared. The file burst open and each single entry rapidly disintegrated as though some minute termite munched them to pieces. The very last set of coordinates came undone then vanished.

Danielle let out a long sigh. "It was some sort of tracking file. I set the bots on it. I think it's gone now." Her throat felt dry and raw. She cleared it.

Bjorn's hand on her shoulder squeezed. When she looked up into his face, he nodded. Sweat pearled at his temple. "Then we'll have to assume they know where we are now but not necessarily where we're ultimately going."

"I think so." *I hope so*, she added mentally.

Shit. Had every other candidate been fitted with a tracking device? Did Yuan have one? Could she track him too? She doubted she could, but entertained the idea for a while. Better to think about hurting him than about what could be waiting for them at the next station. Danielle made a quick spot-check and found the directory still empty. So far so good.

For the first time since she'd left the complex, she had a thought for Yuan. No way the fall from the truck had killed him with all the vampire and nanotech flowing in his veins. He must have had a pretty damn good knock though. She grinned. Had he fed, she wondered? Not that she cared overmuch, but would the military brass provide for that? And where would they get fresh, *living* blood? They must have prepared for the eventuality of having to feed twenty or so vampires...

Danielle winced at the sinister possibilities.

"They won't know which station we will stop at," Bjorn said, sitting beside her on the narrow bed. They hadn't even used either one.

"No," she replied, coming back to the immediate situation. "But they'll have a couple of men at each station the train stops. Do you know Hamburg at all?"

He nodded. "I know we have tickets right up to Oslo, but I think we should rent a car from here on. In case..."

Bjorn didn't have to say it for her to know what he'd meant. They should drive the rest of the way in case her bosses had figured out the final destination. From Hamburg, a multitude of possibilities existed. They could've been going to Russia for all O'Leary knew.

The prospect of driving so many hours didn't appeal to her. She much preferred riding the train while she rode Bjorn. And it was much easier to evade train attendants if they decided to check for passports than it was toll officers. There wasn't much hiding room in a car. "I think it's okay now, I deleted the file and it hasn't popped back yet. I think we should keep to the trains. Lose ourselves in the crowd."

A shrug dislodged some of his hair from behind his ear. Since he sat on her right, the strand looked turquoise to her lens and very shiny. Her fingers itched to touch his hair, his skin. Pushing the distracting thoughts aside, Danielle retrieved her tennis shoes and tied them on, double knots as usual.

"So, um, where in Norway are we going?" she asked as she sat back, but a bit farther away. She hooked some hair over her ear and pretended to have something wrong with the sleeve of her jacket. In truth, she'd much rather hear his words than try to read his expression.

"Oslo then up about four hundred kilometers north to a little place called Steinkjer. It's very nice there, peaceful."

Was it her imagination or he was avoiding her gaze as well? "Is that where you're from?"

He shook his head. "The village I'm from no longer exists. Only archeologists hang out up there."

That must be so sad, to have one's home village or town no longer exist. Clasp her hands together, she crammed them between her thighs and looked up at him. "What's there in Steinik?"

"Steinkjer. Home, hopefully."

"Yours or mine?"

Bjorn stood, crossed his arms and leaned against the bathroom door. Vinyl creaked under the strain. "Ours?" he asked.

God, how handsome he is.

The man could've been pulled right out of a Norse saga illustration. The longish blond hair, mostly doing whatever it wanted, the strong eyebrows and nose, the jutting, cleft chin. Only one tiny detail out of place—the faint protuberances where his canine teeth pushed out against his upper lip. If the guy had a mustache, no one would ever look twice. Danielle tried to imagine Bjorn with a full Viking beard and a pair of thick braids. A horned hat, of course. And a shield. She shook her head. She preferred the hardy Scandinavian fisherman image.

"Won't they look for us in Norway? Why not somewhere far, like Bora Bora or something." On second thought, the heat alone would kill her.

Bjorn must have noticed how she'd skirted the question for his shoulders tightened, the clear azure of his eyes darkened. "There are no extradition laws between France and Norway, not for peacetime crimes, anyway. Unless you're a war criminal?"

His attempt at humor felt forced and she hated herself for busting the bubble. Yet what could she tell the guy?

A sudden urge to protect him overwhelmed her. She jumped up to her feet. Shit. "They're coming."

Bjorn nodded. "I don't know about them, but *he's* coming."

* * * * *

The other vampire he'd sired unwittingly was drawing near. He'd felt him for a while now, but knew Danielle hadn't. In the pit of his stomach, Bjorn sensed a growing uneasiness, like someone had delivered bad news to him only he couldn't remember what it was. Well, except for a multinational military machine bent on capturing him...that counted as bad news too.

An announcement in German crackled over the intercom system. They exchanged a tense look. Their interlude—tracked and transmitted to the bad guys—was officially over.

After fishing around the backpack, she pulled her hair in a French braid and tied the end with a bit of string from the discarded clothes tags she'd found. Danielle zipped her jacket in a quick jerk. "When the train starts to slow down, we'll have to force one of the doors and jump before the platform arrives."

"Ever the subtle one," he sighed. "I think we should wait until we actually get to the station, this way we'll draw less attention than by busting out of the train and running across ten pairs of tracks. Hamburg is fairly big as stations go."

She paced the small compartment like a tiger in a cage, her fists clenching and unclenching, and with set jaw and hard eyes, she reminded him more than ever of Athena. A blonde version.

"Fine," she replied at length. "But we should already be by the first doors so we see them coming. They can't have posted men at every door."

"Here," he said, fishing inside his backpack and producing the thick wad of cash. He split it cleanly in two. "If we get separated."

Danielle stared at him for a long time before she slowly took the offered money and crammed it in the front pockets of her jeans. "I'll pay you back to the last cent."

Lust flared in his belly, hardened his cock against the button-fly. "Don't worry, I'll keep track and make you pay in kind instead."

A blush rose to her cheeks. She hid a grin behind a cough and motioned for the doors. "Let's go."

Bjorn strapped the backpack on, loosened the closings to allow his shoulders through and indicated the door. She preceded him, slid the doors slightly and peeked

out. Without a word or a look back, she marched up the corridor toward the front of the train, passing people who didn't look back as they went by.

Bjorn wondered for a second if all the men on this train were blind or fools. Or both. Who wouldn't notice her? What sort of male could just stand there while she thundered past in that tight, black leather jacket and snug jeans, that too-small shirt—which was his best buy of the century—and not feel the least bit rattled by the sheer power and sexuality emanating from her? A Valkyrie charging down the aisle of a train, for god's sake. Wouldn't men turn and stare? The answer was as noticeable as a fistful of sand in the eyes...they were *weak*. They were weak and lacked the strength of character to measure up against one such as she. Bjorn let his gaze travel down the length of her hips and muscled thighs. What kind of men indeed? Like she would say...morons.

Soon, they'd reached the more crowded first few wagons where someone had smoked, despite clear non-smoking signs. A small crowd of young backpackers noisily occupied the aisle and the landing area. Danielle cut a swath through them, occasionally staring one down until the offender moved aside to let her pass. Had the situation been any different Bjorn would've laughed.

When he came up to the group, his manly pride swelled as the female students stared at him the entire time, urging their male friends to "make room for the *monsieur*". If they only knew. They said "*monsieur*" the way he said "*chocolate*" with a greedy lift to their mouths. There was no food in the world like a big chunk of dark chocolate. Even if it made him feel queasy for days as his system purged itself of the toxins. Saliva seeped under the back of his tongue. The one craving he'd never successfully conquered.

Another announcement over the intercom triggered a massive movement of bodies toward the landing. Bjorn could spot the top of Danielle's pale blonde head easily enough, but he didn't like being so far from her. Using his physical stature, he nudged passengers and firmly moved aside a man who ignored his polite request. When he turned to glare at the offender and came eye to chest with Bjorn, he muttered something and turned back.

Bjorn leaned against the door and peeked toward the front. Through the dirty window, pale dawn light shredded purple clouds as the last of the brown houses filed past before the industrial precursor to the station arrived in view. A maze of entwined tracks crisscrossed out in several branches. At the extreme limit of his vision, Bjorn spotted yellow flashing lights. Not the blue lights of civilian police vehicles.

"They're here. Military police."

Danielle strained forward to watch the coming station. A yellow and black sign passed in the window from left to right, with the word HAMBURG glowing softly in the rain.

"There's a lot of them. Shit."

Danielle spun abruptly when the station slowly went by, the countless passengers milling about, standing still or hugging departing loved ones. Interspersed among the crowd stood military police officers with their olive green uniforms and mustard yellow

caps. Matte black FAMAS F1 machine guns hung on their shoulders. Bjorn remembered how the ambidextrous weapons hadn't much in terms of range, but it sure could blanket an area. And a bullet was a bullet after all, even to vampires.

Their chances of changing trains without being noticed seemed slim. Bjorn cursed under his breath. He hadn't counted on Danielle's bosses having put some tracking device in her brain nor having placed so many men at so many train stations. And to top his luck, that other vampire was here as well. He could feel it clearly, the hatred, the urge to stake his territory and be the one left standing. On some deeper level, Bjorn shared this younger vampire's primal call, he too wished nothing more than to duel with this competitor, establish beyond doubt who was sire and who was...well, *not*.

Bjorn dug in the backpack again and pulled out the tickets. He gave one to Danielle who just stood there staring, seemingly not in the least bit open to that suggestion.

"You're the one they're after, it's your face on the television," he murmured in her ear. Yielding to the temptation, he kissed her neck. A jolt of electricity poked him in the balls. He wanted her so bad it hurt.

"We're not splitting up. So hold onto them."

"Take it."

A very faint green tinge colored her right eye, something he'd never noticed before. He wondered for a second how she saw him, in what spectrum of colors and if she liked what she saw. Danielle's abilities may frighten others, but to him, it triggered an avid thirst, and not in the vampiric sense—well, that too—but on a deeper, emotional level. He wanted to know her, every centimeter of her, inside and out, wanted to feel her, taste her, sense her thoughts, but more importantly, Bjorn wanted to *understand* the enigma that was Danielle Lavoie.

Her dark gaze held his for a while before he nodded and slid the tickets back in his jeans pocket. "You should be a prosecutor. You have that stare."

With a lurch the train slowed, rattled when the tracks converged and crept slowly to the end of the platform. Rain managed to reach a few meters under the covered quay and darkened the cement in a wave-shaped pattern. No police this far up. But no passengers either—hence, no cover.

When the doors quivered and slid open, Danielle rushed out but slewed to her left and let the large clump of backpackers get ahead of her so she could hide in their midst. Bjorn followed. The pair ducked their heads—especially him. Out of the corner of his eye, Bjorn spotted something that bothered him to the highest degree. A pair of non-military police officers stood at one of the station's doors and eyed the passengers intently.

On the men's uniforms glimmered arm patches bearing a blue globe with a sword and scales. The sharp contrast of the black letters O.I.P.C. against a white background was hard to miss. *Organisation internationale de police criminelle*—INTERPOL. Damn.

"You've seen them?"

An almost imperceptible nod answered him.

"Your boss has a long arm."

"I don't think he's the one who called them." Danielle scowled. "And anyway, I'm about to cut that long arm off."

Bjorn slowed down. Time seemed to follow suit as well. Sounds came to his ears muffled and distorted. He could swear each raindrop floated down to the cement and splattered individually, creating an arc of tiny, crystalline droplets that scintillated in the torchère lamps lining the platform.

A prickly sensation erupted all over his skin. Bjorn surreptitiously looked around. His fangs ached in response to the fire burning his throat and chest. Balling fists, he gritted his teeth. That other vampire. He was very, very near. No other vampire had ever caused him to behave this way, to feel such an overwhelming impulse to fight. Was this some vestigial Cro-Magnon male drive that compelled him to not only destroy the competition but utterly annihilate it? For he did. By Odin, he wanted to tear open that other vampire and rend his flesh with his fangs and scatter his guts and –

The mental image of such carnage triggered his vampire hunger as never before. A crimson veil descended upon his vision. He wanted to feed, to *kill*.

Chapter Nine

If she gritted her teeth any tighter, she'd cause damage.

Danielle's systems checked and rechecked the possible combinations. None pleased her. Along her arms, an army of fine hairs in full parade stance bristled hard against the fabric. Those nanobots could sure trigger a reaction.

By the corner of her enhanced eye, she followed the two INTERPOL agents' progress as they scanned the area and slowly moved from door to door. Unless they started running, she'd have time to reach it before they did. But still, nothing assured her there weren't more of them inside. Or worse yet—O'Leary's men. They'd recognize her immediately despite the blonde hair.

But what the hell could INTERPOL want with them? If they were here for that reason. Could be they were looking for someone else. Ha.

A particularly sharp jolt of awareness stabbed at her brain. She swore she could hear the mechanized parts snapping into place as the grid powered up with the flux of adrenaline and hormones sluicing her synapses. The neutron-thin biosilk layer under her skin tightened, the electro-active, polymer-laced muscles flexed sporadically along her biceps and thighs. On top of her nanotech enhancements acting up, her vampire side detected a slew of stimuli her brain couldn't really process, not on an intellectual level anyway. But it all came down to one word—danger.

Suddenly Danielle's protective instincts erupted into her entire body, flooding the already hypersensitive grid, like an exploding glass vessel that sent shards slicing through her.

Protect him.

The call, this time so intense she cringed, overwhelmed Danielle with the thunderous roar of a jumbo jet crashing down on her head. Urgency fired her nervous response. She started shaking.

Ahead, the glass and metal doors were swinging back, allowing her a good inside view. Behind one of the doors stood a bare-chested man, no shirt or anything, dressed in black denim pants and jacket. Smallish, with spiky black hair, he was smirking.

"Yuan."

Bjorn turned toward her but didn't have time to say a word before Yuan burst out of the twin doors with enough force to send them bending outward. Tempered glass crystallized under an opaque white layer when it broke. Rivets shot out like bullets.

Pandemonium broke out around them. People screamed, ran in all directions. The twenty or so backpackers reacted in twenty or so different ways. Some stood rooted to

the spot, unknowingly providing cover for her and Bjorn as Yuan advanced toward them. Poor kids must have been petrified.

Danielle felt as though she'd just leaped out of her skin and circled over herself in a kaleidoscope of crazy, smeared-by-speed colors.

With a tone unvarying in pitch, her threat assessment files zipped out of the root directory and played in a robotic monologue...

Threat assessment – direct.

Danger – imminent.

Counteroffensive measures – appointed.

Throughout her systems, files containing combat training and flowcharts zipped in and out of directories and flashed in her mind's eye. Her systems demanded action. Vampiric hunger stabbed at her gut. She saw herself widen her stance as she circled the scene and, with a bird's-eye view, noticed Bjorn do the same. Then the bizarre trancelike mode faded until she stood solidly back in her skin with Yuan advancing on her with the liveness and grace of a panther. Except she wasn't prey. And neither was Bjorn.

