



SUBURBAN DEMON

LAURA HERBERTSON

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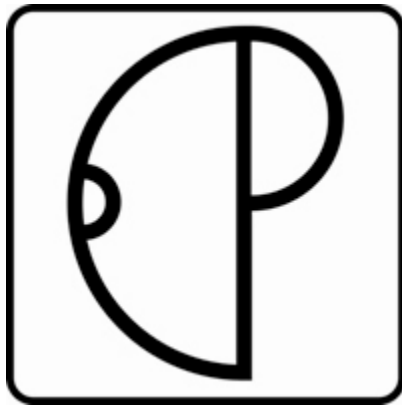
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Chapter One

The sickeningly sweet smell of vampire clung to the wet grass; a scent only her race could detect. Liz stayed in the shadows between the towering houses on Cherry Lane. She slipped between the well-manicured bushes, following the scent of the vampires' trail. Like an airport runway, the smell was a beacon to the clan's latest hangout.

Liz smiled. These suburban vampires were just too easy to hunt. She left the landscaped bushes and the aluminum siding and cut across a freshly cut lawn.

If humans could smell vampires' pungent odor, then maybe they'd learn to stay the hell away. But no. Stupid young girls bared their necks whenever one of the bloodsuckers whispered sweet nothings to them. Until they came to their senses, Liz would always be on the hunt.

At least tonight was better than most for hunting. The moon was bright, the air warm, and the usual yowling of stray cats getting their freak on was absent. The glare of televisions glowed through the windows of each house she passed. Families, smart and safe, huddled together on the couch.

Usually, protecting humans brought her a sense of purpose and righteousness. However, tonight the mantra running in her head went more like, "Why me?"

She wasn't supposed to be here, banished to the suburbs of Southern Jersey. She belonged in the city. Her specialty was patrolling the bars of Old Town and Center City, making sure the tourists left Philadelphia with as much blood as they brought with them. It was what she was good at. What she was trained to do.

The Elders didn't know what the hunt was like in today's world. Humans thought vampires were sexy and exotic. No more scary Dracula

movies; today's pop culture had women throwing their panties in the air at the sight of fangs.

"I really have to find a new line of work. I should learn to type," Liz whispered to herself.

She paused to sniff the air. Three or four vampires had walked by here recently. They followed the path through the woods in the back of the housing development, the one that cut through to the local convenience store. Liz had only been in the suburbs for two weeks, but already the bike paths and shortcuts were well-known to her. They had to be; it's not like she could afford a car.

Liz followed the scent through the narrow band of trees until the smell of ninety-nine cent hotdogs replaced the vampire odor. Neon lights sliced the night. She hid along the tree-line until she could pick up the trail again.

She crouched in the underbrush waiting for the scent to clear. The air suddenly stilled. Goosebumps rose on her flesh as she sensed she wasn't alone. The only sound was soft footfalls from somewhere close.

Liz scanned the night for slight changes in movement and small distinctions between shadows, compliments of her species-enhanced night vision. A dark figure crept along the brick wall of the building. A double edged battle axe was strapped to his back.

She smothered a groan. She didn't want to be caught in the suburbs. Especially not by *him*. No doubt Max was hunting the same vampires she was. The Elders probably thought she couldn't handle it.

"Max," she hissed from the trees. The dry crackle of fall leaves crunched under her boots.

He froze. One hand grasped the axe handle, but he didn't draw it. No, Max preferred to swing the axe from his back and through a vampire's neck in one smooth motion. "More efficient that way," he'd told her when they first met.

"Who's there?" As a human, he didn't have great night vision. He crouched and squinted into the dark.

She stepped into the glare of the neon lights. "It's Liz." She waited for his ridicule. He must've heard about the Elders' decree and her banishment to South Jersey. The vampire hunting profession was a small circle, and headquarters even smaller. It had a water cooler just like countless other offices where gossip ran rampant.

He dropped his hand from the axe. "What are you doing outside the city?"

She raised an eyebrow in surprise. Was it possible he didn't know? "Getting my nails done. What do you think? I'm hunting vampires."

"Yeah. I heard about a new clan in the area," he answered in his usual humorless manner. "What weapons did you bring?"

Liz drew her two favorite stakes from the sheaths on either hip. Diamond tipped with a cushy tennis grip handle. They made penetrating the chest as easy as stabbing straw.

"Good. Now go back to the city, demon. I don't need your help." He turned his back to her.

She rolled her eyes. "Get bit, Max. This is my territory now."

He snorted. "You mean your exile. The Elders gave a seminar about the incident with Cody Hammontree. Word is after you saved him, he took one look at your pointed ears, and he bolted. Right in front of an oncoming car."

Liz was thankful it was dark, and he couldn't see her flinch. Cody was only about sixteen. If someone else had rescued him... but the past was the past, and she was doing her penance for it. "Whatever. Do you want to team up or not?" She took a few steps closer into the light. "Face it, you need my nose. I've been tracking at least three of them for the past half hour. They've probably rejoined the clan by now."

"Good. We can take them out all at once." He spun around; his powerful arms swinging as he walked toward the front of the store.

She coughed to get his attention. "My sniffer says they're around back."

"All I smell are hotdogs," he muttered, moving past her.

Liz turned to follow him. She watched the axe handle bob up and down with his gait. A well-oiled crossbow hung at his right side; an assortment of throwing daggers was displayed on his left. Not that he needed any of them. The man was a walking, talking weapon. She once saw him kill two vampires using a wooden clog borrowed from the woman he was saving. Not too bad for a human.

"Hey, Max. How do you walk around looking like a medieval torturer and not get arrested? I get funny looks for my ears." They rounded the corner of the building and continued through the empty parking lot toward the dumpster.

"A special permit. Shut-up. I think I hear them." He raised a fist in the air and squatted next to the dumpster.

Liz listened. She didn't hear a damn thing. He was playing with her. The bastard just wanted to fill her overly sensitive nose with rotten tomatoes. She stood up. "Very funny."

He smirked. "What do you smell now, demon?"

"Body odor and an over-ripe ego. Quit messing around. Friday night in the suburbs means high school football. We have to find the clan before they feed." She left the protective cover of the dumpster and headed for the narrow strip of pavement between the convenience store and the gas station. The streetlights were browned out which made it a perfect place for horny teenagers... and for the local vampire clan to prey on them.

Liz didn't hear any footsteps behind her, but she knew Max was there. He wouldn't let her go in alone. Not that chivalry had anything to do with it; he didn't see her as female or even as a sentient being. She was a Repere demon, allowed to exist only because of her race's dedication to protecting humans. No, Max didn't care if she lived or died. He followed her at the moment because he'd never miss a chance to slay a vampire.

She came to a stop at the brick corner of the gas station. Sure enough, there were slurping sounds coming from the darkness. The smell of rotten tomatoes drifted away and in its place, came the sugary scent of vampire mixed with the copper of blood. The clan already found its victims.

Liz nodded to Max. He drew his axe and darted across from her. They entered the alley, side-by-side, with a thundering battle cry.

Chapter Two

"I thought you said three," Max hissed from the corner of his mouth.

Their battle charge was temporarily paused due to the sheer numbers in the clan. Nearly two dozen vampires stared back at them from the cramped alley between the convenience store and the gas station. They wore the bright colors of at least four different area high schools. Not one of the fanged beasts looked old enough to drive. Neither did the cheerleaders they were feeding upon.

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Her heart throbbed with pre-battle nerves. At least she wasn't alone.

"Right." Max slipped the axe back into its sheath. There wasn't enough room to swing it in the alley, and it was too unwieldy to fight a dozen fiends at a time. Instead, he pulled a weapon from the inside of his leather jacket. It was as long as his forearm with a wooden spike at one end and a curved scimitar-shaped blade at the other.

An instant ping of jealousy nipped at Liz. "Hello, Poppa. Where did you get that?"

"Shut-up and fight." He charged head first into the clan of vampires, leading with the pointy end of the weapon. Two went down before Liz caught up.

She went for the vampires sucking on the cheerleaders first. The girls' white and red uniforms weren't hard to find in the dark; the colors stood out to Liz's special night vision. Liz plunged her stakes into the vampires' backs while they fed on the girls. The dust from their

disintegration sprayed into her eyes. The two cheerleaders immediately slumped to the asphalt. Liz didn't have time to check them because there were ten more vampires right behind her.

She blinked a few times to clear her vision while she dodged fang after fang. The day vampires learned how to punch she'd be in trouble. Something happened to their minds after they turned that made them think teeth were their only weapons.

Fine by her.

Vision clear, she stopped playing defensive and turned on the attack. Her first couple of swipes with her stakes were wild and only intended to gain some room to maneuver. She cleared her mind and went through the motions she practiced for hours every day. Step, plunge, duck, turn. Step, plunge, duck, turn. Liz relied on her species' superior strength to pierce flesh and bone again and again without tiring. Soon the pavement of the alley had a scattering of vampire dust bunnies and a collection of cell phones, wallets, clothes, and shoes left behind when the vamps crumbled.

Liz couldn't see Max through the thick group of vampires, but she could hear him cutting through them systematically. Every few seconds a new dust cloud rose in the air and another set of discarded clothing hit the ground. After crumbling a few more, she met up with Max. His right forearm was bleeding. Sweat dripped down Liz's face and neck, but she wasn't injured.

There were two vampires left. Both teenage boys, both trembling with terror. Max tilted his head in their direction. They took that as a cue to leave because they both fled. Liz immediately gave chase. Max's scimitar-stake weapon flew over her right shoulder, buzzed her ear, and pierced the back of one of the boys. His dust showered the other vampire next to him.

"Damn it, Max!" she yelled over her shoulder. "Learn to aim. I almost lost an ear."

He started to run. "I did aim. You can't run straight."

She grabbed Max's weapon out of the dust pile and cocked her arm to throw it. Something made her pause and yell a warning first. "Freeze, Fangtooth!"

The teenager came to a stop with his hands in the air.

Max caught up to her. "What are you doing? Crumble him already."

Truth was she didn't know what she was doing. She'd never spared any of them before. This was different somehow. "We need him for

questioning. I want to know how the clan got that large and where to find the master."

The chance to kill a master vampire made Max's eyes shine with anticipation.

The vampire-boy turned around with his hands above his head. "Don't kill me. I'll help you. I'll take you to the master."

It didn't matter to Liz where his hands were – just his teeth. She took off the leather belt holding up her jeans and tossed it to him. "Put this in your mouth. Wrap it around your head until it's tight. Then fasten it. When you're done, I'm going to check it and if I think it's too loose, you're crumbs."

Max unhooked his crossbow from his belt. He aimed it at the boy who was busy muzzling himself. "Where is the master?"

Liz stepped in front of the bow. "Give it a rest. We'll find out sooner or later. Why don't you go help the cheerleaders?" She handed his scimitar-stake back to him.

A groan originated the alley, and Liz saw the cheerleaders regaining consciousness.

"They're fine. I want the master." Max's jaw clenched. For a brief second, Liz felt an icy spike of fear flash through her. She didn't want to fight Max. Not now or ever. Even though he was human, she wasn't sure her superior strength and speed would be enough to win. He had a lot of rage toward anything non-human, especially toward beasts that turned humans into non-humans. Like a master vampire.

Liz felt a tap on her shoulder. The vampire-boy stood right behind her with his three inch fangs sticking out of his mouth. The leather belt was tied so tightly, it pulled his lips back to expose more of his dental weaponry. An automatic muscle reaction caused the stakes in either hand to flicker. She sheathed them before she killed the vampire out of habit.

"Good. Now come with me." She grabbed the belt buckle behind his head and marched him back to the bloody mass of cheerleaders. Liz made sure to stay between him and Max at all times, especially since he hadn't put away the crossbow yet.

