

Orphan Ivy

Loki Renard

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Chapter One

Ivy clasped her resume nervously to her chest, her clammy hands threatening to sweat through the paper. It was a hot summer's evening and she was desperate, desperate for a job. Rent was due and the last dregs of her savings had only just stretched to cover her power and phone bill. If she didn't get a job today, she was proper fucked. After hours of tramping through town, applying at various places and being turned down at almost all of them, she arrived at a place of last resort.

'Help Wanted' the sign said. It hung in the window of a contemporary grungy coffee shop, one with the words 'Coffee Wrex' written on the awning in distressed text. The whole shop frontage had been painted black then treated so that the grain of the wood still showed through darkly. It was a vortex of sweet smelling darkness on the High Street and though Ivy had never entered it herself, being far too poor to afford superfluous luxuries like coffee from a coffee store, she'd always been somehow drawn to the place.

It was dark out, but the interior of the shop was lit with a cozy glow that put Ivy in mind of candlelight. Peering through the slightly swirled glass panes of the shop door, she saw that the place was largely empty aside from a couple of customers lining up for coffee.

Help Wanted. Ivy bit her lower lip nervously. Her degree in Classical Studies hadn't gotten her anywhere, but Ivy had seen a coffee machine once and she was pretty sure she could figure out how to use one.

She pressed open the dark door and stepped inside. It was more pleasant than she'd expected. Instead of being tacky and filthy, the wooden floors were well polished and the tables clearly saw a good wiping down fairly often. There was a slight hint of incense in the air, but it was innocuous, not like the sticks her old roommates used to light that gave her headaches.

The customers were still at the counter so she hung back, waiting patiently as the line dwindled. As she waited, her eyes were drawn to the man serving the customers and making their coffee. He was working by himself and he was probably busy, but he seemed perfectly calm and in control as he expertly drew off cup after cup of designer coffee.

He was probably in his early thirties and he had a presence that drew every eye in the place to him. Imposing, that's what he was, Ivy thought to herself, though she couldn't quite figure out why. He was tall, but not so tall as to be noteworthy, and though he appeared to be well built he was certainly no body builder. No, it wasn't his physical presence that made it almost impossible for her to take her eyes off him. He was dressed simply in a short sleeved black button down shirt and black jeans. It certainly wasn't his clothing that drew her attention either.

Maybe it was the tattoos on his right bicep. Ivy found her gaze drawn to those, they weren't your typical tattoos of dragons and barbed wire and tribal symbols, instead they appeared to be religious in origin. A multi-limbed goddess took pride of place on the hard muscle of his bicep and Ivy found herself squinting to see it better.

The sound of the barista clearing his throat brought her eyes up to his face where she met his deep gaze. She'd been caught staring. With a barely muffled squeak she leaped back behind the last customer

in front of her and did her best to pretend that nothing had happened. As the customer droned his order however, Ivy's curiosity got the better of her and she found herself peeking around the customer to get a better sense of the man.

He was undeniably attractive with a hard, square jaw and large brown eyes surrounded by long dark lashes and set in milk coffee skin that was pleasing indeed. His hair was longish, just brushing the top of his collar and dark as night.

Finally the customer in front of her received his coffee and Ivy found herself called before the barista's bench.

“What can I get for you?”

The wicked eyes fell on her and for a moment, she was tongue tied.

“I ... er... I...”

The man, wearing a name tag Ivy now saw read 'Jon' looked at her expectantly.

“A um.. flat white please,” she stammered.

Why had she done that? Why hadn't she just asked about the help wanted sign? She didn't have money for coffee!

Her heart thudded in her chest as he nodded and began brewing her coffee. Frantically, Ivy scavenged about in her purse, hoping that she would have enough to cover the coffee. With an inward sigh of relief she pulled out a few crumpled dollars. She'd be walking home, but at least she wouldn't have embarrassed herself.

“There you go,” he slid her the coffee with a professionally polite smile.

“Thank you,” Ivy handed over her precious last few dollars and retreated to a corner of the coffee shop to enjoy the hell out of the caffeine buzz that was going to have to get her home.

Sitting in the shadowy corner she savored the scent of the brew, which was beautifully made and moped to herself for a bit. 'Suck it up, Ivy,' she lectured herself quietly. 'Just go and ask.'

She didn't just ask though, not for a long time. For a long time she sat, pretending to drink her coffee, watching Jon out of the corner of her eye.

It wasn't until long past midnight when every customer in the place had left and the barista started going through the motions of closing up the shop that she approached him timidly. He was busily wiping down the counter with something of a frown on his face, as if he were thinking very deeply about something that concerned him.

“Excuse me?”

“What can I do for you?” He looked up, his expression clearing as he looked at her.

“The sign in the window...” Ivy pointed towards it, as if he might not know what she was talking about.

“Yeah?” Jon leaned against the counter and looked at Ivy with his arms folded across his chest, a friendly expression on his face.

“Well I’m.. I mean.. I could be help.”

Jon’s pierced brow rose ever so slightly at her, as if he didn’t quite believe that she could be of help to anyone. “Know how to make coffee?”

“Yes,” Ivy lied.

“Show me,” he stepped back, allowing her space to get behind the counter and swept his arm in the direction of the machine.

“Okay,” Ivy agreed, approaching the coffee machine. She didn’t know the machine from a flight deck, but she had a plan. Ordinarily she wouldn’t have tried bluffing her way into a job, but desperate times and desperate measures and all that.

“Oh,” she said when she was in arm’s reach of the monstrosity, which appeared to be all knobs and pipes. “This is a slightly different model from the last one I used. Maybe you could show me how you use this one?”

Jon shot her an incredulous look. “It’s the standard layout.”

“Oh, well, yes, I suppose it is,” Ivy said agreeably. “Well I suppose...”

She picked up a cup and placed it under what looked like a nozzle then selected a button at random and pressed it. With a horrid scream that sounded like beasts being unleashed from the underworld, a cloud of steam billowed around her. Ivy shrieked in surprise and leaped back, closing her eyes tightly, as if closing her eyes would protect her from the havoc she’d unleashed.

When the ringing in her ears subsided, she realized that someone was laughing. It was Jon. Deep rumbling laughter rolled out of him as he bent over, half doubled with mirth.

“I’m so sorry!” Ivy spluttered. “I don’t know...”

“That’s obvious,” Jon straightened, wiping a tear of laughter from his eye. “Why would you lie about knowing how to make coffee?”

“Because I need a job,” Ivy confessed, feeling thoroughly stupid and embarrassed.

“I see,” Jon said, becoming serious. “Well if you are looking for a job, did you bring a resume?”

“Yes!” Ivy thrust her resume towards him. It was now crumpled and translucent in some places from where the steam had hit it. She tried straightening it out before she handed to him, but she only succeeded in spreading brown muck from coffee grounds across the header.

He took the piece of paper and perused it. She saw a muscle in his cheek twitching and hoped against hope he might give her a chance.

Jon glanced over the battered piece of paper at the young woman in front of him. He'd felt her from the moment she'd timidly paused outside on the street, clutching her ragged resume and battling with herself as to whether she should go in or not. He wasn't quite sure what made him notice her, in many respects she was entirely unremarkable.

Standing in front of him with her feet slightly pigeon toed, she looked pale and uncomfortable. She was dressed badly, but she had pretty eyes behind her large spectacles which were still slightly steamed from her run in with the coffee machine. He could smell her fear. She was trying to hide it, but the stink of desperation was thick about her.

What was her name? She hadn't introduced herself in all her stammering. Ivy, he read on the resume. A pretty name. An old name too. He approved.

"Classics eh," he rubbed his chin as he read the rest of resume. "I went for Anthropology."

She smiled uncomfortably, and he wondered if anyone so awkward could make it in a coffee shop like his that often attracted an edgier clientele. Still, she'd been at least willing to give the machine a go. That took spunk, and he liked spunk. He wondered how much more of it she would have when she was not so clearly afraid.

"Okay, you've got yourself a trial."

Her smile would have lit up a cavern. "Really?"

"Really," he said, handing her resume back to her. "Be here tomorrow night, at 8."

"I will be. Thank you so much!"

He smiled at her. "Aren't you even going to ask what the pay is?"

She gave him a blank look and then he pretty much saw the light bulb go on over her head. "Oh, yes!"

"11.50, plus tips."

"Oh that's good!" Her happy beam was priceless.

Jon chuckled inwardly. Oh for the days when a few dollars an hour seemed like riches beyond his wildest dreams. No doubt about it, they were more innocent times.

"Okay, I will be here tomorrow, thank you again!" Ivy burred happily.

"You're welcome Ivy," he held out his hand. She put her pale, cool mitt in his and he clasped it warmly. As he pressed the flesh of her hand against his, as a shock ran through him, tugging at parts of

his mind. There was something odd about this girl, something very odd indeed. He watched her turn and almost bounce out of the coffee shop into the darkness of the night, happy and innocent as a lamb in spring time.

A job, a new job! It was as good as a new life as far as Ivy was concerned. She was fizzing with excitement as she walked home. It almost didn't matter that she had a good five miles or so to walk home. She had a job!

The night was a dark one, the cloud cover was thick, which meant that she had to rely on the streetlights, which were not well maintained at all. Rushing between spots of light, her stomach began to growl. She was getting hungry.

Up ahead, she saw a spark of light. It came from a lighter. On the street corner there was a group of young men milling around aimlessly. She heard the rumble of rough desire mixed with angry rejection from them. Young men were often strange, they wanted nothing more than to fuck, but they also hated the people they wanted to fuck. It was as if they hated their own drive for pleasure and blamed the women around them for it.

"Hey!" One of them yelled out as she passed.

She put her head down and kept moving quickly. There was still a good mile or two to get home, she didn't have time for this. Her stomach rumbled again, reminding her that she hadn't eaten properly in a couple of days.

They were following her. She could hear their shuffling footsteps, the little sniggers. Her heart began to race. They were keeping their distance, but she felt their intent keenly. Like a pack of dogs, they were pursuing her for sport and perhaps for something else too.