"Don't you make a cute couple," Yuan said from a distance. He grinned widely, revealing a set of fangs that rivaled Bjorn's.

Yuan intercepted a young woman rushing by and curled his arm around her throat. Bjorn raised his hand to protest but cursed when Yuan flicked his wrist so the young woman would face him and tore out a good portion of her throat with his teeth. Blood jetted out and dribbled over his chin and smooth, naked chest.

Dropping her inert form, he smiled a bloody grin. "Not a bad year either."

A shot rang out. Yuan staggered back a step, looking down in surprise at the hole in his black denim jacket. The bullet must have missed him for he parted the lapels and shook his head.

"Les mains en l'air!" cried one of the INTERPOL agents. He aimed again.

Danielle shook her head. Like Yuan would "put his hands up". Ha.

The possibilities flashed in Danielle's mind. So INTERPOL wasn't working with O'Leary. Interesting. But her more immediate thought was that if the police officers were busy with Yuan, it meant she and Bjorn could use this as a diversion.

When Yuan exploded into a ground-devouring charge for the pair of grim-faced agents, Danielle grabbed Bjorn's sleeve and pulled him to the left, back toward the demolished doors. They started running.

Behind her another shot rang out. She peeked back just in time to see Yuan practically vaporizing one of the agents with a brutal kick in the chest. The man went tumbling back and rolled several times. His colleague, much more unlucky, was having his throat ripped open.

Danielle followed Bjorn inside the station proper where a cacophony of screams and alarms bells drowned any attempt at communication. People rushed by but in

much lesser numbers. Metal screen doors slammed down over ticket tellers. Military police officers, dressed in the special ops black uniforms and machine-guns in hand, were rushing at Danielle. They could've fired but didn't. Not a good sign. Danielle would've preferred they shoot instead of silently run for her this way. That meant they wanted her alive.

Two reached Bjorn first, who just let one pass and tagged the other with a devastating right hook, which sent the guy spinning on himself. Before he had fallen to the ground, Bjorn grabbed at his shoulder, brought him close to his face and shook his head. Even from behind him, Danielle saw blood spurt out in several directions.

The other soldier who had run past skidded to a halt and made to fire at Bjorn but Danielle had already assessed the threat, deemed it imminent and so had launched a counterattack. After sending a savage kick to the man's legs, which buckled with a sickening crunch, she extended an arm, closed her fist on his flak jacket while she snaked her hand along the inside of his thigh. Reversing the momentum of his fall, she dipped him up, practically carrying him over a shoulder. His legs twitched spasmodically as she brought him violently back toward the ground, head first. The impact split his helmet and broke his neck. Danielle was dropping him when a shot rang out and the air whistled by her ear.

Bjorn grabbed her by the jacket and yanked brutally, forcing her to backpedal a few steps before she got her legs under her. He turned toward her and she gasped. His usually clear azure eyes had turned a roiling, stormy shade of gray and blood covered his entire mouth and chin.

"Go! Hurry," Bjorn said as he pushed her hard toward the stairs leading to the underground tunnel. His mighty shove propelled her down a number of steps yet she managed to grab at the railing and stopped her mad descent.

Before she could claw back up, he whirled around and charged across the airy indoor plaza, back toward the main entrance to the Hamburg station...back toward the half dozen armed soldiers rushing for them. They didn't want him—they wanted *her*, didn't they? He no longer mattered. *Mon Dieu...*

"No!"

Her yell reverberated in the tiled staircase.

Like a movie, she watched Bjorn reach the first pair of soldiers and barrel into them, using his greater size to gain superiority. The violent tackle sent two flying back. One of those left standing tried to turn the muzzle of his machinegun toward Bjorn, who must have sensed the threat for he closed a massive fist over the other's throat, yanked him close and sank his face under the officer's chin. Even from where she stood, Danielle could see the arterial arc of blood jetting out. While he held the one, Bjorn managed to grip the other's uniform by the front and hoisted him close as well. Dropping the jerking, bleeding soldier to the floor, Bjorn wrapped both arms around the second one's head before giving a quick, brutal twist. Arms going limp, the dead soldier slumped

against Bjorn, who grabbed the FAMAS F1 machinegun and aimed it at the foursome rushing his way.

It'd all seemed to take a second for Danielle. Yet during that short time, Bjorn had dispatched two armed special ops soldiers and was about to repeat the process for four more. Only these had been warned by the ghastly spectacle of blood their colleagues had become part of.

She couldn't move as she stood with one foot on a step and the other on the one below. Shots rang out, but not from Bjorn or any of the men facing him. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a lone form zipping past along the wall. The sneaky little shit!

Horror filled her gut when Yuan stopped running, turned the machinegun toward the four soldiers and Bjorn in the middle of the plaza. So open, so airy. So much like a fucking firing range! Her yelled warning drowned in the dry clack of rapid fire.

One by one, the soldiers jerked and fell. As did Bjorn, only he hit the slate floor much more slowly than the others, every hinge—knee, hip, elbow, shoulder—connecting with the floor in a grotesquely slow succession until his face touched down and rebounded once from the force of the impact. His shirt grew limp over his back, hair settled around his face. He didn't move again.

Deathly cold washed over Danielle, muted the portion of mechanized brain analyzing the situation and offering counteractions. No signal traversed her numb mind. Even the nanobots felt as though they'd frozen in place, held their collective breath. Everything technological in her went dead. And when the enhancements ground down to a halt and her world narrowed to Bjorn's form lying motionless on the floor, Danielle thought the silence in her soul would spread to the entire planet. Surely such pain would be felt across the world? That primal urge to protect her sire, so deeply rooted, so overwhelming...even it died.

This all happened quickly, a mere moment, a second during which nothing else mattered. The pain would kill her. She *wanted* to die. Her sire was dead. The man she loved. Yes, dammit, she loved him and now he was gone. Nothing else mattered. Not even herself.

Out of her grief, rising from the ashes of horror and despair, stabbed a single, blazing thought. As if a sudden too-bright light in a dark place had stripped away any sense of comfort or solace. Danielle felt fear for the first time in her life. Not for herself but for everyone else. For she *knew*.

The terrible clarity illuminated every dark, bestial and ugly corner of her soul, peeled away every dormant layer of violence and fury a human being could be capable of. She wanted revenge on levels she hadn't known could possibly exist. She wanted to rend flesh, tear hearts out by the fistfuls, shred skin and grind bones and satiate the searing hunger, which she'd thought hard to contain and which was quickly reaching incalculable magnitude. Control slipped from her.

The vampire in her had surfaced.

And God help them all.

Danielle turned toward Yuan who had discarded the weapon and was sprinting toward her. The cold, hammer-hard fury in her heart must have shown through for the usually agile, lissome man seemed to slip, catching himself at the last possible moment. The smirk was gone.

"You shouldn't have done that," Danielle said, climbing the last step and standing inside the plaza proper. She slipped the leather jacket from her shoulders and let it fall to the floor.

His eyes did a quick scan of the carnage in the middle of the station. "Now that we have you, we no longer need him."

Ignoring Yuan's words, she went on with her previous thought. "But I won't kill you for it. No. I'll make *sure* you won't die for a while."

For a split second, Danielle discerned fear in Yuan's dark eyes. Then rage replaced it. She saw it coming, fury boiling over. He hated her as much as she did him. The one difference distinguishing their respective hatred for one another was this—she hadn't killed his lover. *He* had.

When he pounced, she was ready.

Danielle used her greater bulk to shoulder him out of his trajectory. With a satisfying humph, Yuan rebounded to the side and crashed back against the wall, his gaze never leaving hers, his mouth twisted in an enraged rictus. The violent crash created a spiderweb pattern of cracked tiles and broken mortar. He pushed off the wall and aimed a devastating roundhouse kick at her head. She barely had time to raise her arm and parry. Pain exploded from her entire arm and shoulder down to her ribs. The little shit could kick. So could she.

Grabbing Yuan's denim jacket by the back, she yanked it down hard and brought her knee up at the same time, her kneecap connecting solidly with his face. After that one good hit she didn't let go as she would've done to anyone else and instead continued her momentum and sent Yuan spinning around her. He punched her in the belly, which didn't amount to much with the biosilk protecting her middle. With a vicious curse, he spread his feet wide, clutched at her knee—nearly ruining her equilibrium—and Danielle understood too late his intent. Yuan bit her savagely on the thigh. A large portion of her skin shredded, her quad muscle ripped. An elbow against the nape of his neck floored him.

"Just as I thought," Yuan snarled, spitting blood—some of hers, some of his. He rolled onto his back, brought his toes close to his face and snapped up, standing. "You taste like old meat."

His words were irrelevant to her, faded from her consciousness as soon as they registered. She wanted to see him bleed. Profusely. Nothing else meant a damn.

Danielle circled him, looking for the best way to produce hurt. Lots of it. He circled in time with her and kept his hands loose on either side of him. She knew he was a master at several martial arts, and she, well, she barely knew how to spell karate. But it

hadn't been her kung-fu ability – or lack thereof – that had made her the best candidate in project Immortalis, but her street-fighting style...she wasn't fancy or pretty, but kneecaps didn't stand a chance if she set her mind to it. And her mind was set as never before.

Uncharacteristically, Yuan attacked first. He came at her with a combination of kicks that forced Danielle to backpedal and parry with her arms and legs. Puffing and grunting under the furious assault, she met each hit with one of her own. Her thigh burned like a bitch. He probably had rabies. Little vermin.

"Not bad," Yuan said, panting slightly. "For a cow."

Yuan grabbed behind him at a thick brass post delimiting a waiting area and ripped it out of its concrete socket. Balancing it expertly like a baseball bat, he bounced on the balls of his feet, pretended to rush at her from the left so she'd make the first move before retreating and trying the other side. Did he think she'd been born yesterday?

Danielle waited until he was switching feet again before she gave him the reaction he was waiting for, but instead of going at him with brute force, she used speed to catch him off guard. And she did.

He yelped when she clutched his jacket, parried the vicious hit he meant for her head by raising her elbow. Since her elbow was already up over her head, she used it like a hammer on the smaller man's face. Bones crunched satisfyingly.

Yuan spat a long string of words in Cantonese before switching back to English and calling her the worst names in existence.

Unbelievably fast, he swung the post at her and pain exploded in her back when the brass weapon connected. Numbness deadened the length of her arm and hand.

"Too bad I killed him already, I'd make him watch while I ripped your gut open and pissed down your throat. You bitch."

A small sound caught her ears and Yuan's as well for he turned toward the main entrance to see O'Leary standing outside with a score of armed soldiers setting up a barricade with yellow tape and wheeled armored vehicles...effectively blocking the view of the inside.

Yuan smiled a bloody grin. "Looks like he doesn't want anyone to see what I'll do to you."

One of O'Leary's soldiers, under heavy cover from snipers placed just outside the doors and with the muzzles of their rifles pointing in, sprinted a few paces past the entrance, placed a black, nondescript backpack on the floor and ran back outside.

Bastards.

"Looks like we've become more than an embarrassment," Danielle commented, not in the least bit worried about blowing up into tiny pieces.

"The bomb is set to go off in ten minutes. They'll blame you for it, the 'mentally unstable deserter'. I'll have fun reading the headlines."

She nodded, a desperate, hopeless grin spreading her mouth wide. "It doesn't matter, I'll finish you myself before the bomb goes off. Too bad, I wanted to make you last."

Yuan swung the post at her, missed when she ducked under the swipe and leaped out of the man's dangerous reach. By the corner of her eye, she spotted the remains of the waiting corral, a piece of which Yuan now held and ran for it. Yuan on her heels, she leaped over the handrails, the first row then the second, before sliding underneath the last one. When she reached the end of the brass handrail, she gripped one corner, gave a mighty tug and dislodged it.

Brandishing the brass post just in time to meet Yuan's attack, Danielle parried, spun and continued with her rotation until she was coming back for him again. This time though, she aimed low. When he jumped, predictable show-off that he was, she straightened and took one good shot at him. Her fist ruined his snarky little mouth. Backpedaling, Yuan spat blood.

"If you come out now," O'Leary's voice interrupted Danielle's next attack. "You'll save a lot of people, including yourself." The general's voice came in loud and distorted through the bullhorn. His Irish accent didn't come out too well this way. She'd so loved it before.

Ten minutes to live. Ha.

Bjorn was dead. Why should she care if O'Leary wanted to blow them all up? She'd sit on the thing for the whole ten minutes and it still wouldn't matter one bit. *Life* no longer mattered.

"I'm taking your project down with me, O'Leary, do you hear? There won't be enough DNA left to scrape off the floor!" she hollered. "Project Immortalis is dead! It's all over!"

"Let's finish this then," Yuan said. He leaped at her, both feet aimed at her chest.

She took the hit with a grunt, went flying back several paces and landed hard, breaking tiles with her elbows and heels. Shards of broken slate tiles stuck to her skin when she floundered to her feet and shook herself. Fire burned in her chest. He'd probably broken something. After discarding the bent post Yuan whirled around, his heel connected against her chin. She fell again but managed to grab his jacket and pull him down with her.

"You're going to taste your own medicine, you little viper."

Wrapping both her arms around him, she sank her fangs in his shoulder. Skin gave way, even the thin biosilk layer, which shredded between her teeth, then tendons and tissue tore with the sound of a celery stalk breaking in half, before blood, hot and thick, flooded her mouth. A savage urge to shake her head and rip it all off overtook her. She sucked hard, took as much as she could. Fire spread down her throat. His blood tasted like sugared liquid copper.

Snarling both, each trying to find a chink in the other's enhanced defenses, Danielle and Yuan rolled and pummeled, wrestled and twisted on the floor. He clawed at her

back, ripped the shirt in places while she sank her teeth even deeper, sucked even harder. While Danielle tried to pin the smaller man under her, using her longer legs as an octopus would, wrapping and squeezing, a faint sensation tickled the back of her mind. As though she'd forgotten something...something important.

As Danielle released Yuan and jerked her head up, blood dribbling down her chin and chest and all the while dodging the man's snapping jaws, movement close to the ground caught her right eye. Acid-green heat pattern rose in tendrils from the clump of rapidly cooling, deep aqua-colored dead soldiers.

Heat pattern...Life?

An arm rose, an elbow, and Danielle noticed the owner of this arm didn't wear a uniform but a dark gray shirt. Bjorn's blond head reared slightly from the floor and turned this way and that. But he looked too weak to move farther and just flopped weakly onto his back.

Dear God, he wasn't dead.

How much time, how many of the ten minutes had she wasted pounding into Yuan? Five, eight? Shit, shit, *shit*.

With a growl, she pushed herself up at arm's length, straddled Yuan about the middle and, putting all her strength into it, fisted his hair and yanked his head up high. He must have understood what she meant to do but reacted too late. Danielle put her weight behind it as she drove his head against the slate floor. Over and over. At least five times.

