

Viola
Grace



Chubby is
the Night

Max just wanted to have a night out with her cousin and go home. As a plus sized lass, she didn't fit in amongst the tiny blonde gazelles, but protecting her cousin from a perv in the alley changed her fate. In a moment of self-preservation when a man started chewing on her neck, she bit the hand over her mouth, setting a paranormal chemical reaction into play. Now that she is infected with his blood, he either needs to turn her or destroy her. The vampire tribunal chips in with an option for Max. She can rescue their kidnapped Guild Master, and he will decide her fate. Sounds like the best deal of the evening.

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Chubby is the Night
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CHUBBY IS THE NIGHT
A NEXUS CHRONICLE

BY

VIOLA GRACE

CHAPTER ONE

If she had to try on one more pair of jeans before they went out, Max was going to scream. The jeans were so tight most of the time that she did.

"It's no use, Tabby. I am not getting into any of your clothes. Just let me wear the ones that I showed up with. Please. I am begging." She would have fallen to her knees if the denim would have let her.

"But the clothes you had on were so...*boring*." Tabby shook her head in despair.

"Yeah, but they fit. And that is the most important thing to me at this stage." Up on her toes, she waddled back into the bathroom and put her comfy clothes back on. The blouse was a respectable and sedate navy and her jeans clasped her curves in a faithful representation of her form.

It was the metal wear that made the outfit. Her crafty friends had given in to her urge for accessories and she now sported a steel chainmail choker she had studded with hematite, metal cuffs on her wrists and a wide belt dotted with semi-precious stones on more steel. It was

unconventional but rather striking.

Black low-heeled boots completed the outfit and Maxine Dorothea Munroe was ready for an uncomfortable night in the club.

Tabby tilted her head and assessed her cousin, nodding finally in agreement. "You won't cause any hearts to pound, but you don't look horrible."

"Thanks. Let's go before I change my mind."

"I promised Tammy a well-attended girls' night. That means you have to be there."

Max grimaced. "Because you couldn't get anyone else to go to that obnoxious twig's bridal shower and I take up enough space for two of you?"

"Something like that. Let's get moving." She clutched her tiny purse and led the way out of her apartment.

Max shuddered when she saw the collection of tiny, fashionably thin women lining the sidewalk outside *Club Nyt*. A heavy dose of Goths were sprinkled in the crowd that they passed with no hostility visible in their audience's eyes until the moment Tabby caught the gaze of the doorman and they were inducted into the dark hell of the club.

The cries of protest erupted behind them and Max hunched her shoulders trying to make her almost-six-foot frame blend in with the smaller form of her cousin. Social interaction was bad

enough, but hanging around these girls always made her feel like a moose amongst gazelle.

She was too big, too wide and not built for speed.

Sighing, Max took a corner of the table and ordered a strawberry margarita while she waited for the other shrieking and giggling ladies to get completely hammered.

Tammy received her gifts with the aura of a queen accepting her due. When it came to Max's turn, the ladies eyed her empty arms and she merely grinned and pulled a birthday card out of the left side of her bra and a gift card out of the right. She had the storage, she may as well use it.

They didn't have much of a cleavage-related sense of humour. She was relegated to watching the purses for the rest of the night.

After the first alcoholic beverage, she stuck to soda. Tabby was not the most sober of ladies at the best of times and her cousin's propensity for getting plastered was predictable.

A prickling along Max's skin made her shiver and she looked around for the cause.

Deep in the shadows of the club, a man was watching the writhing dance floor with what Max could only construe as hunger. His skin was chalky and pasty, his dark hair slicked tightly to his head. Not the kind of guy that Tabby would normally be interested in, but he seemed to fixate

on her cousin as she flashed her boobs to the DJ.

He was leaning forward, almost licking his lips as Tabby flipped her blonde hair forward and back, gyrating to the heavy beat. The moment that he moved to intercept Tabby on her way to the ladies' room, Max abandoned her post near the purses and followed, noting that her cousin started clinging to the stranger's arm in a most un-Tabby-like manner.

The wild sounds and sights of the nightclub were lost to Max as she followed Tabby and the stranger out of the rear fire door. The darkness of the alley blinded her for a moment until her rapidly blinking eyes adjusted to the lack of light.

There. In the shadows behind a dumpster, she heard a breathy giggle from Tabby followed by a harsh squeak. It was the squeak that demanded action.

Max looked around and grabbed a chunk of wood from the alleyway. "Oy, jackass, get your face off my cousin!"

The stranger had his mouth on Tabby's neck and the whites of her eyes were showing with pain. He didn't move and Tabby whined softly.

With her hands clenched on the wood, she swung at his shoulder and knocked him three feet away from Tabby.

"What do you think you are doing, cow?" His snarl displayed bloody lips and teeth that glowed

eerily in the darkness.

“Getting you away from her, ass hat.” She was holding the wood like a broadsword.

“You don’t want to do that.” His eyes glowed a creepy green and she felt a tugging, like she didn’t actually want to do whatever she was thinking about.

Before she could track his movement, he grabbed her and shoved her up against the wall, his fangs gleaming in the darkness. *Fangs? What the hell?* His hand covered her mouth as he swooped in to bite her neck and she did what came naturally.

With all her power, she closed her teeth on his hand and tore a chunk of skin off his palm. Blood spilled into Max’s mouth and her jaw was held so tightly she couldn’t spit. He was gnawing at her neck, but he couldn’t do more than scratch the surface, her choker prevented him from getting a solid grip.

Strength born from fear and fury helped her push him off, but the damage was done. He had tasted her blood and she had gulped his. With a snarl, he ran down the alley, leaving Max bent over trying to wrench, her cousin sitting nearby with her hand pressed to her neck.

“Tabby, are you all right?”

“He bit me. He really bit me.”

Max groaned and helped her cousin to her feet.

The club exit was not accessible from the alley, so Max walked them to her car. Tucking her cousin into the passenger seat, she winced at the mess of blood and torn flesh that was her neck.

With her mouth tight, she got behind the wheel and started her car.

Tabby's voice was soft, helpless. "He bit me, Max."

She gunned the engine and announced grimly, "Don't worry, Tabby. I bit him back."

CHAPTER TWO

The hospital staff was surprisingly helpful when Max brought Tabby in. Perhaps it was that Max was obviously stone cold sober, or maybe it was the dark blood of the psycho that covered her jaw and neck. Whatever the cause, they were incredibly helpful.

The nurse who helped remove the blood gave her a piercing look. "Did he...was there a sexual..."

"No. Just the blood fetish. He munched and ran." She winced as she helped the nurse remove the collar and her dried blood made the steel stick to the skin.

"Looks like some deep scratches, but nothing dangerous. Your cousin is in much worse shape. It looks like a garden tool was taken to her neck." The nurse shook her head and blotted gently and then more aggressively at Max's wounds. "Huh, they seem to have closed completely. You must be a fast healer."

Max didn't want to tell her that the opposite

was true. The lightest scratch had scarred her.

She held still as the woman removed the blood and her lips twitched as the coppery scent filled her nostrils. Normally, her sense of smell was nowhere near this acute, but today, she was hypersensitive. It must be all the adrenaline in her system.

“Well, there is an officer who is speaking to your cousin while they work on her. He will be coming in here next. There is nothing for me to do, so just stay here and wait, please.”

The woman made some notes on the chart that was ubiquitous to a hospital patient and she left the room.

Max sat quietly. The noises coming from the hall got her attention and she made a game of sorting the probable height of the person outside by the sound of their step. A light murmuring came to her ears and she focussed on the voice of her cousin coming from another exam room down the hall.

“No, I don’t know his name. I don’t remember anything. I was dancing and then I was out in the alley with my cousin Max covered in blood. I have no idea what happened. I remember eyes, weird green eyes and then nothing.”

The masculine voice calmed her, “Nothing happened to you. You went outside to get some fresh air and tripped and fell on a board with nails

exposed. There were no weird eyes, your cousin wasn't with you and you will heal well and completely. Do you understand?"

The odd vibration in his voice almost had Max's ears perking up as she waited for him to laugh or make a joke. Nothing. He spoke to the doctor and muttered, "Drunk, she tripped and fell. She came in alone."

Whoa. That was twice he had mentioned that Tabby had been alone. Max got quietly to her feet and slipped out the door, casually moving as if she had been visiting someone. The police officer was indeed the owner of the voice she had heard and he looked at her dismissively as she passed him. It was a look she was used to. No one ever noticed her despite her height. Sometimes it was a curse. Today, she was counting it as a blessing.

As the doors opened and closed behind her, she kept her head high, her shoulders in and her walk casual until she made it to her car. For the ninth time in her life, she thanked her dislike of purses and fished her keys out of her pocket.

A sense of urgency overtook her and she moved as fast as she could to slide into her seat, buckled up and threw the car into reverse.

Mr. Creepy from the alley was directly behind her and she ploughed into him with all the speed she could get her four cylinder to muster.

She heard his curse clearly as the car struck him

and then she flipped the shifter into drive and got herself out of there. Tabby was safe. They had convinced her she had been alone. Max was the one they were stalking and that was not a good thing.

Mr. Creepy was following her and he had fangs. His buddy was a cop and had the ability to convince her clingy cousin that she had been uncharacteristically alone. This was going to get worse before it got better.

Going home was her first instinct and she fought it. Running to the police was out of the question now that her injuries had healed. She had no proof.