The cheerleaders, five in total, had huddled together on the wet pavement of the alley. They leaned protectively over the largest girl, obviously the anchor of the pyramid, who'd been bitten in her neck. She was the most seriously injured. Three cheerleaders had been bitten on the wrists and forearms, and one bled from her upper thigh. The girls

used their white knit varsity sweaters to staunch the bleeding from each other's injuries.

The sight of blood on their perfectly pristine uniforms, and the fang marks in their perfectly airbrushed skin triggered a guilty knot in Liz's throat. She was supposed to protect them. It was the most basic instinct in all Repere demons: protect those who are weaker. If she hadn't stopped to talk with Max, or if she'd been a little quicker catching the scent, these girls might not have been victims at all.

The iron blood smell drifted along the warm breeze of the night air. Liz looked down at her black boots in shame. "Max..." Her words got caught on the enlarging lump in her throat.

She heard the soft ring of an outgoing call on a cell phone. "I have the ambulance on speed dial," he responded quietly.

If anyone understood how she felt, Max did. He, too, dedicated his vigilante life to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. Still, this wasn't his failure. It was hers. The Elders sent her here; this was her territory. She had a responsibility to the South Jersey suburbanites.

Her face burned with anger. Anger with herself, anger at the vampires who did this. She kicked the knees out from under the vampire-boy and let him fall to the ground. "You twitch, and I'll let him shoot you."

She hurried away without a second glance. The click of the crossbow sounded behind her, and Liz knew Max had a bolt cocked and ready. The deep tones of his voice resonated in the alley as he gave directions to the emergency response team.

Liz knelt next to the bewildered cheerleaders. None had started shrieking yet, but Liz knew from experience to wait for it. She had to take their minds off of the attack before they went into shock.

"What's your name?" she asked the large girl with the neck wound. The other cheerleaders watched Liz inspect the punctures. They were still oozing blood, but no major arteries were hit. Young vampires usually didn't know where to bite their victims. Luckily for the girl, the one who'd bitten her did.

"Angela." Her voice was a high-pitch, nasal whine that didn't fit with the girl's oversized frame.

Liz replaced the sweater and put the girl's hand over the wound. "Keep pressure on this, Angela." She pushed the girl's bangs out of her eyes. Her face was too pale for Liz's comfort. She'd need blood when the

ambulance arrived. The knot of guilt tightened. Liz moved on to the next girl before her words became choked again.

"He said it would only be a pinprick," the girl with the big eyes whispered. Her now red sweater was wrapped around her forearm.

"A pinprick? Did his fangs look pin-size to you?" She removed the small roll of gauze she kept in her back pocket for emergencies.

The big-eyed girl dropped the sweater and held her arm out. "Look, it doesn't even hurt." The injuries looked like someone had stuck two wide drinking straws into her flesh. Her veins were close to the surface, a map of red and blue along her arm.

Liz wrapped the gauze around the wound. The blood spotted through the bandage. "It will hurt tomorrow. Vampires secrete a natural anesthetic through their fangs. It keeps the victims compliant as they're drained."

Liz checked the other girls, including the one who'd been bitten on her inner thigh, a vampire's equivalent of third base. She muttered soothing words as she checked each one, but the rage inside her continued to build. These cheerleaders weren't going into shock. They weren't surprised when Liz said 'vampire'.

They weren't in the alley by accident.

"You're kidding me." Liz stood so she could more effectively lecture the girls. "What did you think was happening here? This isn't television. Vampires aren't all moody, tortured whiners who use their fangs for good. Most just want your blood." Her hands were shaking from the waves of anger and frustration at the girls' ignorance. The knot in her throat kept on tightening as she flipped between blame and rage.

She struggled to remain calm. The girls had some serious injuries, and Liz figured the pain they'd feel tomorrow was a more effective lesson than her yelling at them. But she couldn't help thinking these darn girls got what was coming to them. Sneaking off to an alley with a clan of vampires.

"You girls know what to say to the paramedics and police, right?"

Angela spoke first. "Yes. That we were attacked by ninjas wielding pairs of chopsticks. We were told the cover story. They weren't going to kill us, you see."

"No. Just drain you and leave you for someone else to clean up."

The small blonde stood. The top of her head was even with Liz's shoulder, obviously the top of the cheerleading pyramid. Her rosy lips

were tight; her eyes brimmed with tears. She clenched her trembling fists over and over.

This small girl and her wet eyes triggered the Repere instinct to protect.

Liz reached out to give the girl a hug. Mad or not, these girls lived in her territory and were her responsibility.

Liz saw the girl's fist fly up, and then her vision exploded into a kaleidoscope of reds and blues. Jaw throbbing, she couldn't stop herself from falling. She landed on her ass on the hard, wet pavement. "Bloody hell!"

The soft chuckle of masculine laughter hummed behind her. She ignored Max, and rubbed away the radiating pain in the side of her face. A looming presence made her look up.

It was the small girl, all five feet of her, glaring down at Liz. She no longer appeared cute and innocent. Not with her foot swinging back, preparing to kick Liz in the ribs.

Liz caught the girl by the sneaker and yanked up. She hoped the cheerleaders practiced how to fall because the top of the pyramid came crashing down.

The girl stayed down. She wiped her tears on her skirt in an incredible feat of flexibility. "He promised to make me immortal! We were going to be together forever," she blubbered. She pointed a finger at Liz. "You killed him! Now I have nothing." Anything else she said after that was unintelligible, swallowed by her wracking sobs.

Liz grimaced and shifted uncomfortably. "Um, there's always college?" She looked at Max who shrugged in response. He wasn't going to help her. He turned his back to them to stare down the bolt of the crossbow at the vampire.

Right. Killing he could do. Comfort was left to the women.

Liz turned back to the girl, now surrounded by her cheerleader friends. "Listen up everyone. The Elders, the council I work for, estimate that sixty percent of humans who attempt the turn die in the process. That's if it's done by a master vampire." She paused to make eye contact with each of them. "But I guess these vampire-boys left that part out."

The girls blinked dumbly at her. She resisted the urge to slap them silly. Her Repere strength would fracture their cheekbones. Instead, she stood and walked over to Max. The wail of ambulance sirens in the distance broke the night silence.

"Time to go," Max said. He grabbed the vampire by the belted gag and pulled him to his feet.

The human was right. They'd have a heck of a time explaining Liz's pointed ears, Vamp-boy's fanged teeth, and why Max looked like a character out of a fantasy novel. She took one last look at the girls she'd failed to protect before she joined Max. She found him watching her with his cool, unfathomable brown eyes.

"We need somewhere to interrogate him and somewhere to rest. Tomorrow, we hunt the master."

"Do you ever relax?" Liz batted her eyelashes at him and slipped her hand around his elbow. "So which will it be? My place or yours?"

Chapter Three

Liz, Max, and Vamp-boy strolled toward the Pinky Green Motel just off the highway. Aptly named, the one-story motel had green aluminum siding accented by light pink window sills and painted curbs. It was gaudy, but cheap. On a vampire slayer's budget, cheap was all she could afford. The Elders didn't pay much.

She headed toward the 'vacancy and free HBO' sign suctioned to the dirty glass of a large window, figuring that had to be the front office. A tug on her elbow prevented her from opening the door.

"We can't take him inside." Max yanked the vampire closer. "I'll stay with him."

Liz looked at the teenage beastie. The long walk to the motel had sweat beading on his face, and he sucked air like it was blood vapors. Contrary to popular belief, vampires weren't dead. Their bodies were very much alive, just really hard to kill. Even though Fangtooth breathed, it wasn't like she could choke the life out of him. His body would temporarily shut down, repair itself, and then spring back into action like a hungry bear with a taste for man-blood. Or Repere blood, for that matter. Sort of like a computer reboot after the blue screen of death.

Her particular bloodsucker, with his fangs extruding past his lips because of the restraining belt, had globs of drool dripping from the corners of his mouth. Max was right; she couldn't take him inside with her, but she didn't trust Max enough to leave him alone with the vampire. She'd return with a room key just to see the back-end of Max strolling away, shaking the dust out of his hair.

"I'll stay with him." She yanked the belt out of the human's hands. The vampire's head jerked roughly. "You get the room. Leave the axe and crossbow with me."

"I don't have any money."

"There's an ATM inside."

"No, I mean I don't have my wallet."

Liz took a deep breath and rolled her eyes. "You're a grown man. How can you not carry a wallet?"

He folded his arms over his broad chest. "If the clan got a hold of my license or credit cards, they'd find where I live."

"Well, it's not like I have a credit card. The last time I checked, they don't give out social security numbers to demons!" She dug out forty dollars from her jeans pocket and thrust it into his hands. "Go get us a room. I'll stay with the kid."

"Vampire."

"What?"

"You said kid. It's a vampire."

She threw her hands in the air and groaned. "Max. Please. Get. The. Room."

He dropped his weapons on the strip of grass between the sidewalk and parking lot then stormed through the office door muttering something Liz couldn't quite hear. She turned back to the Vamp-boy who was trying to wipe the drool on his shoulder. He stopped and blinked at her a few times.

She rolled her eyes. "Saving you better be worth this crap."

A few minutes later, Max retrieved his weapons and led the way to room nineteen. He fumbled with the electronic key card in an attempt to gain access. After three failed tries, Max rammed his shoulder into the door. The brown paint crumbled from the impact.

It worked; the door opened. Max unsheathed his battle axe and entered the dark room, ready for action.

"You're kidding me." Liz shoved the kid, make that *vampire*, through the threshold, past Max, and flicked on the lights. The room had two queen beds which looked about as comfortable as a couple of granite slabs. Tacky artwork of sand dunes and seagulls hung on the walls. The carpet was the same nasty pink and green combination as the rest of the motel. Except for the bathroom. That was a bright yellow and looked like it was last remodeled in the 1970's.

Max dropped his axe on the fake wooden table with a loud clang. "Do you follow *any* of the standard operating procedures?"

She threw Vamp-boy on the queen sized bed with the flowery polyester comforter. She undid the belt buckle, not caring if she ripped out a few strands of hair. "Do you follow *all* of the procedures? Do you really think the remaining clan, if there are any, would set up an ambush in room nineteen of the local pay-by-the-hour motel?"

A rather large clump of hair came away in her fingers. The vampire growled and more drool collected on his shirt.

"The Elders' handbook section seven, subparagraph one point one clearly states, when in an unfamiliar place, always —"

"Check for vampires! Yes, I know." She unwrapped her leather belt from the boy's head. He made a few sputtering noises and wiped his mouth on his sleeve, then worked his jaw several times.

Liz turned her attention back to Max. With throwing knives on one hip, crossbow on the other, and his palm near the axe handle, he made for one intimidating sight. Especially when his hard, brown eyes shone with anger. Like it or not, they were on the same team, and the very same handbook he liked to quote was what prevented any violence from erupting between fellow vampire slayers. Neither of them could afford to be outcasts.

"Why don't you carry out section seven subparagraph one point one and scope out the rest of the motel? Maybe the clan members we didn't crumble are hanging out by the pool." She picked up the plastic ice bucket with painted daisies and threw it at his head.

Max drew a long knife and impaled the side of the bucket before it hit him. He calmly slid the bucket to the floor.

Her eyebrows felt like they were about to be introduced to her hairline. Her anger melted away rapidly. Liz thought she was pretty good with weapons, but she knew with all the practice in the world, she'd never be that accurate. "Right. I guess no ice for us."

"I could really use some water right now." Fangtooth sat on the edge of the bed watching them.

Liz squared herself toward him. She should've been watching the vampire instead of arguing with Max. Now she stood directly between a heavily armed, angry man and a thirsty, post-adolescent beastie with impressive dental ammunition. A tickle scurried over her skin in response to the electric tension in the air.

"What's your name?" She flicked her chin at the vampire.

He smoothed the curls of hair still sticking up from the belt restraint. "The name I was born with or my vampire name?"

A familiar click of the crossbow bolt quieted the room. "Don't be cute. We're not some brainless bimbos in tight skirts. The lady asked you a question."