As she drew closer to residential areas, they made their move. Laughing like jackals they raced forward and surrounded her. The leader, an ugly youth with jug ears leered at her horribly.

"What's your problem, bitch? Why don't you say hello?"

"I'm sorry, I was.. thinking..." Ivy stammered.

"I'll give you something to think about," he said, crudely grasping at his crotch. The others laughed as he advanced on her. She retreated, keenly aware that she was being herded back to the darker reaches of the less populated part of town.

"Please, let me go," she begged. She didn't want this, not now. This was not a good time. She was hungry, too hungry.

"We'll let you go when we're done with you."

There was a cruel light in the young man's eyes, and his face carried the expression of one who is accustomed to preying on the weak. He was smirking, already so sure that he had her where he wanted her.

She regretted that she wasn't able to see the moment his expression turned from triumph to terror as she lunged at him, pressed past the point of forbearance. She grasped him with a strength that belied her fragile frame as her fangs sliced forward, cutting into the precious artery. She felt the blood rush into her mouth, pumped at full volume by a terrified heart.

Screams were all around her, not from her victim, his cry was quickly cut off as she gripped his throat with superhuman strength. His friends, seeing their leader cut down quickly and cleanly by a predator who masqueraded as one of them, took to their heels and fled, crying the whole way.

Ivy heard their shouts receding down the street as her victim's blood flowed into her, warming her, nourishing her. She felt her body begin to hum with life even as the thug's leeched from him. When she had taken her fill and he was limp in her arms on the verge of existence, she laid him in long grass beside a factory.

"Remember, you too are prey," she whispered into his ear before taking off into the night at speeds faster than the eye could detect. Now that she had fed, her powers were temporarily restored. She was at her home almost in the blink of an eye.

The night held one more surprise for her however. On arrival, she was surprised to see a familiar figure waiting for her in the lobby of her apartment.

"Jon?"

"Hello Ivy," he spoke casually, as if it were quite natural for a new boss to show up at his employee's home hours after employing her.

"Is something wrong?"

"In a manner of speaking," he said smoothly, looking around his surroundings with a distasteful eye. "You really live here?"

"Yes," Ivy replied simply, fishing in her bag for her apartment key. "Would you like to come up?"

"Please."

He spoke grimly. Ivy shot him an inquiring stare, but he clearly wasn't going to elaborate on his displeasure there in the lobby with the peeling paint and the stained carpet that smelled of a myriad of body odors.

She felt his presence behind her, large and angry as she ascended the stairs. What bothered him she couldn't say, but he was certainly holding his anger in well. If she hadn't been so sensitive to the emotions of others, she would perhaps have mistaken this for a friendly, albeit strange visit.

Once inside her apartment, he paced back and forth like a caged animal. It was clear that he didn't feel comfortable in her little bedsit. She thought it was nice enough. It was clean-ish and there was very little furniture to clutter it.

"What is wrong?"

She asked the question directly, though her heart was in her throat. Perhaps he had decided that she couldn't work for him after all.

"I saw you." He faced her for the first time and glared at her quite angrily.

"You saw me? Yes, I was in your store." Perhaps he had some sort of dissociative disorder, perhaps he was broken mentally. She didn't sense instability in him, but her senses had been off for a while.

"No," he walked towards her, his jaw set sternly. "I saw you. On the side of the road. Killing a man."

"Oh I didn't kill him," she reassured him. Her mind raced as her heart sank. How could she explain this away? There was no way he would allow her to work in his store now he'd seen her feasting on the living flesh of a human being. Flesh eating experience was totally undervalued in entry level employees.

He shook his head at her. "That is not the point. On the street. In full view of others, without so much as attempting to cloud their minds!" He was looming over her now, shaking his finger at her as if she were a kid who had committed some gross misbehavior.

"Wait..." Realization was settling in. He wasn't concerned about the bloody attack. He was concerned that someone else might have seen it. She stared at him for a long moment as the pieces mentally fell into place. He was not a normal man. He was a creature like her. A blood drinker, a vampire. "I didn't feel you there..."

"No, because you are sloppy," he said curtly. "Whoever made you was remiss in their duty to educate you."

Torn between the desire to keep her new job and anger at this man who dared walk into her life and lecture her without knowing the first thing about her, Ivy gritted her teeth.

"My maker is dead."

"Oh," Jon replied, brought up short by that news. "What happened?"

"A hunter," Ivy replied coldly, avoiding his gaze now. She did not want his pity.

He nodded, taking that information in. "How long after you were created?"

Ivy growled quietly. She found the questions invasive. She did not like questions as a rule. "Are you here to tell me that I no longer have a job with you?"

He took a deep breath. "I am here to tell you that you were seen. I saw you. You cannot allow yourself to be seen."

Ivy shrugged. "Sorry. It wasn't planned. They attacked me."

His gaze grew darker still. "Because you let them! Why were you walking home so slowly?"

"I was hungry and weak. I could not move at my usual speed." As the questioning continued, Ivy began to grow more incensed. Who was he to bluster into her home and start questioning and lecturing her?

"Why did you not drive, or at least take a cab?" The questioning continued unabated.

"For the same reason I applied to work in a coffee shop," she said tersely. "I have no money."

Confusion was written all over his handsome face. She knew why he was confused. Poor vampires were rare. Long lineages meant money. Ivy's lineage had been cut short abruptly and she had been left penniless.

Jon looked around at the sorry little hovel. This was not suitable. This was not suitable at all. The rage that had consumed him when he saw Ivy feeding on the side of the road like an alley cat was almost gone. What was left of it was now directed at whoever had left this fledgling vampire on her own to crash about the world without a clue how to handle herself. They had been grossly negligent, dead or not.

"You sleep here?"

She shook her head and he looked at her askance. It was clear that she did not feed often. Those who did not feed became tired and vulnerable. She had to sleep somewhere.

"Do not lie to me, Ivy."

"Okay," she sighed. "Yes, I sleep here."

"Where?"

She pointed to the dingy lump of upholstery that could have been alive itself at one point. "On the couch."

He swallowed another wave of outrage and managed to speak calmly. "You mean to tell me that you sleep here, in this room, protected by nothing but a shoddy plywood door?"

"Yeah, I guess," she shrugged again. "What's it to you?"

Jon's brows rose skyward. "Don't give me attitude, girl. I am not some petty human. I will not be disrespected."

Her gaze dropped to the ground and she shifted uncomfortably in front of him. "Sorry," she muttered.

"This isn't acceptable," he lectured.

"I said I was sorry," she exclaimed.

"Not that, though you would do well to watch how you speak to others. This place. It's not acceptable."

“Because it's not a coffee shop?”

Jon growled. Her pert attitude was becoming tiresome. “Because it's not safe.”

“Life's not safe,” she replied cavalierly.

“You are not alive,” he reminded her.

“Look,” she said, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand. “I'm tired. Do you still want me to work for you or not?”

“If I say not, what will you do then? Be evicted from here and sleep in dumpsters during the day?” He heard the derisiveness in his tone, but really, the situation was so far from tenable it wasn't funny.

For a moment she looked angry. Very angry. Then her face fell and he saw that he had hurt her with his harsh words of judgment.

“I'm sorry,” he said more gently. “I am simply concerned. I would like you to work at the shop. Consider this an advance.” He fished into his wallet, pulled out ten crisp hundred dollar bills and placed them on the marked old counter top.

Ivy's eyes went wide like saucers behind the silly glasses he was now sure she did not need. “What's that for?”

“Get yourself a decent place to live.”

“That's very generous of you,” Ivy said, drawing herself up stiffly in a way that told Jon she was going to be difficult about this. “But I like where I live, and I can pay my own way.”

He felt his jaw clench in frustration. She had no comprehension of the danger she was putting herself in, or of how to be a vampire at all. The apartment spoke to that quite clearly. The couch was facing away from the curtains towards the front door and was covered with a blanket. He guessed that her method of escaping the sun's rays probably involved climbing onto the couch and covering herself with the blanket until the sun went down each day.

She was looking at him uncertainly as his eyes passed disbelievingly around the room for the nth time. He could feel her fear again. She wanted the job, but she didn't want his charity. Looking at her face, he saw that she must have been fairly young when she was turned, perhaps nineteen or twenty years old. He doubted she had been vampire for all that long. Oh the folly of youth. She thought she knew it all, this vampire who lived as if she were still a mortal.

“Very well,” he said, relenting for the moment. “I will see you at eight.” He left before he could totally shred her dignity.

Chapter Two

Ivy feared what might await her at the coffee shop when she arrived the following evening, but Jon merely greeted her like he might greet any employee and handed her an apron. No mention was made of the previous evening's activities.

"Know how to work the card machine?"

"Nossir," Ivy confessed.

"Watch and learn," he winked at her in a remarkably friendly fashion and for a moment, Ivy forgot what he was. He just seemed like a perfectly congenial man with a penchant for a good coffee.

She watched as he took a customer's card, ran it through the magnetic card reader at the top of the machine, then entered the amount of the purchase and handed the terminal over to the customer for them to put their pin in.

"Easy as," he smiled charmingly.

Ivy smiled back nervously. She was sure that in spite of his facade of good will he had not forgotten the travesty that was her private life. In spite of her internal tension, she tried to apply herself to the task of learning all the ins and outs of the coffee shop. It was fairly busy and they were the only two on for the late night shift. Coffee Wrex was open 24/7, the perfect cover for a vampire.

"So, you know many others in town?" The question was phrased innocently enough, but Ivy knew what he meant. He wasn't asking her if she had friends. He was asking if she knew other vampires.

"No," she shook her head. "Apart from you."

He nodded. "Probably a good thing. Not everyone in this town is as friendly as I am."

Ivy laughed. "Friendly? Is that what you call a visit with intent to yell?"

Jon's eyes darkened a shade as his face became serious. "We are not done on that score."

"That reminds me," Ivy said, fishing in her pocket. "You forgot something." She held out the wad of bills he had left on her counter the previous evening. His low growl as he laid eyes on the money he'd given her sent a shiver through her lower belly.