“Stupid imagination. I am having a stupid hallucination that a stupid vampire has chosen my cousin as a snack and I am running for my life because I interrupted his late-night munchies.”

She kept muttering to herself as she drove to a park with an open picnic shelter. She parked and got out, running to the fire pit and digging in the ashes. With a two-foot spike of unburned wood, she turned at the sound that rushed her from behind.

Mr. Creepy’s open eyes showed his shock as he struck her quickly obtained weapon and he staggered back before bursting into flames. Max fell to her knees.

The police car caught her in its headlights, her

hands covered with blood and ashes, shirt stiff with blood and only her shock at watching a man burst into flame kept her from running.

"You killed him. I can't believe you killed him." The officer shook his head in surprise and lifted her to her feet. She was still slumped on the ground where she had fallen.

She fought him out of reflex and he hissed at her, exposing his teeth.

"Is that supposed to mean something?"

"Yes, it means get in the back of the car before I kill you myself. The tribunal is looking forward to destroying you and it would be unpleasant if I took away their fun." He cuffed her, but it wasn't a standard steel cuff. Wide manacles locked her wrists together in front of her and he shoved her into the back of the police car, taking care not to smash her head. Very considerate given the circumstances.

"What's a tribunal?"

"The ruling body for the vampires. Normally, our Guild Master handles this sort of thing, but in his absence, the tribunal is making the rulings."

"What kind of rulings?"

He ignored her and drove through the city to a neighbourhood with gated properties. He flashed his lights at the gates and they swung open to let them in.

Max turned her head just in time to see the

panels of wrought iron slam shut behind her.

The house that loomed at the end of the drive way was huge. "Whose house is that?"

"The Guild Master's."

"I thought you said he wasn't home."

"He isn't. Never mind. We are here. Shut up, behave and your end will be swift." The officer parked the car and hauled her out of the back seat.

Her boots crunched gravel as he kept his hand around her bicep and pulled her across the drive spattered with cars and into the house itself. Two fanged guards scowled at her as the officer dragged her past them.

"Evening, fellas." Being polite couldn't hurt.

They seemed startled that she had spoken to them, as if she was some kind of pet that had taken up speech.

"This way." The officer hauled her through room after room of lounging men and women with chalky skin.

In a large ballroom, a set of heavy oak desks were arranged in a semi-circle. Two chalky men and one woman glared at her as she was yanked unceremoniously into the room.

The officer forced her to her knees and held her there with hands on her shoulders.

"I have brought her to face the tribunal."

The central man nodded and tapped his left fang with the nail of his index finger. "Where is her

maker?"

The officer was silent.

"If you mean Mr. Creepy that attacked me this evening, he burned up in a ball of fire that was truly impressive." Max held up her chin in defiance. They weren't going to see her freak.

"What? Abomination! How dare you kill your maker?" The woman pounded her fist on her desk, making the pens and paper jump.

She wanted to cross her arms, but the manacles prevented her from taking action. "The only makers I have ever had are my parents and possibly the old mustang convertible they conceived me in."

Fangs were being shown in every person looking at her. "Vampires, right?"

The irate woman snapped her mouth shut. "You don't know what you are?"

"I am a human being. I don't have an inclination to be anything else."

The man on the far right looked thoughtful. He looked to his peers and made a gesture. They gathered and left the room.

Max shifted on her knees and looked up at her captor. His face was blank and empty of any emotion, no help there.

The men and women gathered on the edges of the chamber were stone faced as well. Hostility and fear was riding under the surface and Max

didn't know why. Mind you, she didn't even know what the hell the fuss was. She was bitten, she healed, there was nothing more to it.

Less than two minutes passed until the tribunal returned. "What is your name, miss?"

It was the slightly thoughtful one who asked her. "Max."

"Max, I am Deiter, this is Alfred and that is Donnatha. We are in a peculiar situation." He nodded to the officer. "Release her and let her stand, Miklos."

The officer released her cuffs and helped her to her feet.

"Thank you."

"You are welcome." He steadied her and then withdrew his hand, staying behind her and to her right.

The tribunal lifted their hands and all extra folk in the room evacuated at once. When the room was empty except for the tribunal, Max and Miklos, the doors were closed and locked.

"What passes here now cannot be spoken of in our community, Miklos. Will you swear to uphold your silence?"

The officer nodded and bowed to the tribunal. "I will."

"Max, you are an Abomination."

She couldn't help but smile. "You are not the first to say it, Deiter."

He laughed and waved that off. “No. By your killing of the vampire who infected you with his blood after having tasted yours, you gained something that no vampire has, life and freedom.”

“I don’t understand.”

Donnatha grimaced. “Initially, we believed you were a new vampire child. An unauthorized transformation. We were going to destroy you.”

“And now...”

“As an Abomination, we don’t have the authority to destroy you. That is the sole purview of the Guild Master and he is missing. We need you to find him.”

CHAPTER THREE

Max couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry. She weighed her response carefully. "So, if I find the Guild Master, he can order my death?"

Deiter spoke again, "Yes. Rest assured that he will be just and merciful if that is his decision."

"It would be in my interest then not to take on this quest."

"If you do not, you will not have the protection of our tribunal and any and all of our kind will try and hunt you to your inevitable demise. Should you take on our task, you will be protected until the Guild Master is found."

"So, be hunted to death or face a possibly dignified demise at a later date. That sounds better the more I think about it. Where did your Guild Master go?"

Deiter held up a map. "We believe that he was abducted and buried alive. Those that are counted amongst his vampiric offspring are certain he is alive but unable to move. They have tracked him to this place, but are unable to rescue him

themselves.”

“Why, where is he?”

Miklos took the map from Deiter and handed it to Max. She stared at it for a long moment before a giggle welled up inside her. Nevada’s Black Rock desert glowed up on the map and she noted the tiny stick figure that had been drawn. “There is a vampire at Burning Man?”

“That is the theory. The bright sunlight makes it uncomfortable for any of our kind to try and mount a rescue.”

“I thought that was a folk tale.”

“It is. It is also the territory of another race and they do not take lightly to having our kind trespass.”

“Werewolves?”

“Goblins. Rock goblins to be precise. They hate vampires with a passion and will not allow one of our kind to simply waltz in and mount a rescue.”

Max started to pick up on the point. “And because I am not a vampire, you think I will be able to get in?”

“You should be able to do it. The goblins love those who look like humans.”

She was mulling over the map and planning a route. “How long do I have?”

“Seven days. We are fairly sure his death is rigged to the great burn during the festival. You had better get going.”

“So I just take my car?”

“Unless you can fly. Miklos will take you back to your vehicle and you can leave immediately.” He waved his hand and the rest of the tribunal lost interest in her.

Miklos tugged her arm and led her out of the room, unlocking the doors before escorting her down the hall.

“I—”

“Quiet, there are too many ears here.”

Max kept her mouth shut until they were back in his squad car. This time she got to ride up front. “I am guessing that not everyone wants your Guild Master back.”

“Very astute, Abomination. Alfred is an opponent to Gregori’s reign. If our Master dies, he will be first in line for the new opening.”

“How will I know Gregori when I see him?”

“If you have one drop of vampire blood in you, you will know him from miles away. His aura is unmistakable. I would show you a picture, but all the portraits are back in the house.”

They were through the gates and on their way to her car.

“Why was it a horrible thing that I killed the guy who bit me?”

“When we are made into vampires, our maker holds sway over us and is responsible for curtailing our behaviour. Steve should have either

turned you or killed you on the spot.”

“It wasn’t his fault that I bit him. Well, it was, but he couldn’t have known I would do it.”

The screeching of brakes almost deafened her. Miklos turned to her in surprise. “You bit him? He told me that you injured him and ingested his blood that way.”

“No. He had me pinned against the wall and was trying to chew on my neck. He had one hand over my mouth so I started chewing. He tasted gross.”

“That’s...I have never heard of...you bit him.” Miklos rubbed his forehead and started chuckling. “Max, I have underestimated you. I wish you all the luck in the world in retrieving Gregori. He is stern, but he is fair. You may be able to keep your life if you continue to react with your own best interests at heart.”

“Welcome to the problem that modern women face every day. Us or them. I pick me every time.”

He resumed their course back to the park, still grinning and shaking his head.

“Do I get some kind of travel voucher or something?”

“Keep your receipts and submit them to Gregori when you bring him back. I am sure he will arrange something suitable.”

“Can I tell my family?”

“I would recommend that you tell them you are

heading out of town for a few days, the reason I will leave up to you.”

“Great. I guess I am going to have to quit my job as well.”

“You can find another when you get back, Gregori may even help you.” Miklos looked over at her as her car came into view. “You need to do this, Max.”

She noted his earnestness. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“That it is someone highly placed who set Steve loose and that is the same someone that I think is connected to Gregori’s disappearance. He probably knows who took him, but you will have to find him to find out.”

He stopped his patrol car next to her vehicle and gave her one final bit of advice. “When you get close to the area, keep an open mind. Good luck, Max.”

“Thanks.”

She got into her car and pressed her forehead against the steering wheel. A sharp sting inside her lower lip made her yelp. Turning on her dome light and flipping the mirror, she cursed out loud when she saw the fangs that grew from her canines as she watched. Her teeth reshaped themselves and when she carefully closed her mouth, there was a hard flash of pain before it subsided. She opened her mouth and rolled her lower lip down,

unsurprised to see a small pouch on each side of her lip to accommodate the teeth.