Protect him.

The whispered call, so faint, so weak, filtered in her desperate mind. God, no, she'd be too late.

With a cry of rage, she hit Yuan's head against the floor. If this didn't knock him out, nothing would. Fortunately, he flinched, his eyes rolling back in his head and he lay very still.

Floundering to her feet, each second feeling like it was her last, Danielle sprinted to where Bjorn still lay. He turned to look at her when she crouched above his head and snaked her arms under his armpits. With a grunt, she lifted his torso off the floor and started to drag him back toward the stairs. The tunnel...if she reached it, they might stand a chance.

The tennis shoes squeaked, the shirt's seams behind her shoulders ripped open but she worked through it all, the burning pain in her bleeding thigh, the desperation of saving Bjorn. Her sire. The man she loved, dammit.

"Come on, come on," she repeated as she made it toward the stairs.

The whole while, she kept an eye for the black backpack. It could go off any second. How much time did she have left? No way to know. *Just move, don't stop. Don't ever stop.*

Unbelievably, Yuan was already up and staggering toward her. Couldn't the little shit have stayed out a minute longer!

When her heels met air, she staggered down the first few steps so she could drag Bjorn over the edge with her.

Danielle wasn't sure which came first, the heat wave or the blinding flash.

As she had just pulled Bjorn over the edge, maybe five or six steps down, a wall of heat and a thunderous roar churned over their heads. A cry left her when she felt her hold on the handrail slipping, the force of the explosion and Bjorn's added weight too much for even her to withstand. Yuan leaped past her, both arms raised to cover his face.

Both she and Bjorn went tumbling back. She cushioned his fall as best she could with her own body. Each step, it would seem, drove into her, knocked her, bruised her battered frame. When they collapsed against the tunnel's cement floor, a cry of pain tore out of her. She rolled onto her back, felt for Bjorn by her side and found his arm, warm and moving faintly, and when he squeezed her hand, she returned it tenfold.

"Ouch, shit," she muttered as she tried to get up. Something had broken in her arm, no doubt about it.

Smoke and debris floated down to them, and the heat was soon becoming too much to bear. They had to leave quickly. With a long groan, she cradled her arm and meant to sit.

A fist blocked out everything. Stars exploded in her visual cortex. When she could see again, Yuan was straddling her middle and wrapping his hands around her throat. Air stopped coming. Warning messages flashed across her mind's eye where the wet-wired files clicked in place.

She punched him in the face, winced when her knuckles shredded against his bared fangs, and forced her mind to clear despite the armada of warning bells telling her she didn't have long, not long at all, before lack of oxygen would deprive her of any chance for survival. And she had just one arm. The sneaky, little bastard!

With tiny pixelated suns bursting in her vision, some of them acid-green for the night vision lens and others just plain bright white, Danielle grappled one-armed with him. A thought sliced through her turbulent mind—what if he managed to kill her? What of Bjorn? He was wounded, would need to feed so he could heal.

Feed...

One last shred of energy ignited her overloading systems. Danielle bucked and propelled Yuan a meter or so to the side. While she blocked a left hand chop, she fisted his hair, hissing at the pain in her broken forearm and its awful crunching noise, and dragged him down. After she rolled onto her side, taking Yuan with her, she shoved him up to Bjorn's face, very close.

"You're going to do some good for the first time in your life," she snarled.

Yuan desperately tried to straight-arm some distance between his face and the dangerous centuries-old vampire's mouth.

Bjorn must have sensed her intent for he wrapped an arm around Yuan's neck and squeezed tight, trapping the lithe man against his chest in a headlock. Her sire's magnificent fangs gleamed for a split second before they disappeared in Yuan's throat. Blood bubbled, frothed pink. He thrashed, flailed, punched Bjorn. To no avail.

Nanotech couldn't help Yuan as the seven-hundred-year-old vampire drained the life out of him. Danielle watched on, not a single shred of compassion elicited from the rapidly diminishing cries.

Yuan's enhanced blood would sustain her sire for a good while, even if the nanobots, now severed from the rest of the system, would shut down and be excreted through the body's natural process. She watched Bjorn's cheeks turn concave.

"Here," Bjorn said as he lowered Yuan toward her. "You need to feed as well."

Danielle didn't even try to be careful as she clamped her jaws on what portion of Yuan's throat hadn't already been punctured, shredded or slashed. She fed rapidly, brutally, feeling the shot of compatible nanobots readily be absorbed within her system. The rest would just be flushed out.

With smoke now billowing over their heads in angry, swirling fists, she released Yuan and crawled against the wall, pulled herself up to a sitting position and leaned her forehead against her raised knees. Pain in her thigh flared but she could already feel the nanobots working at her, like the needling of blood coming back to a numb arm, repairing tissue, and this, coupled with her vampire nature also healing itself to some degree, told Danielle she'd be okay.

Bjorn finished Yuan and when he grew still, when his arms rested against the vampire sire's shoulders in a poignant parody of a lover's embrace, Danielle got to her knees. Coughing and squinting, she spotted Bjorn's face emerging from his feeding. The hunger still darkened his eyes to that sinister gray so utterly different from the sparkling blue of his more good-humored nature.

"We have to leave before they figure a way in," he croaked, coughed then gently let Yuan roll off him.

Bjorn stood first, obviously restored somewhat and offered his hand to Danielle.

"You've been shot," she began, searching with her gaze for bullet holes but finding none.

"Just a graze." He rubbed at his bleeding scalp and winced. "Let's go."

Fingers intertwined, they jogged down the length of the tunnel, coughing at the smoke and debris floating down from the blazing inferno above. A loud, crumbling noise announced parts of the massive structure collapsing.

"Hurry," Bjorn urged. "This way."

He grabbed her numb hand and pulled her with him down a perpendicular corridor that seemed to Danielle's dazed mind to be going down deeper underground. She didn't know Hamburg's station, trusted Bjorn implicitly anyway. And he seemed to

be feeling much better than before, much better than herself actually, despite the quick feeding.

Along the wall, a couple of doors with signs she couldn't read broke the monotony of bricks. Bjorn pulled at one of the doors, cursed when it refused to budge then put his shoulder to it. It gave on the first try. With a half snarl, half wince, he dived in the embrasure, Danielle hot on his heels, just as a group of black-clad soldiers were rounding the corner. A wide riot shield heralded the single-file squad.

Danielle sighed as she closed the ruined door behind her. The soldiers had been too occupied clearing the other corridors before theirs and hadn't seen them. She'd *know* if they had.

The smell of cigarette smoke and disinfectant made her wince as they stood in some sort of cleaning crew compartment.

"There."

Bjorn grabbed her hand again. They climbed some steps. She couldn't see them clearly. Her eyes were watery from her encounter with O'Leary's "dismissal order". When he opened a steel door that led to a balcony and pure, smoke-free air, Danielle leaned against the wall and breathed in deeply.

Her broken arm cradled against her chest, she drew in a deep breath. "We can't take the trains anymore. We need to find wheels."

Bjorn leaned into her and kissed her forehead. He guided her gaze with his as he pointed down at the alley below them where a dark Land Rover gleamed in the rain. "Exactly. But this time, we're getting something bigger."

Chapter Ten

Rain made halos in the windshield as streetlights zipped by overhead. When a circular sign bearing the word “Zoll--Douane” emerged from the gloom and into his headlight’s reach, he checked the clock on the dashboard. 21:04 gleamed muted amber back at him. They were in Denmark now, with Germany already far behind.

Only twenty or so kilometers before the deserted toll station—remnants of pre-EU days—one hundred before Frederikshaven’s ferry, a night to cross the Skagerrak channel then finally Oslo, Norway. Home.

Their luck had held for the entire day. A comfortable, *large* vehicle with a tank capable of taking them right to the ferry, a pharmacy right off the autobahn to get supplies for Danielle’s numerous wounds and a fast-food place right across the way for some much needed fluids. With the clothes he had in his battered but intact backpack, they’d been able to change into fresh ones that didn’t smell like smoke or bear large rips and bloodstains, and wash the blood off their faces. A bloody and ripped shirt was a sure way to attract all the wrong attention. Something they couldn’t afford in their state.

Bjorn had decided he’d leave the Land Rover at a hopefully crowded parking lot by the ferry so its rightful owner could at least get it back. He’d get another vehicle on the other side. An honest transaction this time, for he knew people in Norway. They wouldn’t ask questions.

Checking in the mirror for the nth time, Bjorn sighed in relief. He’d been so scared Danielle was beyond help. But after tending to her injuries, nasty but non life-threatening, he’d patched her up and had told her to lie in the back of the SUV. To his surprise, she hadn’t argued, hadn’t even looked like she wanted to, and had just complied. She’d been asleep within minutes.

He realized that in their fifty-some hours together, she hadn’t slept once. He at least had been knocked unconscious—not asleep but still—and had recently fed. With her pair of failed attempts and the quick bite to that heinous little man, Danielle hadn’t benefited from enough sleep or sustenance.

When the signs announcing the ferry became closer together, he called Danielle’s name. She woke immediately and sprang up behind the last seat like a jack-in-a-box. Static from the carpeted floors made her bleached hair stand on end.

“We’re nearing the ferry,” Bjorn said, looking at his sleepy Athena in the rearview mirror. The black turtleneck underlined her beautiful face. Bjorn had to force his gaze back on the road before he crashed the expensive toy.

Climbing over the two rows of leather seats, a barefooted Danielle swung a leg over the armrest and settled in the passenger bucket seat. Both layers of leather from her

jacket and the seat cover squeaked and triggered an amazingly fast response from his ever-alert cock...ever alert when Danielle was near.

Rubbing her face hard, she yawned and stretched. "How long?"

"In about an hour."

She stared at him open-mouthed. "You let me sleep *all day!*"

He grinned a lopsided one and let a fang show. "So you're rested for tonight. I've had all day to think about you."

A chuckle confirmed he'd be having a great time tonight!

Bjorn gripped the wheel harder, his foot instinctively heavier than a second ago. The Land Rover lurched forward with the sudden acceleration. He wanted to get to that ship, slam the door to their cabin and fuck all night like dogs in heat. And as soon as they landed in Norway the next day, both would need to feed. That Yuan character's enhanced blood would sustain them until they reached Norway—therefore safe territory—but not much longer than that.

Bright streetlights illuminated the dock and the soon-to-depart ferry. Making sure he parked in the crowded part of the lot—hidden in plain sight—Bjorn grabbed his backpack, made sure everything was in it and followed Danielle around the back as she retrieved her shoes.

After she slammed the tailgate and turned around, Bjorn crowded her against the vehicle, his hands planted firmly on either side of her shoulders, his hips rubbing against hers. He knew she could feel his erection, which was precisely what he wanted. As he trapped her willing gaze in his, he let a hand reach out and caress her face, the high cheekbone and sculpted ridge over her eyes.

Her gaze never wavered in intensity as he lowered his hand to her throat, the space between her rising breasts then down against her belly, exposed to his touch through the sweater she hadn't bothered to tuck in. Goose bumps rose in his fingers' wake. He could feel the tiny mounds of flesh rising excitedly as he passed back over the same area, teasing her skin, teasing his as well and frothing his lust into frenzy. A quickly stifled gasp escaped her when Bjorn's fingers reached up to a nipple and trapped it. Rubbing mercilessly, he pressed his pelvis harder against hers, movement she facilitated by spreading her thighs slightly, just so his knee would fit in between. How he wanted her!

But when Bjorn released her breast so he could snake his hand down past the waist of her jeans, she looked around, the green tint in her right eye gleaming for a split second.

"Do you want me to stop?"

She scanned the car-packed but traveler-deserted lot again then shook her head. Most passengers were already waiting inside the terminal. As should Danielle and he if he hadn't started playing with his self-discipline!

Following the contour of her strong figure, he curved his hand in until his middle finger encountered that one tight, wet place he wanted to sink his cock in, which pulsed at the mere thought. Liquid silk already drenched her sex. So ready, so inviting.

Bjorn leaned into her neck, breathed on the tender skin and allowed himself the luxury of a swift flick of his tongue—very quickly so the hunger wouldn't tug at him. No words were needed as she let her head rest against the glass, offering her throat for him to take—which he wouldn't, not now anyway—in one of the most gratifying, heart-swelling displays of love and trust any woman could ever show him. There had never been anyone like her, would never *be* anyone like her.

"Thank you, my love," he murmured below her ear.

Bringing his fingers out, he put the first two to his mouth and licked her nectar off them. "Just a quick appetizer so I can last until supper."

She kissed him hard, left him on the brink of collapse then pushed him off gently but firmly. "And you're not going to get any supper if you have dessert right now."

"Oh you..."

Bjorn followed her swaying behind to the terminal where he bought two passenger fares to Oslo. Within minutes, the busy, smoky lounge emptied as people filed out of the rusty sliding door to the docking bay. Concrete glistened with rain and sea foam. Beyond the balustrade, Bjorn spotted whitecaps forming over the churning sea. The crossing would be momentous then, with winds probably approaching fifteen knots, barely force four on the Beaufort scale. Nothing to worry about for him, but Danielle may need some reassurance. He turned to tell Danielle about this particular arm of the North Sea, which he knew like the back of his hand—but noticed how excited she looked. Her eyes flared as did her nostrils as she surveyed the fretting strips of water slapping the ferry's hull berthed at the end of the cement platform.

"Have you ever lived by the sea?"

She shook her head. When other passengers caught up to the pair, Danielle scowled and moved on with obvious reluctance.

Desire for Danielle only accentuated at her open love of the sea. Cringing against the ache in his balls, Bjorn lengthened his pace. The quicker he reached that damn cabin, the longer he could feast on Danielle.

A pair of women walked by to his right, passed and turned back to look at him. One seemed to notice his monstrous erection for she stared down at that area, nudged her companion, who followed the intent gaze. Bjorn only winked as they tried to fight the smiles forming on their faces.

His grin crystallized at the edges when he spotted over people's heads a uniformed man standing by the ferry's gangplank, a two-way radio in hand. Danielle slowed down beside him, rubbed shoulders when she angled her face toward his. "Norwegian police?"

"No, port authority." Shit, he'd never seen one of them on the passenger-only ferries before. A bead of sweat snaked down his back.

As they drew nearer, he felt Danielle tense beside him. By Odin, if she didn't control her response, she'd look like a junkie in withdrawal! The port official would surely notice and ask questions, or at the very least, delay them long enough that they'd miss the only crossing for the day. There'd be no end to the ensuing nastiness as he and Danielle would have to fight their way back out of the terminal.

And *then* what?

They couldn't stay in Denmark, couldn't very well return to Germany. If they weren't caught trying to steal another car or fuel the one they'd already stolen, surely someone would recognize her despite the changed hair, which was a Band-Aid on a sucking chest wound at best.