Liz glanced at Max, more than a little surprised he stuck up for her. And he called her a lady. It didn't sound like much, but he said it without a trace of sarcasm or jest.

Overall, Max wasn't a bad-looking guy. His rounded ears were actually kind of cute. His jaw was, as usual, clenched and covered in stubble. The look in his eyes was one of intense concentration, all day, everyday. For the first time since last year when he joined the ranks of the Elders' hunters, Liz wondered what he'd look like without the fanatical must-hunt-vampire glare. She'd never even seen him smile.

Max arched an eyebrow.

A fiery blush rose to her face; he knew she was staring at him. Liz turned her attention back to Vampy. The boyish lips were curved upward in a knowing smirk. The heat in her cheeks felt like she could cook an egg.

She crossed her arms. "I asked you your name, devil spawn."

"Victor Bloodworth, at your service." He extended a hand to her.

Liz resisted the urge to plant her boot heel in his open palm. Vampires named themselves the stupidest things. "Vic, then. Where is the rest of your clan?"

"Where is the master?" Max took a step closer, still with the crossbow bolt aimed at the vampire's chest.

The boy stared at his Converse sneakers. "The clan is gone. The master and I are all that's left."

Max ditched the crossbow on the other bed and grabbed the vampire by his shirt collar. He yanked the kid off his feet until they were nose-to-nose.

Max moved too quickly for Liz to intervene. Besides, she wasn't sure she wanted to stop him. She'd rather see how this played out.

"Where is the master?" he growled through his clenched teeth. The veins in Max's forearms bulged with the strain of holding the vampire in the air. Liz found herself admiring the way the snaking cords wrapped themselves around his muscles.

"I d-don't know." Vampy kicked his feet. "B-but I could take you to him."

Max gave Vic a quick, hard shake. "Where?"

"C-cell phone. I'll text him and ask him to meet me somewhere." The kid's eyes were wide with fright. He arched his neck back to put some space between his face and Max's.

Max shook him again. "Where?"

Liz's Repere instincts flared. The boy's young face and his frightened eyes triggered her species' soft spot. She placed a hand on Max's forearm and pressed down. "Put him down, Max. He's no threat to us."

A tremble flexed through Max's skin right under her fingertips. She found herself staring into his eyes. He stared back until she saw a slight flicker in his gaze. Max started to say something but clamped his lips together instead. He looked back to the vampire, shook his head, and dropped him to the floor. Max took a seat on the plastic chair. "Fine, we'll do it your way."

She'd no idea what just happened. Whatever passed between them changed something; Liz knew it by the awkward tension in the air, and the pointed way he kept his gaze fixed on the vampire.

"Trouble in paradise?" Vic grinned.

Liz raised her hand to backhand him. The vampire flinched. Max gave an amused snort, but as soon as Liz looked at him, he stopped. The knots in her stomach made her feel like a bumbling oaf performing an interrogation for an audience.

She forced the feeling back down to where it belonged. He was just Max, vampire slayer and crossbow wielding demon hater. A regular pain-in-the-butt guy.

"All right, Vic. Here's what's going to happen. You're going to call the master. Tell him to meet you in the parking lot by the stadium tonight." She leaned over and got into the vamp's face to show she wasn't afraid of a zit-face bloodsucker. "And if you screw this up, I promise you *will* see the sunny light of day come morning."

Chapter Four

Sunlight glowed between the slits of the blinds in the motel window. The sound of suitcase wheels and car engines in the parking lot welcomed the morning. Liz sat on the hard carpet with her back against a cobwebbed corner with Max's well-oiled crossbow in her lap.

The master hadn't returned Vic's phone call. She'd stayed awake all night to keep an eye on her bloodsucking captive. Max kept a lookout near the window and had occasionally walked around the motel to check things out. For the last five hours, he'd given her the silent treatment. The only time he spoke was when she asked him a direct question.

As the long hours of the night passed one by one, the temptation to use the weapon had grown exponentially. At the moment, she couldn't decide what she wanted more: stake the vampire and go home for some much needed sleep, or scarf down a big pile of scrambled eggs and pancakes.

"Forget this. I have eggs at home." Liz's knees popped as she stood. Every muscle in her back protested. She put down the crossbow and unsheathed her trusty stakes, a more manageable weapon in her opinion. She raised one stake over her head and positioned it to plunge into the back of the snoring vamp. Once he was crumbs, she'd go home and sleep. The master could always be hunted and destroyed tomorrow. Or maybe this weekend.

A strong, warm hand wrapped around her wrist. "Crumble him and we just wasted the entire night." Max's eyes were bloodshot, and his usually clenched jaw looked less rigid than normal.

She knew by the tangled strands of hair in her face she didn't look much better. "I'm okay with that. Really."

Liz poised to strike, expecting Max to tackle her, or make a grab for the stake. When he did neither, she stood there feeling stupid with one arm over her head. He called her bluff. Embarrassment heated her face. She dropped her fist, too tired to take the game further. The master had probably spent his night creating a new clan. He had to be stopped before more people were hurt, and Vamp-boy was the best way to find him.

A soft masculine chuckle filled her ears. So quiet, she wasn't sure she heard it. Liz looked at Max. He was smiling. An actual, bare-your-teeth kind of grin. And it looked natural, as though he did it all the time.

Too soon, the smile was gone. The surprise and shock of seeing his straight, gleaming white teeth did a better job of waking her up than a gallon of coffee. With a tender touch, he tucked her hair behind her pointed ears and turned to the window where he'd spent most the night.

Liz didn't know what to do or what to say. She stood like a statue, worried any movement would shatter the moment from her memory like a dream. He smiled. He touched her hair. He didn't flinch when his finger grazed her demon ears. This was Max, for crap's sake! Max, the demon-hating vampire slayer. Max, who'd given her nothing but grief for the past year and treated her like a plague to be endured. She'd no idea how to react to the new improved Max. But she *was* aware of the rush of blood through her body, and the desire to have him touch her again.

"Your heart is pounding really loudly. I'm trying to sleep here." Vamp-boy threw a pillow at her.

"You're going to love it when my stomach starts to growl." She grabbed the pillow and pretending it was a stake, bashed him over and over until he rolled off the bed. He landed with a thump that shook the light fixtures.

"Ow! All right, stop!" He held an arm up to block her blows.

Sweating, she tossed the pillow across the room at Max. He let it drop at his feet. The stony expression was back in full force; the smile just a figment of her imagination. She frowned, unwilling to believe what she witnessed was a trick of a sleepless night.

She'd make him smile again, if only to prove she wasn't crazy. "Did you hear the joke about the unsuccessful vampire slayer?" she asked Vamp-boy, but kept her peripheral on Max. "He used a pork chop instead of a steak!"

Max turned around to face the window, but Liz saw the gleam of white teeth in the glass reflection. Ah ha! She hid her own triumphant smile. Her insides felt like little fuzzy explosions of giggles.

"That was awful. Leave me alone. I sleep this time of day," Vic muttered. He climbed back into bed.

Liz collared him. "Oh no you don't. You're going to call the master again. You're going to keep calling all day until he agrees to meet you tonight."

Vamp-boy bared his fangs at her. "Are you stupid? He's figured it out. The rest of the clan is dead, and the lone survivor wants to meet him? The master is not as dumb as you are."

Liz balled her fist, but Max reacted faster. In the time she could blink, he was across the room with his knuckles smashed into Fangtooth's cheekbone. The kid landed on the floor for the second time today.

"Never bare your fangs at her or I will remove them. If you can't deliver the master, then you're of no use." He drew the battle axe from the leather holster on his back. The slide of metal knelled death and destruction in the small hotel room.

Liz never wanted to kiss a man as much as she wanted to kiss Max right then. He looked like a god of war and acted like her personal, one-man war machine. His actions sang to the very essence of a Repere demon; he'd protected her.

Not like she needed protection. Nevertheless, it was nice.

The sight of him scowling at the vampire with the axe in his strong hands made her body flush with heat. Her sense of smell became more enhanced as her nose flooded with the enticing scent of adrenaline and masculine sweat.

With her eyes on his face, she walked over to Max and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks."

He turned his head ever so slightly toward her. "Don't mention it."

Vic growled. "Well, isn't that sweet." He stood up cautiously, like he expected another attack. "Look, if I set up a meeting with the master, I want your word you'll let me go. No staking me through the back, so to speak."

Liz didn't see a problem with that. He was only one vampire and not a master. He couldn't turn anyone; he couldn't start his own clan. Besides, she could always hunt him down the next night. "It's a deal. You come with us to the stadium. Once the master arrives, you take off running in the opposite direction. Clear?"

"Clear." He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and started texting. "It would speed things along if I had a laptop and internet access. Send some email? Maybe in a better motel or an internet café?"

She rolled her eyes. "Not a chance."

"Didn't think so."

Liz's stomach decided it was time to complain. She sucked in her gut to stop it from growling too loudly. Dinner had been over twelve hours ago, and she'd been forced to skip her usual microwave popcorn post-vampire slaying snack. She'd need food if they planned to fight the master tonight. Which meant either she or Max would have to leave the motel while the other was left alone with the teenage beastie. And with Vic's access to his cell phone, he'd have plenty of time to set up an ambush.

"Crap!" Liz darted toward the bed and grabbed the cell phone out of Vic's texting fingers. She checked the call log to scan all of the messages he'd sent since yesterday.

"What is it?" Max had one hand on his throwing knives and the other on the axe handle.

She continued to scroll through the messages. All read the same: *where are you, we need to talk, can you meet me, please call*, etc. Nothing gave away their location in the motel. Liz sighed her relief as she cursed her own stupidity. She didn't take prisoners often, but she should've known better than to let him keep his cell phone. "It's fine, Max. But from now on, one of us will do the texting."

Max raised an eyebrow as the realization of what could've happened dawned on him. He pursed his lips and glared at the vampire.

Vic scowled. "Calm down, superhero. There's no one I can call anyway. The whole clan is crumbs."

Max took a seat at the table. His knees cracked, and he exhaled as he sank into the plastic chair. "You claim they're dead, but offer no proof."

Vamp-boy threw his hands in the air. "How can I offer proof when—"

Liz's stomach couldn't wait any longer. It growled loudly. The sound seemed to reverberate off the walls of the cramped motel room. Both males looked at her with raised eyebrows.

She shrugged and pulled a dime out of her pocket. "Heads or tails. Loser gets breakfast." Liz flicked it into the air.

"Heads," called Max.

"I got tails," Vic said.

"Shut-up," both Liz and Max said together.

She caught the dime with her left hand. "It's tails."

Max nodded. "I'll go." He began the process of disarming himself. Sneaking around at night with a small arsenal was one thing, but going into a supermarket with a battle axe in broad daylight was another.

He tossed the sleeve of throwing knives to her. "Keep these on you and don't take your eyes off of him. I'll check with the front desk to see where I can get some donuts. Do you have any more money?"

She rolled her eyes and dug around in her jeans for the last twenty. "You'll need to get some cash to keep the room —"

"What about me?" Vic interrupted.

Liz raised an eyebrow at him. "What about you?"

He gave her an are-you-stupid look. "I need to eat, too."

"Crap." She looked at Max; he stared back.

"Let me have my knives. I'll see if I can catch a squirrel."

She tossed them to him. He snatched the sleeve out of the air and hooked it onto his belt in one smooth motion.

Vic sat up on the bed. "Squirrel? No, I don't do well with fur. It sticks to my teeth."

Max snapped his head up. "I've half a mind to bring you road kill. If you give her any trouble, you'll have me to face when I get back. If you aren't a pile of crumbs already."

He whirled around and flung open the door. The bright morning sun blasted into the room. Vic let out a yell and dove out of sight.

Liz hurried after Max and caught him just as he was leaving. She grabbed him by the hand. Hard calluses on his palm rubbed against her fingers, but that was expected when your weapon of choice was an axe.