“Fabulous. This night just keeps getting better.”

Max drove home, one hand on the wheel, the other playing with her new fangs. It was surreal, but she was heading to her apartment to retrieve clothes and go on a mission to save a master vampire who had the right to kill her.

She headed home.

A backpack seemed the best choice for luggage. Max grabbed t-shirts, jeans, two sets of running shoes and a twenty-four pack of water bottles. Underwear for three days, a few sets of socks and a towel. As an afterthought, she grabbed sunglasses. She normally didn't wear them, but she was heading into a desert and it wasn't going to be fun.

She grabbed her wallet, her stash of cash and her cell phone. It was nearing six in the morning and her mother wouldn't be awake yet. She quickly left a message that said, “Hiya, Mom. A friend's suffered a loss and needs me to come by for a few days. I will call you when I am back in town. Tell Dad. Love you.”

She left a message at work about a family emergency and a few days away, but she knew that a pink slip would be waiting for her when she got home. Clerks were a dime a dozen.

Unable to put it off, she ran down to her car and started the engine. A quick fill up and she was on

her way. Twenty-seven hours to her destination,
no problem.

Road trip.

CHAPTER FOUR

There was something to be said for being partially vampiric. She was able to remain awake and driving far beyond her normal endurance.

Her entire life became the road stretching before her until finally signs for Nevada started. When she entered into the desert, her Midwestern eyes took in the golden hues around her with a strange sort of wonder.

She noted the odd assortment of vehicles moving on the highway, all flowing toward her destination. Feeling grungy, scruffy and freakish, she felt she fit right in.

Max overshot the camping area, driving further down the highway and pulling in behind a large boulder. She would try to sneak in after dark.

Who are you?

The voice was harsh and masculine, but it drew her.

Who are you, what are you?

It took some concentration but she answered

him. *I am Max, the Abomination. I have come seeking Gregori, Guild Master.*

I am Gregori. How many are with you?

I am alone. Only an Abomination could make this journey and face the fires they are about to light. Do you know where you are?

Near the effigy. The minds nearest to me are admiring it, so I must be close.

Are you in a cell?

I am shackled to the wall, deep underground. More than ten feet.

She thought about it for a minute. *Today is Friday. They will light the man Saturday night. I am really in no shape to launch a rescue tonight.*

Tomorrow it is, but, Max, do not be late. The threat in his voice was unmistakable. Rather amusing for a man locked underground.

That was the moment she remembered he was not a man, he was a vampire.

She smelled something acrid and heard a scuffling noise a moment before she turned and felt a searing pain in the back of her skull.

Waking staked to the ground with bizarre creatures around her was par for the kind of week she had been having. "Hello."

"You dare speak to us, nightwalker?" The moon-shaped face was flat, the nose pointed and mashed downwards, mud-coloured eyes and hair topped sandy skin. She had no idea what she was

looking at.

"I don't even know what you are and I am not a nightwalker. I am an Abomination." If the technicality could get her out of this, she would be an Abomination with everything in her.

That started a murmur around her. "What is an Abomination?"

"A human that bit a vampire in self-defence. The details are a little muddled."

That caused even more muttering. "We are the tribe of desert goblins. You smell of vampire and we took you for one."

The sun was already setting and the goblins were lighting fires that burned an eerie green.

"Why am I tied to the ground?"

"We were going to light a fire under you to listen to you scream. If you put one of your hands in the fire and pull it out, we will invite you to become one of our tribe." His eyes were sly.

"That will hurt like hell."

"If you are what you say, you will recover. If you are a vampire, you will continue to burn."

"Wonderful. Well, cut me loose and I will jam my hand in the fire."

He looked surprised by her acquiescence. He gave a sharp nod to the goblins behind her and they cut her loose.

Rubbing her wrists, she glanced around at the hundred-plus goblins that made their home in the

desert. Their average height was just shy of five feet tall and when she stood, she dwarfed them.

"This fire, right now." Her captor grabbed her arm with a taloned hand and hauled her to the central blaze.

Max looked around and in the distance, she could see the fires of Black Rock city. With a sigh, she knelt next to the green flames and with no ceremony, she shoved her left arm in to the elbow. The goblin's hands gripped her bicep as the flames licked her skin. He kept her from pulling back.

The constant pain made her grit her teeth, but she hissed through them in a fast pattern until finally another goblin struck the one holding her on the head. It seemed a traditional way to communicate dissatisfaction amongst their people.

"Jarok, you should not have been so cruel." A female examined her arm and to Max's surprise, the scorched skin did rapidly heal, right down to the arm hair.

"Thank you for allowing that to stop."

"I am Lesh. Jarok is my husband and a stupider male there has never been. Come, I will get you some water and you can prepare for the sing."

"The sing? Oh dear, my voice is terrible." Max winced at the thought of their reaction to her voice. She didn't know if her skull could take it.

"That doesn't matter as long as your heart is pure."

Well, her heart was pure, but she knew that her vocal cords were crap.

Lesh led her into one of the rocks via a low opening and gave her an encouraging wave as they approached a bubbling fountain in the rock. "Come, drink."

Her hostess handed her a bronze spoon and waited while she drank her fill. Outside the cool cave, a drumming started and howling began shortly afterward.

"Come. We will miss the sing if we are not quick." Lesh grabbed her hand and hauled her into the darkness and toward the largest fire.

The singing was more an ululation to the beat of the drums and after some of the alcohol that was being passed around, Max joined in.

She sang softly at first, until the booze kicked in, then it was all hands to the eardrums as Max cut loose. She howled with the crowd and as they quieted one by one, she kept going until the drums stopped. When she let her voice rest, applause broke out.

Lesh had tears in her eyes. "That was amazing!"

"Thank you."

Males and females alike came to her to pat her head or hands.

The sing took a break and Lesh and some of the women gathered around her. "Why are you in the

desert, Abomination?"

"I am here to rescue the vampire Guild Master. He is underground in the temporary human city over yonder. I have to go and rescue him before they light the man on fire tomorrow night."

Lesh scowled. "You would be better off staying here with us. The humans there are odd, even for humans."

"I know, but I have to blend in and find him or my life is forfeit. Not pleasant."

Lesh kept her frown for a moment. "Well, if you must go among the humans, you cannot do it looking like that. Tomorrow, we will help you camouflage yourself. We have paints and beads that will make you look like one of the crowd. None will question you after we get done with you."

It sounded like more of a threat than a promise, but Max was not in the mood to be picky. The singing was about to restart.

All night long, she sang, drank, did a few solos, jumped through and over the fires with a dexterity and energy that she couldn't remember having. It was party night at the goblin desert enclave and she was an honoured guest.

Near dawn, they stopped and slept where they fell. Lesh woke her near noon and had her strip and bathe with the water from the stream.

The females converged on her, standing on

rocks to braid beads into her hair and painting her nude body with a mix of latex colours. Blue, gold and silver took up intricate sweeps, swirls and dots on her flesh until she was the only one who knew that she was naked. To anyone else, she was wearing the most faithful of bodysuits.

Where are you?

Nearby, getting my camo on.

His mind ran through hers, *Goblins are helping you?*

Why not? I am a nice person. And an Abomination. That seems to be a key factor.

The time is getting closer. Minds are becoming more frantic.

I will be there. I am almost done.

His snarl didn't really give her much information, but he was rather grouchy.

"Thank you, Lesh, ladies, for all your help. I am confident that I will blend in with the participants. Now, I need only sneak in."

Lesh smiled, but did not hug her. "Jarok will lead you to a passage that will put you inside the gates. You will be there in half an hour. Jarok!"

He sheepishly came and did as his wife had bidden. He led Max through the tunnels and into the noise and smells of a human city in the desert. "Good luck, Abomination."

She raised a hand in farewell, but he had already closed the sand door that she had exited

from.

You are almost there. Just a little closer.

She didn't dignify it with a response. Her body paint was very elaborate, but many costumes had flames and fireworks. She achieved just the right amount of attention in her mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

Max wandered through the crowds of people approaching the construction event that was the Burning Man. The outfit that the goblins had provided her with was making her blend but left very little of her curved frame to the imagination. The blue, gold and silver body paint that the goblins applied made her look like a creature from the farthest reaches of the writhing desert.

A few drunken enthusiasts fell at her feet, worshipping her like a goddess as she passed. She could feel the glow in her eyes from Gregori's power and her hair was rippling in the hot breezes and scents of the gathered humans.

You are close to me. I can feel your presence.

And I can sense you as well. They buried you under the depiction of the wicker man. If I don't get you out of there, you will burn.

Then, my dear Max, you had better get moving or the vampires will find you and rip you to shreds.

I have no idea how I am going to get you out of there. How deep do you think you are?

Twelve to fifteen feet.

Wonderful.

See you soon, pet.

The way he said *pet* made her shiver. If he was anything like the lethally elegant vamps she had run into so far, he would not be interested in her the moment he was out of the ground.

There was a strange freedom in running around the celebration with only enough body paint to cover the essentials. The enhanced nature of her body caused her to move in a slow swaying walk that shifted her hips and gave her a feeling of relaxation in her own skin. Part of her mind enjoyed being a colourful part of the crowd, the other part scrambled to find a way to get Gregori out of the ground.