"You are trying me."

Before her eyes he changed. She couldn't work out how precisely, but the illusion of the congenial coffee shop owner was suddenly gone, replaced by a barely restrained force to be reckoned with. She felt his power like a low hum, emanating from his body.

It didn't occur to her to be scared, but she was awed. A mature vampire at the height of his powers is an impressive thing.

"I'm not trying to try you," she said apologetically.

He smiled at that and relaxed a little. "You are stubborn. It is a good trait for a vampire, but not for a fledgling."

"I am not a fledgling," she complained. "I have been a vampire for ages now."

"How long?"

She shook her head in an effort to remember. The years had blended together confusingly. "Ten or maybe twenty," she said, over estimating by quite a large margin.

"And how long was your maker around?"

She frowned at the pain of the memory and pushed it away quickly. "A month maybe, I don't remember."

"That is not long." His voice was soft, understanding. She wanted to fall into it, be enveloped by it. The feeling scared her. There was no security in the world, not with this vampire. Not with anyone.

"No. But it's fine. I get by," she said stiffly.

"Just barely. You have few resources and you are vulnerable when you sleep."

"I will get more resources in good time."

"So stubborn," he said under his breath. "I wish you would let me help you."

Ivy shrugged. She was thoroughly confused by his interest. "Why should you help me? You don't know me. I am no-one to you."

His brows drew together sharply. "Rude little witch," he chastised.

"I am only speaking plainly."

"You are speaking rudely and quite disgracefully. It is quite obvious you were not turned all that long ago. Why, even fifty years ago a young woman would have known better than to speak that way." He lectured her in imperious, staid tones that sounded incredibly strange coming out of a pierced face.

Ivy was taken aback. The chill, modern impression Jon gave when slinging coffee was clearly an act for the benefit of the crowds, an act that kept him safe from the scrutiny of the world. Underneath it all he was a misogynistic walking cliché. She wanted very badly to take off her apron, ball it up and throw it in his face, but she needed this job. She had rent to pay. She had a legacy to build.

"I am who I am," she said, picking up a bottle of disinfectant spray and a rag and turning away from Jon to resume her task of wiping down the tables. Really, he was too overbearing and thoroughly insufferable.

She'd dismissed him! Jon glowered as Ivy set about wiping down a table aggressively. He was irritated in the extreme. He expected a little common sense from her, a little gratitude. Instead all he was getting were increasingly rude rebuffs from a fledgling who had no idea how to take care of herself.

His maker would never have taken that kind of back talk from him. But he was not her maker, he was merely her employer. He had no moral authority over her, so why couldn't he do as she suggested and leave her to muddle along in her own messes?

Glaring at her rear end, he fantasized about bringing his palm down hard across it and teaching her a lesson in respect. She had none at all. Before he acted on the impulse, he turned on his heel and walked away from her, simmering in his anger.

"Idiot girl," he muttered under his breath.

The bell by the door rang and he forced his feelings to the back of his mind and put on a pleasant smile and laid back drawl. He saw Ivy glance over with what seemed to him to be a derisive look as he served the customer.

Pushing thoughts of Ivy out of his mind, he focused on the customer, a lanky fellow with pool blue eyes, long straw blonde hair that brushed his shoulders and a conspiratorial wink. It was Blaze. The man had the worst timing in the world.

"Whaddly'have, Blaze?" The question was almost one word as it slid off Jon's tongue.

"Brazilian Macchiatto, coffee boy." There was a slight sneering smile on Blaze's face. Jon was used to that. So many night walkers believed that a vampire working in the service industry was akin to perversion and his brother was no exception to that rule. Jon enjoyed serving human and vampire alike however, so he ignored the convention that said a vampire could never serve a human. He enjoyed feeding and watering those who would be his prey, like a farmer tending his herds.

Blaze was at least a customer who knew what he wanted. Jon liked that kind of customer, sure they could be pretentious but they at least appreciated a good cup of coffee. He concentrated on the brew, inhaling its deep scent as it poured forth from the pristine machine. A very healthy helping of foam brought it to completion. A simple drink, but a powerful one.

Jon glanced up from the machine to see that the vampire's gaze was fixed firmly on Ivy as she moved around the tables. She seemed not to notice the leering grin, or the creature himself for that matter.

"New meat, little brother?" Blaze leched the question.

Jon scowled at the vampire. "She's spoken for."

"I bet," Blaze chuckled. "It's been a while for you, Jon, you remember what to do with one of them?"

"I remember just fine," Jon assured him.

"She's pale," Blaze observed. His keen eyes were roaming all over Ivy in a way that Jon hated.

"She's young and hasn't fed much yet but she will," he said, trying to distract Blaze with a free marshmallow in his coffee.

"Better make sure she does or she'll have one of your customers for breakfast," Blaze chuckled at what he clearly thought was an amusing joke.

Jon ignored the lust in Blaze's voice as he handed him his coffee. "Night Blaze, happy hunting."

"You too brother," Blaze lifted his double paper cup in a parody of a salute, spun on his heel and strode out the door.

When Blaze was out of the place, Jon tuned to watch Ivy as she finished clearing up the tables and took the discarded cutlery and cups to the kitchen in back to wash them. She didn't look at him as she passed quite close by him, she kept her head down, focused on her task.

His ire was already beginning to abate as he got a grip on himself. She was vulnerable. Whether she wanted his help or not, she needed it. The way that Blaze had looked at her made him more sure of that than ever. Now that she'd surfaced, it was only a matter of time before the others took an interest in her. Not all of their intentions would be benevolent.

With a deep sigh and a stern reminder to himself to keep his temper under control, he went into the kitchen where Ivy was stacking a tray full of dishes.

"Listen Ivy, I'm sorry I spoke to you that way." He couldn't quite believe that he was apologizing to her. She deserved every bit of chastising he'd given her and probably more, but he needed her on side if he was going to protect her. Idiot or not, his principles would not allow him to abandon her to the wilds once more.

She looked up at him and nodded. He had to bite back a flush of anger. Did she not know what concessions he was making for her? Did she not understand what she was dealing with? No, she knew nothing.

He tried once more to explain the reason for his concern. "I don't know how things were where you came from, but this city has a very active population."

"Active population?"

"Of night walkers. After midnight it is hard to throw a rock in the inner city without hitting at least one vampire." He chuckled a little at his own joke.

"Well that's nice," she said, clearly failing to understand his meaning, or the significance of that information.

"Not all are friendly. Those who are friendly may be more dangerous than those who are not."

"What about those who continually give unsolicited advice?" A little smirk appeared on her pert mouth as she stood back from the tray with one hand on her hip.

He clenched his jaw. She was trying as all hell, and now that he'd let her get away with the first few jibes, she had a damned smart mouth on her as well. Images flashed through his mind, images of taking her over his lap and slapping the heck out of that round little ass of hers until she behaved.

This was the problem of the modern vampire of course. Young vampires who had been turned in previous centuries understood that they must pay deference to their elders and listen to them. Such messages had been drummed into them from their human birth. These new vampires knew nothing of obedience. They thought that they knew all they needed to know. Many of them were proved tragically wrong very quickly by a predatory old guard and by hunters.

As he glared at her Ivy withheld a little giggle of delight. Jon looked thoroughly frustrated. It was nice to turn the tables on him, to make him feel out of sorts and strange. Ever since she'd seen him lurking about in the lobby of her building, her world had been strange. He attracted her in a way she couldn't describe, which was why it was so important that she push him away.

For a moment she thought he might storm away, but instead he walked towards her, stopped about a foot away and leaned down towards her. When he spoke, she could hear the control in his voice. He wanted to do something very badly, what that was she couldn't quite tell. Fire her, probably, or maybe beat her senseless.

"Listen to me, little one," he said. The words 'little one' jolted through her body, setting her senses alight. "I will soon tire of this misbehavior, and when I do, you will be sorry."

Looking into his eyes, she couldn't muster a smart retort. The part of her mind that specialized in defiance was temporarily shut down by the force of his presence. She knew that he was angry, she had seen it in his eyes, in his body language. He expressed none of that towards her now however, he was perfectly calm, perfectly controlled and entirely immovable.

"Well.. I..."

She stopped speaking as he shook his head at her. He didn't even bother to speak. He didn't need to, his message was clear.

In silence, she looked at him. What did he want? Why was he so interested? She was not very interesting, aside from being vampire and new.

"There is much you do not yet understand," he said firmly. "You are impetuous and hard headed." He held up his hand as she opened her mouth to speak. "You have done enough speaking. You are not knowledgeable enough to speak. You will be silent until I tell you otherwise."

Ivy gaped at him. She was staggered at the amazing gall of the man. He told her to be silent as if she were a child, no not a child, as if she were a peon he could command at will.

Taking advantage of her surprise, Jon smiled at her. "See? It is not so hard is it."

She opened her mouth to speak again, but he held up his hand once more. "I already tire of playing this game with you Ivy. I have tried to be congenial, but you have responded to that with nothing but smart

comments and flippant disregard for my instructions. You may be a vampire, but you are still living by human rules. Those rules no longer apply. We play by my rules now. You are in my territory and you will do as I say.”

His expression was hard, as if he expected her to try and defy him. “You have a choice. One choice. Your last choice. If you leave, if you walk out that door right now I will leave you alone. You will never hear from me again. But if you stay, if you want this job, then you will abide by my rules and I will teach you what you need to do to have a long and happy unlife.”

Ivy went cold at the ultimatum. On principle she did not like ultimatums, but she was also tired of being alone. Parts of her she would deny existing, wanted someone. If she left now, she would have no job, she would have to leave her apartment. She would have to start over again, probably sleep inside a dumpster as Jon had sneeringly suggested the other day. There was no choice, she had to agree to his terms. He had forbidden her to speak, so she simply looked at him mutely.

“I will take your continued presence here as a sign that you have agreed to my terms,” Jon said, his tone neutral as if he had not much cared whether she stayed or went. “Finish cleaning up. We will speak after closing.”