"Max, what's the real reason you came to the suburbs?"

He blinked at the question. A flash of emotion penetrated the hardened mask of his usually expressionless face. He leaned closer; his lips brushed the side of her cheek. "You know why."

Chapter Five

Max left room nineteen of the Pinky Green Motel with a nervous knot in his stomach. A demon. Of all things, he had to be attracted to a demon. At least vampires and werewolves were, at one point in their lives, human. Who knew what she looked like underneath her clothes?

He pictured her naked, lithe form, slender by muscle tone... Immediately, his cheeks flushed. She was a Repere demon, a different species entirely. She might not even have the normal woman parts.

That would be just his luck. Bearing his soul to her, stripping her naked in a moment of passion, only to find out his male parts weren't compatible with her body.

It's not like the Encyclopedia Britannica had a section on the anatomy of Repere demons.

He sensed the weight of Liz's eyes as he crossed the parking lot. Those swirling gray-blue eyes; they looked so human, but at the same time reminded him she wasn't. No human woman had eyes as deep as hers. She saw through the hardened mask he wore, and drew emotions from him he'd thought he'd lost for good.

Emotions only get in the way, was what his Krav Maga instructor beat into him. Retzev, continuous motion, was the way of the fighter. Not holed up in a crappy motel room with a gorgeous demon woman who tested his restraint with every breath he took.

Max kicked a pebble across the blacktop. He skipped asking the front clerk for directions to the closest mini-mart; he wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone. The walk and the fresh air (and the squirrel hunting) would be enough to clear his head of Liz. By the time he returned, he'd have reined in the desire to kiss her and smile at her like a love-sick little

boy. It was nothing more than a sleepless night that made his resolve momentarily slip this morning.

The worst of it was she started to suspect he had feelings for her. Which he did. He really did. Right from the first time he saw her. She'd walked in the door of Elders' headquarters carrying the severed head of an Uag demon. The blasted thing was still screaming curses at her, but she strolled through the lobby without a care in the world, and gave him a wink as she walked by.

His life went downhill from there.

Max followed his nose toward a gas station off the highway. The morning commuters in their gray business suits lined up to fill the gas tanks of their SUVs. He walked past them without a second glance and entered the store. The overpowering stink of French vanilla coffee clung to his skin as he made a bee-line to the donut rack. He picked out five glazed: two for her, two for him, and one for squirrel bait.

He joined the ever-growing cashier line. Donuts in hand, the warrior demon-slayer sighed.

It seemed like all he did over the past year was worry about her. He arranged scenarios where they'd bump into each other, appearing suddenly whenever she was injured in a fight; helping out when she took on too many opponents at once, and making sure she always got home safely. The whole time he pretended her demon blood nauseated him so she wouldn't learn the truth: those pointy ears turned him on more than any human girl in a black lace teddy ever had.

He'd never let Liz suspect their chance encounters weren't accidental. Until her unfortunate banishment to the suburbs. He had no reason for being here except to see her. Liz was learning his deepest secret, and he was letting her. It didn't matter what species she was; Max needed Liz in his life. If it turned out they weren't sexually compatible, well, they'd find a way around that.

Max slapped the money on the counter and waited for the change as patiently as he could. A master vampire was out there waiting for him, hiding among the manicured lawns and cookie-cutter houses of the suburbs, turning cheerleaders and high school jocks into unnatural creatures of the night. His only lead to finding this master was the vamp-boy back at the hotel. Which was where he should be, not buying donuts and getting elbowed by suburbanites who needed their coffee fix.

Definitely not catching squirrels for the vamp-boy to feed.

And definitely not thinking about pointed ears and seductive eyes.

The business people got back into their cars, but Max strode in the opposite direction. He walked around the back of the gas station into one of the last patches of forest, the few surviving trees not yet bulldozed to make room for new housing developments.

A ten minute walk put him smack in the middle of the small patch of woods. The dry leaves of autumn crackled under his heavy boots. A scent of pine and sap filled the air. The house sparrows sang from the underbrush as they scattered out of his way. He broke apart a donut and flung the crumbs in the ground cover, licking his fingers clean when he was done.

Max knelt and closed his eyes. The sounds of the forest drifted into his thoughts chasing away the echo of highway. He relaxed his body, breathed in and out, tapping a perfectly balanced throwing knife against his palm. He waited. Waited for a squirrel to catch a whiff of a sugary treat, waited for nightfall so he could finally destroy a master vampire, waited for Liz to discover how he felt about her.

A warrior of constant motion stuck at an impasse. How ironic. Allow the squirrel, the master, and the demon temptress to come to him? Or rely on instincts and go after what he wanted?

A rustle of leaves and a small squeak of a furry rodent sounded from across the clearing. Max opened his eyes. A squirrel was busy stuffing its mouth with pink glazed frosting.

A sense of peace washed over him. He hadn't waited for the squirrel to come to him. He went into the forest, its habitat, laid down the bait, and stayed put until the squirrel got over its fear of humans.

With a flick of his wrist, he pinned the squirrel to the tree with his knife.

That's exactly what he'd do with Liz. Not impale her with a throwing dagger, but stay in the suburbs, her new habitat, and stick around until she came to realize she had nothing to fear from him. That he loved her, and always had.

He collected the squirrel carcass and headed back to the hotel with more purpose in his step than usual. His plan would require patience and persistence, both of which he had in abundance. Liz would come around, and she'd know without him telling her the real reason he was in the suburbs.

The green roof of the motel came into view, and Max's resolve lessened. His gut knotted with each step he took closer to the building, each step closer to her. The wait was not going to be easy.

Chapter Six

"It's on. Tonight we kill the master," Liz said as Max entered the room.

She flipped the cell phone closed and tucked it into her back pocket. He noticed how her snug jeans stretched to make room for the phone. If anything, it further accented the nice curve of her hips and muscular roundness of her buttocks.

"Max, did you hear me?" She reached for the bag of donuts in his hand. "A master. That's what you wanted."

"Yes." His voice sounded harsher than he intended. Strange how his first thoughts were of her ass and not the chance to plunge a stake through a master vampire. Now was not the time to lose focus. In the past, he never would've allowed himself to be preoccupied by a woman when there was a mission to complete. The fact Liz could distract him so easily did not bode well. Max pretended to inspect the crossbow and axe on the table to hide his unsettlement.

She snorted. "I didn't fuss with your precious weapons." Liz bit a hunk out of the donut. "You eat?" she asked between chews.

"I certainly didn't. Where've you been? I'm parched." The vamp-boy banged his ropes against the headboard.

Max raised the impaled squirrel to eye level. "Breakfast of champions." He slid the knife from the body and tossed the furry package to Vic.

"But it's dead." The vamp-boy held the squirrel in cupped hands. The pose looked innocent enough if not for the fangs protruding from his lips, and the paling skin of a vampire about to feed.

Max lifted his axe from the plastic table. "I'll forward your complaints to customer service."

Liz chuckled behind him. He turned to see a chunk of chocolate glaze drop from her smiling mouth. She picked it off the table and popped it back in.

Damn. She was cute even when she was disgusting.

He sheathed the axe into the holster on his back. The familiar weight on his shoulders was reassuring. Immediately, his nerves calmed.

Max washed his hands in the bathroom sink and grabbed a hand towel to clean his knife. First thing first, he sat down at the table to share a donut with Liz. With the romance of a heavy crossbow between them, he realized this was the first meal they ever had together.

She reached into the bag and held out a donut for him. He took it, slowly, to make sure his fingers brushed over hers. She looked at him with her deep, demon eyes, and he...

...hardened his jaw and looked away. Old habits die hard. He spent the last year perfecting his expressionless mask, unable to show her any emotion for fear of his true feelings being discovered.

It was time for all of that to change. People who like each other start by sharing food. This was step one in the courtship of Liz. *Smile and eat the damn donut*, he told himself.

Her intense stare pressured his smile into more like a raised cheek. She stopped chewing and narrowed her eyes in confusion.

"I'd rather face a hundred vampires than this," he muttered under his breath.

"What? I didn't hear you."

He'd never been so thankful to have something to shove into his mouth. Max nearly bit his fingertips off trying to cram the whole donut inside.

"Wow, you really were hungry. You didn't have to wait until you got back to eat."

Unable to reply, he shrugged. He tried to keep his face expressionless as usual, but it proved difficult with the mound of pastry expanding his cheeks.

"Anyway, we've a couple of hours to kill before our appointment with the master. We're meeting him at the high school in the stadium parking lot after sunset." She stood from the table.

"Done!" Vampy announced.

He flung the desiccated squirrel at her. The body hit Liz square in the chest. With a yelp of surprise, she bobbed the carcass in her hands. It hit the floor with a dull thud. Blood was splattered across her t-shirt.

Max was across the room with his hands wrapped around the bloodsucker's neck before he was able to swallow the rest of his donut. He squeezed until his knuckles gleamed white, then gulped his breakfast down his dry throat. His heart thumped to the beat of his rage. Anger heated his muscles and sent a wave of adrenaline coursing through him.

Max's pride screamed for punishment for the insult to Liz. He'd gladly trade the master's death for the chance to squeeze the life out of the little beast. The only reason the vamp was still alive was because of Liz. Letting this one go to kill the other didn't seem like such a good bargain anymore.

Max gave the vamp-boy's neck a nice, hard shake. Vic opened his mouth to show the full length of his fangs.

"What I wouldn't give for some pliers right now." Max dug his knee into Vampy's torso.

A light touch on his forearm cut through Max's anger like a block of ice thrown on a fire. It pulled his attention from the vampire and into the deep, swirling mix of grays and blues of Liz's eyes. His grip around the beastie's neck lessened.

"I'm fine. I was just startled. We still need him to identify the master." There was a devilish twinkle in her eye. "But feel free to choke him unconscious just for fun." Liz held her t-shirt away from her body and walked into the bathroom with a bounce in her step.

He heard her turn on the water in the sink. Max broke into a devilish grin of his own.

"Caught you." Liz poked her head around the bathroom door.

Max tucked his smile away quickly. He opened his mouth to say something, but couldn't think of anything witty, romantic, or charming. "Uh."

"You can be a bad-ass fighter and still smile once in a while." She turned to go back into the bathroom but stopped. "Max? Thank you." She nodded in the direction of the vamp-boy still struggling against Max's hold.

"You're welcome," he answered with a lighter heart. Two words he said all the time to every victim ever saved. He never meant those simple words as much as he did at this moment.

Max returned to the vampire with renewed strength. He pressed down hard on the beastie's windpipe until the vamp-boy's eyes rolled into the back of his head. Vic tried unsuccessfully to plant his fangs into

Max's forearms before he went still. Max eased his grip, but kept his knee in Vampy's ribs just in case he was faking. Vic didn't move.

Satisfied he'd be unconscious while his body repaired, Max headed for the bathroom for some water to wash down the remnants of the donut.

He found the door ajar, and heard the sounds of splashing coming from behind the cheap wood. Figuring Liz was dabbing at the stain on her t-shirt, Max pushed the door open all the way.

Endless creamy skin flowed over the muscles in Liz's long, lean back. The nude smoothness looked like she'd been poured into her jeans. Her skin cried to him for a caress, a loving touch, an opportunity to say with his hands what his mouth could not.

She turned to the sink where her t-shirt and bra lay soaking in a bath of cold water. A small, but perfectly curved breast came into view.

Max flushed. He knew he should leave before she spotted him standing in the doorway. He also knew any movement would draw her attention. His pants tightened and his body grew hard as he tried to decide.

"Liz." The word escaped him before he could stop it from rolling off his tongue. His insides pulsed with the urge to pull her close and have her bare skin burn against his.

She gasped and yanked her t-shirt out of the water to cover herself. "Max! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

He turned to leave, but couldn't peel his eyes away. Water dripped from the t-shirt over her ribs and along the lean side of her torso. The plunk-plunk-plunk of the water splattering on the floor was the loudest sound for miles. The shirt, being wet and white, did nothing to cover the view of her peaked nipples.