The fire jugglers gave her the idea she was looking for. A large, open circle of spectators was positioned right over the spot where Gregori was buried. She flirted her way through the crowd until she reached one of the nearby jugglers. A light flirt, a gentle caress of her fingers and she took possession of a bottle of the liquid paraffin and a torch. Breathing fire got her into the centre of the open space, right above the burial spot, only ten feet from the base of the Burning Man.

Max twirled in a circle, blowing fire and laying a streamer of paraffin in a circle around her. The crowd clapped at her furious display and if she

hadn't been regenerating, she would have been bald.

With a final flourish, she tossed the paraffin back to its donator and blasted flame at the ring on the sand. A wall of fire embraced her and she spun rapidly, digging through the sand until she hit a solid bottom.

A few deft punches with her hand and she was through the roof of Gregori's cell. Coughing out the sand in her lungs, she fell to the floor. A slow hourglass trickle of sand followed her.

"Don't just lie there, pet. Get me out of here."

There was no light, but her new senses showed her a pair of feet shackled to the wall within reaching distance of her hand. She looked up and up and whoa, way up. He was definitely not the effete snob she had imagined. His torso was a hard vee of muscle, his thighs thick and she had no doubt that he had a butt to die for.

He also was wearing clothing, but she couldn't get the colours with her night vision. All she fixated on was glowing eyes and brilliant fangs. "The room is filling with sand, pet. The key is to your left."

She stood mechanically and reached for the key. Now came the tricky part, releasing him.

Max started with his feet, releasing one ankle at a time. She stood and unclasped the silvered chain at his waist and fought her jump of surprise when

he leaned down and sniffed her. She slapped him. The broad plane of his chest was just as hard as it looked. "Stop that."

He chuckled. The sound went through her in a thousand different ways.

"Um, I can't reach your cuffs."

"Climb me."

She blinked, not sure if he could see her expression. "What?"

"Climb my body and unlock the cuffs. I won't grab you, I promise." He was laughing at her. She could tell.

With her body the next thing to naked, she slowly braced her hands on his shoulders with the key between her teeth. His face was in the middle of her rib cage and she kept her focus as she unlocked the cuffs as rapidly as she could in the dark.

The moment he was free, she sprang back.

He stretched and she heard the muscles and tendons pop. "So, an Abomination had the will to rescue the one man who could consign her to death. Very brave or very stupid."

"I will go with both. How do we get out of here?"

He rushed at her and held her in his arms. He felt even bigger up close and personal. "First, I need a donation and then I will help you escape my prison."

Blood. He wanted her blood. She tilted her neck and closed her eyes. "Fine, go for it."

"Don't mind if I do."

She jerked in his arms when his tongue tasted her neck and shoulder. He lapped at her skin for a few moments before the heat of his mouth opened over her flesh and his teeth slid in with no trouble at all.

You taste...

Like what? Chicken?

His laugh in her mind distracted her from the reaction she was having to his snacking.

Like sunshine, sand and woman.

Good thing I am one of the three and covered with another.

He finished drinking, but didn't let her go. Gregori licked the wounds until they closed. "Thank you. Now, they are getting ready to light the fire, so we must go."

The vampire Guild Master lifted her from her feet and whispered, "Hold your breath."

Before she could think of what he was doing, he lined them up under the hole she had punched and they flew straight up and into the open circle left for the performers.

Max saw a startled knife thrower fall on his butt, but nothing was in play as they flew into the night an instant before flames erupted and Burning Man lived up to his name.

My car is over there.

Do you have clothing there?

Of course. I don't dress like this normally.

You are naked, pet.

Her blush stayed with her all the way to her car. The moment he let her go, she dug her keys out of the sand and opened the trunk. She yanked on her t-shirt and slithered into her jeans. Going commando was by far the least of her problems. The sand in everything was going to drive her nuts.

Her sneakers filled with grit as she put them on, but she needed shoes to drive.

"So, my lovely rescuer, where are we going to spend the day?"

"There is a hotel in Elko. Also a casino. The Red Lion. The faster we leave, the faster we get there."

Gregori nodded and slid into the passenger seat with more grace than Max could ever claim. She buckled up to drive them to their safe haven and stifled a smirk when he released the seat to its fullest extent.

The effigy burned in the distance as they drove off, lighting the night sky for miles around. Max smiled, thanks to her, there was one less burning man this year.

CHAPTER SIX

“King-size bed.”
Max winced as his voice rumbled over her head.

Gregori was behind her, his arms around her as she filled out the registration slip and handed over her credit card. The clerk smiled slightly as she took in the clinch they were in as well as Gregori’s height.

“No problem, sir.”

The transaction was completed in under three minutes. She took the room keys and her backpack and led the way to the room. The Guild Master was not inclined to let go of her and kept a grip on her hand.

After commandeering and sliding the key into the door, he went on alert, checking the room rapidly and then pulling her in. “It’s safe.”

“I would hope so. If anyone could predict that we would end up here, I would freak.” She shuddered. “I am taking the first shower. I don’t care that you have been down there for weeks if

not months. I hate being gritty.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and inclined his head. “As you wish, pet.”

Max darted into the bathroom, ignored her reflection and grabbed the tiny shampoo and conditioner. She stripped to the skin and residual body paint and jumped in the shower.

The grit and paint slowly came off as she scrubbed as quickly as she could. She wasn’t sure that Gregori wouldn’t invite himself and when she finished her shower, she was rather disappointed that he hadn’t.

With her hair wrapped in one towel and her body mostly concealed by the other, Max lifted the backpack and grubby clothes, returning to the bedroom. “Your turn.”

He looked surprised.

“What, didn’t I get all the paint off?” She didn’t want to drop the backpack, but he was staring at her.

“You look so...innocent.”

“Oh. Yeah, the milkmaid thing. I think it comes with the extra pounds.”

“No, you are truly a pure soul. Who was your maker?”

“Some twit named Steve. He didn’t last the night after he *made* me.”

He nodded, “Good. I would have had to have killed him myself.”

On that cryptic note, he left for his shower. Her sleep shirt was comfy—a men’s shirt that hung down to mid-thigh. She tugged her comb through her hair while absently brushing the residual sand off the bed with one foot.

The television remote was still on the bedding where Gregori had left it. She poked at it with her toe and watched a recap of the evening news.

There was a buzz about the new performance artists that disappeared an instant before the man was lit. Max snickered at the stunned witnesses that were less than coherent at the sight of a man and a woman jetting through the sand. Even the videos that were being filmed caught little more than a blur of flesh as they flew up, up and away.

She heard the opening of the bathroom door while her gaze remained glued to the TV. “You wouldn’t believe how many stoners are interpreting our escape as a sign from the gods. Hopefully, they will sober up before they try and drive.”

She glanced up and her mouth got suddenly dry. He was wearing a towel around his hips and was drying his shoulder-length hair with another. Every massive muscle in between was delineated as he rubbed his hair.

“After two months in that box, I can’t tell you how good a hot shower feels.” He sighed and flopped back on the bed, the length just fitting his

frame.

She was locked in place – every hormone in her body was screaming *jump! Jump!*

It took her three tries to speak. “I can guess.”

He lay back with his hands under his head, the pillows curling him into a semi-sit-up that kept his abdomen taut.

It suddenly hit her – he was preening! He was trying to seduce her using his body as the enticement and she couldn’t say it wasn’t working.

“I’ll draw the blackout curtains so that the sun won’t blind you in the morning.” She got up and moved across the room, making sure that her nightshirt covered everything.

Once the curtains were closed, she returned to the bed and sat uncomfortably on the edge, watching the news.

Finally, she blurted out her thought. “Guild Master, am I slated for death the moment you get back and reclaim your position?”

He sat up in surprise. “Of course not. You may be an abomination, but you are my Abomination.”

She laughed, but there were tears in her eyes. “Yours? I beg to differ on that point.”

“You are not yet mine, but you will be.” There was confidence in his black eyes and a certain set of his jaw that left her certain that he was as stubborn as he was strong.

His dark hair slid across his shoulders as he

took in her clothing. "You have a man?"

"No. why?"

"You are wearing a man's shirt. The buttons are on the wrong side for it to be a woman's shirt."

"I wear a man's shirt to bed because it is comfortable and I can't sleep with pants on. Drives me nuts. I buy the shirts because they accommodate the dimensions of my chest better than the standard women's shirts."

His gaze fixed on the problem area. "I can see how that would have been an issue."

"So, are you going to sleep?"

"Eventually. Come closer."

She was suspicious. "Why?"

"Because I have been locked underground for two months, I have been alone and I need the comfort of another body."

Grumbling outwardly while her mind was giggling and clapping its hands, she scooted close enough for him to grab. He didn't.

"Under the covers."

She crawled under the covers and waited. He turned off the television and left them in complete darkness. Her new night vision was all that let her see the intensity of his face as he removed the white towel and crawled in next to her.

His arms pulled her to his chest and he spread one of his hands across her back, almost covering the entire expanse. His erection was pressed

against her inner thigh, but he did nothing except sigh happily.

To her chagrin, Gregori was asleep in her arms within a minute. She stayed awake with her heart pounding in her chest for hours, watching over him as he rested after his ordeal.

Dawn would come soon and she would run out to get him some clothing. With luck, the clothes in the bathroom would give her a clue as to sizing.