For the rest of the evening, Ivy worked in silence. It was tempting on a few occasions to talk, but for some reason she didn't. Something about the way he'd spoken to her strongly suggested that she had found the limits of his patience. She believed him when he said she wouldn't like what would happen if she went beyond them.

Jon was pleased. He had not enjoyed delivering the ultimatum, but there was no other way. Either she dropped the pretense of independence and did as she was told, or she would bring hell on herself and possibly on anyone near her. Perhaps a firm hand was all she needed. He hoped so, for he was possessed of a very firm hand indeed.

At the end of the shift she presented herself as he'd instructed and waited patiently. He could see the confusion in her eyes. She did not quite know why she was obeying him, he imagined. The thought made him smile inwardly. Poor little Ivy had no idea of the powers a fully realized vampire possessed.

“Sit down,” he said, stretching his long legs out in front of him as he sat in one of the shop's comfortable arm chairs.

Timidly, Ivy sat opposite him, curling her feet up under her on the chair so that she fitted neatly into the seat like a curled up cat.

“Let's talk for a bit,” he said, lacing his fingers together over his chest. “You may speak,” he added, remembering his earlier command that she not say a word.

“Okay,” she said, testing her voice for the first time in a couple of hours.

“I do not know how much your maker taught you, so I will start with the basics. As you already know from your previous existence, humans are group animals. They live in societies. They crave contact, connection.”

Ivy nodded, allowing him to speak without interruption. Already this was going much better than any of their previous attempts at conversation. Usually by this stage she would have interjected with some half witted comment designed to derail his train of thought.

“Vampires are also social beasts. There are hierarchies that mirror those in the animal world. Unlike in the animal world however, vampires don't die very often. That means that hierarchies become entrenched. Power becomes consolidated over time. You understand?”

Ivy nodded her head, then shook it. “I understand what you're saying, I just don't understand its significance.”

“You mean you don't understand how it is relevant to you, tucked away in your little flat under your blanket,” he smiled slightly. “It is relevant because it is the world you are now moving in, whether you know it or not. When you come into contact with others of our kind, you may be at some risk if you are not recognized.”

Shrugging, Ivy shook her head. “I've never had a problem.”

“Not yet, you haven't. Where have you been these past years?”

Again Ivy shrugged. “Here and there.”

Frowning slightly, he pressed her. “Here and where, exactly?”

An intriguing flush was growing on her cheeks. “After they killed Hector, I sort of, fell asleep.”

The pieces of the puzzle clicked into place. That explained her almost total naivety. “So you have been sleeping for all this time and have only just emerged?”

Ivy nodded. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“And you thought you could just get a job and apartment and carry on as if you hadn't died and been born anew,” Jon chuckled to himself.

“I was doing my best,” she replied, coloring with embarrassment.

“You have done well,” Jon reassured her, leaning over and patting her hand gently. “We all need help at the beginning. To survive as long as you have without any help at all is quite a feat.”

“Really?” She smiled a little. She looked sweet when she smiled, he thought to himself.

“Yes. There are many reasons why we respect our makers. One of them is the close bond we share, another is that their teachings are essential if we are to survive.”

“I'm confused though,” Ivy said. “We're apex predators. Top of the food chain. I haven't felt scared a day in my life since I turned.”

He knew she was not telling the complete truth. If she had never known a day's fear since her creation,

she would not have slept for a decade, the vampiric equivalent of a frightened child pulling the blankets over its head until morning.

“There are other vampires, and there are hunters. There is an entire human population that needs to be kept in the dark as to the realities of our existence. There are rules, codes, histories to learn.”

“Sounds tedious,” Ivy remarked. Already she was beginning to relax, he noted. She had a definite tendency towards informality.

“You only need to learn it once,” he smiled. “But you must learn it well.”

Ivy looked solemn now. When she was not smiling it was hard to tell what she was thinking, how she was feeling. Because of her hunger her energy was muted, which made it all the more difficult to get a read on her.

“You will not live in that apartment any longer. You will find more suitable accommodations,” he said firmly.

“I don't have anywhere else to go,” Ivy said simply. “And I'm not taking charity,” she added quickly, cutting him off as he opened his mouth to reply to her. That earned her a scowl.

“This isn't charity. This is necessity. Don't worry, you'll work off every cent.” He took a deep breath. Even when she was attempting to behave with a modicum of propriety she was mouthy. “Today you'll stay with me.”

“Do I get my own coffin?”

He looked at her and saw that she was struggling to keep a straight face. Damn but the little wench was irrepressible!

“You'll end up over your own coffin if you keep this up, miss,” he warned her.

A look of confusion appeared on her face. “Over my own coffin? Is that some kind of vampire thing?”

“Over your own coffin or over my knee, whichever is easiest.” He spoke casually, restraining a chuckle at her look of pure horror as she finally understood what he was saying. For a long moment she simply stared at him, trying to digest what he'd said, trying to come up with a response.

“Are you serious?”

He was impressed, a rather direct question there, no coy avoiding of the topic. “Quite so,” he said. “If it is necessary.”

“Under what circumstances could it possibly be considered *necessary*?”

“Under circumstances in which a certain young vampire is disobedient or insubordinate.” He kept his tone light, but serious. He did not wish to frighten her, certainly she had experienced enough fear in her life already. He did want her to know that he meant what he said however. She needed to know that her actions would have swift, physical consequences.

“You're... I...” She stammered, tripping over her own tongue. It was clear that she wanted to make another one of her typically flippant comments but didn't want to risk experiencing what he was talking about. “I don't like this,” she said finally.

“Fortunately you're not required to like it,” Jon replied. He did not expect her to understand what he was doing for her, not yet. She really was stuck in an old mindset, a human mindset. Left to her own devices he wouldn't be surprised if she'd struck up a romantic relationship with a human and tried to be a nocturnal suburban housewife.

“Come,” he said, propelling himself from the chair. “It will grow light soon. It is time we went home.”

Chapter Three

Ivy followed Jon out of the coffee shop with a queer feeling of slow misery in her belly. She was trapped. If she didn't do as he said she would be forced out of her home – if going to her home was even an option. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe he would just beat her if she tried to go back there.

Her place wasn't nice. It wasn't entirely safe. But it was her place. She would no longer be allowed that autonomy it seemed.

Jon strode ahead of her, confident and self assured with his car keys in his hand. He was so handsome, she thought to herself. If it wasn't for his overbearing nature she might very well have been very attracted to him indeed.

“Come on,” Jon waved her over to his car and opened the passenger side door for her. She slid into the comfortable leather seat and sat on her hands feeling entirely out of sorts.

“Seat belt on,” he prompted her as he got into the driver's side.

“I'm a vampire,” she protested. “If we get into a crash, it's the car that should worry.”

His dark brow rose a fraction. “Are we going to start the defiance already?”

“No,” Ivy sighed, putting her seat belt on and staring straight ahead. She would go along with his plan until she was paid, she thought to herself. When she was paid she'd look for something else. That thought alone prevented her from panicking as he started the car and drew off into the dark night with her as his captive passenger.

“You're doing the right thing,” he said as they were sitting at traffic lights.

“Sorry?” She'd been almost entirely lost in her own thoughts.

“I know you must have doubts, fears even,” he glanced across at her, then returned his eyes to the road. “But I promise you I will not harm you. I know what it is to be lost and alone. It is not a fate I would wish on another.”

His words intrigued her. “When were you lost?”

A faint smile as the lights turned green and he accelerated through the intersection. “It was a long time ago now.”

She wrinkled her nose. Clearly he was going to be evasive. Well let him be evasive.

“We're here.”

Ivy looked up from her sulk to see that they had stopped in front of a two story block building that stood in a row of similar buildings. It was white washed and plain and bland. It was unlikely that the neighbors ever had screaming fights at four am in the morning here. It was extremely unlikely that she would be entertained by youths fist fighting for honor or sport on the street outside. No, this house was

restrained and refined. It was a house constructed in the building equivalent of a strait jacket. She hated it instantly.

“Nice,” she said politely.

He smiled. “It is not anything special on the outside,” he acknowledged as he got out of the car. “But I think you will find it comfortable.”

He was right. When she was ushered inside, Ivy found herself smiling in spite of herself. The place had a pleasant woody smell and was full of character. The walls were white, but there were artistic and anthropological curiosities lined along the hallway that drew her eye. The living room Jon invited her into when she had finished ocularly devouring the walls in the hallway boasted two well stuffed chocolate brown couches that looked almost good enough to eat.

Best of all was the large fish tank full of brightly colored fish set into one of the walls. She was drawn to it instantly. It was filled with a stunning white limestone rock wall full of holes that the fish swam around occasionally chasing one another.

“Beautiful,” she breathed, laughing as the fish caught sight of her and zoomed towards her, bobbing their heads up and down at the front of the tank in the hope of being fed.

“They are,” Jon agreed, looming up behind her. “I enjoy watching them go about their business.”

“You have a lovely home.”

“Thank you,” he inclined his head graciously. “I have a spare room for you if you'd like to see it.”

“Yes please.” She no longer had to feign politeness, she was now feeling very grateful that he'd opened his home to her. It was a very nice place and nothing like the bland prison she'd been fearing. She was seeing another side of him now, a side that existed apart from the coffee shop owner and the stern old stick in the mud. Jon was clearly a man of curiosity and sensitivity, a man of culture.

The room he showed her to made her gasp with pleasure. An electric fire burned in a grate which faced a large, comfortable looking bed. There were no windows, hence there was no risk of being exposed to dangerous UV rays. It was simply furnished with a bookcase, a leather arm chair and a decently sized armoire that would hold Ivy's limited wardrobe several times over.

“Thank you,” she said, slightly shamefaced at how she had behaved when he had first invited her to stay.

“You are welcome,” he said warmly, squeezing her shoulder. “I hope you will be comfortable.”

“I will definitely be comfortable,” she smiled. There was no way not to be comfortable in a home like this. Comfort and stability oozed out of every pore of the place.