The old him would've hardened his face and lashed out with a demon insult. The new him screamed it was time to stop waiting. His body, hot with desire, ached with urgency. For a year, all of his thoughts had centered on her. It was time to let her know how he felt. From the part of her anatomy he could see, it appeared their species were sexually compatible. He couldn't think of any reason, any force on the planet Earth, that would make him leave the bathroom at that moment.

"Here." He lifted the towel hanging on the inside of the door and took a careful step toward her. To his surprise, she didn't retreat. Encouraged, he let the muscles in his face relax. His mask completely dissolved, he stepped closer.

Slowly, hands trembling with the need to grab her, he wrapped the towel around her body, patting the spots where water had dripped down her side.

"What are you doing," she asked with no trace of question in her voice. Her heady tones betrayed her, as well as the quiver in her lips.

"I'm not waiting anymore," he said. He was a man of actions, not words. Max tightened his arms around her and pulled her against his hard length. He placed his lips on hers in an exchange of heat and pent-up desire. He poured himself into that kiss, told her all about the past year with his tongue, spoke his love with his pliant lips, and divulged his secret desire with every caress of his hand.

She moaned in pleasure. The feminine rumblings of her throat vibrated his blood.

In a trail of blazing kisses down her neck, Max squirmed to remove himself from the leather straps of the axe harness. She tilted her head to allow him better access. His body burned with need. He'd dreamed about this for so long, and it was hard for him to believe she didn't spurn him with the memory of countless insults he had delivered.

The axe hit the floor with the sound of cracking tile. The small, bright yellow bathroom heated several degrees with the excess of passion. The air pressed on Max like a sauna. He whipped his shirt over his head and tossed it on the axe. With his hands on her hips, he allowed her to look at his chest, and the collection of scars he'd collected over the years. If she was going to say no, she would do it during this brief pause.

Liz dropped the towel from around her breasts. She pressed her warm, heated flesh into his scarred skin.

"Are you sure?" he asked. Reality was moving fast for him; it had to be mach speeds for her.

She ran her fingertips up his spine sending hot shivers to his groin. "Yes," she breathed.

He guided her backward until her bottom was pushed against the bathroom counter. She ran her hands along the muscles of his stomach, tucking her fingers in and out of the top of his pants. The light, teasing touches caused his manhood to twitch. He needed to be inside her, and soon.

Max kissed the top of her breasts while he undid the button on her jeans and lowered the zipper. His lips felt like sandpaper against the smoothness of her skin. The calluses on his hands were too large and too rough to touch her softness. He started to pull away.

Liz grabbed his hands and placed his palms over her breasts. "Kiss me, you demon-hating barbarian."

A smile came to his lips—genuine and not in the least bit awkward. The mask he wore as a self-prison was gone. He did as she asked. He wrapped his arms around her tightly and plunged his tongue past her teeth. She tasted like chocolate donut, but he didn't care. He'd finally have his Liz.

He ran his hand down her back and past the cotton fabric of her underwear. He cupped the soft skin of her backside. Her body trembled in response. She wiggled her hips to be free of her jeans.

Max pinned her against the counter with a thrust of his groin. His breath was heavy with wanting. He tucked his thumbs into her pants and eased them off her hips. Her jeans and panties slid to her ankles. She stepped free with her usual graceful movements.

Liz attacked his belt buckle like a woman on a mission. He liked the fact she wasn't shy, that she felt comfortable enough to show how much she wanted him. But he would be the one to control the tempo. He'd give it to her when and how he wanted.

His pants were introduced to his ankles, and the long length of him jutted up freed from its confines. Liz didn't hesitate to reach into his shorts and grasp him in her hot hands. With one hand on his shaft, the other on his balls, and a mouth searching for his tongue, Max had no doubt who was in control.

"Max," she gasped between kisses. "Do you...have protection?"

"In my pants pocket." He kissed the valley between her breasts. "I've carried one ever since I met you." He retrieved the condom and gave it to her to put on him.

"Have you ever made love to a Repere demon before?" She opened the wrapper and lowered his shorts to his knees.

Max's gut knotted and his manhood twitched in protest at the pause. This was the part where she told him they weren't compatible species. "No."

"Good, I want to be the first." She slipped the condom on one slow inch at a time.

Max's whole body quivered with desire. If they weren't compatible, he'd find out in a few seconds. He'd wanted her for too long to stop now. The fire in his blood couldn't be watered down. He wanted her and that's all that mattered.

Max crushed his lips on hers to smother any further words. He leaned into her so his shaft was poised just outside her feminine folds. A little at a time, he entered her slickness, giving her body time to adjust and stretch to accept him. Liz arched her back and moaned in pleasure; her fingers dug into his shoulder to tell him to go faster.

There was no way he'd rush this. He'd waited for so long.

With his shorts around his knees and pants at his ankles, he began rhythmically thrusting into her. Each penetration was a little harder and longer than the last. Her labored breathing came out as gasps of passion against his stubbled cheek.

Liz began to move with him, milking his manhood with the inner muscles of her gender. Her moans were louder and more passionate with each thrust. The noises she made, and the way her fingers kneaded into his back brought Max close to finishing. It wasn't until her body trembled in the throes of a climax did he allow himself the final thrust.

With a contented sigh, Liz eased off the counter and wrapped her arms around his waist. She laid her head against his scarred chest. The thumping of his heart was loud to his ears; he could only imagine what it sounded like to her.

He ran his fingers through her hair and held her close. The reflection of their satisfied, naked bodies in the mirror was a work of art that was beyond any museum masterpiece.

"Thank you," she said with a squeeze.

"For what?"

She looked up, her blue-gray eyes swirling faster than ever. "For getting over whatever was stopping you." She untangled her arms from him. "Clean up," she said referring to the heavy load in the condom. "I'll check on our pet vampire."

Liz wrapped a towel around herself and left the bathroom before he could stop her. He wasn't ready for her to let go just yet.

"Max!" He heard her yell from the other room. The panic in her voice made him go to her without hesitation, the passion replaced by icy tendrils.

The brown, flaking door to room nineteen was wide open. The belt used to keep Vic tied to the bedpost was coiled on the pillow. Liz tightened the towel around her body and turned to Max with eyes wide with panic. "He's gone."

Chapter Seven

Liz ran to the bathroom to collect her clothes. The room smelled of sex, and her thighs burned delightfully from the act. She had sex with Max, the demon-hater. She had sex with him and it was wonderful. Hotter than anything her past two boyfriends could muster.

She splashed some water on her flushed face. There was no time for a proper shower. "Max, get dressed. We have to get out of here in case he comes back with vamp friends."

Max appeared in the doorway; his gloriously naked self held the crossbow at mid-handle. His muscular, scarred body and the cocked crossbow made him look like a god of war, newly risen from the cracks in the Earth.

"I choked him unconscious." The hardened mask, the fury in his eyes, and the coldness in his voice gave Liz pause. She pulled on her jeans without taking her eyes off of him, like he was some kind of feral animal.

"I know. It appears we underestimated the little bloodsucker. He's stronger than we thought if he can walk in the sunlight." She peeled her gaze away from Max, who was still in the bathroom doorway.

She smoothed her hair in the mirror, leaning against the same counter she was pleased upon just a few moments before. Liz let her shoulders drop with a sigh. Max, the demon-hater; Max, the colleague; Max, the lover. And what a lover he was, going so slow he drove her crazy with anticipation. Even though his body was a maze of scars and he carried a crossbow as easily as most men carry golf clubs. He wasn't a war machine... he was just Max. Her Max.

"So that was the first time I had sex in a motel with the door wide open. How about you?" She grinned to make the War God stand at ease.

An eyebrow rose high on his forehead without any trace of humor. "You have sex in motels a lot?"

A flush came to her face. "Well, no... it was a joke... I don't... Just get dressed." She threw his pants at him.

He caught his clothes on his arm and stepped out of the bathroom doorway. When he left the room, he took the heaviness in the air with him like the proverbial storm cloud following him overhead.

"We need to hurry." He pulled on his pants.

"Yes." Despite the urgency, Liz watched him dress. The calm, deliberate way he buttoned his pants set off the peals of warning alarms in her head. "I don't regret what happened. It's not your fault he got away. We know there is a master somewhere in these suburbs. We'll find him." She squeezed his shoulder in comfort.

Without looking at her, he touched her hand and stood. "I shouldn't have allowed myself to be distracted. And that is my fault." He pulled his shirt over his head. "I won't have innocents suffer for my mistakes. We know where the master will be tonight. I intend to be there."

She ignored the stab of pain in her chest at being called a distraction and focused on the more urgent sense of doom tightening in her gut. "That's insane. It's suicide. I know you feel guilty about this, but think with your brain, not your ego. Going to the stadium tonight will be a death trap."

He snapped the leather harness over his shoulders. "Duty calls."

Liz didn't look at him. Looking at him meant she was humoring his suicidal urges. Now that Vampy was loose, he'd warn the master there were two vampire slayers in his territory. The master would spend the entire day creating a clan to protect himself. There was no way to know what to expect at the stadium tonight, but she did know one thing with absolute certainty. If the master did show for that meeting, he'd bring his army with him.

Max had finally opened up to her. She wasn't about to let him charge in there alone. She had something to lose now. "Fine. We're going to need weapons and back-up. A lot of back-up. And we should head to the high school now because that's where our master seems to be recruiting."

Max dug his fingers into her shoulder and spun her around.

A brief flare of old fear flashed in her chest, but when she looked into his eyes, he was just Max. Hard and angry, but still Max.

"No one else needs to be involved." He picked the axe off the bathroom tile and swung it onto his back.

Liz planted her hands on her hips. "Because it's suicide and you don't want the other vampire slayers to die? The Elders handbook section two, subparagraph five point zero says when knowingly facing a large group of enemy combatants—"

"To call headquarters for back-up," he finished with a sigh. "Looks like a war is coming."

She slid her feet into her boots and checked her stakes. "Yes."

Max strode to the door and checked the peephole before opening it. "Sending you into the suburbs was the best thing the Elders have done."

Liz pinched her face in confusion. "Don't you mean the worst thing?" She stepped outside into the bright, autumn sunshine.

"No. Because you're here, we found out a master is in the area. Plus, well... other reasons, too." He looked at her with a slight smile and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Come on, we have a field report to deliver."

Chapter Eight

"I'll be damned. They didn't kill each other," Donnie said as he climbed out the passenger side of Kurt's red pick-up truck. He still wore the greasy apron from the deli where he worked. It looked like the Elders pulled him straight off the grill line. A point emphasized when he tossed Liz and Max each a deli-wrapped Philly cheesesteak, no peppers, no onions.

The smell of hot food overtook Liz's sensitive nose and conquered her brain. Nothing else existed except that roll of cheesy goodness. "Donnie, I think I love you." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and planted a kiss on his rounded cheek. The solidness of the man still surprised her, as much as the belt of stakes he wore under his grill-cook apron. Jovial he might look, but jovial he was not.

He bumped her off with his gut. "Keep kissing, Lizard, but they aren't free. That's five-fifty each."

"I've got it," said a voice behind Donnie's girth. Tasha drew a twenty out of her black leather purse and shoved it into Donnie's thick fingers. "Hey demon-girl, long time no see." She pulled Liz into a quick hug. Liz didn't hug back because she didn't want to wrinkle the woman's expensive business suit. Only Tasha would wear stilettos to a vampire slaying.

"You're going to break an ankle out here." Liz pointed around at the abandoned parking lot located a few minutes from the school. Grass had long ago invaded the cracked asphalt where they stood.

"Nah, my Tasha's a tough chick. Besides, she looks damn sexy in heels." Kurt pulled a heavy duffel bag from the bed of the truck and tossed it to Max. He caught it with a grunt. "What's up, man?" Kurt slapped him on the shoulder. "Word is you found a master."