She groaned mentally as she realized that she wanted him more than any man she had ever met and to him, she was simply a convenience. He would grant her a pardon when they got home and they would go their separate ways. It would be better that way.

She was waiting next to the bed, slurping the remains of her supersized soda and watching game shows. Gregori was asleep one second and awake the next.

“Max. Come here, pet.”

He was hungry, it showed in the red gleam within his eyes.

“Fine, but this is not the kind of thing I want you to get used to.” She loosened the shirt from her jeans and pulled it off over her head. Her bra wouldn’t impede him, but the shirt would stay blood free. It was a commodity she was beginning to appreciate.

He held out his hand and she took it, sitting across his thighs as he stroked her hair away from her neck. "You are truly magnificent."

"Thanks." She knotted her fingers in her lap and waited.

"You don't believe it, do you?"

She was shivering. What were his fingers doing to her neck? The light dance along her skin was maddening. "Believe what?"

"That you are truly a woman of great courage and amazing beauty. I have never been able to abide those tiny creatures who depend on others to fight their battles."

His breath was heating her skin, his tongue tracing idle patterns as if he was in no hurry.

"Um, can you just bite me already?"

She felt his smile against her skin. "Why? Aren't you enjoying this?"

"It makes me uncomfortable."

"I can tell. I find it fascinating that you could charge through human hordes, face down goblins who are bent on killing you, but a small caress on your neck throws your body into riot and turns you into a shy maiden."

Max turned hot pink the instant he bit, a light sliding of teeth on her skin an instant before penetration was achieved. He was taking his time, but she was getting a strange rush as he fed.

His hand cupped her breast as he snacked and

she squeaked in surprise. His other hand curved around her waist and pressed her tightly against his hard pelvis through the bedding. His sexual interest was unmistakable, but she had the feeling that it was related to his feeding and she had qualms about her appeal being dependent on her being edible.

That little reality check cooled her jets quite effectively and she waited passively until he finished his meal. His tongue closed her wounds quickly and he sighed as he released her. "You won't give an inch, will you?"

"I just want my life back. How often do you need to eat anyway?"

He smiled, "At my age, every two months or so."

"So this was..."

"Just for fun and because I enjoy feeling your body against mine. It isn't often that I get to hold a woman who fits me so well." He nuzzled her neck and she shivered.

"Well, I just want to get you home so that you can give the verdict on my odds of survival." She tried to edge away from him, but his grip on her waist kept her in place.

He sat back and turned her head to meet his gaze. "You amaze me. Most women who knew that I held their lives in my hand would try to seduce me, to sway my decision using sex, yet you

are trying to get away from me. You aren't even playing hard to get, you are simply not processing my interest as genuine. How am I to convince you?"

She sighed and met his dark gaze with her own. "You can't. I want a job, friends, a life. Hanging around with thirsty vampires isn't conducive to any of those." She rubbed her forehead with her free hand.

"Are you weak?"

"A little."

"Have you fed?"

"I had a sandwich when I went shopping."

Gregori looked at her in astonishment. "I meant blood. You haven't eaten from a living being?"

"Um. No."

He sighed and leaned back, rubbing his chin. She watched his hand move over the hard line of his jaw and he came to some kind of a decision.

"Drink from me."

"Uh, something tells me that that isn't the correct protocol."

"No one drinks from the Guild Master except his apprentice. I am offering you that position."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Max blinked. Was he asking her what she thought he was asking her?

“What does being your apprentice entail?”

“You will be a companion, a personal assistant, a representative to other races and an escort to the formal events that the magical community holds during the year.”

“What about sex?”

“What about it?”

“Is it mandatory?”

“No, but it is optional or a perk if you are interested.” His eyes glittered and his lips were twisted into an enticing smile. As she watched, he wagged the dark wings of his eyebrows.

She swayed. She was really dizzy even though she had eaten. The hunger was there again as well, a dark, lip-licking hunger that made her focus on the heavy column of his neck.

“What happens if I say yes?”

“You can drink from me and we will get back on the road. The rest will be settled when we

return home.”

It took only a few seconds of her focussing on his body for her decision. “How do I do this?”

“Your saliva has a pain killer in it. Lick the area you want to bite and then simply close your mouth over the area. The blood will flow. When you are finished, lick the wounds and they will close.”

She nodded absently, but she couldn't get a good angle on him while sitting across his lap. Max moved until she was straddling him, pressing her palms to the firm set of his shoulders and holding herself away from him as she slowly licked his skin. Her tongue sizzled with his taste. There was power in him just under his skin. She felt his body shake as she gave him another slow lick and her smile came and went as she slowly opened her mouth and sank her teeth through the skin that parted easily.

Blood and energy filled her mouth and she swallowed quickly. After the first rush, a steady trickle came to her and her body rocked against his with each surge. The sex and blood connection made sense, it was impossible for her not to move to the slow pulse of his body. When she would have withdrawn, his hand slid into her hair and held her head in place while he gripped her hip with the other. He rocked against her until a low groan broke the air and he slowly released her from her feeding.

Dazed, she licked the already-closing wounds and sat back, shivering from the power she was wearing on her skin. His release had swept through his bloodstream and into hers, leaving her shaking and feeling incredibly aroused.

“Welcome, Apprentice.” The words were formal and his eyes had a possessive gleam she had a sinking feeling she was going to have to get used to.

“Thank you, Guild Master.” Blushing, crackling with energy, she tried to dismount. He threaded his hand in her hair again and brought her forward for a kiss.

The kiss was sweet, hot and had Max’s pulse pounding in seconds. When he released her, he only let her back up far enough to ask, “Shall we get going?”

Bemused, she dismounted and staggered to her backpack and put away her dirty clothes. “I washed your clothing from last night, but it’s still damp so you may want to try the clothes I bought while I was out.”

She nodded to the bag on the table and he took it with a pleased smile. “Thank you, Apprentice.”

“You are welcome. I took your other stuff with me so it should fit.”

He nodded and left the bed with no thought to modesty. Her mouth went dry and another kind of hunger surged as she noted him completely from

head to toe. Head to naked toe. *Wow.*

Thank you.

Oh, crap. She forgot about the mind-reading thing. He had probably been picking her brain the entire time.

Not the entire time, I was a little distracted when you were riding me.

She blanked her mind as he took the bag to the bathroom and gave her a view of his phenomenal butt on the way. *Oh my.*

It wasn't fair for a guy like him to look as good coming as going.

I find you very handsome as well, your breasts are amazing and your hips are just right for my hands.

Darn it, she was projecting again.

She cleared the room, deliberately not checking between the sheets for any residuals, used the automated checkout and when Gregori came out of the bathroom wearing loafers, jeans and a black cotton dress shirt, she was ready to leave.

"I'll drive. I know a short cut." Gregori took the keys and she took the passenger seat. With a cursory readjustment of the mirrors, they were off.

Since he didn't have a wallet with him, she was stuck with gas charges, but she kept all her receipts carefully, just on the off chance she would get reimbursed.

He didn't seem inclined to talk and instead, he focussed intensely until a relieved look passed

over his features.

Max couldn't see anything, but just as she thought he was happy to see a field, a hotel sprang up out of nowhere.

"This is Hotel Spectre. All paranormal races keep a representative here. Rather like a consulate."

"Even vampires?"

"Even vampires. Yosh will greet us at the door and bring us to a transport gateway. From there, we will be home in an instant."

A whole new world was opening up in front of her and she had to admit that it was a little exciting. If vampires and goblins were real, then it stood to reason that any number of other species were actually in the world and she passed by them every day.

"We will have to leave your vehicle here, I will buy you a new one when we are back home." He squeezed her hand as he parked the car in the valet area. A troll emerged and took the keys, shifting his form until he could fit in the driver's seat. With her backpack on one shoulder, she followed Gregori into the hotel.

The vampire that was hugging the Guild Master was not the lean, elegant vamp that she was anticipating. He looked like his previous life had contained swords, armour and a whole lot of mean.

“Yosh, this is my Apprentice. Max, the Abomination.”

To say that the pale blonde was shocked was an understatement, but instead of commenting, he looked again. “I am pleased to meet you, Apprentice. I am Yosh, ambassador of the vampire population here at Hotel Spectre.”

“Max. Really confused and horribly tired.” She extended her hand and he took it, another flare of surprise in his eyes as the creep of power ran over his senses.

“We will have you home soon, Max. Come this way.”

Gregori smiled and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, steering her to the elevator and up to the nineteenth floor. She was running on nothing but his touch, her body and mind exhausted now that she was close to being home again.

The mage standing next to a huge mirror should have surprised her. His pointy ears should have gotten her attention, but nothing could break through her numb exhaustion.

Her reflection was an after image in the mirror, her chestnut hair loose and hanging to cover her breasts, her eyes were their muddy colour between green and brown with splashes of blue and her face looked exhausted.

The mage changed, waved his arms and soon

the image of the tribunal room that had started this mess. Her mind remembered the large mirror over the fireplace and she had a horrible feeling that she was going to have go jump.

“Up you come.” Gregori lifted her in his arms and held her against his chest as he approached the mirror. “Breathe deep.”

She sucked air in a second before he launched himself through the image.

Ice flowed around her and got into her soul in the seconds that they flew from Hotel Spectre and into the tribunal hall. Shaking in his grasp, she huddled in on herself as cries started around the room. Some glad, some startled.