No, he thought after a while, her method might be the best under the circumstances. If it came to that, he'd break the guy's neck and dump him in the water, hoping no one would notice...at least until the ferry was well on its way across the channel. They'd swim the last few hundreds of meters if they had to. He knew he could, and had no doubt as to Danielle's abilities.

Forcing his mind to clear, Bjorn grabbed her hand in his and squeezed. "I love you. No matter what."

She looked tired and frustrated...not a good combination. But when she looked up into his eyes, her gaze was clear and strong. "I love you too."

They were the last passengers to reach the platform and embark on the ferry. The port official, much smaller than Bjorn but imbued with the intensity of a boxer, turned to greet them. Green eyes like a cat's stared right through Bjorn as he surveyed him and Danielle. His nostrils flared then his mouth parted. A very faint notch, not even clear enough to be a cleft lip, pulled his mouth in an annoying quasi sneer. Thick, male musky scent reached Bjorn's sensitive nose and quickened his heartbeat. The fucking jerk was lusting after Danielle!

"Papers," he said with a thick Eastern European accent—Polish perhaps—the R rolling at the back of the throat. Raw passion and intense masculine energy emanated from the man and Bjorn couldn't help but admire such vigor, even if the guy might have to die for it.

While Bjorn dug in his jeans pocket for his wallet, the official set his burning gaze on Danielle, continuing his visual disrobing of her, who in turn just hooked her thumbs in the back pocket of her jeans and stared right back. Rage and jealousy forced Bjorn into a wrestling match with his self-control. He'd like nothing better right then than to put his fist into the arrogant face.

Smug jerk. Faen heller of a fuck, half-portion, little shit who I could break in half. Eat three like him for breakfast, the no-good, fucking piece of DNA reject — ah, there it was.

Fuming, Bjorn nearly ripped his pocket when he pulled the wallet out. He flipped it open and flashed right it in the guy's face, imagining it was his fist.

“Very well,” came the too-fast reply.

He hadn’t even looked at the goddamn ID! Too busy picturing Danielle naked, no doubt. Speaking of which, he hadn’t even asked for hers.

And that’s when Bjorn Follesdaal, for the first time in centuries, lost his composure over something as simple as a look. He could endure much, *had* endured much—witch hunts, riots, angry mobs, wars, betrayals and even the occasional hired gun—but the way this man looked at Danielle, like she was his, like she’d ever *be* his, the arrogant little shit, made Bjorn’s blood just boil.

Taking a threatening step forward, he looked down his nose at the port official and bared his fangs. “I suggest you keep you eyes to yourself, friend, if you want to keep them in your skull.”

If the guy was afraid, he didn’t let it show. Instead, he looked up, way up, into Bjorn’s face and stared back. Bright green gems gleamed in the gloom of the embarkation area. Slowly, his radio came up to his lips. Then his mouth twisted in a sardonic grin. Revealing a pair of pearly white, very sharp-looking fangs.

“All in order, you may lift the gate,” he said in the radio.

A second before the gate swung up, the port official stepped off the ferry, his tight, solid body moving with the agility of a dancer but with the raw power of a panther. He turned and stared at them as the handrail collapsed and allowed a thick steel plate to close off the gap so the ferry could pull away from the dock and begin the night-long journey across the channel. After a while, the figure disappeared inside the terminal.

When he looked back at Danielle, Bjorn noticed she wore the same expression undoubtedly showing on his own face. Bewilderment.

“Did you know him?”

Bjorn shook his head.

Danielle scratched her head. She looked so tired. “Man, how many of us are out there?”

“Too many, it would seem.”

Chapter Eleven

Danielle winced as she tried to fight the urge to scratch her arm. The sensation of a thousand needles piercing her skin accentuated while the nanobots worked to repair the torn tissue and broken bone. With Bjorn's excellent first-aid techniques, it was already on its way back to partial usability. She estimated another twenty-three hours before she could use it fully again. Not bad. O'Leary's project may have been scary, but there were good side effects to dying and being reborn into...

What was she anyway? She'd been injected with some sort of genetically tampered, weaponized strain of vampirism. So she'd become what, a transhuman? Part machine, part vampire, part woman. Would there be a part of her, later in her future—if she had any—that would win the three-way tug-of-war, would detach and demark from the rest? And would that sliver start killing off the other ones? She felt part of a biotech Mexican standoff with—instead of guns—DNA sequences pointing at her head.

The worst part of it all was that O'Leary would never give up now, not with a ten percent success rate. Yuan and she had survived out of twenty, had crowned project *Immortalis*, and as such, O'Leary would find more funding to continue his quest for the ultimate weapon. Carbon-based, undetectable and near-immortal. And this time, he'd make sure it didn't turn against him. She could just imagine the sort of twisted experiments necessary to ensure complete and utter fealty, and felt a twinge of guilt that someone else, some other keen careerist like herself, would clean up her mess.

Danielle shrugged. It didn't matter much. Not with Bjorn as her companion.

She peeked at him as he charmed his way into one of the larger cabins near the front, though he'd only paid for regular fare. Blushing like a schoolgirl, the female attendant patted her silver hair and smiled up at him. No, *beamed* would be more appropriate. With a bit more smiling and thanking, Bjorn let the woman show them to their cabin.

After she'd left, one last lustful look behind, he opened the door, peeked inside and waited as Danielle stepped into the darkened closet. For this was indeed a closet. A glorified, ultra-expensive *closet*. Actually, she'd been to houses where the closets were bigger than this. But right now, after the hellish journey they'd gone through, it looked like a maharajah's palace to her.

"And here we have a sink made of imported enamel, complete with faux-rustic chrome faucets," Bjorn said, running his hand like a model would on a new car. The faucet creaked when he turned it on full blast. He stuck his hand under the trickle and stood there, gazing at the ceiling as though waiting for divine inspiration.

"Let me guess," Danielle said, too tired to laugh but wanting to. "Not a drop of hot water."

He shook his head theatrically.

"Well," Danielle said, meaning to slip her jacket off her shoulders and let it drop where it may. "I don't care. I'm washing his stink off me if I have to use toilet water."

Bjorn pretended to gag. "Please don't."

She managed a quick grin. The guy was just unflappable.

He dropped the backpack on the narrow bunk, drew near then pulled the jacket back over her shoulders. "There's something I want to show you before I let you bathe in the toilet. Come."

She leaned against the bulkhead as he locked the door, followed him out of the tight corridor, dodging emergency equipment cases, and stepped out onto the deck where a crescent moon and dirty yellow pot lights barely illuminated the way. Not a soul to be seen. No one in his or her right mind would go out onto the deck. Especially in the dead of night. Everything glowed lime green on the right side of her vision. Even the frothy caps on the water. She blinked.

Bjorn wrapped his dry and warm hand over hers and led her to the back of the ship where the powerful wake created even more foamy crests over the waves. She salivated with the sudden craving for a tongue-burning hot, frothy cappuccino.

Tiny lights like yellow stars twinkled in the night as the Danish terminal receded into a jagged line. Wind buffeted her face when she meant to speak. A shiver shook her.

Bjorn leaned against the railing with his back to the sea, his hair in his face. A subtle nod and Danielle joined him, let him wrap his arms around her, let his warmth seep into her tired and aching body. Despite the heaviness settling in her limbs, Danielle's core heated with the close physical contact. She closed her eyes when a wave of desire tingled along her arms and thighs. In the tennis shoes, her naked toes curled in tightly.

"Have you ever lived by the sea?" he asked again after a while. His deep voice rumbled in his chest as she pressed her ear to it.

"No. You have, obviously." She felt him nod.

"I was born in a fishing village, as I told you it's gone now. But back then it was called Fallhavn, and we were mostly all fishermen."

Danielle chuckled. Theory confirmed.

"Why are you laughing?" he asked, trying to look into her face through the loose strands of her partially undone French braid.

"Because the first time I saw you, I pictured you at the helm of fishing boat. You *looked* like a fisherman to me."

"At the helm, huh?" She didn't know how, but she knew he was smiling. "And what was I doing at the helm of a fishing boat?"

Embarrassment flushed her cheeks. She'd imagined him half naked, jeans barely holding onto his hips, his strong back bent over lobster cages or some such nonsense. She shrugged. "I just pictured you, that's all."

She let him force her chin up with firm fingers. Despite the night, she could spot his eyes darkening, his mouth twisting up in one corner. A gleaming point peeked out through the seam of his lips. "What did you picture me doing? Was I alone or were you there with me?"

Silly woman. She'd been too caught up in the vision back then to include herself in the fantasy. Danielle quickly remedied the issue and put a vision of her standing by Bjorn at the helm of that fishing vessel. She didn't even know *what* a fishing vessel looked like, but in her fantasy, it didn't matter anyway.

"You were standing, looking out over the sea. There was wind in your hair."

"Like this?" he asked, shifting them both until he stood looking out and she was wedged between the railing and his body.

Not quite, but much better this way in fact. Danielle nodded.

"What else?"

Though he was gazing out over the sea, she could feel his keen awareness on her, burning her, *branding* her. "You were showing me something in the distance."

Bjorn gently turned her around so she faced seaward as well. His thigh pried a home between hers. "Was I doing something else or just pointing?"

The point of irony needled her to up the ante. "Your hands were on me."

Danielle gripped the railing when Bjorn's hands closed over her hips and squeezed hard. While one remained immobile, he cautiously snaked the other under her injured arm and around her waist for a one-arm hug.

"Go on. I was touching you. What else?"

In fact, her fantasy hadn't bloomed into anything more than just him reeling in something heavy just so his muscles would bulge with the effort. But she could come up with additions aplenty. *Pas de problèmes*.

Those big hands. Danielle grinned. "Your hand...it was on my breast."

She hadn't finished the sentence before Bjorn was slipping his hand underneath her turtleneck and cupping a pebble-tipped breast. His fingers soon trapped the rock-hard nipple and rolled it mercilessly. "Maybe I was doing something else? Something more?"

Oh oui, monsieur!

"Talk dirty," Danielle replied without missing a beat. "In a language I can understand," she thought good to add.

After a quick chuckle, Bjorn leaned into her ear and hooked some loose strands of hair behind it so he could clear the way. His silky lips tickled her lobe. "In your fantasy, was I going to fuck you or just talk to you?"

"Both."

"At once?"

She grinned wider.

"Very well."

While he kept her wedged between his body, his arm around her waist and the handrail, Bjorn tugged the turtleneck up over her breast, which he exposed to the cold wind. Shivers after shivers tightened her nipple impossibly hard.

"Was I telling you that I was going to undo your jeans," he said, doing just that, "and slip my hand in? I bet I did. And you liked it too. Didn't you?"

She confirmed with a nod.

Bjorn's demanding fingers skillfully splayed her lips and rubbed back and forth in an upward arc. "At that point was I about to bury my fingers in your cunt or did I wait until after I did this?"

Danielle gasped when Bjorn used his other hand to yank the collar of her turtleneck aside and let his fangs trace a sharp path down her neck. Jolts of electrifying pleasure-fear stabbed at her heart. She started panting. And when he followed with the second part of his plan, ramming a hard finger up inside her, she groaned.

His hand, returning to its implacable assault on her breast, Bjorn nudged her thighs a bit wider apart so he could slip his knee all the way to the railing. His finger in her pussy soon became two.

"Did your fantasy end then, with me finger-fucking you?"

"No," she whispered.

Bjorn used his thumb on her clit then, rubbed a series of quick, tight circles. "What was that?"

A sharp precursor of pleasure tightened her whole sex. "No," she repeated louder. "It didn't end there."

"Oh? What did I do next? This?"

Pressing the tips of his fangs against the part of throat exposed over the sweater, he stabbed his fingers in hard. Pleasure hit her in waves. His name erupted garbled from her locked jaws.

With a hand brutal yet precise, he undid and yanked her jeans down around her knees. Danielle didn't even think to help him, just stood there, clutching tightly the railing with her good hand and loosely with the other. She didn't dare move in case she'd break the spell, ruin her orgasms. Wind slapped her raw flesh, cramped her bandaged thigh.

"I must have said that I wanted to spread you wide around my cock," he went on, this time standing a bit farther behind so he could part her cheeks with his thumb. After abandoning her throbbing nipple, he slipped two fingers into his mouth and thrust back into her drenched pussy.

"*Oui*," she cried out, not caring if she woke the dead. Or the living.

"In your fantasy, was I gentle? Was I rubbing your clit?" He blew on the nape of her neck, caressed her exposed butt while he slipped in and out of her. "Or did I just take you hard?"

He pulled his hand out, unbuttoned his jeans then parted her wide with his thumbs. His cock ramming into her forced a sharp, little yelp from Danielle. Another orgasm gushed out of her swelled pussy.

"Was it too much? Did you cry out for me to stop?" Bjorn demanded in her ear as he pulled out almost completely. "And did I listen?"

Danielle bucked back against him. His cock stretched her as taut as she could possibly go.

"I'll take that as a no."

She felt every vein as Bjorn slowly drove back into her aching, drenched cleft, pulled out to the thick tip then shoved in again. Danielle felt like a village being plundered and pillaged by this fierce vampire Viking...and loved every second of it!

"Did I tell you that I was going to ram my cock in you, standing like this, with people watching until I made you scream my name?"

The thought of people watching from their portholes served as a stimulant to her already fired senses. *Were* they really?

After a particularly violent stab upward, which nearly lifted her heels off the deck, Bjorn leaned over her back, wrapped his arm around her waist and held her close. She felt his burning seed dribble down her thighs.

"In your mind, Danielle, my goddess of war," he murmured, "Did I tell you how much I loved you? And that I'd give up everything in a heartbeat just to be near you?"

The sudden change soothed her raw nerves, strengthened her shaking legs. Tears came unabashed. She squeezed her eyes shut and let them roll down her feverish cheeks. "The Bjorn in my head didn't know me well enough for that."

"This one does," he countered, slipping out and lightly sheathing his still-hard erection along her cleft. "And he'd tell her that he'd love nothing better than spend the rest of his long life with her."

A life of what? Looking over their shoulders? Afraid O'Leary's men would track them again and try to get at her? If that now destroyed file came back somewhere else and she couldn't find it soon enough... What if? *What if?* Bjorn would stand in the way, of course, and get himself killed. Just as he'd almost done. Was this the sort of life he wanted? Hiding in Norway would last only so long. The enemy would soon discover that neither had died in the explosion. Sooner or later they'd find her. They'd come.

Danielle couldn't speak for the lump in her throat. "They'll never stop looking for me."

"Like you said once, let them come."

And he meant every word.

Let — them — come.

He'd show them how vampires dealt with pesky little hunter-wannabes. He'd show them how Bjorn Follesdaal dealt with people who threatened those he loved. They

wanted his blood and now they wanted his beloved. He'd give them something else. If it was a war they wanted, they'd be served. When Danielle was rested and ready, he just might take the war they had begun to their doorstep. See how they liked being the prey.