“If you need me, my room is across the hall.” He pointed to a closed door across the way. “You should get some rest.”

“I will,” she nodded cooperatively.

"Then I will bid you good night," he said with a gentlemanly little bow that Ivy found both charming and sort of funny.

When he was gone, she looked around the room in awe. It was nice, really nice. It felt like him in many respects, solid but still slightly edgy. She looked at the bed. It loomed large in the room, calling to her with seductive plushy calls.

She stripped off her clothes and got into bed. Crisp, clean sheets greeted her, feeling wonderful against her skin. She had become sadly accustomed to the rough upholstery of the old couch in her apartment and the scratchy blanket that smelled faintly of human emissions.

Laying in bed, she thought about the man. The man who was probably even now laying in his own bed across the hall just as she was lying in hers. He was a strange creature clearly used to playing a role in his everyday life. She had not had the slightest inkling when she first met him that he too was a vampire. He blended so well into the human world he'd chosen to inhabit.

She'd seen behind his facade now though. Behind his pretense of a laid back purveyor of coffee he was old, and serious and sometimes formal. The way he spoke to her when he was frustrated put Ivy in mind of some ancient school master.

Turning to lay on her side and pressing her cheek to the soft white pillow case, she puzzled at her own feelings. She'd antagonized him and enjoyed it, but his response, the threat to thrash her like a misbehaving child had caught her off guard. Would he really do such a thing? Jon didn't strike her as someone who made threats lightly. He seemed to be a man of his word in most every respect.

Her stomach churned as she had a glimmer of realization at what she was getting herself into. After Hector died she had thought that she would always be alone. That seemed unbearable so she slept, slept for a long time. Finally however she'd emerged, driven by hunger. She remembered her first meal with some guilt. She'd been totally mad with the need to feed. It hadn't been pretty, but it had been someone who she considered deserved it. A man who tried to prey on her, mistaking her for a runaway. His evil intent had hung about him like a dark cloud and she'd known as she looked at him that he'd done what he intended to do to her to many, many others. She'd torn him apart, drained him dry. When she was done with him there was nothing left.

The blood of the murderer had sated her, restored some of her strength. Since then she had fed only sparingly. She remembered enough of her human life that the idea of harming innocents turned her stomach. Jon would probably have had a fit if he knew, but she made a habit of walking through darkened alleyways and deserted areas of town, waiting for someone to strike. If they made the first aggressive move towards her, they were fair game in her mind.

She didn't feed very often, just often enough to keep the worst of the hunger at bay. The knowledge that she was in some way serving the human community she had once been a part of by removing its predators assuaged any guilt she felt over taking life.

How did Jon feed? Probably from an espresso cup, Ivy thought, giggling softly to herself.

As she lay there thinking the fingers of the sun's rays began to rise over the curve of the earth. She

could not see them of course, safely tucked away in Jon's solid house as she was, but she could feel their effects. Her energy drained away almost immediately and sleep, irresistible sleep claimed her.

“Wakey wakey.”

Ivy started awake grumpily. She did not like to be woken early, and her body told her that she had, without a doubt, been woken early.

“What?”

Jon stood in the doorway. “It's time to eat.”

“Time to... What?”

Ivy looked at him groggily for a moment then turned over in the bed and tried to go back to sleep. She did not want to be awake yet, certainly not for nonsensical comments from Jon.

“Ivy. Up.” There was a low note of command in his voice.

“Don't want to,” she replied from the depths of the bed.

“It is time to feed.” She heard him enter the room. Her warning growl was ignored as he swept the blankets back, picked her up as if she weighed nothing at all and put her down on the ground.

“I'm not hungry,” she complained.

“Yes you are. You just don't know it,” he said. “You don't feed nearly enough.”

Ivy sighed a long drawn out sigh. It seemed that he was planning to interfere in quite literally every aspect of her life.

“So who are we killing?” She asked, following him out into the hall.

He stopped short and gave her a hard look. “We're not killing anyone.”

She looked at him askance and he sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “Do you know how to feed properly, Ivy?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied indignantly.

“Hmmm.”

He turned and kept walking. She followed him through the house, up a flight of stairs and onto the second floor which was an open space furnished to look a great deal like a lounge bar. The lights were dim and there were large, long couches and tables set about the place. At one end of the room there was even a bar. It was the strangest interior Ivy had ever laid eyes on.

As she gazed around she became aware that they were not alone. There was a woman in the room. Ivy stopped short, looking at her, trying to work out if she were human or not. She was rather beautiful in a generic sort of way. She had long blonde hair, ruby red lips and high heels that would have hobbled her if she'd needed to go anywhere in a hurry.

"Hello Dorothy, how are you my dear?" Jon went forward and kissed the woman's hand.

"Very well thank you m'lord," Dorothy replied without the slightest hint of irony.

"I have a fledgling to train tonight," Jon gestured towards Ivy.

"How adorable," the woman replied, looking at Ivy with a pleasant smile.

"Come here Ivy," Jon called her over. Ivy did not want to go. She did not know what was going on, but it seemed to her very much as if Jon was chatting quite congenially with his food.

"Yes come, I will not bite," Dorothy made the joke with a light laugh.

Ivy sidled over reluctantly and stood a good three feet away from where Jon was now sitting with his arm around Dorothy's shoulders. The position was friendly, but there was an intimacy to it that made her feel a brief, inexplicable pang of jealousy.

"I have seen you feed. You are vicious and reckless. It does not need to be that way. It can be gentle, even pleasurable for your source," Jon lectured her, making her feel thoroughly uncomfortable.

"I am not hungry," Ivy scowled at him petulantly. She did not want a lecture and certainly not in front of a stranger.

"You need to feed, only a little, but you need to feed," Jon contradicted her. He then turned to Dorothy. "Forgive me, my dear, this one is young and stubborn."

Ivy blushed deep red. She was more uncomfortable than she could ever remember being. Without another word she turned on her heel and walked away. She wanted none of this, this weird dinner time conversation, this condescension.

Before she could reach the door, Jon was in front of her, blocking it.

"I told you yesterday I would teach you. Today I am teaching you," he reminded her. "Now go over and apologize to Dorothy. You are making this difficult for her."

Ivy's jaw dropped. "I am making this difficult for her? I am not doing anything!"

Jon's expression grew ever more displeased. "Enough back talk," he said. "You will feed this evening because the longer it takes you to feed, the hungrier you will grow and the more difficult it will be for you to learn to do it the correct way."

He took her by the wrist and lead her firmly back to the woman.

"Now," he said. "When you feed, you must do so gently, with sensitivity..."

The lesson was difficult for Ivy. She had not known anything but savage attack. Jon was teaching her to have some empathy for those she feed from, to feed gently in tune with the victim. For the first time, Ivy learned what it was to connect with a human mind, to feel it with her own. Dorothy was very calm, she appeared to be in a state of almost euphoric submission as Jon fed from her. Ivy took only a few tentative sips, but it was enough to placate Jon.

“Go to your room,” he said as she licked her lips. “I will come for you shortly.”

She was being dismissed, she thought to herself. She was happy to go. Dorothy was sighing with adoration at Jon and she didn't really need to sit around and watch that. No wonder he'd gotten so mad at her when she treated him like just another guy. He was used to being revered.

Sitting in her room after her meal, Ivy had to admit to herself that she was feeling better already. Dorothy had freely given of herself, which was nice. It was nice to eat without someone screaming in your ear and clawing to get away. Maybe she could get used to feeding this way, regularly from willing donors. What did Jon give them in return for their blood? Free coffee maybe, she thought, giggling to herself.

Jon strode into her room half an hour or so later. She could tell that he was irritated with her. His handsome face was a perfect mask of strained patience.

“You must learn to trust me. To do as you are told,” he began lecturing her immediately, doing away with meaningless pleasantries that would only get in the way of his chastising of her.

“Trust is not easy,” Ivy reminded him. He seemed to expect her to treat him like an old friend. She had only known him for a few days and she was not of such an open and easy disposition that new acquaintances, no matter how charming and obliging were entirely trusted.

“True,” he acknowledged. “But I have done you no harm, have I?”

“Not yet,” Ivy said with a glimmer of mischief. “You have threatened to beat me though.”

“Not beat, spank.”

Spank. The word made her cringe. It sounded horribly juvenile.

“That's ridiculous,” she said haughtily. “I am grown several times over. Such treatment is not only below me, it would be an insult.”

Jon chuckled gently. “You are beginning to sound like a little vampire now, all ego, little sense.”

“I have plenty of sense,” Ivy said.

“Not enough to take a free meal without complaint, it would seem.”

Ivy rolled her eyes. Part of her knew that he was right, but it was odious being reminded of her

shortcomings over and over again. When she had lived alone and answered only to herself she had felt quite good about her efforts. In eating bad people, she had cleansed the human population, in seeking employment and paying rent she contributed to the economy. On her own terms she had been doing well, but in Jon's eyes she was nothing but a screwed up orphan.

"I'm getting really sick of you talking to me like I'm an idiot," she snapped at him. "I've survived just fine for over a decade, I think I can manage to get by without having some overgrown mosquito telling me I'm doing it wrong."

Jon blinked for a moment, probably trying to come to terms with his vampiric powers being compared to those of an insect. She'd chosen the analogy purposefully to bite at his ego, which was bigger than his house and coffee shop put together.

"Why do you continue to taunt me, Ivy?" He spoke softly now, his voice a quiet purr as he approached her where she sat on the end of the bed. "Do you think I am not a man of my word?"

"I am sure you are," Ivy assured him, "but I am a vampire. It is my essential nature. I do not need to be told how to be one. I am not as vulnerable and weak as you think."

Jon shook his head at her. "You are far more vulnerable than you imagine."

"I am a vampire. V.A.M.P.I.R.E. Aside from trickery, which can only happen when one gives trust, I cannot be harmed," Ivy said with total confidence, spelling out the word as if she was speaking to a half wit. She knew she was pushing his tolerance but she did not care. Her irritation blinded her common sense.