Gregori carried her to a large chair in front of a heavily gated fireplace and he wrapped her in a throw. “Stay here, Max. I will find you if you try to leave.” He caressed her face and turned just in time for a lithe, elegant blonde to plaster herself to him from neck to knees, her hands caressing him all over.

Max looked into the flames and ignored the soft cooing sounds the woman was making.

“Sofia! Enough. You were not in my bed when I was taken and you will not join me there again.”

“Oh, Gregori. Don’t be that way. Skip your bed, we can use the credenza.” Her purr was not to be ignored.

Max looked at them out of the corner of her eye

and watched Gregori try to extricate himself from the clingy vines of the blonde. She blinked in surprise as he grabbed the woman's satin-clad arms and shoved her backward with enough force to knock her to her butt.

The woman finally took the hint. "Don't tell me that the cow there is more your type. I won't believe it."

Max felt her hackles rise and she fought her urge to bare her fangs. Power started to crackle along her skin and the bright blue eyes of Sofia widened until the whites were showing. Max snarled and shoved herself at the woman only to be brought up short by Gregori's arm around her waist.

"She has gotten the hint, Apprentice. Calm down." He was pleased, she could feel it through the bond that they had. Smug was the more accurate term, as if he was delighted with her reaction.

Still holding her casually against him, Gregori started barking orders. "I want everyone aside from my personal guard out. I need to speak with Anthony, but that will be all. You have five minutes."

The scramble of previously spooky vampires was almost funny. Sofia scuttled to her feet and ran and the others were right behind her.

Gregori held her casually in his arms, waiting

until they were completely alone.

A staid man in a dark suit came through the open door. "Guild Master, I am happy to see you alive. And this is..."

"Max, my Apprentice. She needs a full wardrobe, a new car and reimbursement for all expenses incurred while retrieving me."

"Of course, sir. Congratulations, Max. I am the Guild Master's major domo and keep track of his household."

He extended his hand and Max took it. She watched as he lifted her hand to his lips and he pressed a warm kiss against her skin. His hair slid forward and she noted he had a pointed ear.

"Anthony, are you..."

"An elf, miss. One of the few living and breathing things in this household." He straightened with a smile. "I am glad to welcome you into that exclusive category. Anything you need, simply ask me."

Max was smiling back at the charming man. "Thank you, Anthony. I will need meals at regular intervals and I will need to get stuff from my apartment." She looked up at Gregori and asked, "How long will I be here? How much stuff do I need?"

Anthony tried to speak, but Gregori lifted one of his hands. "I will explain it to her, Anthony. She is tired. Send a snack for her to my quarters."

“Shall I send a snack for you as well, sir?”

“No. I have eaten.” The intimacy in his tone made her shiver and he swung her up and into his arms as he went through the hall, up the stairs and down another hall into a bedroom guarded by two trolls.

They smiled when they saw him and opened the doors for him seeing as how he had his hands full.

Max yawned.

Gregori sat her on the edge of the bed and pulled off her shoes, unsnapped her jeans and skimmed them down her legs.

He was too amused as he stripped her down. Something was up. When another wave of fatigue came over her, she got outraged. “Cheater! You are making me sleepy.”

“I need you at your best tomorrow. That means fully rested. You aren’t the type to rest in a strange place, so I am forcing you to nap.” He tugged her shirt off and slipped her bra from her shoulders.

Her arms went across her chest in defence of her modesty, but he got up and opened a walk-in closet. The shirt he selected was silk, ivory and soft when he slipped it over her head. It was thin, but the barely opaque fabric covered her almost to her knees.

Gregori turned down the bed and tucked her into it. He shucked his own clothing quickly and

crawled in next to her. "Dawn is coming and the guards will keep us safe. I don't want you alone out there. You are far too vulnerable right now."

Darkness weighed on her eyes as he wrapped himself around her. "What about my snack?"

"It will still be there in eight hours. Sleep." His hands stroked her through the silk and she snuggled down into sleep with the vampire Guild Master cuddling and protecting her.

Out of all the outcomes of the events leading up to this moment, she had never predicted this.

CHAPTER EIGHT

She felt rested and there was coffee within inches of her nose. "That was a dirty trick."

"I am the Guild Master, it was my will. Now sit up. Anthony made you an omelette."

He smacked her thigh under the covers and she sat up, glaring at him. "First you force me to sleep and then you wake me up with no notice...meany."

He snickered while he put the breakfast tray over her. She scootched up in the bed and put pillows behind her back, hauling the tray into place. There was fruit, the omelette, a cup of coffee, sugar, cream and toast. Everything a new Abomination needed to start the day.

"Wow, Anthony went all out." She nibbled on a strawberry, closing her eyes at the feel of the juice trickling down her throat.

"He likes you. If he didn't, you would have gotten cold cereal or a granola bar."

She didn't comment. She was too busy destroying the food and not biting the inside of her

lips. The fangs took some getting used to, but she was managing fine. Max prepped her coffee and watched Gregori prowling around the room in silk boxers. The man liked silk. He also liked cell phones. He was making call after call that she was trying not to listen to.

She was three quarters done with her meal when a knock on the door brought his head up. One of the trolls opened the door and whispered to Gregori. It was at that point that she realized he was messing with her perceptions. "Cheater!"

"Your seamstress is here. She is setting up in my office. Finish your breakfast, grab a shower and Tonho will escort you there."

The smiling troll in the doorway waved cheerfully.

She put her eating into high gear and slugged the coffee down. Breathing deeply to cool her throat, she moved the tray and left the bed. She found a new toothbrush next to one of the sinks in the bathroom and she used it, getting rid of the coffee residue. The elaborate shower made her smile. She stepped inside and was bombarded from all sides by sprays that made her twirl on the slick surface with delight. The toiletries were masculine but they got her nice and clean. When she reluctantly turned off the water and reached for a towel, she almost moaned happily. Huge black bath sheets swallowed her and covered her

from collarbone to calves. It was a relief to have a towel that didn't have to be held closed.

When she reached for the shirt she had been wearing, she smiled. It had been replaced by a navy blue shirt that would cover her completely. She towelled her hair dry and left the bathroom, her feet making no noise on the thick carpet.

Her escort was waiting for her. "He's scampered off?"

The troll grinned at her. "The Guild Master does not scamper. Bounding perhaps. Yes, he bounded off."

"Well, I am as dressed as I am getting since he had my clothing abducted. Where is this seamstress?"

Tonho nodded. "She is this way." He lead the way out the door and she pattered after him. The troll was over seven feet tall and she had to give herself a mental shake. All her life she had been too tall, too curvy and now she was almost a vampire and surrounded by men who were just about the right size. Why couldn't she have met them while she was still normal?

"How long have you worked for Gregori?"

"Thirty-three years this month. The Guild Master is throwing me a party."

She blinked. "That sounds nice."

"Oh, working for the vampire Guild Master has never been so rewarding as it has been in the last

seven decades. He remembers birthdays, anniversaries. We have medical and dental. It's a great place to work."

"How many Apprentices has he had?" She tried to make it casual, but she was confident he had picked up on her insecurity.

Tonho looked surprised. "Only you. A Guild Master can only tap one Apprentice in his term. If he dies, you rule the guild. Many will try to destroy you, but I think you can manage it. You have a strength of character that few can match."

"How do you know that?"

"Knowing that you could escape and hide, you chose to rescue the Guild Master from certain death. You had already been made aware that he could order your death with no notice, so saving him was done because your character would not allow you to take the easy way out."

He opened a rich mahogany door and escorted her inside. A woman with several dress racks waited for her and when she turned to face Max, she noticed the little tidbit she had missed before. The woman had four arms.

"I am Mistress Galfor, you must be the Abomination."

She grimaced for a moment and then gave in to the designation. "I am, but please, call me Max."

"Max then. Call me, Galfor. The Guild Master has ordered you a complete wardrobe. Step on this

podium and let's get measuring." Two of the woman's arms snapped a measuring tape and the other two carried a note pad and pen.

"Are you a goblin?"

"Yes, spider goblin to be precise. Why?"

"There is just something about your fangs that is very familiar." She laughed and took her position while the woman went to work.

"I have been hearing things through the goblin grapevine, Max, but I wasn't sure whether or not to believe them."

"Oh, like what?" She held her arms out at her sides as the tape measured her bust and then dropped them for the shoulder measurement.

"That a vampire who wasn't a vampire had a singing voice that managed goblin karaoke with skill and good humour. The rock goblins are telling tales of her voice far and wide. Was that you?"

Max was blushing. "It might have been. Were the goblins in Nevada?"

"Yes."

"Then that was me. What did Gregori order?"

Galfor started to tick off the list—suits, corsets, gowns, vests, ball gowns, cocktail dresses. "I will also obtain underwear, hosiery and shoes for you."

"Thanks. I don't suppose you have anything I can wear today?"

"Only if I can take it in while you are waiting."

Gregori was adamant that I show off your figure in all the outfits. The dramatic narrowing of your waist is quite the feature."

Max shrugged. "I have always found it to be a pain when I was looking for clothes to fit."

"Hence all of the custom clothing. Don't worry, Gregori has a good eye and he has made some lovely selections, including the gown you will wear to the formal introduction as his Apprentice. Think Mae West meets Morticia Addams." Galfor rubbed her hands together. "I can't wait to work on that one."