Bjorn ruminated those dark thoughts of blood and revenge as he helped Danielle back into her jeans and into the ship. She stumbled several times on the way. No sea legs apparently. He'd have to change that. Maybe buy a sailboat and travel the world? Or at least spend romantic weekends on it, moored somewhere far enough so she could scream to her heart's content. This last thought brought a proud smile to his lips. How he loved hearing his name as she twisted in the throes of passion. No other music like it.

He held the door for her as she passed, blonde hair deliciously tousled, her strikingly dark eyebrows arching up high at his gallantry.

"That's how it used to be done, you know. Women never used to open doors."

Enjoying the threatening look she threw his way, Bjorn closed and locked the door. "Now," he said, flicking the bathroom light on. "You can use the toilet to bathe if you want."

She just made a face at him then cringed as though something had hurt her.

"The hunger?"

She nodded. "Like I have heartburn."

"Tomorrow morning as soon as we dock, we'll feed. Unless you think you won't last until then?" She looked drawn and pale. Perhaps he could...

Bjorn rolled his sleeve up over his elbow and approached her. "Here, I can spare some."

A look of wounded pride flashed in her eyes. "Absolutely not. I pull my own weight. I'll be fine until tomorrow, but we'll have to find someone quick, okay? If not, I just might go for the first one who comes close enough. Any crusty old guy will do."

Her attempt at lightening the mood was touching. Yet her refusal to feed off him left him a bit wounded. He trusted her to take only what was necessary. Obviously, she didn't trust herself. That or she'd taken his "lesson" in the steam room to heart.

"I trust you," he said. The crook of his elbow was close to her mouth.

She closed her eyes and forced a valiant grin. "Thanks. I'll keep you for dessert. For now I just want to wash Yuan's stink off me."

Bjorn reached out and pinched her leather jacket's lapel, parted it wider over her chest. Nipples showed under the thin knit. "You can let *me* do it."

How could he want Danielle again so soon after he'd just lost himself in her? The poor woman could hardly stand for the fatigue and exhaustion of the last days. And perhaps more from the last few minutes. Manly pride swelled his chest.

The vampire's hunger hardened her gaze, dug dark circles under her eyes. She'd need to feed soon. She managed a tired grin and a shrug. "Do your worst."

Bjorn yanked the bedspread off one of the narrow bunks—first class indeed—and indicated she should lie down on it, which she did with a big, contented sigh.

He hadn't turned his back on her for a minute that her eyes closed and her chest rose with a slow, deep rhythm.

Bjorn padded out of the cabin, locked the door behind him and made his way through the deserted ship. Fighting the urge to whistle in satisfaction, he climbed up the rusted stairs and emerged into the brightly lit but deserted kitchen. A pair of cooks leaned against the stainless steel counter. One, the woman, spotted him and straightened right away. A deep blush rose to her cheeks. Her colleague looked up to see who was intruding on his break and smirked before resuming his relaxed pose. A yellow stain marred his white apron.

"What can I do for you, sir?" the female cook inquired, her gaze avoiding his for a bit before boldly coming back and settling there. Her hair was dark red under the net.

Bjorn smiled, feeling like a conspirator. Over her shoulder, he noticed a tiny porthole that seemed to open out onto the back of the ship, right onto the deck he'd just spent a very pleasurable time with Danielle. Ah, now he knew who'd been watching.

Grinning, he winked at the female cook, who blushed even deeper, then leaned an elbow over the glass compartment holding stale-looking desserts. "Would it be possible to get a pot of hot water? For tea?"

His gaze flicked to the coffee machine where just such a pot rested on a heater. The male cook shook his head "no" a split second before his colleague rushed over and retrieved the pot for Bjorn. She wrapped a dishcloth around the handle and handed it to him over the counter.

"Be careful, sir. It's very hot."

"That's all right, I like it very hot."

Grinning wide, he returned to his cabin and found Danielle in the exact same position as he'd left her. Only her mouth had opened and a soft snort rustled the otherwise complete silence. He wouldn't miss the chance later on to tell her she snored.

Bjorn put the plug in the sink and poured the steaming water in. A few drops of cold satisfied him that it'd stay hot long enough.

Gently, he tugged Danielle's jacket and jeans off, followed by the turtleneck. She grumbled and cursed but didn't open an eye. Her nakedness stirred his lust again and strained his jeans, but Bjorn clenched his teeth and focused on the task of cleaning Danielle, something he hadn't the chance to do when he'd bandaged her wounds.

Thankfully whatever technology allowed her to kick through steel doors also made it possible for her to heal amazingly fast. The deep bite mark on her thigh, which had so troubled him, had all but closed, even thinned to a pink line in places. As for her broken arm, he could tell just by the firmness that it was healing as well, for which he was deeply grateful. Seeing her hurt and bleeding wasn't something he dealt with very well.

Using the dishcloth and some of the shampoo he'd shoved in the toiletries bag before rushing out of his house, he gently ran it over her neck and shoulders, down and under her arms. He went back again, this time spending a bit more time washing her chest and waist, which triggered a massive erection he knew he couldn't possibly sate any time soon. But when he ran the soapy and hot cloth on the insides of her thighs, Danielle moaned and spread them a bit wider. Gleaming temptingly, her nether lips poked out of the fine strip of dark curly hair. Such glossy invitation.

His breath caught in his throat. Bjorn finished the job with narrowed eyes and clenched teeth, but succumbing to the temptation, he came back to her thighs, so muscular and smooth as to look like a pair of twin alabaster columns, and ran the cloth slowly over her mons in an upward movement. Another deep moan wafted out of her parted mouth.

Bjorn noticed how Danielle's nipples shrank into tight little buds the color and consistency of dark pink opals. He was bending over and wrapping his lips around one before he registered he'd moved.

Torn between satiating his lust and letting her rest, Bjorn very lightly licked her areola, the tip of his tongue barely touching her skin. She arched her back and lolled her head to face the wall. After dunking and wringing it again, he brought the hot, wet dishcloth over her mons and let it rest there so her flesh would soak up the liquid heat. Soon, another tiny moan rewarded his touch.

Bjorn knelt by the bunk, by small increments pulled the leg that dangled over the edge wider then let her foot rest on the floor. Danielle sighed and put an arm over her face. He kept her from rolling to her side by pressing his palm against her shoulder. His hand had soon drifted lower to her breast where he let the pads of his fingers dust her silky skin in a butterfly's touch.

Snarling a curse in Norwegian—always an indication of imminent loss of self-control—Bjorn stripped, drained the sink then washed himself with icy-cold water, lamenting the lack of a real shower. The last time he'd had a real shower was on the train the day before. Or was it the one before that? It was all a blur. But he did remember, and clearly, his encounter in the steam room. The vivid images wafted into his mind, shredded the last bits of resolve to which he clung. He looked back at Danielle, now positively sprawled on the bunk with her knee turned outward and exposing her cleft to his hungry eyes. And his hungrier mouth.

Just a taste, he swore to himself. He wouldn't wake her.

Lust rising in fiery chills up from his belly to his chest and throat, Bjorn leaned over her knee and descended pushup-like over her belly. He let his lips graze softly the smooth skin, followed a crease here, a little scar there, before dipping low below her navel, past the velvety strip and beneath the curve of her pussy. The smells of shampoo and female musk forced his eyes closed. A deep breath made him salivate—literally *drool*.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered against her ebony fleece.

With a sigh, Danielle shifted faintly.

Still in an awkward half-standing pushup, his shoulders banded to keep his weight off her, he lowered himself farther until his mouth reached Danielle's gleaming sex. He gazed at it a while, wanting to run his fingers over the skin like crumpled silk sheets but knowing she'd wake—therefore Bjorn denied himself so he could continue his gentle caress of his slumbering Athena.

Shaking with the effort of keeping his upper body hovering over her legs, Bjorn ran his lips over hers, left to right, up and down. A tiny pearl soon poked out amid the succulent flesh and he literally had to bite his lip to keep from lapping it into a quivering orgasm. Instead, he waited until the pearl had retreated in its sheath. Pure torture!

Danielle made faint, little wet sounds with her mouth. He spent a while looking at her mouth so he could regain some measure of control over his yearning.

Bjorn forced his mouth to be featherlight as he blew kisses across her sex when in fact he felt an overwhelming urge to devour her until she begged him to stop. And while images of his ravishing her with his mouth and tongue played in his mind, he compelled his body, dominated his nature, to use the utmost gentleness when easing the tip of his tongue between her folds. Locating it, he used centuries of self-control to tenderly, ever so gently stroke life into the tiny bud. Like a flower, Danielle's pussy bloomed out for him, as though waiting to receive his love.

Bjorn nearly stopped it all right there with a potent swipe of his aching tongue. By Odin, he wanted to! Wanted to stretch her wide and sink his tongue in, rub his fingers in her juices and smear her scent all over her inner thighs so he could lick it all up again. She smelled so deliciously tempting, so damn near impossible to deny...she smelled like a *woman*. Not a girl. A woman. *His*.

Showing more discipline than even he thought himself capable of, Bjorn fought against the rampaging urges and concentrated all his skill into his next move. First left then right, he worked his tongue upward to her engorged bud. If Danielle hadn't woken so far, her clitoris surely had!

To his keen vampire senses, Danielle's pulse throbbed right beneath her hooded pearl and teased him into a matching rhythm with his tongue. But he didn't yield, for doing so would wake her, and he'd gotten into his mind not to and let her rest. This didn't mean he wouldn't sate his hunger. He would.

His shoulders ready to pop with the strain, Bjorn used his tongue like a pianist would for a subtle, difficult note and applied just the right amount of pressure to elicit a reaction from Danielle's body without alerting her consciousness.

In a crescendo of quickening yet soft strokes, Bjorn triggered a tightening in her glistening flesh.

"That's it, my love," he breathed against her. "Come for me."

His reward doubled when he positioned his tongue to receive her climax and nectar flowed past his lips and into his mouth. Hungrily, he lapped it all, didn't waste a precious drop.

Moaning softly and turning her head, Danielle let out a long sigh. Her nipples looked hard and called out to him, begged him to imprison them in his mouth and fingers. He wanted nothing more. His cock demanded her pussy, her mouth. He wanted her against a wall, on her back, on her knees.

He sighed. "You have no idea the power you have over me, Danielle."

A faint shiver created a scree of goose bumps along her inner thighs then Danielle shifted, trying to bring them closer together.

Pushing thoughts of his claiming her right then and there, of pumping into her tight, inviting cunt and forcing her to scream her sire's name again and again, Bjorn closed his eyes and slowed his ragged breathing.

After a short while, he pulled himself up and away so she could find a more comfortable position. He tucked the blankets over her, making sure to stroke her nipples goodnight.

He'd done what he'd set out to do. She'd come into his mouth and never knew she did.

Feeling proud and powerful, Bjorn claimed the other bunk and let his imagination run free with images of Danielle on her knees, sucking his cock while he watched.

Chapter Twelve

Danielle braided her *blonde* hair back and tied it with the piece of string. She'd need to get some elastic before she decided to chop it all off. *Whoa, cold.* A strong gust slapped her face when she stepped off the ferry and looked around. She felt at home as soon as she set foot on the pier and checked behind her as Bjorn crossed the gangway with a bounce to his step. And that satisfied smirk, where did it come from?

The crossing from Denmark to Norway had taken a bit longer than anticipated because of the wind, and so midmorning had already come and gone by the time they stepped out of the Oslo terminal.

And she'd slept the entire time, only occasionally half waking from the most erotic dreams she'd ever had. Her sex still throbbed with the dissipating memories.

"Now," Bjorn said as he drew near and wrapped his large hand over her shoulder. "You need to feed."

The vampire thirst burned in her throat, made her teeth feel loose and sensitive. She agreed with a nod. The image of Bjorn's arm near her face needled her ego. She'd never had to rely on someone for anything and wouldn't start now, although the thought of his blood flowing in her mouth excited her.

"And this time, we do it together."

It was more a command than a question, but Danielle didn't mind. Her last two feedings hadn't exactly been stellar successes—except with Yuan—and the thought of a repeat performance needled her pride acutely. For this one time maybe she *should* follow someone else's lead.

Bjorn led her deeper inside Oslo, past a fortress Bjorn called the Akershus castle where he'd worked for a time as scribe and which was just a bit older than himself. Danielle couldn't help but stare in awe at the dark turrets and beige brickworks, not for the architecture itself, albeit magnificent, but at the image of a medieval-attired Bjorn walking its halls. Had he been the only vampire in town at that time? Had he fought hordes of torch-wielding mobs? A totally unrelated thought crossed her mind.

"Do you prefer men or women?"

Bjorn arched a blond eyebrow. "You mean in bed?"

Danielle cringed at the thought. "No, I mean to feed. Men or women? Do we...?"

"Taste the same?" he finished for her, clearly amused.

Not the gentlest way to put it, but yes that *was* what she'd meant.

"Personally, I prefer ripe women, but they're much trickier, smarter. Men of any age are easy to find and lure. Manly pride, I guess, but we don't mind walking alone at night. Women, on the other hand, don't usually walk alone much past nightfall, or if

they do, they're careful and hard to tempt. But without a doubt, they 'taste' much better. Their skin is like warm satin and their blood..."

A muscle bulged along his jaw. Danielle saw heat patterns rising in great yellow-green waves off his parted collar. The hunger called him too.

As they rounded the corner of the Akershus perimeter wall, they fell upon a group of tourists following a guide who held a blue and white sign over her head.

Bjorn grabbed Danielle's forearm, his face suddenly very tight, his eyes focused straight ahead. "There."

Danielle followed his intent gaze, sifting through the crowd until she thought she found the object of his focus. A lone woman in her forties, tall and slim, stood a bit farther back from the group.

"She'll be perfect."

Danielle narrowed her eyes. "Why? What's special about her?"

"She's not wearing the group's sticker, she's holding a map so she's obviously not with the group, otherwise she wouldn't need it. She's just tagging along to hear the guide who's speaking English, so she's not from Norway. She's wearing sensible shoes and a rain jacket and none of the others are. She prepared for this visit, bought her things in advance."

The woman occasionally checked behind her and, from the bulge at her hip, kept her purse under the jacket. Danielle nodded. The woman didn't feel safe, despite the group's proximity. She traveled alone.

A violent stab of thirst knifed at Danielle's belly. Her tongue swelled up against her front teeth, her mouth parted. Faint scents wafted in thin tendrils past her face, smells of perfume, some cheap, some not, hair products and the unmistakable tang of blood. As though every nanobot had decided to simultaneously fire a burst of electricity in her system, a spike of energy raced up her spine. A groan of pain escaped Danielle.

"It hurts," she hissed under her breath.

"We'll follow the group," Bjorn said through a fake smile, holding her hand tight and pulling her behind him.