The good humored atmosphere sobered as Max joined them. Tasha and Donnie stared at him. Even Liz stopped devouring her cheesesteak in the gravity of the moment. The chance to kill a master only came once or twice in a slayer's career. Out of the five of them, Liz was the only one who'd killed a master before.

Max held his hands behind his back like a soldier making a report. "Yes. We had a minor clan vamp captive. He was going to lead us to the master tonight, but he escaped."

Liz noticed the tightening of his lips, a small difference in expression she wouldn't have noticed before. He was readying himself for criticism for allowing Vamp-boy to slip away.

Liz stared at her feet and fought the growing lump in her throat. He'd never touch her again, not after the amount of guilt he laid on himself for being 'distracted'.

Kurt elbowed him. "Lighten up, man. The vamp confirmed there's a master in the area. That's all the motivation I need."

"Me too," Tasha chimed in.

"Same here," Donnie added.

"You guys are nuts." Liz kicked the weeds poking out of the pavement.

"No, we're prepared," Kurt said with a much-too-pleased-with-himself smile, which usually meant he was about to introduce his latest vampire-killing invention. The tall red-headed man was a weekend engineer with a small machine shop in his garage. Kurt was the Elders' research and engineering department, but without the fancy degrees of an accredited university.

"We have a belt-fed automatic weapon good for defending a fixed position. It's capable of three round bursts and single shot." He pulled out what looked like a converted military machine gun with a canister of compressed air attached to the butt stock. The ammo was hardware store dowel rods sharpened to a point and linked together.

Liz took a step back with her hands raised in surrender. She imagined a hundred different scenarios where she was accidentally riddled with wooden pins. "How accurate is that thing?"

Kurt shrugged. "Accurate enough."

"I'll stick with my battle axe." Max folded his arms across his chest.

"You barbarian." Kurt passed the weapon to Tasha. "I also brought a few homemade grenades." He held up a purple, plastic hamster ball.

"They're filled with shrapnel splinters. All you have to do is light the fuse at the end here." The 'fuse' looked too much like a tampon string.

Liz shuddered. "One day you are going to kill us all."

"Oh! That reminds me." Kurt dug deeper into his duffel bag of goodies. "I brought eye protection for everyone." He tossed a pair of laboratory safety goggles to each of them.

Donnie let his bounce off his stomach. "Now I know you finally lost it. How are we supposed to fight with goggles and hamster balls?"

The engineer frowned as if his feelings were hurt. "Grenades, not hamster balls. And what did you bring besides cheesesteaks? Does the big, tough grill cook plan to beat the master to death with a spatula?"

"At least my spatula won't kill one of us by accident, you scrawny, red-headed nerd. Shouldn't you be at home watching Battlestar Galactica?"

"You're just jealous. My proximity mines killed more vamps last year than your grease-fired flamethrower. Which I built for you in the first place!"

Kurt laughed and lunged at the larger man. Donnie's playful punch sailed over the engineer's head.

Max jumped in the middle of the two slayers. "That is enough. If you don't start acting like adults, we'll never stand a chance."

They both pounced on him.

Tasha stepped in front of Liz, blocking her view of the action. "What do you say we take a walk, demon-girl?"

Liz frowned. The regular antics between Kurt and Donnie were her favorite form of entertainment, but she hadn't seen her friend Tasha in a while either. Liz gobbled the rest of her cheesesteak. "Sure."

Her friend linked her arm through Liz's. They strolled to the far end of the parking lot to the old convenience store, boarded-up and abandoned long ago. The sounds of scuffling and the occasional curse kept up behind them.

Tasha sat down on a crumbling curb. She arranged her tight business suit skirt for modesty. "Donnie and Kurt owe me twenty dollars each."

"For lunch?" Liz plopped down next to her. A wild piece of rebar poked her in the back.

"No, for winning a bet." Her red-painted lips curled into a grin. "It was on the way over here. Kurt had his money on the two of you killing each other. Donnie thought Max had gone rogue rather than follow you

to the suburbs. And me? I bet on love. I think I won, demon-girl." She elbowed Liz in the side.

Liz coughed. Her eyes wandered to Max, with his hand on Kurt's collar and a foot in Donnie's gut. She returned to her friend and sighed. "If you bet on sex, then yes, you won. Love, no. That's how Vampy escaped. Max will never get over that."

Tasha rolled her eyes. "Girl, he's been after you for a year. Everyone at the Elders knows that. Whenever you were sent on assignment, Max would sneak out the side door five minutes later." She pointed at him in the middle of the scuffle. "Look at him. See how he keeps glancing over here? He's got it bad."

Her friend was right. Every few seconds, she saw his gaze flicker her way. Liz's chest tightened. Tasha meant well, but Liz knew Max better than that. "You don't understand. He thinks I'm a distraction. And the fact that he keeps looking this way only proves his point." She stood up to leave.

A dirty tuft of weeds smacked into Liz's shoulder. "Hey!"

Tasha stood. In her tight business suit, sharp stilettos, and a look on her face that could melt glass, Liz knew she was in for a scolding. When Tasha got like this, it wasn't hard to imagine her dusting bloodsuckers as a weekend hobby.

"Listen up, demon-girl. He's here, isn't he? He followed you to the suburbs. Now it's your turn. Max thinks you're a distraction? Prove to him you're not." Tasha folded her arms across her chest and strode back toward the men, leaving Liz alone with the broken asphalt.

Chapter Nine

Liz squatted in the dirt under the bleachers at the high school stadium. She was the lookout. Make that the sniff-out, because her Repere nose was the early warning system. Surrounded by old French fries, a sweaty jockstrap or two, and a used condom, Liz wished for the third time in as many minutes she picked a better hiding place.

Tasha took her position in the teachers' parking lot with the automatic dowel rod shooter hidden under a blanket in the back of Kurt's pick-up. Kurt was directly above Liz on the bleachers with a bagful of hamster grenades and a lighter. He pretended to watch football practice and shouted encouragement like an older brother.

Donnie strolled the grounds checking the trash cans and sprinkler system, doing his best to look like a school janitor.

As for Max... Liz let her eyes gaze drift to where he stood. Arms crossed, with his crossbow and battle axe in plain sight, he took his position in the lush grass of the empty soccer field. The sun was setting behind him and the field hockey girls gave him a few catcalls as they jogged past on their way home. They must've assumed Max was some crazy thespian trying to get the kids involved in theater, or maybe the new history teacher. After the reaction of the cheerleaders, the last thing Liz wanted the girls to know was the truth. If they found out Max was a vampire slayer, she'd have to fight them off with a stick.

In a few more minutes when the fields darkened completely, vampires would come out to play. And with Max, the slayer who'd held one of their own captive, as the bait, they'd come for sure. But would the master?

A hiss of static came from her walkie-talkie. "Liz, smell anything yet? Over," Kurt asked. From his elevated position at the top of the bleachers, he had the bird's eye view and thus, was in charge of the operation.

Liz did a sniff around with her super-nose. Nothing but the stench of her immediate surroundings, and the body odor of the retreating football players. "No joy."

She watched Max reach for the walkie-talkie in his back pocket. He paused and went for his axe instead. The warrior swung his axe around in a circle, brushing the blades of grass then held it over his head. A calisthenics routine for battle preparation, perhaps? Whatever. Max was a mystery. Always had been, always will be.

Liz juggled the walkie-talkie in her hand. She was tempted to radio him and wish him luck or happy hunting or tell him to be careful. But he'd see that as a distraction. Tasha was right; Liz had to prove to Max she wasn't a liability.

How exactly she was going to accomplish that while stuck under the bleachers was beyond her.

Kurt wanted her to play clean-up. Max was the bait, Donnie was his back-up, Kurt was the artillery, and Tasha was the covering fire. The plan was to draw the master in and have Max keep him occupied. Donnie would be close by in case something went wrong. Once the vampires had gathered in a protective circle around the master, Kurt would hit them with his splinter grenades. Then Liz would jump out and dust the wounded and confused. The rally point was Kurt's truck where Tasha waited to provide cover fire. Simple enough, except for the part where something was sure to go wrong.

A sugary, sweet smell drifted under her nose. "It's time," she said into the walkie-talkie.

"I don't see anything. Over," Kurt replied.

"Me either," added Tasha.

Nevertheless, the smell grew stronger. Liz rolled her eyes at her walkie-talkie. What good was it having a Repere demon on the payroll if they doubted her nose? "They're coming. From the direction of the road, as far as I can tell."

"Tasha, get down," Kurt ordered his wife. If the vampires were driving, they would pass the pick-up truck on their way into the school's parking lot.

"Roger that." Tasha jumped into the bed of the truck and pulled the tarp over herself.

A large, red SUV pulled into the teachers' lot. Following it was a Ford minivan, then a banged-up compact, a Jeep, two sedans, and a station wagon. Liz estimated about forty vampires, only about eight vampires per slayer. Not quite the army they expected, but she'd take those odds any day.

"Something's wrong. The license plates are from New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, even New York," Tasha whispered over the walkie-talkie.

Liz looked up at Kurt even though she couldn't see his reaction in the darkness. Different vampire clans working together was unheard of. They were fiercely territorial, adopting the government's state and county lines as their borders. A Philadelphia clan could work with a New York clan about as effectively as peanut butter and lettuce. It just wasn't done.

The lead vehicle hit the gas and mowed down the chain link fence that separated the parking lot from the playing fields. The convoy headed straight for Max at full speed. He didn't move.

Liz's blood pounded in her ears. Her Repere instincts to protect were too strong. She sprung out from under the bleachers; her muscles twinged with the need to run for him. If she ran fast enough, she could knock Max out of the way before the SUV got him.

A thick arm shaped like a tree branch crashed into her chest. She flew back, head bouncing on the soft grass. Air rushed back into her lungs with a painful burn. Liz rolled on her side to get up, but something heavy trapped her legs.

"Quiet, girl, or you'll get us all killed." Donnie pinned her knees to the ground with his palms. He locked his elbows straight so she couldn't fight against him.

The cars had slowed and were parking one-by-one in a semicircle around Max. The headlights blasted in his face. If he couldn't see, he couldn't fight, he couldn't run; Liz had to get up and help him. Protect those who cannot protect themselves. "Let me go, Donnie. They'll kill him."

A meaty palm crashed over her mouth. Donnie dragged her into the shadows of the grounds' shed. She kicked and bit the whole way, but the heavy-set grill cook wouldn't let go.

"Stop it." He tilted her head so she had to look into his eyes. "This was part of the plan. The plan you agreed to. Max is the bait. He's heavily armed and well-trained. If you'll be quiet and let him do what he

needs to do, we're going to crumble a master tonight." Donnie waited another two seconds and released her.

Liz realized then where the plan would go wrong. She was the reason it would fail. Her Repere instincts were too ingrained; she could never stand by and let someone else be bait. Especially not Max.

She peeked around the corner of the moldy shed. He stood alone, illuminated in the wide open soccer field with dozens of vampires moving in the shadows between the vehicles. The sugary smell was much stronger now, but it was different than she expected. The scent was more muted, more refined; it lingered and permeated the entire area as if they stood in an enclosed place rather than an open field.

This was not the scent of newly minted vampires. Max was expecting immature fighters; he was about to get ambushed by the longest surviving vamps in the Mid-Atlantic region. Liz's legs quivered with the urge to jump out and help fight. He was alone, outnumbered, unprepared. The Repere inside her couldn't stand it. She shifted her weight to make a run for it.

Liz felt Donnie grab the back of her jeans to hold her in place. "I told you to stay still."

She shook her head and gave him a pleading look. "You don't understand. These aren't new vamps. He won't stand a chance out there."

Donnie didn't budge. With her super strength, she might give him a good fight, but the grill cook was ready for her to try something, and he outweighed her by seventy pounds.