In spite of her rudeness, he was listening carefully, and when she stopped speaking, he nodded. "I see. So you think that if you trust no-one you will be safe. You will be immune from the slings and arrows of fate, perhaps from the laws of nature itself?"

Ivy smirked. "I am already apart from the laws of the nature."

"And yet if you were to open a curtain during daylight for just a few seconds you would suffer the rigors of terrible agony."

She tried to think of a retort to that point, but it was hard to.

"Make no mistake, Ivy. Beyond these walls, beneath your feet lies a restless earth full of forces beyond your control. You and I might have relative power over the dominant species, but compared to the forces this planet can unleash we are nothing." He spoke with a fierce passion that surprised Ivy into listening. "The only true safety you will ever know is in the bonds of those who will aid you in difficult times. You might feel safer alone Ivy, but you need others of your kind. That is why we form covens."

"I don't do groups," Ivy said sulkily.

"You will. I will make an introduction to those I know when I deem you to be ready."

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“When you are less likely to bring down the fury of a coven on your pretty head,” he smiled at her.

“I'm not pretty,” she snapped immediately.

“You are certainly contrary,” he said, deftly avoiding a dangerous topic. “And you are soon to be late for work. Your employer will not be pleased if you aren't there on time.”

His congenial manner was back, covering his more serious side. As he flickered a wink at her, Ivy felt herself smiling in spite of herself. He was still insufferable, but she did owe him a great deal.

“That certainly will not do,” she said, playing along.

By the time they got to the coffee shop, she'd almost forgotten the fact that he was an overbearing brute who threatened to spank her. Her meal had put her in a very good mood, now that it had settled in her body, revitalizing her tissues so that she buzzed with a pleasant energy. Jon had good taste in food, she thought to herself as she bustled about the shop wiping tables down.

The early parts of the shift were busy. Plenty of customers came in before going out on the town, or after a long day at work and Ivy soon found herself working out the mysteries of the coffee machine on their behalf.

Jon did not reprimand her at all, in fact he stayed largely out of her way, focusing on the needs and desires of his frail human customers who would have been thoroughly shocked to know just what he was.

She noticed more things as she oriented herself in the coffee shop. Instead of being hyper focused on not messing anything up, she had a chance to look around and see the customers who were coming in. Most did not interest her. Most were happy, bubbling humans without a care in the world. One fellow however, caught her eye as soon as he walked in the door. He had a peculiar energy that marked him apart from the group. He was as she was, as Jon was, vampire. She was certain of it.

He caught her eye as he waited in line and smiled. She blushed. He was not the most handsome man she had ever seen, but he was an interesting figure. Like Jon he dressed all in black, but unlike Jon who preferred casual clothing, this man wore a crisply cut suit that fitted his frame perfectly. He was rather slim and had long blond hair tied back in a ponytail, but what really caught her attention were his bright pale eyes and his wide, charismatic smile.

Ivy was not used to being noticed. She went out of her way to look unremarkable. But this vampire had definitely noticed her. The edges of her vision clouded as she looked at him, seeing only his face. His smile was magnetic, it drew her in. She found herself walking towards him without even thinking about it. There was no intention behind her actions, she was simply being propelled by an unseen force.

“Ivy!” Jon barked at her. With his angry call whatever spell or reverie had gripped her was broken. She looked up, wondering what she had done to earn his displeasure.

“The dishes are piling up.” He jerked his head towards the back room.

Without question, she went, but she discovered that there were very few dishes waiting to be done at all. Not even enough to fill a single one of the thick plastic trays that went through the dishwasher.

She poked her head around the door just in time to see Jon serving the blond man. "There aren't any..."

"Do what's there." He hadn't exactly snapped, but there was a curt note to his tone. Ivy felt rather hurt by that, she hadn't done anything to deserve his growling.

In the back room she slammed plates into the tray with irritation. Even when she was good she was bad apparently.

"You really need to learn to listen and do as you're told." He was suddenly standing next to her, his hand out to block the passage of any more slammed crockery.

"So I'm told," she growled between gritted teeth.

"I do what I do for your own good."

"So you keep telling me."

Jon sighed. "You still think that I'm being overbearing to be overbearing."

"I don't think anything. I don't know you."

"Why were you walking towards that man?" Jon disregarded her childish snark.

"I don't know," Ivy shrugged.

"No. Think. Why did you want to go over to him?" His eyes burned darkly into hers, impelling her to expend the energy to think about it.

Thinking back Ivy realized she had no idea. It was slightly scary actually. "I don't know," she said again, this time in far more humble tones.

"You realize that if I hadn't told you to go into the back room you would have followed him out of here like a little lamb without the slightest resistance? If you don't like me telling you what to do, I doubt you'd enjoy total mind servitude."

Chilled fingers crept along Ivy's spine. She hadn't been able to protect herself or even begin to resist. She had effectively become a zombie. The sheer power of the unassuming vampire blew her mind.

"How did he do that?"

"He is advanced, he is well fed," Jon shrugged. "The minds of humans and fledglings are easily manipulated."

Ivy cocked her head to the side. "Can you do that?"

"Sure."

She was confused at hearing that news. It made no sense. Jon had spent many days arguing with her, putting up with her attitude, cajoling her into doing as she was told.

“So why didn't you? Why are you putting up with me fighting you every step of the way if you could just make me do whatever you wanted?”

Jon chuckled. “I have wondered that myself. But the real answer is I want you to actually learn. Mindless obedience is worth nothing.”

“Hm,” Ivy said. She was beginning to get an inkling that Jon wasn't just some brute who enjoyed bossing her around. He really was helping her. But why? What could she possibly matter to someone like him?

Chapter Four

That question stayed with Ivy over the following days and weeks. In that time she made some efforts to behave herself according to the new code Jon told her she would do well to live by. Disobedience was difficult anyway, Jon kept her on a very short leash. She went to work and she went back to his home. That was it. He did not allow her to go out anywhere else. Either he didn't trust her not to run away, or he thought she would be snatched away by the mysterious blond vampire. Ivy noted that her would be abductor did not show his face in the coffee shop again.

Every night before they went out she would feed from one of his willing volunteers, and every night she grew a little bit stronger. He was easing her slowly towards a fuller realization of her powers and her trust in him was growing steadily. As he had promised, he'd done her no harm, in fact he'd been the personification of kindness itself.

"Hey boss, when do we get a night off?"

It was the end of another long shift and Ivy suddenly realized that she'd worked two weeks straight without a single day off. She rested her weight on the broom she was holding as she questioned her employer.

Jon looked up from the cash register where he was counting the bills. "Indentured servants don't get days off," he winked.

"That's it, I'm joining a union. You'll be sorry then."

Jon pretended to think about her threat for a moment. "Hm, I'm not sure there is a union for little vampiric upstarts."

He ducked as Ivy threw a wet washcloth at him. "Oh dear, what insubordination," he tutted, advancing towards her.

She tried to scramble away, but she was too slow. He was faster than light itself and any attempt to run away from him was doomed to fail. That didn't stop her trying.

"What are you..." Ivy was cut off as Jon grasped her firmly, sat down on a chair that had carelessly been left pulled out of a table and yanked her over his lap. It all happened so suddenly that Ivy didn't understand what was going on at first. He'd never laid hands on her before. "Jon! Let me up!"

Jon's chuckle was dark as he held her in place, see-sawing awkwardly over one of his strong thighs. "I don't think so, little vampire."

"What are you doing?" She craned her neck around as he laid his palm over her jean clad rear end.

"What I've been promising to do to you since I met you, naughty girl."

"You can't!"

A sharp slap to her bottom contradicted her assertion with stinging fact. "Why would you look at that, I very much can."

Squirming in place, Ivy tried to take stock of her position. It wasn't that it was uncomfortable. She could prop herself with her hands on the floor. It was embarrassing though, she was very powerless in this position. Jon had total control over her. He patted her backside gently.

"I think it is time a certain young lady learned some manners."

When wondering what a spanking would be like she had imagined that it would be horrible and mean and painful. To her surprise, Jon was not being mean at all. He seemed to be enjoying himself actually, the smile had not left his face since he'd laid hands on her. But what would happen when he hit her again? Her bottom already stung from the last slap. She feared pain.

"Please don't hurt me," she pleaded.

"Don't worry, I won't hurt you." The expression in his eyes softened reassuringly.

She trusted him. She liked being held this close to his body, her torso snuggled against the hard lines of his abdomen, her groin pressed firmly against the hard muscle of his thigh. Desire was awakening in her, especially as his hand pressed down on her bottom, pressing her more firmly into her place.

"I will take these pants down though. Can't spank a naughty girl in her jeans."

"Oh I see what this is about," Ivy recovered from her shock enough to tease him. "This has all been one long elaborate ruse to get in my pants."

Jon laughed. "You think I need a ruse to get into your pants?"

"So fucking arrogant," Ivy shook her head at him, momentarily forgetting her place both figuratively and literally.

"You know it," he laughed, yanking at her jeans. They were ugly, oversized things and they offered no resistance, sliding off her ass and leaving her stuck there in just her panties. "Kick them off," he ordered.

She'd half expected him to punish her for swearing, but he was clearly enjoying himself far too much to be angry about a little insubordination. She could feel his hardness pressing against her hip as he tugged her jeans off completely.

It was a strange feeling, having no pants on in the middle of the store. A cool draught played around her legs as Jon's thick fingers traced lightly over her backside. Shivers of pleasure ran through her body. He was dominating her, but doing so with an expert touch that kept her enthralled as his fingers traced the lines of her panties, then dipped down between her thighs for a moment to play across her sensitive lips.

Ivy moaned and arched towards him, falling deeper under his spell. Her passions had lain dormant for so long but now he was filling her with lust. When his hard hand fell once, twice, three times across her

lower cheeks she did not squeal in pain so much as squeak with excitement. The slaps hurt a little, but they made her bottom tingle and sent shooting darts of pleasure through her loins.