They tailed the camera-happy tourists as they trooped past the gates to Akershus castle. But their intended target walked past, folded the map and crossed the street where she entered a café with a sign Danielle couldn't read. The hunger assailing her senses was quickly reaching unmanageable proportions. She had to feed. Soon.

A while later, time Bjorn spent with his arms wrapped around Danielle's shoulders, leaning against a bus shelter, murmuring soothing words in her ear, the woman came back out with a small paper bag in hand. They followed her some distance behind until she'd headed for a narrow street Bjorn announced he knew well.

Danielle's wet-wired brain inundated her with signals and messages that the target was acquired, attack combinations ready and systems primed. Adrenaline spiked.

"Don't let her see us coming," he warned when Danielle meant to charge across the way. She looked at him through a haze of pain and hunger-triggered tears.

"You can't let them see you coming. When they do, you see in their eyes the horror you represent to them. Believe me, it's not something you learn to live with. I can't count all those of us who ended up in asylums when the guilt finally caught up."

He left Danielle's hand and lengthened his pace. The woman didn't see him coming as she entered the narrow street. Bjorn's wide body completely hid hers when he pounced. Danielle rushed up to them just as the paper bag landed on the ground with a brittle sound.

Bjorn cradled the woman in an arm as he scooped her up behind the knees and carried her without apparent effort deeper down the alley. Danielle followed, her heart beating in her feverish brain. Fire stabbed at her gums and tongue, her throat felt raw, tight, as did her stomach. Dizziness forced her hands out toward the wall.

Bjorn let the woman's feet touch the ground and gently parted her rain jacket and shirt. "Bite delicately, as you would a ripe peach."

Fighting the urge to shred and savage the woman's throat, Danielle leaned over and bared her fangs. Heat rose up from the unconscious woman to meet her lips. The skin really did feel like warm satin.

"No need to tear the skin and hurt them. First just one fang." Bjorn's whispers soothed Danielle's fired systems. Still holding the woman against his chest he added, "then the other fang."

Danielle did as he told her and pressed one fang against the offered throat, feeling the skin give way almost immediately. At once, a warm flow of blood seeped out onto her tongue. She then angled her head so the other canine tooth punctured the flesh. Blood now flowed rhythmically in her clamped mouth. It felt warm and comforting, nourishing her hunger, appeasing her pain and left her feeling satiated in more ways than she could count.

"That's it, gently," Bjorn murmured.

A low moan rose from Danielle. The urge to shake her head and rip the woman's throat open nearly overwhelmed her. But she fought it, pushed it down, and under her sire's guidance, fed peacefully for the first time. Too soon he pried her mouth off with a gentle but firm hand and replaced it with his own. Sounds from his mouth against the satiny skin stirred lust in Danielle. She watched him feed while still holding the woman close against his chest, like a lover's embrace, until he pulled up and gently lowered her to the ground. After zipping the rain jacket back up, he arranged her on her side facing the wall and took Danielle's hand.

"Now we'll go see a friend of mine. One like us. She'll give us papers."

The feminine pronoun didn't please Danielle one bit as jealousy reared its pointy little head. But the near euphoria of the feeding created a warm sensation in the pit of her stomach and she discovered she couldn't hold onto the dark thoughts.

After a long taxi ride across town, one she couldn't help but compare to a giant fishing village, Bjorn took her to a nondescript, dark brick row house among a dozen identical to it and pressed the brass doorbell worn smooth by use. Danielle's hypersensitive hearing caught the faint chime through the oak door. It opened soon after and a stunning brunette with eyes like amber beads stuck her head out, looked both ways and stepped back so they could enter.

"It's been a while," she said in an accent Danielle couldn't place. It sounded Mediterranean. Spanish, perhaps?

"*Kalimera*, Mel," Bjorn replied with a guarded smile.

Mel threw a look at Danielle's hair, raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "I didn't know you liked fake blondes."

Before Danielle could reply—and she had a few good ones lined up—Bjorn stared down hard at Mel. His eyes darkened to that stormy gray so unsettling and sinister. "My blood flows in her veins. Danielle is my chosen."

Mel gasped, took a step back. "You sired...?" She faltered, clamped her mouth shut and took another long look at Danielle. This time, nothing but respect and admiration—and quite a bit of envy—shone in the amber eyes. She nodded. "You're a lucky woman."

"And you'll be a dead one if you don't get out of my face."

"We need papers," Bjorn said, rolling the R in the back of his throat. "Dutch and American ones."

A deep blush rose to Mel's tanned cheeks. She turned on her heels. What had to be the curviest ass in the whole city—peopled with pole-thin Norwegians—swayed in an angry rhythm as she stormed down the corridors, the drapes hiding adjacent rooms rustling in her wake.

Too much attitude, too much jewelry, limbs with nonexistent muscle tone, too big a mouth on the sculpted face, hair way past regulations and not even tied back, heavy lashes and pulpos lips rouged like gleaming rubies...in other words, the girl was the image of beauty. Danielle snorted. Cow.

"Mel's had a rough beginning. I have to keep reminding myself of that whenever she pushes my buttons."

"Where is she from? From the temper, I'd say Italy."

A grin tugged at Bjorn's lips. "Crete. She fluently speaks about ten languages and can insult people in at least ten more."

"Yeah, mouthy little thing. So she's the papers mistress?" And bitch *du jour*.

He nodded. "Come."

Danielle followed him down the corridor where hung a vast array of portraits. Some looked extremely old. A door still ajar indicated Mel's passage. Bjorn ducked as he went down the stairs, Danielle on his heels. Smells of electrical machines and ink assaulted her nostrils. Small metallic sounds wafted from a room straight ahead. When

they entered, Danielle couldn't stifle a whistle of amazement at the machinery crowding the small place. Copier machines, printers of every known brand and caliber, computers, a photographer's bland-gray screen and a slew of other office equipment took every flat surface available. Some even sat right on the concrete floor. Electrical cords and extensions looked like skinny black octopi at regular intervals between desks and tables.

"I see you've cleaned up the place a little," Bjorn remarked as he tried to find a place to lean his shoulder and settling for the doorjamb.

Cleaned up? Had there been more stuff here? Disbelieving, Danielle entered the room a bit deeper so she could survey the expensive-looking setup Mel had going in her basement. Some of the stuff Danielle saw would have made the tech guys back on base green with envy.

"You have good gear here," she said before she remembered she hated the little bitch.

A grunt and a shrug answered her. Mel sat at one of the computers, a silver affair with half a dozen USB ports, and sifted through a multicolored glass bowl filled with memory sticks of different shapes and sizes. Her lacquered fingernails clicked against the glass and plastic in a way that irritated Danielle for no good reason other than their belonging to Mel.

"Stand against the screen," Mel muttered without looking up from the monitor. The mouse moved at dizzying speed on its frayed pad.

"That'd be me, I guess," Danielle retorted as she made her way to the gray-on-gray screen and stood with her back to it.

Mel smiled sardonically. "Say *cheeeese*."

"Say *biitch*," Danielle quipped with a big smile for the camera across the room.

A click announced the picture was done. Via her tactical lens, she spotted a spike in body heat around Mel's head and shoulders.

* * * * *

"Your papers will be ready in about two hours. Wait upstairs."

The last word sounded like "oopstairs" and made Bjorn want to smile. That the two women were ready to fight it out stimulated him to the highest degree. Foolish, male ego, but titillating just the same!

He let Danielle pass in front and devoured with a hungry gaze the strong behind all the way up the steps.

"To the right, first curtain on your left."

Danielle turned down the hall, her head twisting left and right to gaze at each painting, and poked her face in between the thick purple curtains.

"Oh fire, good," she said as she walked up to the fireplace and stuck her hands out to its flames. A long sigh swelled her chest.

Bjorn stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of her silhouetted against the amber glow, her athletic shoulders and hips curves his hands itched to touch, and with a sliver of light between her thighs he yearned to anchor with his cock. His erection tightened.

"Turn around," he said, knowing his voice must have sounded much deeper than usual. His yearning for her provoked such strong reactions in him!

Danielle did as he told her, once again establishing him as her sire and chosen one. To have this headstrong woman, his Athena, a super soldier infused with deadly technology, willingly let him dominate her tickled his senses as nothing else. He knew she couldn't best him outright in a physical confrontation, he was too old and cunning for that, but still, he realized she could give him a run for his money if she set her mind to it. The thing was, she chose not to. And this, more than anything, stoked his fire. Her favorable disposition. Her *choice*. Bjorn wanted to explore this thrilling facet and he wanted to do it right now.

She faced him squarely as he dropped the backpack by the door and crossed the room, stopping only when her chin was about to connect with his collarbone. Her eyes sparkled as though they'd been cut from obsidian.

"I want to fuck your mouth."

He used the crude words on purpose, to see if he shocked her—and in truth he shocked himself. But if he did bruise her sensibilities, Danielle didn't let it show and instead dropped to one knee where she roughly undid the fly of his jeans. Bjorn had to grip the mantelpiece with a firm hand to keep steady as she wielded his shaft in a steel grip and stretched the skin back taut. Baring her fangs, she took him all in at once. He gasped.

No woman had ever done this to him, given his size and girth. He gazed down as his cock disappeared in her mouth, emerged glistening then sank back in again. With her hands working in a counter rhythm, she soon had him curling his toes and gritting his teeth.

"Swallow me," he snarled, the sibilant whistling through his fangs.

A moan answered him and she did consent to his seed when it exploded out of him in fiery spurts. Through narrowed eyes, he watched her work her jaw, cheeks sunken, tongue rasping up under his glans as Danielle wasted not a drop, as though she were dying of some inner hunger only he could satiate. She could start devouring him and he wouldn't move a muscle. Could suck him dry and pump him for more, force his soul out through his cock and gulp him down to her heart's content. He wouldn't complain!

When he thought she was about to do just that, Danielle relinquished her fierce hold on him and looked up. "You taste like the sea."

No better compliment could be paid to him. His grin, he knew, revealed just how much he loved the woman.

Chapter Thirteen

He did taste like the sea, which she'd ample occasion to savor while he was pumping himself into her back on the ferry. And like the last time, someone else watched it all. Danielle's enhanced hearing picked up the subtle sounds of footfalls on the corridor carpet. Mel was enjoying the show apparently. So.

She didn't stay though as the faint creak of the basement door was heard, accompanied by the sound of feet going down the steps.

"She likes to watch, your friend?"

Bjorn shrugged. "I don't know Mel that well. No one does, really. I only know she used to be someone's slave—and I mean a real one, not the suburban type with the studded collar and fuzzy handcuffs. He broke one of her fangs too, right at the tip so it looks kind of like a normal tooth."

Danielle cringed at the thought of someone breaking one of her own fangs. It must have hurt like a bitch. No wonder Mel acted like one.

"Why doesn't she get it fixed? It'd only remind me of the jerk."

Another shrug. "Maybe she doesn't want to forget."

Way too deep for her. If someone broke one of her fangs, the guy had better get the hell out of her way and fast. She'd repay that kind of gift with a few broken bones.

While Bjorn pulled himself back in, Danielle gripped his muscled thighs and stood. He kissed her deeply, obviously no compunction about the taste of semen still in her mouth.

By the time he was done with her, Danielle wanted to chew his clothes off and ride him all day. Only a delicate cough behind him alerted her overloading senses that Peeping Mel had come back.

"I have your papers," she announced, proffering a pair of royal blue passports and another of a dark red shade. "American and Dutch."

Bjorn finished buttoning his fly while Danielle took the passports and examined them. She looked like grinning idiot, thanks to Mel and her smart mouth. With a muttered remark on the photographer's dubious skill, Danielle pocketed hers and noticed how Mel's hand shook when she gave Bjorn his.

The smell of fear permeated the place.

Or it did to Danielle's enhanced senses. Why would the girl be afraid of Bjorn? And then again, why *wouldn't* anyone be afraid of him in general? But in particular while he stood there quite unthreateningly, why would Mel fear him? Unless she feared what he represented, one powerful, centuries-old vampire. Maybe whoever had broken her tooth had been another older vampire like Bjorn?

"You should've broken his dick for it," Danielle blurted out before she could catch herself in time.

Mel looked like she had rocked back on her heels. After the initial shock passed in her amber eyes, a sparkle settled, ferocious and untamed. She grinned a lopsided smile at Danielle. "I broke more than his dick."

They shared a quick laugh then. And Danielle knew she'd found the real woman underneath the prickly shell.

When they left Mel's house, Danielle actually had a little pang of regret at not getting to know the smartass a little bit better. Bjorn nearly bounced down the sidewalk toward the car Mel had indicated they could take. He looked more than ready to go. A battered but spacious Mercedes-Benz with leather seats. *Heated!*

"I'm driving *this* baby," Danielle proclaimed as she grabbed the key from Bjorn and circled the gray car.

"So," Danielle asked after she'd started the engine, which purred like a giant cat, and engaged the transmission. "Where to, sir?"

"Home, James," came the extra-posh accented reply.

After a hair-raising journey through Oslo afternoon rush hour, Danielle maneuvered the car onto a quiet country road leading north to some towns she couldn't name, a road that seemed to follow every little nook and cranny in the rocky terrain, and soon, the thin strip of asphalt narrowed even farther and flanked the sea. Whitecaps in the distance heralded a storm according to Bjorn, which made Danielle's foot that much heavier on the pedal.

"You drive like a maniac," Bjorn said after she passed someone who drove at a measly one hundred and twenty kilometers an hour. She had places to go!

"I'm French."

By the corner of her eye, she saw him grin but grab the handle right after when she took a particularly tight turn at neck-breaking speed. Norwegian drivers.

Signs for a town called Stei-something—she drove too fast for her to decipher the language—came up and Bjorn straightened in his seat. Anticipation could be read on his tight expression and in the way he clasped and unclasped his hands. What could bother him so much? She felt lighter than the wind, freer than a bird. She'd left O'Leary and his men behind, had dealt with Yuan, drove presently toward her new home with the man she loved...nothing else in the world mattered now.

"It's nearly here, slow down."

She did, braking on the wet pavement and sending the car into a quick fishtail, which she quickly recovered. "Sorry."

"I'll show you sorry when I'm out of the car," he growled. His large hand snaked up along her thigh and cupped her mons. "I'll make you sorry right here."

Heat transferred through the denim when he clutched at her crotch. She pushed her pelvis against his hand. "Oh yeah?"

His upper lip curled up over a feral smile. “Yeah.”

The promise of another lesson triggered an armada of adrenaline jolts through her system as nanobots prepared for the physical ardor to come. He could make her sorry anytime he pleased.

A small village appeared as if it had emerged out of nowhere among the boulders and moss-covered landscape. Some gnarled trees managed to cling to rocks here and there. The village clung to the cliffs with the tenacity of lichen and was kind of cute as fishing villages went with its colorful façades and pointy roofs. An army of little boats bobbed ungainly along the wooden piers beyond the houses.