Instead, Liz grabbed her walkie-talkie. She didn't care about the consequences. She had to warn the team. "Max, those aren't newbies. They smell old. Real old."

The Elders had offices in every city, every region of the country. Chances were, older vamps had come across a slayer sometime in their long life spans. The fact they weren't all crumbly said a lot for their survival skills. The master didn't need an army, just three dozen pairs of experienced fangs.

"Is that Liz I hear?" A male voice echoed over the fields.

Liz couldn't see who spoke, not with all the cars in the way. She had a guess though. "Hi, Vamp-boy," she said into the radio.

"Come out, come out wherever you are!" A chorus of fanged giggles rumbled in the night.

She pressed the button ready to give a snappy retort, but Donnie smacked her hand away. "What are you stupid? Now they know the bait isn't alone."

Liz whirled on him. "Stop calling Max that." She planted a high kick into his thick chest. Taken by surprise, Donnie fell backward onto his butt with a stunned look.

She didn't waste any time. Liz jumped up and was off running before she thought out a plan. Her boots chewed up tufts of grass as she ran through the night. The smell of vampire was strong, but despite that, a feeling of rightness spread in her chest. Her Repere nature propelled her forward. Toward Max.

On the other hand, how she'd get past the seasoned vampires on her way from Point A to Point B was rapidly becoming a problem.

Chapter Ten

"It figures," Liz said to dozens of vampire eyes watching her. "I'm the species who thinks running toward vampires is a good idea." She waited on the outskirts of the vamp circle, waited for them to attack or let her through to Max. The beasties didn't move, just watched her with their glittering eyes. It was as if they waited for the order to attack. Liz still didn't know if the master had shown up. This all could've been for nothing.

Her breath was heavy; the sweat on her skin itched as the night cooled. Her feeling of rightness rapidly slipped away. She couldn't see Max. The crowd of vampires and their vehicles blocked her view.

"Let her through," a voice commanded.

The vamps parted like they were the Red Sea and she was Moses. Liz took a deep breath before her first step. She pressed the talk button on the walkie-talkie and slipped it into her jeans so the button would stay pressed. It meant her team couldn't coordinate with each other, but at least they could listen to what was happening on the field.

The master was here tonight, and he was strong. He had to be. Only a very strong master vampire could unite and control out-of-state clans.

She sauntered between the vehicles ignoring the bared fangs and the growling hisses. She knew she wouldn't be attacked. None of them would break the master's orders. Even so, her grip on her stakes tightened just in case.

Finally, she saw Max. He was still in the middle of the soccer field illuminated by the headlights of the cars. His jaw was clenched and the veins in his neck were strained. He shook his head angrily at her.

Liz paused at the hood of the lead SUV. She turned to face the vampires. "Turn off the lights." She addressed the master, but since she

didn't know which beastie he was, she let her gaze roam over the whole group.

"Do it." Vic, her favorite teenage vampy, stepped forward. He wore a smug grin. The few vampires in close proximity scrambled to carry out his orders. Within seconds, the headlights were off.

Any feeling of right and goodness sunk into her boots. "Crap."

"Yes." He took a few steps closer to her. The nearest vamps circled back and forth behind him while the ones on the outskirts outside of the semicircle stayed still.

"You're the master," Max growled.

"Vamp-boy is the master," Liz repeated. She needed to hear it aloud before she believed it. "The scent of the other teenage vamps rubbed off on you. I never knew." Liz backed up until she was even with Max. She never took her eyes off Vamp-boy.

"I hope you realize what coming over here means," Max whispered sharply to her, but quietly so the vamps wouldn't overhear. "I could've killed him right here, but now I have you to worry about."

Anger flared inside Liz's chest. "You could've killed him? What, kamikaze style? Charged in with your axe? Let's say for a second that would've worked and beheaded the master, those other three dozen greatly experienced vampires would rip you apart," she whispered heatedly. Liz remembered Tasha's words back in the parking lot. She had to prove to Max she wasn't a liability, wasn't a distraction. That time was now. "It's about time you realize we're stronger together."

Fueled by anger and the need to prove herself, Liz drew one of her stakes and let it fly toward the center mass of the vampire formerly known as Vamp-boy. She froze, watched the weapon head to its target, too afraid to take a deep breath. Just before it reached Vic, one of his vamp cronies jumped in the way. His dust blasted the master in the face, and his empty clothes fell to the grass.

The world seemed to pause for a half second while Vic stared at Liz. She stared back, defiant. She was aware of the faint tugging at her arm as Max tried to move her, but she felt rooted to the ground.

Suddenly Vic laughed. It was odd, the youthful chuckle emerging from his fanged mouth; the same fangs that had probably turned hundreds of people into beasties of the night.

"Liz, Max, my friends. You are outnumbered. Outgunned. These are my families, my brethren. I'd like you to meet the new Mid-Atlantic super clan." He waved his arms proudly at the semicircle of vampires

behind him. "You could've crumbled me back there in the alley, but you didn't. You took me prisoner, fed me, even allowed me the opportunity to escape while you humped in the bathroom. I feel as if I owe you a chance. If you surrender now, I'll do you the honor of allowing you to join my superclan. However, if you resist the Turning, my family will feed upon you until you are drained of every drop of blood. I'll give you a minute to decide."

It wasn't the first time Liz had been threatened with a Turning. Nor was it the first time she faced off with a master. It was, however, the first time she believed it could actually happen. When the daylight shone on tomorrow, she might very well be a member of the superclan, hunted by her former employers. By Max perhaps, if he survived.

Beside her, displaying a calmness Liz wish she felt, Max tucked his t-shirt into his pants. The belt of extra crossbow bolts, the sheath of throwing knives, and a pair of suspenders with a row of wooden stakes attached (an invention of Kurt's) gleamed like a shiny arsenal, a little ray of hope in the dark night. "I think you'll find we're not so easy to Turn." He tossed his battle axe into the air. It swung above him twice before he caught it deftly by the handle. "You can take your minute and shove it—"

"Max, a word please." Liz grabbed his arm and pulled him backward a few steps. She lowered her voice. "Look, I'm all for going down fighting, but we might as well use the minute to come up with a plan." Trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, she lowered her eyes to the radio in her pocket.

His gaze followed hers. A slight twitch in his eyebrows told her he saw the pressed talk button. The rest of the team was listening.

"We need to surround the superclan somehow." Max leaned in closer so his voice was picked up over the walkie-talkie.

"I say we make a run for it." Liz held her hand in front of her mouth in case any of the vampires were lip readers. "Run as fast as we can for the bleachers. The vamps will give chase and follow us. Kurt can use his hamster bombs. Tasha can follow in the truck and meet up with Donnie. Then they can use that machine gun to do some real damage."

"That would leave us to deal with the master." He looked at her with a twinkle in his eye. The corners of his mouth curved into a smile and, for a second, she thought she saw admiration in his face. So she was helpful after all?

The look faded quickly, and the War God was back. "It could work. On my count. Three, two, one. GO!"

Heart racing, she spun around to get the hell out of there. Her boots slipped on the wet grass and she almost tumbled. One misstep meant dozens of fangs sticking into her body. Max caught her by the hand. His steady strength helped her keep her feet and allowed her to run faster than she could alone.

Together, with a stake in her free hand and the axe pumping in his, they fled the soccer field and the fanged beasts on it.

Liz risked a glance over her shoulder. Their sudden flight had put some distance between them and the superclan, but only enough for some breathing room. The hunting instincts of the vampires kicked in, and the whole gaggle was chasing them. She released the talk button on the walkie-talkie in case the others needed to communicate.

"It's working!" She flashed Max a smile. He hadn't let go her hand. She'd left all her fear back on the soccer field. Despite the fact a superclan was ten yards behind them and she was running for her life, she wasn't afraid anymore. Max was with her. Her hand in his, she felt strong. Invincible. Together, they would take down the superclan master.

"We have to gain more distance on them," Max said between pants of breath. "Otherwise, Kurt will hit us with the grenades." He hefted the axe to shoulder height. "Keep running. I'll try to slow them down."

"What?" Liz didn't get to tell him it was suicidal. He let go of her hand and whirled the axe in an arc behind him. Unable to help, she ran.

Max stayed a few steps behind her, feinting and attacking at random to slow down the superclan. These vampires were skilled survivors. They stayed out of reach of his axe. From their point of view, Liz and Max didn't have anywhere to run. Prey was easier to catch when it was tired out.

Liz's walkie-talkie hissed with static. "In a few more steps, hit the ground," Kurt warned.

"Max!" She yelled over her shoulder. They were nearing the safety of the bleachers. A little closer, they'd be within range of Kurt's throwing arm.

"I heard him." He sheathed the axe into the holster on his back. Arms spread out wide, he tackled Liz to the ground.

She hit hard; the air was forced from her lungs and her elbows scraped against the tough dirt. Max's heavy body crushed her into the

ground, but at the same time, oddly enough, his comforting weight on top of her made her feel safe.

Dust and wooden shrapnel filled the air. Screams of retreat sounded across the wide expanse of grass. She risked exposing her face to see if Kurt needed help. With his grin gleaming enough to brighten up the night, Kurt laughed as he fired the hamster balls from a tube launcher rapid-fire, lighting fuzes one after another as fast as he could. The mechanical rumble of a truck engine let her know Donnie and Tasha had joined the fight.

Donnie had lowered the pikes sticking out of the grill and drove toward the thickest mass of vampires. Tasha was on clean-up duty, peppering any vamps who tried to flee the massacre.

With the flying debris filling the air, it wasn't safe to stand and join the fight. Max's body shielded her from the exploding bits of wood and the crumbles of left-over vampire. He caught her watching the battle and tucked her head under his chest.

They laid together on the outskirts of the chaos, legs entangled like lovers, his powerful arms wrapped around her torso. The warmth of his body, the smell of maleness and sweat, and his protective posture made a feminine ache grow in her core. She wiggled to turn herself in his arms so they faced each other. She arched her back and pressed her breasts into his chest. His lips parted hers, and the ache grew. The desire was more powerful than the pull of battle; the passion more important than the destruction of the master.

This was exactly the reason Max had called her a distraction, Liz realized. Playing kissy face under the bleachers instead of doing their job was exactly what he thought would happen.

Ignoring the urges of her flesh, she kissed him on the tip of his nose. "Later." She squirmed to her feet and held out a hand. "Let's go hunting."

He took it and pulled himself up. His eyes were wide with desire, and his lips still puckered from the kiss. She laughed even though her own body still trembled. "The master awaits."

The passion cleared from Max's eyes. The face of a lover was replaced with the hard, tight features of a seasoned fighter. He drew his axe. "Let's go find him."

With a blended battle cry, they joined the fight with weapons in hand. The superclan had scattered out of range of the grenades. Donnie left the truck and was crumbling vamps on the other side of the field.

Most of the beasties had fled back to their vehicles for safety and to regroup. Even with her night vision, Liz couldn't tell how many of the superclan survived the carnage. They were too scattered and the vehicles too far away.

On her guard, she headed into the open field to meet up with Donnie and Tasha. Max hung back a half-step to watch her flank. It was the classic position they'd been trained to fight in, when they fought as pairs. A flutter and a smile came to her when she realized how easy and how comfortable she felt with Max as her rear guard. They worked well together, and if it took a battle against the Mid-Atlantic superclan for him to see it, then bring on the vamps.

They hadn't walked very far from the bleachers when the scent in the air turned sweet. It drifted on the currents surrounding her like a cage of wind. She stopped and held up her hand. "Hold. I think the master is close."

"Which direction?" Max shifted his grip on the axe.

"I don't know."

"Use your eyes. Where is he?"

The night was moonless, cloudy. A warm fog had drifted into the fields bringing the loose autumn leaves. She studied the shadows and tried to track the smell. A cold shiver traveled over her skin as she peered into the dense darkness. "I can't find him."