“Oh you need this spanking,” he growled above her. “This round little ass needs to be warmed nice and red.”

The desire in his voice inflamed her passion. He wanted her. This beautiful, powerful creature desired her. Even now his hands were roaming hungrily, sliding up under the plain white blouse and cupping her breast as he slapped her bottom with short, sharp slaps.

If this was a spanking, then she wouldn't bother behaving herself. This was wonderful. The pain, which ordinarily would have angered and enraged her was dissolved in arousal.

After a few more slaps, Jon stopped spanking her and stood her up. She whimpered in disappointment and frustration as his hands left her sensitive skin.

“We should get home before the sun rises,” he said with a rueful smile.

“You should finish what you started,” she replied accusingly, making him chuckle.

“Oh don't worry, you'll get what you need,” Jon grinned wickedly.

The drive back to Jon's place was the most frustrating drive of Ivy's life. Her upper thighs were slick with arousal and she keenly felt his large, solid presence next to her. It was a promise of pleasure delayed. Though she tried not to stare at him, she kept glancing over at him during the short drive and when they finally arrived she sprang out of the car, filled with tension.

“You're in a hurry tonight.”

She looked over and saw that he had a smirk on his face. He knew. He knew how she was feeling. He knew he had her in the palm of his hand, that her every nerve ending was calling out for his touch. He was enjoying her desire far too much. Growling softly to herself, Ivy stalked over to him and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. His look was one of pure surprise as he looked down.

“Don't fuck with me,” she growled aggressively.

He smiled slowly and reached down, taking her hands in his. “Watch yourself, little vampire.”

Snarling, Ivy exposed her fangs.

“Oh no,” he shook his head at her and tweaked her nose. “Don't try and provoke me into spanking you by being naughty. You won't like what you get.”

He'd seen through her ruse and she cursed in frustration as he laughed again.

“I told you you would get what you need,” he reminded her, wandering inside nonchalantly. Ivy followed close behind him, weaving near him like a cat in heat.

“You're torturing me,” she complained when he simply tossed his jacket on the back of the couch and

went looking for something to drink.

Jon's grin was wide as he poured himself a fine drop of port. "You've come a long way from the woman who couldn't imagine being spanked."

"I don't want to be spanked," Ivy said indignantly.

"What do you want?" He swirled the deep red liquid in its glass and looked at her.

She found herself blushing, but she pushed through it. Her lust, repressed for so long during her sleep and then again by her constant hunger had now been woken properly. Jon's insistence that she feed every night had made her grow stronger and returned many of her sensibilities and instincts, along with the undeniable passion that was part of her existence.

"I want you."

"Such a wanton little vampire," Jon purred as he walked towards her. He stopped before her and gently stoked her cheek and she shivered with pleasure even at his light touch.

"I can't help it," she said softly. The strength of her lust was almost frightening. Her entire body burned with it. She wanted nothing more than to touch and be touched, to consume and be consumed.

"I know. It is a natural need, do not fear it, do not be ashamed by it," he reassured her, taking her in his arms.

With his body pressed against hers, Ivy sighed with satisfaction. She needed him like a drug. She needed him more than she needed to feed. The sheer force of her passion was scary.

"What's happening to me?" She whimpered the words even as she ground herself against his body.

"You're coming back," Jon said, stroking her hair. "When you slept for so long and denied yourself the blood you needed many of your systems shut down. You became a shadow of yourself. That is how you flew under the radar for so long. Vampires are sensitive to others of our kind, but when one's powers are at a low ebb, it is much harder to sense them."

"I didn't know," Ivy whispered against his chest, pressing against him. It was no longer possible to keep her distance from him. He was right, she was coming back to the world. The world was a place of needs, the world was a place of desires. Hers could no longer be denied.

"I noticed," he said, tipping her chin up and gazing into her eyes. "I noticed the little waif who thought she knew what she was doing even though she was starved half to death." He smiled at the memory and she smiled back up at him.

"And now?"

"And now you need what every well fed fledgling needs, respite from the libido. Everything is heightened when you are fed, Ivy, including your desire." As he spoke, his hands trailed down her back to cup her bottom and pull her against his body.

“I need you,” she growled, grinding against his manhood.

“Well then you shall have me.”

She felt herself being lifted in his arms and carried into the bedroom opposite hers where a soft bed and many erotic caresses awaited her.

Jon took her that night, he claimed her body and her mind in ways they had never been claimed before. Over and over he branded her body with kisses as he stroked deep inside her. She had almost forgotten how it felt to be so intimately connected, to be, just for a moment, one with another. When it was over she felt sated in a way she had not felt sated since she had been turned.

With their relationship firmly cemented on the physical plane, Jon began to worry less about Ivy. She was no longer sullen and insolent, she was cheerful and insolent instead, which he much preferred. In the early days he had been concerned that she might simply run away. Now he was fairly certain that she was beginning to feel that he was her home and it pleased him.

His heart had gone out to her the moment he laid eyes on her, or if perhaps not the immediate moment, not long after she had unleashed steam on herself. She was pretty, and spirited and independent. Perhaps too independent at times, but he secretly admired her strength even if he chided her for her headstrong ways more often than not.

She was feeding well now, by herself without any need for prompting. It was during one of her evening feeds that Jon broke exciting news to her.

“You have an evening off, Ivy.”

She grinned, licking the blood off her lips. “My union representative finally got to you.”

“Not quite. We have a gathering to attend.”

She frowned. “A gathering?”

“Its time you met your new family,” Jon declared.

Ivy's trepidation was clear. She didn't say anything much, but she looked deeply troubled. “I thought other vampires were dangerous?”

“A few bad apples could have made your life quite unpleasant before you returned to your full strength, but I think you are strong enough now to resist any cheap tricks. Besides, I have claimed you, you are mine. They would not dare cross you now.”

“I am yours, am I?” She pouted sexily as she approached him with a deliberate sway in her hips. He knew precisely what she had on her mind. Her lustful cravings had not abated in the slightest, nor would they for some time. A young vampire was a beast of blood and passion. “Maybe we could just stay in?” She fingered the buttons on his shirt.

He felt his body respond to her advances, but they did not have time.

“Later, when we return,” he promised her. “Tonight we must go out. You must be on your most formal behavior.” He avoided the phrase 'best behavior', knowing it would irk her and probably provoke an outburst of some kind.

“This is going to be boring, isn't it?”

“I doubt it,” he shook his head, smiling inwardly. Boring indeed. Only Ivy could contemplate an evening surrounded by vampires and call it boring.

Dressed in a silly red silk dress, Ivy flounced her way into the car.

“You look beautiful,” Jon praised. She smiled in spite of herself.

“I look like a Christmas bauble.”

He chuckled and shook his head at her and she smiled. She was enjoying the relationship that was growing between them. Jon was steadily becoming more of a lover than a boss, and though his overbearing nature could not be denied, she felt closer to him than ever before. In spite of her nerves, she was looking forward to seeing where he had come from.

Their drive took them out to the countryside where a large old manor stood in a large estate surrounded by well manicured gardens and grounds. Ivy felt trepidation sweep over as they approached the high gates and saw the brightly lit mansion beyond.

There was a hum of activity inside that she felt the moment she stepped out of the car. It was as if she could feel the vampires in the building without seeing them. The sheer amount of energy surprised her, she was used to feeling a slight buzz when vampires passed by outside the coffee shop, but this gathering felt like electricity fluttering at the edges of her senses.

“How many people are here?” She asked the question as Jon came around and put his arm over her shoulders, giving her a place to lean, a place to hide.

“Thirty or so,” he said, smiling down at her reassuringly. “They are all friends.”

She approached the house nervously. As they entered the foyer, curious eyes appraised her on all sides. She was glad then that Jon had made her wear the silly dress, it made her slightly less conspicuous in a room full of women in silly dresses. The faces were all unfamiliar to her as she glanced around quickly, loath to make eye contact with any of them.

“Jon.” A finely dressed woman made her way out of the small throng and approached the pair. Ivy was instantly intimidated by the finely shaped brunette who moved with otherworldly grace.

“Hello Madeline,” Jon said, taking the woman in his arms and kissing her cheeks. It was a warm, affectionate greeting very much reciprocated by the woman. Ivy considered feeling jealous, but Jon turned back towards her almost immediately.

“Madeline, this is Ivy. Ivy, meet Lady Madeline, my maker.” The deference was thick in Jon's voice.

Madeline's smile was a warm one that easily reached her deep brown eyes. “Welcome Ivy,” she said extending her hand. Ivy took it and shook it, feeling a little bit shy. Madeline had the weight of age behind her, and though she did not look a great deal older than forty or so, Ivy was certain that she must be very, very old indeed.

“It's nice to meet you,” she said politely.

“Likewise,” Madeline smiled, apparently charmed. “Jon tells me that you are new to our area.”

“Yes,” Ivy said. “I... lost my maker.”

“That is a great pity,” Madeline said compassionately. “But you have new family now. If you need anything, please come to me.”

Out of anyone else's mouth those words would have sounded fake, right up there with 'we should really meet up for coffee sometime'. From Madeline they seemed genuine.

“Thank you,” Ivy said as gratitude swept through her.

“Well hello little waitress. To lose a maker could be construed as carelessness.” An unfamiliar voice horridly misquoting Wilde came from somewhere near her. Ivy turned around to find herself face to face with the blue eyed blonde who had tried to control her mind in the coffee shop. It was something of a shock to lay eyes on him and feel the dark energy that rolled off him in a way that she had not been able to detect all those weeks ago before her strength had fully returned. This was a powerful vampire indeed, a powerful, ruthless man.

She said nothing, but Blaze laughed as if there was some joke being told as he looked her over lecherously. “You've been keeping her to yourself Jon. Not that I blame you. I'd keep her to myself too.”

Ivy frowned as she felt waves of his lurid intention pass over her. She could sense what Blaze's plans had been for her, horrid sordid plans. If he'd have found her, she would have been very unhappy. Unlike Jon, who had slowly, patiently nurtured her towards her true self even whilst asserting himself as master, Blaze would have accepted none of her attitude, none of her personality. He would have broken her down and made her into anything he pleased.