Following Bjorn’s precise directions, she drove through the village proper, noticed how people stared at them for a while but looked completely uninterested the following second, and reached a part hidden by a deep ravine. There—near the deepest part of the rocky outcropping—sat a thick log house with its face to the sea and the wind and its back right up against the cliff. Thick posts supported the structure. A stone balcony and chimney were the only sections not made of wood. The house positively gleamed under the afternoon sun already setting on the churning sea.

When she parked the car beside the house, she noticed a garage behind it and another smaller structure. “What’s this one?” she asked, pointing to the miniature house, complete with balcony.

“The wet sauna.”

Images and sensations of their first real sexual encounter—except for the quick bit of fun in the getaway truck—flashed in her mind and body. “I’m going to like this house.”

A relieved grin spread on his face. So this was what had bothered him the entire time. He’d been wondering if she’d like their new home. Like her approval mattered. Danielle smiled in return.

“How it works is you take a sauna, let the steam purify your body, and you use thin cedar or birch twigs—they call them *vasta*—to slap on your thighs and back. For circulation,” he added when he noticed her smirk.

“Flagellation...for circulation. Go on.”

“Then you step out of the sauna and go for a quick dip in the ocean. Repeat as needed.”

“So you run out of the hell-hot sauna butt-naked and throw yourself in the North Sea...and this is, what, *fun*?”

Bjorn leaned into her and quickly stole a kiss. “I’ll make *sure* it’s fun.”

The steps creaked under their combined weight when they climbed up to the balcony and the front door. After fishing around above the doorjamb, Bjorn retrieved the key. A bit of shoulder was needed to dislodge the long-unused door. No one would be tracking *this* house, not after the town hall had burned to the ground several decades

before. Every record had been redone by hand and it'd become the region's joke to say that people from old Steinkjer didn't really exist, even for the taxman.

He stepped aside to let her pass. His expression was so full of anticipation, a mix of hope and pride and apprehension that Danielle wanted to give him a great bear hug to calm his nerves.

The inside proved just as cute as the outside with simple but sturdy natural pine furniture in the rustic Scandinavian style. Wooden planks for floorings, each one unique in hue and size and riddled in knots, squeaked pleasantly as she walked in and made a full rotation, hands on her hips, gaze taking in every detail. The massive fireplace and its wrought iron grate occupied a good portion of the far wall.

"Make yourself at home. Well—" Bjorn stopped, ran a hand in his hair "—it *is* your home. If you want it to be."

"I do. It *is* my home now." Danielle crossed her arms and pointed with her chin to a squat, brown velvet armchair facing the bay window. "And I'm claiming that chair."

Bjorn chuckled. "That hideous thing? It's about a hundred years old. Seriously. But if you want it, it's all yours. I'll go fire up the pipes and get some water going."

He disappeared back out the door. Danielle heard another door clatter then the sound of metal-against-metal banging before a loud rattle reverberated throughout the house. She went to check the sink and turned the faucet to let the air out of the pipes. A thin trickle of brownish water splattered in the enamel sink before it turned gray and finally clear.

Bjorn and she made the house habitable again, had a fire burning in the hearth, gas for the generators and other supplies from the village's lone general store—having gone by himself so she wouldn't go near Mel's Benz—and by the time midnight came around, Danielle had crashed in her chair, sweaty, tired, dusty and horny as hell. Her man looked just as she felt, with a thick erection straining the dirty jeans leg. His bangs were plastered to his forehead.

"Up for a sauna?"

"*Mon Dieu*, man, do you ever rest?"

He grinned. "No rest for the wicked, they say. And what I'm thinking about is *very* wicked."

A frisson of pleasure snaked down her spine and fanned out to her shoulders and arms. "You want to go skinny-dipping in the North Sea in the dead of night?"

"Absolutely. I'll start the sauna."

Bjorn yanked his shirt off and marched out of the house. Danielle followed with much less enthusiasm. Yes, she was horny. Yes, she wanted to join him in his nighttime swim just for the pure joy of seeing him naked. But she was also bone-tired.

While he fiddled about the sauna, she watched the sea slapping the rocks some distance to the left and wondered about the man's sanity for wanting to go anywhere

near the water. In her right eye, the sea resembled a frothing mass of lemonade crashing against aqua-colored boulders.

A rumble announced he'd fired up the generator. Slapping her arms to warm them, she entered the sauna after him and whistled appreciatively. He was well equipped. The double-entendre made her smile.

Water trickled from a pipe onto a pile of stones, already emanating heat waves in shades of candy yellows. Soon a nice, comfortable warmth settled in the wood cabin, created a sheen of steam on the gleaming cedar benches along two walls so they formed an L in one corner.

"We'll do it in reverse order, start with the cold and get back to the hot." His jeans fell around his ankles as he said the last word. His massive member hung thick between his thighs.

"Clothes. Off. Now."

Groaning in protest, she pulled the turtleneck over her head and slipped the jeans down her tired legs. "The things a woman has to do..."

They kept their shoes on their naked feet as they stepped outside into the September Norwegian night. Cold wind slapped her right in the face. She cursed but made sure she kept right behind Bjorn, occasionally giving a sharp little slap to the delectable butt bouncing left and right as he picked his way down to shore. To her surprise, they reached a quiet little creek where the wind didn't blow too hard and the waves died somewhere out over the rocks before gently lapping up the side of the natural bowl-shaped crevasse.

"Right there," he announced, sounding excited and almost boyish. "I used to come here all the time."

Bjorn didn't even slow down as he entered the glacial water, right up to his thighs and sat on his heels with a stifled Norwegian curse. "Whew. Just right too. Come on."

With a groan, Danielle stuck her foot in the water and hurriedly pulled it back out again. "*Merde! Que c'est froid!* It's just too damn cold! You want to kill me?"

"Sissy."

Pride. Pure pride. Danielle gritted her teeth, raised her chin defiantly and marched into the water until she couldn't feel her feet anymore and swore she had only an upper body and no legs. She snarled a long series of curses, in French *and* English. Threw in a couple of German ones she sometimes used on her new recruits.

"Here," Bjorn offered, "let me rub some life back into you."

He did just that, using his large hands like towels and rubbing up and down the length of her, down her back, up her quivering belly, down her arms, up her butt. Tingling erupted all over her skin and Danielle feared for an instant her quasi-frozen nanobots had rebelled and wanted out of her through the pores if need be. He did the same for himself, even dunking his head back for a quick dip. No amount of teasing

and wounded pride would make her dip her head. She'd probably do irreparable damage to the obscenely expensive gear wet-wired to her brain.

"Okay, I can't feel my arms now, can we go?"

Bjorn laughed as he shook some water off his face. "And I can't feel my dick. We definitely have to go."

A big grin on his face, he tugged her out of the inhumanely glacial water, retrieved their shoes and scampered back up the bank to the sauna. Never had a humble little shack looked so good to her as she pushed past Bjorn and barged right in, stopping only when she'd reached the actual stove and put her body almost right against it. Steam gathered along the rafters in roiling yellow-green pixels, which clouded the right side of her vision. O'Leary would probably have wanted to know this, how the tactical night vision lens could be incapacitated with extreme heat, or in this case, steam. That was a lifetime ago. Another Danielle Lavoie. For now, all she cared about was getting some circulation going in her limbs and this little stove did just that. Just for good measure, she pressed her palm against her right eyelid and checked for any suspect files. Nothing.

A long sigh of contentment escaped her. Maybe she wouldn't die of exposure after all.

The door closed behind her with a resoluteness that caught her attention. She turned just in time to see Bjorn leaning back against the door, arms crossed, a massive erection looking like a veined alabaster column.

"Now we have to talk about your driving skills." His voice sounded deeper than ever before and reached the bottom levels on the spectrum of her hearing abilities. His eyes had darkened as well. She shivered.

"You drive without thought to your safety, recklessly. You're taking chances with your life. I can't have that."

Peeling his muscled frame off the door but keeping his arms crossed, he took a step toward her. His clearly excited state thrilled her. The sinister glint in his stormy gray eyes fired a series of electrical impulses in her battle systems compelling her to run, fight. Making love to this man felt just like entering a battle zone. And this was no simulation! Because she didn't know what to do with them, she put her fists on her hips and stared.

The move must have triggered a primal reaction in Bjorn for he bared his fangs. "You don't seem to understand how much I meant what I said. I won't tolerate you taking chances with your life. It's too precious. If not to you, then to me." He hissed with every other word, fricatives faintly whistling through the canine teeth. Steam created a sheen of wetness all over him. Danielle would have gladly licked it all up!

He really looked angry, not just playacting.

"I'm a big girl," she replied, knowing she'd just put a big measure of oil on a raging inferno.

Yet that had been her goal, hadn't it, to get him going, bait him, make him do things to her she'd allow no other man? With Bjorn everything was different. She gladly let him dominate and overpower her, be her vampire sire, make her go down on her knees and suck his cock while he watched—while his friend watched. Though she felt overwhelmingly protective of him, at the same time intellectually realizing he could kill her with one hand. Or fuck her until she begged for a reprieve. Another lesson was coming. One for which she yearned with all her being.

"You want me to change my ways," she snarled through a defiant grin. "You *make* me."

Bjorn didn't seem too pleased by her bravado. He shook his head. "Don't worry, I will."

He was on her in an instant, his mouth like a pillaging marauder against hers, his hands plundering her body, searching, finding, laying claim. Danielle bent back under his passion, yelped when her thigh connected with the stove. Bjorn grabbed her around the waist in a one-arm hug and spun them both toward the wall where he crushed her with his body against the uneven, moist surface. Danielle puffed loudly.

Showing impressive strength, he intertwined his fingers in hers and brought her hands up shoulder width high above her head. Her knuckles throbbed when he ground them into the wall. Excitement tightened her nipples into pebbles as she stood there practically suspended by the hands, his rock-hard, wet body flattened over her front. His erection felt hefty and potent against her belly. She licked water droplets off her lips as she gazed into his eyes. Love for Bjorn flared. She'd die for him. And *kill* just as willingly.

His mouth fell on her again, stole her breath, sucked her lips until they ached. She responded with all the ardor she could muster. His tongue ran along her teeth, demandingly delved deeper then retracted so his teeth could replace it in its ravage. She moaned when his fangs grazed her lips, her throat, trapped a lobe in a burning, pointed vise.

"Lick me, savor your sire," he said, raising his head and offering his water-beaded throat to her mouth.

Danielle did as he bid her, used her tongue like a brush to cover every square centimeter of the canvas that was his skin. The rough patches of unshaved skin provided sublime contrast to the smooth silk of his lips. An overwhelming urge to bite forced her upper lip to curl over her canine teeth. God, she wanted...just a taste.

A growl rumbled in his chest. "Be careful what you start..."

She pushed the urge down. He hadn't granted his permission. Her mouth took possession of his, pulled at his lips, trapped his tongue. He allowed her this small triumph before pulling back and staring down at her chest. She shivered at the implacable spark in his eyes. His shoulders and pectorals were corded with the effort of keeping her against the wall. She prayed he could hold it for a while longer as the position thrilled her to the highest degree.

Leaning downward as far as his arms could go without releasing her hands, he flicked his tongue out, shaped it like a half pipe and rolled his eyes up to watch her reaction while he began to lick her gently at first then more insistently, and finally seizing her nipple and a good portion of her entire breast between his teeth.

Danielle's body reacted instinctively. Ceramic joints creaking, she arched back and wrapped a leg around his middle.

He looked surprised by the sheer brute strength in her body, even winced. Before she could revel in the knowledge of surprising a seven-hundred-year-old vampire, a spike of adrenaline washed over her systems. A sharp, burning pain accompanied the rush. She looked down...

Bjorn had bitten her!

A tiny pair of crimson beads trembled on her breast. What the hell did he think he was doing? Hadn't he once said she wasn't supposed to bite him during their lovemaking, not unless he okayed it first? She'd only nipped him and he'd reacted so strongly. Had he changed his mind?

"Do you realize what I've just done?" he demanded. "I marked you."

"But I thought...we weren't supposed..."

She wasn't even sure she didn't like him marking her, *branding* her this way, claiming her as his own. In fact, she quite enjoyed the dull burn of his bite on her breast as it spread over her entire chest. Sexual hunger suddenly erupted into her being. She wanted him with a rage that bordered on violence.

Bjorn licked the beads of blood off and straightened. The intensity of his gaze nailed her to the spot. She couldn't move, couldn't think.

"Do you trust me?"

Of course she did, although that feral glint in his eyes did unsettle her a bit. She gave a quick nod.

He released her hands but kept her leaning against the wall with his palm on her sternum. "Spread your legs."

Her heart in her throat, Danielle twisted her feet wider. The floor was getting warm too.

Bjorn knelt and bared his fangs, looked up into her face and buried his chin in her groin, right at the juncture of her thigh muscle. His stubble prickled the sensitive skin there. His tongue on her sex was firm, as were the fingers with which he splayed her lips. Danielle closed her eyes when the first signs of orgasm tightened her muscles. He licked her harder, faster, his hand still on her sternum, keeping her pressed against the wall. She angled her pelvis outward to receive more of his ardor.

Two sharp points pricked her. She gasped.

"Bjorn...?"

He bit her. Hard.

Her cry of pain, pleasure and surprise startled her. Right after the initial shock came white-hot ecstasy. Bjorn's gaze was still on her face as he sucked at her. The skin around her groin looked feverish and red.

She moaned loudly. Fire spread from the bite to her entire being. It felt so good, so *right*. He kept his mouth against her flesh for a few seconds more then let go. She watched him lick the twin punctures clean.

"Now your turn."

She gasped, shook her head. "No," she had to stop to ride the last of her orgasm. Her pussy throbbed. "I can't."

"Yes, you can. And you will. Now."

Bjorn wrapped his hand around her neck and forced her face against his pectoral.

"No," she snarled, the realization that she wanted to so much forced her to stay the rest of her sentence. His skin felt so hot, so soft against her lips. She allowed herself a gentle lick. So good.

"It's my gift to you, Danielle. As your sire. I want you to taste my blood as I've tasted yours."

God, she wanted to. His thick, hot blood in her mouth, under her tongue. Danielle opened her mouth wide, let her canine teeth rest against his skin. More pressure against the nape of her neck indicated she should do it.

Forcing her jaw wider, she pushed her teeth in, felt skin give way. At once blood flowed in her mouth. She closed her eyes and concentrated on his essence as it coursed into her, visited her every limb, mixed with her own blood. While she sucked, she felt a finger enter her pussy.

"Enough."

With more self-control than she thought herself capable of, Danielle pulled away, did as he'd done and licked the wounds clean.

"We're the same now," he said. His forceful gaze compelled her to lower hers.

"Now that you've received your gift," Bjorn added, taking his hands off her. "Remember when I said I'd make you sorry?"

She nodded, still unable to form a clear thought other than Bjorn needed to be inside her. His blood was like a drug.