Galfor went to her racks and selected a dress that had a halter neck and was reminiscent of a famous Marilyn Munroe dress. With deft fingers, she put it on Max and took it in, fitting it to her expertly. A pair of strappy sandals with three-inch heels and the outfit was complete, except for underwear.

The halter tightened under Galfor's clever stitches and was soon supporting Max's breasts in a secure and comfortable manner. The skirt flowed and swirled as she moved and she had to admit she loved it.

The deep midnight blue of the fabric kept her lack of undergarments her secret. Galfor gathered her supplies and waited impatiently. "Come on, I want to get started on your clothes."

"Fine. Back to Tonho it is."

When she opened the door, the troll straightened with his eyes taking in every inch of her. A low whistle made her blush and she hated to ask. "What happens next?"

"The Guild Master is down in the audience hall. You are to join him after you have something to drink and a light snack. Anthony is waiting in the kitchen. This way."

She followed the troll to her destination as a group of goblin assistants rushed up the stairs to help Galfor.

Anthony looked up in surprise as he finished putting touches on a tray of crackers, cheese, vegetables and meats. "Am I supposed to eat all that?"

"You can share with Tonho if you wish and may I say your appearance is much improved over last night." Anthony bowed and held out a chair at the table.

"Thank you. Though to be fair, Gregori sort of forced the sleep on me."

"That is why he is Guild Master. He can see what is needed and take action."

Max wisely chose not to comment. Instead, she worked her way through the food, drinking water every time her glass was filled.

"Tonho. Come, eat."

"Thank you, but the only thing I would eat off that plate is the sausage. Trolls don't digest cheese

and vegetables are something we step on.”

Max chuckled and shoved a few rounds of sausage to him. “Take the edge off.”

“Thank you.” He reached out and she saw close up the deadly claws tipping his fingers, the greyish green skin almost armoured at close range. The sausage disappeared.

She swallowed and kept working through until she had removed the majority of the food and she felt like she was straining her seams. When she stood, she felt marginally less stuffed but still took a slug of water before turning to the attentive Anthony.

“Gregori would like to see you, miss. Would you come with me?”

“Of course, just let me wash my hands.” The kitchen was one she would have killed for—huge granite-topped counters, multiple burner stove, two ovens and a triple sink. She rinsed her hands quickly and dried them on the cloth Anthony held out. “You are very good at that.”

“I have centuries of practice, miss.”

“Call me Max.”

“Of course, miss.” His eyes twinkled as he winked.

She sighed and followed him through the halls, the heels she was wearing made her feel confident and put her over six feet tall. She pulled her shoulders back and walked confidently as she

passed a few vampires in the hall. Several nodded respectfully, but a few bared their teeth and Max kept them in mind as she walked into the audience chamber.

CHAPTER NINE

Gregori straightened behind the single desk that was now the focal part of the room. The other two desks had been removed. His dark eyes widened as she approached and stopped in front of him. "Hello, Gregori. How has your day been?"

"Not as transforming as yours apparently. You look lovely."

He held out his hand and she took it. With a move that left the observers gasping, he lifted her hand to his lips and she smiled when his tongue flicked lightly across her knuckles.

He used his grip on her hand to guide her to his side where Anthony brought her a chair. She sat next to him as a vampire approached and asked for a ruling on a territorial dispute. Gregori kept his grip on her hand while he listened to the plea and asked for the other two vampires to come forward.

It was settled by age of occupation and a street map that Anthony produced. Gregori used his free hand to draw a border in the disputed area based on known population density. It was a fair method

of delineation and Max was impressed.

The next petitioner wanted to turn his girlfriend into a vampire. She didn't know that he was one and that was the primary sticking point as far as Gregori was concerned. The vampire had obtained his maker's permission, now he needed to find out what the Guild Master thought.

"I will send an assessment team to watch her and when they have forwarded the report, I will summon you for my decision. Thank you for adhering to our traditions and asking first. Not all have been so careful in the past." He squeezed Max's hand and she squeezed back.

The vampire bowed low and smiled as he left.

Miklos was the next petitioner up. His police uniform was not in evidence. He was wearing slacks and a dress shirt.

"Miklos, thank you for coming."

"Any time, Guild Master."

"I want to know which of those assembled here sent Steve out to raid the population."

"It was his maker, Guild Master. Donnatha."

He released Max's hand and stood. "I would like to announce to all that it was Donnatha who was speaking to me when the spell struck me and Steve was the only other vampire in the room. Donnatha. Come forward and explain."

Donnatha came forward and she didn't look half as scary without the desk in front of her.

"Guild Master, I express my joy at your return to your position."

"Thank you, Donnatha, but I would not be here without the help of the Abomination, so fate has taken a hand in my survival."

Max was leaning forward. Something in the female vampire was not right. She was radiating a disturbing energy.

"Why is your pet baring her fangs to me?"

A strange energy gripped Max and she sent her mind forward. Donnatha gasped as her mind was laid open and Max grew queasy at the nine hundred years of blood and debauchery that she was feeling through the weird connection that she was sharing.

"Gregori, what is a vial of Osiris?"

Donnatha's eyes went wide in shock and she reached into a pocket of her jacket in a blur of motion.

Max got to her feet and shoved Gregori out of the way the instant that the vial left her hand.

The sharp pain that splashed across Max's shoulders burned her where fire didn't. A trickle of ice ran through her veins and she heard a scream.

Gregori's face was in front of her and he was holding her arms. "Max, hold in there, pet. He has no sway over you."

She gritted her teeth and swallowed the agony that made her want to shriek. "Who doesn't?"

“Osiris. You are not dead, not undead and he cannot take you.” His hands were stroking her forehead, her cheeks and her throat.

Eventually the pain ceased to escalate and she slumped forward into the Guild Master’s arms. Her skin was clammy, she was panting and sweat was pooled under her dress. “What the hell was that?”

He held her tightly, careful of the damp substance on her back though.

Shrieking continued in the background and it reached a fever pitch before there was sudden silence.

Gregori pressed his lips to her temple and she sighed as the pain faded to nothing. “Thank you, Max.”

“For what? Getting sprayed with a mystery substance? I am sure that you could have managed to survive it.”

He pressed his lips close to her ear. “I am not so sure.”

The Guild Master turned her so she could see what went on behind her back. Tonho and Anthony were each holding one of Donnatha’s arms, but it wasn’t necessary. She had been turned to stone.

“The curse in that vial was specific. One being needed to be taken to the underworld for judgement. Since you were still alive, it could not

be you. So since she was linked to the spell, Osiris has taken her for judgement. There is a reason that the spell is seldom used. It has a tendency to rebound on the caster if their aim is off."

"And since Tonho and Anthony are not undead, they could hold her until the rebound hit."

"Exactly. See, you are catching on to all of this, Apprentice."

He chuckled as Anthony released the stone vamp and gestured for another of the trolls to assist him. In front of the shocked vampires, Anthony stripped her dress off her still-stinging skin and rubbed her down with something that felt slick and smelled herbal.

"Am I really naked in a room full of bloodsuckers?" She asked it of Anthony, Gregori was removing his shirt.

"Yes. But only for a moment. You need to remain within their view so that there is no question of your power or your survival."

Apparently, Anthony had given his all clear because Gregori wrapped her in a shirt that smelled of him and she gave in to the urge to inhale deeply.

Gregori returned to his seat, but he pulled her down onto his lap. "Back to business. Miklos, if you could see to her disposal in the gardens?"

"Of course, Guild Master."

The screeching of stone on tile set Max's ears on edge, but she was too tired to complain. She closed her eyes and leaned against Gregori's chest. His heart didn't beat, but he smelled great and the energy that coated him made her feel warm and tingly.

The vamps that came up for mediation were a little more nervous than they had been before. If Max opened her eyes and looked at them, they became positively incoherent. She grimaced at that and went back to her waking recuperation.

Thank you, Max.

For what?

I was not expecting that attack. I was far too interested in your cleavage to be honest.

She felt wrong. Would it have killed you?

Likely.

Then I am glad I caught it for you. You smell too good to have this be your last day on earth.

I was thinking the same thing. Do you think you need some of my blood to assist your recovery?

I don't think it would hurt. Would you mind?

Not as long as I was the only thing you were wearing.

She opened her eyes wide to meet his amused dark gaze. He grew closer and she realized that he was coming in for a kiss. His lips teased hers and she lifted her hand to cup his jaw, sliding her fingers through the wealth of his silky, dark hair.

She felt one of his hands shift and by the time

he finished the kiss, her toes were literally curled and her skin was flushed. Embarrassed, she looked around when he would have kissed her again.

“Where did everyone go?”

“They left five minutes ago. You, young lady, need to be in bed and I need to be next to you.”

He stood with her in his arms, Max was wearing nothing but his shirt and her sandals, he was wearing his trousers and his own shoes. In a rush of speed that surprised her, they were back in his room and the doors locked behind them.

While she watched from next to the bed, he toed off his shoes and slipped out of his trousers. Black silk boxers were all he wore as he leaned against the headboard and waited for her.

“Well? I am waiting.”

Her lips twisted as she untied her sandals and stepped down from her perch. She unbuttoned his shirt but kept it on, just letting it hang open as she climbed onto the bed, straddling him like she had in the hotel room.

This time, they were both wearing considerably less. Max kissed his lips and worked her way over to his jaw line, sucking his earlobe before she worked down the column of his neck. She laved his skin slowly until he was shuddering at the lightest touch of her tongue and then she opened her mouth and sank her fangs in.