"I am here." The master appeared out of the fog, out of nowhere, just a few feet in front of her face. A retinue of six or seven vamps accompanied him. He bared his teeth and poised to strike. Max shoved her aside with his battle axe in front of them. The master darted forward, took a running step and launched himself over their heads. He flew through the air into the night. A metallic clang coming from the bleachers echoed in her ears.

"Kurt!" Tasha yelled from across the field. She started to run for her husband with Donnie close behind. The vampires who had hidden in their vehicles appeared in the fog before them. A scream of desperation tore from Tasha's throat as she launched into battle.

Max swung the axe in a half-circle to keep the master's retinue at bay. The vamps stalked around them until Liz and Max were surrounded. She placed her back against his and drew both stakes.

"Any bright ideas now?" He murmured over his shoulder.

The sounds of Tasha's and Donnie's fight were loud in the night. "Nope. You?"

"Vampires!" Ex-Vamp-boy called from atop the bleachers. He held a struggling Kurt by the throat a full arm's distance from his body. "It is time to feed."

He tossed Kurt over the side of the bleachers as though he was no more than a rag doll.

Tasha's scream of horror blared from across the field. The fog itself seemed to hear her call and carried her pain straight to Liz's heart. Kurt's arms flailed as he fell. A dull thud met him on impact with the ground.

The vamps around Liz stirred with the promise of an easy feed. Using their distraction to her advantage, she plunged the stake into the back of the nearest beastie. It was a clumsy strike, more out of anger than skill, but it did the job. The vamp exploded into a dust shower and his clothes sagged to the ground.

It got the retinue's attention away from Kurt. "No one is feeding tonight."

Max dropped the axe in favor of two stakes. He threw one and missed. These were not young vampires; they'd dodged a flying stake or two. Liz launched herself at two vamps making sure she didn't leave Max's back open for attack. Like most creatures of the night, these two were all teeth and no fists. But they were fast. It wasn't long before she was breathing heavy and sweat dripped from the tip of her nose.

Vampire crumbles hit her from behind accompanied by the rustle of fabric; Max had taken another one down. That meant four left; two for her, two for him, and then nothing stood between them and the master.

Unfortunately, she couldn't last for too much longer. The constant swinging and kicking to knock the vamps off balance was taking its toll. Liz's limbs were heavy clubs, and her lungs were on fire. Always, they stayed just beyond her reach then darted in with their teeth. Liz's knuckles were bloody from punching fangs away.

"When you collapse from exhaustion, I will turn you. Good fighters are hard to come by." The master laughed from his perch above the bleachers.

"I have an idea," Max puffed.

"It's about time."

"What is your plan, human?" asked one of Liz's vamps. She punched the undead woman in the face. Waves of pain shivered up her arm, but it was worth it.

Suddenly, Max spun around and took out Liz with his foot to the back of her knee. She went down with a cry of surprise. All four vamps

pounced toward their downed prey. Still turning, Max swooped up the axe from the ground. He swung it over his head, slicing into eternal flesh as he went. One vamp turned into a dust cloud.

Liz was on her feet in a split second. She staked one and moved toward the other before the clothes hit the ground. Max took out the third with a powerful slice. Then it was two-on-one. Liz threw both her stakes. The vamp dodged one, but not the other.

"Kurt." She ran toward the limp form of her friend.

"Wait," Max called, but she didn't stop.

Liz ran into the master. She bounced off his chest and landed in the dirt on her ass. She never even saw him jump.

Max was at her side in an instant with his weapons drawn. If he hadn't been there...

He gave her a hand to help her up. Max pulled her closer to him while she recovered. "It was a trap. Kurt was the bait."

Max nodded. He held his axe out so the master couldn't come closer. "He jumped right on top of you."

"I knew Max was the smarter of the two. The demon never checked the deleted text messages from the cell phone." Vamp-boy hissed at her.

"Sorry. I don't take hostages often!" Liz reached for her stakes but remembered she threw them at the last vamp. She was unarmed.

"Lucky I got the dumbest—"

Max swung his axe at the master's head, cutting him off mid-sentence. Vamp-boy jumped backward out of range. Liz sprung forward and tackled the teenage master to the ground. She was about even with him in weight, but her muscles were fatigued from fighting. He tried to flip her over, but she grabbed him by the wrists and held his shoulders down with her elbows. Her arms shook from the strain. He tilted his head to bring his fangs dangerously close to her neck.

"Hold him still," Max said.

"I'm trying!" The burn in her arms grew as her strength lessened.

Max placed the blade of his battle axe between Liz and the master's face. He smiled at Vamp-boy's surprised expression. "Did you think we'd play fair?" Max pushed the blade into the master's throat and didn't stop until he hit grass. Liz landed on the dirt covered in master crumbs.

Exhausted, she rolled over. Every muscle burned in agony. She smelled Tasha's perfume and heard her run past to Kurt's side. A groan of pain rumbled over the now-quiet grounds.

"He's alive!" Tasha shouted to the world.

Giving the couple their moment, Donnie slumped onto the grass beside Liz. "I thought for sure you'd do something stupid like challenge the master to a duel, Max."

Max shrugged. "This isn't some movie. Liz had done the hard part, I just ended it."

"Still, the Elders will give you the bonus for delivering the final strike. Good work."

Liz patted Donnie's knee. "You, too."

"Donnie! Get the truck. I need to get Kurt to a hospital." A hint of relief tinged Tasha's voice. Her husband was hurt, but not fatally.

Donnie dashed off. Liz rolled onto her side to see her friend. Kurt was sitting up but holding his ribs tightly. They were probably broken. His wife darted around him in her tight business suit trying to help him in any way. He kept waving off her attentions, calling her "fretting woman." Liz smiled at the sight of them.

Donnie pulled up with the truck. Max jogged over to help Kurt off the ground. They placed him in the bed next to his homemade machine gun with no small amount of moaning and groaning.

"Stop whining like a little girl." To everyone's surprise, Max smiled.

"Slaying masters suits you," Donnie remarked.

Tasha giggled. "I don't think that's it." She nodded in Liz's direction. All four of them turned to where she lay in the grass. Heat rose to her face.

"Well, I guess I better go with you." Donnie jumped into the truck bed. He wrapped his arm around Kurt's shoulders to keep him steady during the bumpy car ride. Tasha climbed into the driver's seat. A few seconds later, all they could see were the red taillights of the pickup.

Silence fell over the area, as tangible as the fog in the air. An owl hooted somewhere in the distance. The cool grass relaxed Liz's muscles like a comforting blanket. She was aware of Max's presence, so very aware, but she didn't turn to look at him.

With a groan, she sat up. Max would head back to the city, and she'd live here in the suburbs until spring when her exile was up. Liz chuckled to herself. Ironical that it took her banishment for him to admit his feelings, yet it was her banishment that kept them apart. At least they had a chance to be together once, even if it was a quick, bathroom romp.

Still not making eye contact, she pushed herself off the ground. Liz picked up the closest set of clothes and patted the pockets.

"What are you doing?" he asked from a few feet away. She hadn't heard him approach. The hard, warrior look had drained away, leaving just a man with a question in his eyes.

She pulled out a wallet. "Getting paid." The credit cards she ignored, but took the forty dollars in cash. "There seems to be discrimination against pointed ears and no social security numbers in today's workplace."

"I'll help." He shook the dust from a discarded pair of jeans.

"Those are cute. Are they a size eight?"

He checked. "Ten."

"Oh well. Look for size seven shoes while you're at it." She moved to the next dusty pile of fabric.

"Liz—" the strain in his voice was obvious. This was where he told her he was leaving and would come back to the suburbs next weekend, maybe.

"And check for cell phones. I'd rather call a cab than walk home." She shook out a sweatshirt a little rougher than necessary.

He let out a breath. "Do you want to go to dinner with me?"

She stopped and stared at him. "On a date?"

Max fumbled with a pair of women's sneakers in his hands. "Yeah. You asked me why I came to the suburbs. Well, I came to see if you were okay." He handed her the shoes. Size seven.

Happy fizzles tickled her stomach. She smiled, deciding to tease him a little before letting him off the hook. "And am I okay?"

With a straight face and a deadpan voice, he said, "Yes."

"I'll expect you to take a shower and wear a tie," she said in the same voice, with the same expression.

"I can do that."

She narrowed her eyes. "And to pay."

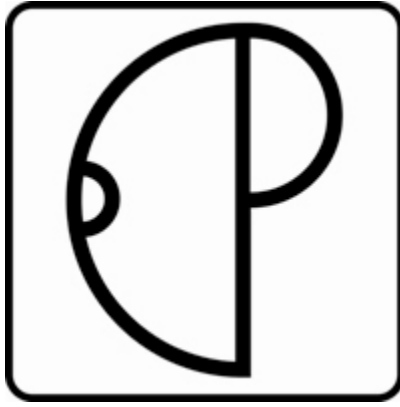
He picked up a wallet off the ground. "No problem." Max walked closer to her until they were inches apart. The heat from his body beat back the chill autumn wind. It also stirred awake the warmth inside her.

"Rumor has it, I'm a distraction." She tilted her head for a kiss.

"You have your moments." His breath was hot against her cheek.

"But I think I can handle slaying in the suburbs."

Laura Herbertson



About the Author

A resident of Pennsylvania, **Laura Herbertson** lives with her husband and wonderful dog, Colby. She graduated Bucknell University in 2003 with a bachelor in mechanical engineering, and received an MBA from Florida Institute of Technology in 2007.

Most of her day is spent in a cubicle in the field of armament research and development, but at night Laura is glued to her laptop writing stories of science fiction and paranormal mischief.

Available now from Eternal Press

The Draconis and the Stallion

by Laura Elliott

Think it's tough finding the right guy? Try having red eyes and a spiked tail.

When an escaped Draconis starts turning houses into kindling, Wing is ordered to track him down. With her spiked tail, flame-resistant skin, and ability to breathe fire, she's got the right tools for the job.

She's not the only one on the hunt - bullets fly when a military commando, Stallion, mistakes her for the pyro. Wing must convince him to stop trying to kill her and combine forces to catch the rampaging Draconis. But she gets a little more than she bargains for when the very sexy, heavily armed human male agrees.

The steam from the shower surrounded them, adding to the heat they generated in the small bathroom. He touched her shoulders, guiding her to her feet. Holding the shower curtain back, he motioned for her to get it. The water was heavenly. Layers of dirt and sweat washed from her body. Stallion joined her in the shower. He poured a fist full of shampoo into his palm. Lightly, he started to massage her scalp. His strong fingers numbed her senses, and she rested against his chest, water pooling on top of her breasts.

"Does that feel good?" he asked.

Rather than answer, she decided it would be more fun to return the favor. Wringing excess soap from her hair, Wing worked the shampoo through his. Groaning in pleasure, he tilted his head back and pushed his hips forward...

Laura Herbertson

Available now from Eternal Press

Shadow on the Crystal

by Brittany Kingston

For years, Whisper has hunted his archenemy, the vampire, Santez de Aragon. Whisper intends to kill the vile murderer and put an end to his evil ways once and for all. Katherine Browning finds herself attracted to the tall, handsome Gypsy who wards off the unwelcome attentions of her brother's tutor.

But soon she discovers that Whisper is not what he appears to be...

Whisper tightened his grip on his sword. "I will never be like you."

Santez circled their tight arena. "You are me. Do not deny you lust for blood the same way I do. You crave it. You take it wherever you can. You can't get enough of it." His eyes, like embers, ignited when his gaze came to rest on the frightened face of the girl. "So much the sweeter when virginal, no?" His stare challenged Whisper. "Deny that you want to drink her blood. Deny that you want it so bad you can already taste it." Whisper glanced at Katherine. The haunted gaze that caught at the edge of his vision sent a chill up his spine.

"Deny it!"

"Whisper?" Katherine took a step backwards.

Santez laughed. "Tell her what you are, gypsy."