"Now's the time," he said against her mouth but without touching her. "Sit on the bench."

With steam roiling in a thick, acid-green fog all over them, Danielle sat in the crook of the L-shaped benches, her back turned toward the corner.

"Spread your legs."

She did, bumped one knee against one bench and the second along the other.

Bjorn drew near and stepped between her feet. His meaty cock hung just a few centimeters from her chin, groin muscles straining against the weight and bobbed gently with his breath. He tilted his pelvis in. "Do you want it?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

She opened her mouth to take him in but he drew back. "Not yet. Take it in your hands."

Light from the single bulb hanging from the ceiling silhouetted Bjorn's thick, muscled figure like Chinese shadows. She gripped his shaft, weighed and squeezed his balls. Blond curls tickled her fingers.

He reached out and cupped some water trickling out of the faucet over the heated stones. When he had enough, he brought his hand back and let water dribble over his member and her hands. "Now you can take it in."

She did, with a vigor that surprised her. Making small mewling sounds deep in her throat, she gathered his cock in one fist and angled it at her mouth, let his burning glans graze her lips first before she opened wide and slid up along his shaft. He planted both hands on the perpendicular walls, effectively trapping her in the corner. Like she wanted to go anywhere!

"Suck hard."

Danielle did. Wet, smacking sounds filled the tiny place. Slowly, he pressed forward, rolled his hips in a figure-eight shape, which she desperately followed so he wouldn't slide out of her mouth. His silky erection felt smooth along her lips as it glided in and out. His knees pressed inside her thighs and trapped them against the benches.

"Do you want me to release in your mouth again?"

For reply, she pumped hard with her hand, worked her tongue around the base of his cock while she squeezed his balls mercilessly. Yes, she wanted to take him in again. His semen, his blood. And she wanted it now, dammit!

He thrust in slowly but deeply, made her groan with excitement. He was coming. Danielle could already taste the salty precursor and didn't waste a moment licking it clean. He pulled back almost all the way out and froze.

She looked up to see him staring down at her intently, his eyes darker than she'd ever seen them. His mouth curved in a feral smile. "Do you think I'm that easy to please?"

With a soft growl she doubled her cadence and pressure until she was afraid the thing would detach from the rest of him. He followed her assault with his hips, occasionally giving a sharp thrust that all but made her want to devour him whole, starting with his massive dick. But he didn't come.

Frustrated, furious, she pumped even faster, sucked harder.

When he pulled back out completely, leaving her leaning over the benches like a starving bird with its beak open, Danielle reached out to force him back into her mouth. But he slapped her hand away and knelt between her thighs. Beads of blood had formed on his bitten pectoral, just as it had on her breasts and groin. His gaze bore into her face, raked all the way down her chest and belly before settling at the juncture of her legs. She felt an acute stab of desire tightening her clit when he licked his lips.

"Spread your legs wider."

She hurriedly did, putting her feet on the benches and pushing her knees out as far as she could. The thick fog of steam clouded her peripheral vision until only a thin sliver, which Bjorn occupied, formed right in front of her. Everything else was lost in swirly ribbons ranging in color from too-bright white and yellow right down to turquoise and deep aqua. She could feel the nanobots working their damndest to clear her sensors of the battle responses Bjorn's treatment triggered.

His shoulders flexing, he used his elbows to keep her knees apart while his hands stretched the skin of her thighs wide. Yuan's bite mark was a mere pink line now thanks to the subcutaneous layer of biosilk repairing itself. Danielle braced her hands behind her hips. She felt exposed, spread out under his burning, forceful gaze.

Bjorn's gaze never left hers as he leaned down by barely a hair's breadth. "Do you want me to?"

She nodded emphatically. She'd never wanted anything more in her life.

"Ask me then. What do you want?" He bent a little closer.

Danielle meant to push her pelvis out, force his face between her thighs so he could lick her, feast on her oh-so-ready sex, devour her. But his hands pressed down in an implacable grip against her thighs and she discovered she couldn't move much of anything past the hips. Except for her feet, which she angled outward until the tendons in her ankles burned.

"Ask it," he said through a fang-framed smile. His eyes weren't smiling though. She felt judged, gauged, weighed against some internal scale only he understood.

"Eat me. Come *on*," she snarled. There was just so much a woman could take!

Bjorn shifted so his cleft chin rested against one of her thighs. The wet heat inside the cabin clumped his hair against his forehead, created a tantalizing sheen all over his firm body. "That's it? Just 'eat me'?"

Liquid fire spread to her thighs under his fiery touch. Throwing decorum to the wind, she reached down and stoked her own fire. "Yeah, just 'eat me'. *Now*."

With a snarl, he forced her hand away from her sex, leaving her unfulfilled and getting mightily desperate. "You don't get to touch until I've been there. Now..." Bjorn sucked hard against the tender skin of her inner thigh. "Ask me like you mean it."

Danielle groaned shamelessly when he approached closer still, until she could feel his rapid breath against her raw flesh. Like she meant it. Ha. "Take me with your mouth," she murmured with her gaze on his. "*Fuck me with your mouth.*"

When he lunged forward, lips curled over his gleaming teeth, Danielle braced her hands against the walls. As though he meant to anchor her to his face by sheer physical strength, Bjorn clamped his mouth, fangs threateningly close to piercing the tender skin again, over her mons and used his tongue like he meant to scoop her off the bench.

An impulse of sheer pleasure shredded what composure she still had. She gasped. And when the wave of liquid fire engulfed her entire being, from soul to soles, his name resounded in the tiny cabin with the intensity of a battle cry. Without restraint, she yelled out his name again then snarled it, mewled it, finally she moaned *Bjorn* as the last of her climax released its searing clutches. Danielle slumped against the wall for support.

"I'm not done yet," Bjorn said.

He stood, pulled Danielle up by a hand and pressed her against him so he could sheathe his erection along the cleft her trembling thighs offered.

"I want you against the wall."

And he placed her there, facing him, feet and legs on either side of his. Displaying incredible strength, he crouched slightly, slid his member along her drenched entry and, his gaze on hers, straightened with her balanced precariously on his hips, her legs wrapped around his middle. Danielle bit her lip under the tremendous thrust...a split second before another impulse heralded further sexual satisfaction. Having only partial control over her body, Danielle writhed against Bjorn as he pushed harder, deeper, spread her taut and crushed her throbbing clit. A series of small but potent orgasms needled her pussy. Another then another. She squeezed her eyes shut. Then Bjorn lowered her.

"Stand up."

She did, unwrapped her legs from around him. Bjorn pulled out. Never had she been left feeling so empty and bereft. She opened her eyes to see him sit on the bench beside her. He hooked an index finger at her.

Legs shaking violently, Danielle did as he told her. She straddled his lap, but instead of bearing down on him with all her might—which she wanted with a violent thirst—she planted her palms on either side of his head and stared hard. With her breasts, she teased his mouth, grazed his lips with her nipples, always escaping his eagerness to catch her.

"You're playing with fire, Danielle," he warned. Though his words implied one thing, his restraint betrayed his satisfaction at her games.

She taunted him thus for a while, writhing, undulating, always close but never making contact. When he bared his fangs, she decided she had teased the poor man enough. Danielle straddled his lap. Fast. Hard.

The sharp fire of skin stretching to the limit accompanied his cock past her engorged lips. Hissing with triumph, she wolfed him all in, bound his thick girth with her clutching sheath, cinched him tight with every fiber, organic and synthetic, in her

body and as she did so, as her flesh distended to accommodate his, Danielle felt more love for this man than life itself.

“My sire,” she murmured against his ear.

Chapter Fourteen

The words had the effect of a thunderstorm, as though a bolt of lightning had struck down into the very core of his being. Never, ever, had anyone so rattled him with words!

"Danielle," he started, unable to go on for the lump in his throat.

When she began to sway against him, he found that he couldn't hold onto the wonderful feeling of having arrived home much longer. This woman could elicit so many damn emotions at once that he could barely think straight.

He wanted to fuck her until she begged him to stop, wanted her in every position in the book and then some. He wanted to taste her again, that warm nectar flowing in her veins, just as he wanted her to take his essence in her mouth and swallow him. His seed, his blood. He was in her now, completely. And she in him. Visions of savage blood exchanges and fucking filled his mind's eye. He knew she could take it all. His goddess of war.

At the same time, Bjorn wanted nothing more than to gather her in his arms and hold her tight, never let her go.

Danielle arched back. He seized the moment to capture a nipple between his teeth. A hiss of approval spurred him on. Standing with her still impaled on him, he bent his knees until he could deposit her, standing, on the floor. She pulled out of him and knelt on the bench, her backside offered up for his taking like a ripe, pale peach. He slid his finger along her drenched pussy, marveling at the silky quality of her sex.

"Take me," she moaned with a pronounced lift of her *derrière*.

Such an offer he couldn't resist.

His cock in a fist, he guided it in. As much as he tried to make his entrance cordial, he yielded to the temptation and drove in all at once. Danielle planted her palms against the wall and braced her arms. Muscles corded over her strong back and shoulders. Taking this as the challenge it was, Bjorn thrust his cock until his balls ached from the momentum. His knees jammed inside hers so she wouldn't move, his hands firmly against her deliciously solid hips, he shoved in and out with an abandon he hadn't known possible for a man equipped such as he was. Always he'd had to be careful with his women so as not to harm them. Not Danielle. He'd known right away she was built to withstand his assault. And to last too!

"More! Harder!"

Her cries of pleasure injected more vigor in his hips and back.

"Oh you want more?" he said, taunting. He slowed his movement to see her reaction.

It was instantaneous.

She used the wall to propel herself backward. He felt like he would pierce her womb but instead, her flesh distended even more to contain him. His mouth opened with wonder. Odin be thanked for sturdy women!

Bjorn resumed his fierce lovemaking. Soon he had her bucking violently against him, matching thrust for thrust. Steam made the skin of her back and butt look like silk stretched taut. Unable to resist the cadence and intense stimulation of her screams of encouragement, Bjorn growled, braced a hand on the wall and spilled his seed.

A series of rings cinched his cock and he knew she'd come too...only hers lasted a good while longer than his, but soon, she too quieted down and meant to sit. He pulled out, used his T-shirt to wipe them both and joined her on the bench.

She looked exhausted but fulfilled, which stoked his manly pride into an inferno. To be able to satiate such a woman would give any man a case of fat head. With a sigh, she leaned against his shoulder.

"I'm so tired, I could sleep right here."

He chuckled. "You'd look like a prune come morning. We have to get back inside the house now."

"Argh."

Bjorn turned the water and stove off. Within seconds, the air noticeably cooled around them. He felt her shiver.

"Come," Bjorn said, standing. He offered her his hand, which she took. But when he meant to scoop her up behind the knees to carry her, she snorted derisively and steeled her legs.

"I weigh a lot more than I look, you know. Muscle's heavy."

Bjorn gripped her wrist, forced her closer and slipped his forearm under her thighs. Unbalanced, she fell back in his arm. He had Danielle in his arms before she could protest further.

"Do you have any idea how much I can lift?"

She rolled her eyes. "That makes me feel so much better. Thanks."

After Danielle twisted the handle, Bjorn used his shoulder to push it out and stepped into the cold Norwegian September night. Wind hit both their wet bodies and sent their hair flying. She yelped and nestled in his shoulder.

"Didn't you say you had a house in Greece," came her muffled voice.

Bjorn chuckled as he picked his way up to the house, a path he knew by heart. "I do, but the sea is much more beautiful here. Much more...mmm, *tempestuous* here. The way I like it."

She leaned out and opened the door as he reached it. Making sure he didn't bang either end against the doorjamb, Bjorn strode into the old house, crossed the main room and deposited his precious charge on the lone bed of their new home.

Danielle had her eyes closed by then and didn't move from the position he left her in. With a smile, Bjorn pulled the covers out from under the mattress and wrapped them around her, tucking the ends neatly all around her sturdy frame.

After retrieving a bathrobe from a hook in the tiny bathroom, he sat on the chair, which served as coat hanger, laundry basket and seat—and leaned back. Through a sliver of space between the curtains, a beam of bluish moonlight fell across her face, illuminated her high cheeks and that strong lift of her chin he loved so much.

He could watch her sleep all night and endeavored to do just that. One never knew when something cherished would be taken away. Such was a vampire's life. Only now he'd have someone to share it with.

"You've tasted my blood and I've tasted yours. We are one now, *min elskede*, my beloved."

* * * * *

Danielle stood on a deserted road. Bjorn was by her side, his hair disheveled with the fierce wind howling a forlorn, winter tune. She was cold and realized they were both naked.

A low rumble in the distance made her turn her head. Far, but still visible, a large vehicle devoured the road. A thick column of exhaust smoke billowed out behind it.

"We should move out of the way," she said, meaning to turn but seeing how Bjorn remained in place, only smiling in a knowing sort of way, she stopped. "We should move out of the way," she said, louder.

He shrugged. "They can go around."

What childish behavior was this! Already the vehicle appeared closer, its engine whirring angrily as its driver shifted into high gear. Why was it speeding up? Couldn't they see them on the road?

"Come," she said, grabbing Bjorn's hand. "We'll wait by the side over there."

But he didn't follow, only looked back at the approaching vehicle. "I'm not running away from anyone. Never have, never will."

Afraid now, Danielle pulled hard on his arm. He didn't budge. "Come, Bjorn. It's not very smart to play chicken with a car when you're on foot."

"Let them come."

The roar of the vehicle drowned what she said, but Bjorn didn't seem to care as he just crossed his arms and stood his ground.

To her right, coming at them much faster than any speed limit anywhere—even in Germany—a black truck with its windshield busted out. She couldn't see the driver well, only part of his naked torso. A faint sensation began in the pit of her stomach, flared out in her entire being. The nanotech in her brain fired wave after wave of warnings and defense combinations. Then something else, much deeper, primal, surfaced. A call against which there was no denial.

Protect him.

"Christ! Come on!"

The truck was much too close. They wouldn't have time. What a dumb way to die.
"Bjorn!"

* * * * *

Danielle snapped up to find Bjorn slumped in a chair by the foot of the bed. He woke with a start.

"Something wrong?" he asked, instantly alert and straightening.

What could she tell him? That she'd had a bad dream in which he wanted to tackle a truck with the lone force of his will? Was there a dream more moronic?

"No," she said, scooting to the side to leave some room for him.

He took the silent invitation with a predatory smile. The brass frame creaked in protest when he settled in bed. "Wet dreams then?"

Danielle smiled through her unease. "Yeah, all because of you."

"Thank you."

Bjorn closed his eyes, nestled his head against her neck and soon, his breathing deepened, lengthened, indicating sleep had claimed him back.

Danielle just stared at the ceiling, cursing her stupid dream, yet unable to completely dismiss it either. She closed her eyes. Now, if she could only focus on something else than the little voice murmuring in her ear.

Protect him.

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.

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