He gripped her hips and pressed her onto his

erection as he groaned happily. He positioned her while she fed and as her teeth were inside him, soon he was inside her.

Heat and energy flowed between them and when he spiked, so did she. Her body shook and she removed her teeth from him carefully, licking the wounds shut as her limbs stopped quivering.

“Wow. That was not...I have never...Wow.” She leaned heavily against him, panting for breath.

“I agree. Wow it is.” His hands held her tightly, possessively. “Imagine how much fun we could have if you didn’t have to do all the work.”

Max leaned back. “Is that an option?”

His eyes lit up, “As my Apprentice, it is your duty to learn.” He rolled her to her back, “Pay attention, there will be a test later.”

Max paid attention and soon she was able to write an essay from the details she had absorbed.

CHAPTER TEN

Three days after the attempt on Gregori's life, she was still at his side most of the time.

Galfor had come through with a nice businesslike wardrobe that still managed to have her cinched in and each curve highlighted.

Anthony was in the bedroom and running her through the checklist. Gregori was getting dressed a few doors down so that the crew could assist her here. "So, this evening, all local representatives from the magical community will be here for your formal introduction as the Apprentice. Galfor will be here to help you into your gown and hair and makeup will be taken care of."

She yawned. With Gregori keeping her up during the day, she wasn't getting nearly as much sleep as she was used to. Not that she was complaining. He made up for it in other...more flexible ways.

"The hairdresser is outside the door. You have two hours to get ready or he will come looking for you. That is not something you want to happen."

Anthony gave her a serious look that she was getting used to.

He disapproved of her finding her own food in the kitchen and he liked to surprise her when she had armloads of food and was sneaking back to bed. Flying sandwiches was becoming a daily special in the Guild Master's home.

An elegant sprite-like woman came into the bedroom and she set her case down on one of the nearby tables that had been placed for Max's toilette. "Now, what are we working with?"

Max looked her little hairdresser up and down. "I need hair that matches..." She crossed the room and opened the wardrobe where the dress dummy was hiding with her form-fitting gown on it. "This."

"Wow. Who is the designer?"

"Mistress Galfor. I love it, but I want to make sure that you do it justice."

The sprite fluttered her wings and rolled up her sleeves. "Oh, with that for inspiration...I will."

Max had never experienced the work of a flat iron before, but her hair was smoothed, curled, smoothed again and by the time the makeup artist was there, her elven eyes curious and a startling dark rainbow of colour, Max was ready to scream.

The makeup artist took one look at the gown and her eyes lit in anticipation. Rubbing her hands together, she took over the primary spot and

started working Max's face over.

Galfor's arrival was a relief.

"Oh, thank goodness. You will never believe what they have been doing to me."

Galfor looked shocked, "Max? Is that you?"

"It is. Get me out of here, or get me into that dress. Your choice."

Galfor took off her coat and rolled up her sleeves, all four of them. With the look of a woman going into battle, she approached the Abomination. Only one of them would get out of this unscathed.

Pinching, prodding and the peculiar feeling of another woman handling the interior of her cleavage made up the next hour. The sprite and the elf were watching in amazement as Max was slid, stuffed and stitched and laced into her gown.

It was tight, it was the blue of a midnight sky and tiny stars moved on the surface. The bodice was part deep vee, part corset and had a gemstone lacing crossing the open expanse of flesh in the centre front.

The skirt cupped her hips, turned her thighs into a slinky column and flared out again just above the knee. She would not be running anywhere in this outfit.

As Galfor worked on the back of the gown, the hairdresser touched up the softly waved expanse of chestnut hair.

When the goblin seamstress stepped back, Max stepped forward. The gown required a certain step that she had practiced right after the dress was delivered. A kind of a kick-swish.

“I think it’s time.”

Anthony came through the doors, “I think you are right...holy hellebore.”

She stepped forward until she could catch a glimpse of herself in a mirror. Wow. She looked amazing but still like herself.

“My lady. The Guild Master awaits his Apprentice.” The bow he gave her was different from his previous efforts. She was respected, revered and feared just a little in that moment.

“There is a loop in the back in case you dance, lady.” Galfor was respectful and smiled a toothy grin as she showed Max where it was. The nearly invisible loop lifted the train and made the skirt much easier to move in.

With a nod, Max moved to pass Anthony to head for the ballroom. He forestalled her and led the way.

His whisper came clearly to the enhanced hearing she was sporting. “Wait here for Gregori to announce you.”

She was hidden from view of the great staircase by a corner and a large vase. She waited and soon Gregori’s booming voice rang out. “I now present to you, my Apprentice, Max. Abomination of the

Vampire Guild.”

It was now or never. If she didn't come out, he would come up to her. With smooth steps, she concentrated on bringing herself to the top of the staircase. A sea of faces greeted her, some applauded, others sneered, but the only face she focussed on was Gregori's.

His appreciative smile warmed her and brought back mental images of her in his bed. She blushed beneath her makeup when she realised the thoughts and pictures were his.

She made her way down the steps at a slow pace. In a move that defied protocol, Gregori met her halfway. With her hand in his, they entered the crowd and made the rounds.

Most of the races did not have a good opinion of the vampires, but they were amused by *her*.

The elf ambassador commented on his own preference for a woman who could take a pounding and without her willing it, her fist met his face with extreme prejudice. Her fangs were showing and a wave of unease went through the crowd.

Gregori merely wrapped an arm around her waist and gave her those words she longed to hear, “Good girl. Next time aim for the groin.”

She giggled and they continued meeting agents from the mythological creature detachment, a leering minotaur named Vokal. He had the sense

to take her hand and release it when she growled.

Tonho's uncle gave her a wink and flattered her choice of bodyguards and the moment she had been dreading came when the goblin contingent wanted a rumour confirmed.

"I have heard that you joined a sing out in the desert."

"I did." She heard Gregori's silent query and she told him she would fill him in later.

"Would you consider joining a sing here in the city? We have a festival next week."

His lumpy, four-eyed face looked so earnest that she could only reply, "I will get back to you once I know my schedule."

The delight he showed made her a little less embarrassed. "I look forward to hearing from you. It is few other races who can do justice to a goblin sing."

She smiled at the memory, "I can believe it. It is quite the experience."

Gregori whispered into her ear, "You are going to have to demonstrate this for me."

She whispered back, "For the sake of our new relationship, never."

Music started on one side of the room and as the crowd opened a dance floor, she bit her lip.

"Dear Apprentice, will you dance with me?" Gregori bowed over one of her hands.

"Oh, Guild Master, is your insurance paid up?"

This could be a hazardous event.”

He chuckled, straightened and led her to the floor, “I can regenerate anything you do to me.”

She picked up her train and stepped into his arms. “Now there is a challenge I just can’t resist.”

They spun together around the floor, ignoring the looks of disgust for a vampire looking besotted with a living being, the looks of envy in both male and female faces and the pride on the face of Anthony.

Max smiled as they made another turn, life as an Abomination wasn’t all bad. At least she got the guy and who knows how long her story would be.

* * * *

Anthony stood aside as one of the mage contingent came up to him. “Anthony, I need to get in to see the Guild Master this week.”

“Xander, what do you need?” Anthony nodded to his great-great-nephew.

“The Nexus project is underway and we are outfitting Oak Point Way. We would like a vampire representative to attend the next planning meeting.”

“I can put you on the schedule for six o’clock Wednesday.”

“I will be here. Please congratulate the Guild Master on his choice of Apprentice. The Seers

predict great things for her, for them both.”

“You would know.”

Xander smiled and nodded as he left the room.

Anthony was proud of his small part in the events of the evening. At midnight, Gregori would issue his complete pardon of the Abomination for her lifetime and his. She would be safe from attack from those who would put themselves in her place.

According to the Seers, the Abomination and Gregori would usher in a new golden age for the vampires, they would integrate with other paranormal races and achieve acceptance beyond their current status as parasites.

He scratched his ear lightly. Perhaps Miklos would be interested in the Nexus staff posting. It could not hurt to ask.

He watched the figures on the dance floor. If any two creatures could embody balance, they were Gregori and Max.

Anthony smiled and went about his duties, making sure that the guards were alert, the buffet was stocked and the guests all had someone to talk to. A major domo’s work was never done.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Here is the tale of Max and Gregori. I always planned to make it a full novel and probably still will at a later date.

The idea of a woman with curves who ended up with the ruler of a vampire kingdom kind of flies in the face of common convention. Tiny women have their place, but big girls need blood, too.

I tried to make the debut happen on Halloween, but with Burning Man being a fixed point in time, there was no way to have Max creating household havoc for that long. So, have your Halloween story and enjoy the vampires any time of the year.

Thanks for joining the Nexus Chronicles. To see more of Max, find her in *Gargoyles in the Round* and *Pixies in the Park*.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there.

She has no pets and can barely keep sea monkeys alive for a reasonable amount of time. Her line of day job tends to be analytical which leaves her mind hopping to weave stories. No co-worker is safe from her character analysis.

In keeping with busy hands are happy hands, her hobbies have included cross-stitch, needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metal work, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain mail, and a few others that have been forgotten. It is quite often that these hobbies make their way into her tales.

Viola's fetishes include boots and corsetry, and her greatest weakness is her uncontrollable blush.

Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. It is an admirable thing and something that we should all strive for. To find one that we truly like, as well as love.