“You're a fucking asshole,” she growled under her breath. The chatter around them paused briefly as several of the others turned to look at her. She wasn't looking at them though, all her anger was focused on Blaze. He was a sickening excuse for a creature and her fangs itched with desire to end him. She had been defensive enough coming to this place, feeling the depths of Blaze's depravity nigh beamed into her head pushed her from defensiveness into anger.

“Enough Ivy,” Jon warned, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“No,” she growled. “He would have...” she stopped, unable to give voice to what she could see in her mind's eye when she looked at him. Blaze was utterly ruthless and he demanded nothing less than total

submission.

“But he didn't.”

“I don't care.” She was feeling vicious, and as her natural aggression rose, she bared her fangs at Blaze, who smirked at her. He was clearly not afraid of her.

“Get your whelp under control, would you old man?” Blaze drawled.

“Ivy, you are causing me embarrassment,” Jon growled against her ear.

She didn't care. All she cared about was hurting Blaze. When she had been on her own she had taken vengeance against scum like him and she wasn't about to stop just because Jon had decided he was the boss of her.

“Nobody controls me,” she growled, stalking closer to Blaze.

“Now that's where you're wrong.” A strong hand grabbed the back of her dress and yanked her away from her quarry.

Kicking and growling with anger, Ivy was dragged through the old house to an empty parlor. She saw the openly amused older vampires looking at her as she went past and it only served to fuel her anger. She tried fighting away from Jon's grasp, but he was far too strong.

“What are you doing? Let me go get him!” Ivy raged at Jon.

“I warned you,” Jon said matter of factly. He let her go briefly and stood glaring at her, unbuttoning his cuffs and rolling up his sleeves.

She had no idea what he was doing until he grabbed her again, took her firmly over his knee and began slapping her ass with fast, hard slaps that sent harsh waves of pain rolling through her flesh. There was no room for questions or for pleading or for anything other than an anguished howling, a noise Ivy was sure would travel through the whole place.

He did not speak throughout the punishment. When she managed to flail around enough to see him, Ivy saw that his expression was determined, his mouth set in a grim line as his arm rose and fell over and over, branding her with discipline. The silly dress he'd wanted her to wear offered her no protection at all, it didn't matter if his hand fell over it or under it and it did both as she tried desperately to squirm away from his discipline.

She fought against the pain for as long as she could, but inevitably she began crying as it overwhelmed her. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that she should be treated this way whilst Blaze, the most horrid predatory creature she'd ever known stood smirking and drinking fine wine, probably listening to her being punished and being aroused by the whole proceeding.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She felt betrayed and heartbroken. Jon had beaten her so as not to lose face in front of that scum. She was worth so little to him that he would thrash her if she caused him to lose face.

“Ivy.” Jon's voice came to her through her pain.

“Shut up,” she growled aggressively. She hated everybody, but she hated him most of all. How dare he treat her this way? How dare he hurt her? The sharp slap he dealt her as a result of her rude speech only reinforced her anger.

“Listen little girl. You need to behave yourself. Nobody touches anyone on coven grounds and fledglings certainly do not attack elders.”

“You're touching me,” she said, pointing out his hypocrisy.

Jon held her in place over his lap, though one of her arms and one of her legs were free. She had been fighting for all she was worth as he spanked her and he had only barely managed to keep a hold of her.

“You're mine to touch. I've explained this before Ivy, we have a strict hierarchy.”

“Fuck your strict hierarchy and fuck you,” she said, mustering a burst of strength and pushing away from him angrily. Her attempt was successful and she landed on the floor. “I don't like you anymore,” she declared.

His eyes were hard. “I don't much care if you like me or not Ivy, you will do as you are told.”

“No I won't.”

“Yes you will. Now get yourself together and let us rejoin the party.”

Ivy spluttered. He couldn't be serious. There was no way she was going out there again to see the sly smiles directed at her. They would all know and Blaze, he would be the most insufferable of all. She wiped her eyes, trying to get control of her emotions. Jon could feel them she was sure and she didn't want him to have an inkling of what she was planning.

“Okay. Is there a bathroom I can clean up in? Or should I just go out there bare assed, would that assuage your embarrassment?”

Ignoring her bitter taunts, Jon escorted her to a nearby bathroom. Fortunately it was empty. With a deep sob of pain Ivy splashed some water on her face and looked at herself in the mirror. She was so out of here. Her ass and thighs ached like hell. There was no way she could face anybody. There was no way she would face Jon again.

She looked around the room for a way out. As she had hoped, a small window gave her the egress she needed. Without a second thought she slipped out the window and into the night.

Chapter Five

“Ivy!” Jon pounded on the door. It had been ten minutes since the little hellion had disappeared into the bathroom and now there was no answer.

“Fuck.” He knew what had happened before he knocked the door down. The wide open window mutely confirmed his suspicions.

“Stupid little hard headed...” he muttered to himself, yanking the tie that had been knotted far too tightly around his neck off in one frustrated motion.

“She ran away? Why?” Lady Madeline's wide brown eyes were filled with concern when she heard the news.

“I thrashed her for the way she behaved towards Blaze.”

“That does not seem to be reason to run away,” Madeline replied, her brows drawing together quizzically. It was not uncommon for fledgling vampires to be physically punished. Jon himself had been the recipient of more than one beating when he was a rebellious young fledgling.

“It is to Ivy. She is completely stubborn. She believes herself outside the law,” he explained tersely.

Madeline cocked her head. Instinctively she seemed to know that there was more to the story. “Does she run away every time you punish her?”

Jon shook his head. “This was the first time I truly...” he stopped speaking as a look of very stern disapproval came into his maker's eyes.

“What have you been doing with her all this time then?”

“Er,” a blush rose under Jon's stubble. He had been doing plenty with Ivy, but it was all in the pursuit of pleasure. He had rather neglected her discipline in favor of the erotic play they both enjoyed.

Comprehension smoothed Madeline's features. “I see. So the first time she feels the full force of your hand it is at a gathering of those she fears.”

“I suppose,” Jon said. His voice sounded sulky in his own ears.

“And having been raised in modern times, she has probably never had such a thing happen to her before,” Madeline surmised. “So you have not only humiliated her in front of the coven, but you have probably hurt and frightened her too.”

“Did you see what she did?” Jon tried to defend his actions. “She nearly started a brawl!”

“Certainly her actions showed ill discipline, but it is not entirely Ivy's fault that she is ill disciplined, is it?”

A raised eyebrow put Jon in mind of his days as a fledgling once more, when Madeline would chastise

him ever so calmly, but in a way that left him in no doubt that he had made a mistake. His broad shoulders dropped as he came to the realization that Madeline was right. This was his fault.

The first place Jon looked for Ivy was the little apartment she had lived in months earlier. When he arrived and managed to trick his way in he found that it had been let out to someone else and aside from a couple of alcohol reeking bodies wrapped up in a sickeningly human tryst, there were no other signs of life in the place. Where else could she be? It was a large city and a large world beyond it and she could be anywhere.

Fear began to grip his heart as he thought of the possibility of losing Ivy. She'd told him that she didn't like him anymore. At the time he'd taken the words merely as words of anger, but perhaps she'd meant them. Maybe she'd never really liked him at all. After all, he had forced himself on her from the beginning, never really giving her a choice.

Sitting in his car, wondering where to look next, he wished that he had been her maker. If he had been her maker he would have felt her anywhere in the world. As it was, he simply had to guess.

"She's feisty."

"Fucking hell Blaze!" Jon slammed his palm against the steering wheel as Blaze's voice came from the back seat. He turned to glare at the pale vampire who was lounging languidly in the back, a crimson smile on his lips. "What are you doing here?"

"Helping you," Blaze said, inspecting his nails with languid indifference. "As usual, you need help."

"Not from you, you've helped enough," Jon growled.

"Oh come now," Blaze tutted. "I have helped you a great deal."

"And how do you figure that?"

"To start with, I allowed you to keep the little wench. Probably a good decision. I would have broken her."

"You *allowed* me to keep her?" Jon's outrage was growing quickly. He understood very well why Ivy wanted to tear Blaze limb from limb. He was outrageously arrogant, one of the old school who believed in taking what he wanted where he found it. Wherever Blaze went, he left a string of broken hearts and broken bodies behind him. "I doubt you would have broken her. She's tougher than you think."

"Oh you think so?" Blaze appeared to ponder that for a moment or two. "Perhaps you're right."

"Get the hell out of here," Jon growled.

"Now it is you who is forgetting his manners," Blaze tutted at him. "Keep a civil tongue in your head, coffee boy."

"Don't push me, Blaze," Jon warned him. He wanted nothing more than to get out of the car, drag

Blaze out and beat him senseless. He knew it wouldn't work out that way though, Blaze might have a deceptively slim frame but he was old and powerful. Jon had learned too many times in the past that a physical altercation with Blaze was a bad idea.

“Oh nobody is pushing you. I'm here to help you and that idiot child. It's pathetic watching you two bumble about. Besides, you know Mommy will be mad if we fight.”

Sighing, Jon rested his head against the steering wheel. Blaze had been made by Madeline before Jon. He had always been a wicked older brother, spending most of his time being nothing but a source of pain and annoyance.

Blaze reached through the space between the seats and affectionately punched Jon's arm. “Time to put that girl on a leash, brother. A taste of leather would sort her out.”

His stupid taunts were quickly getting the best of Jon. “Get.Out,” he snarled.

Blaze sighed dramatically. “Very well. I tried. Perhaps I'll go get myself some coffee.”

“You do that,” Jon said through gritted teeth.

Blaze departed the car with a gracious, but sneering bow and Jon left him on the side of the road as he resumed his search. He searched high and low, but he couldn't so much as feel a trace of her anywhere. At this rate he would never find her again. After driving around the streets for what felt like hours on end, he was driving past the coffee shop when he realized that the light on the machine was on.

Muttering to himself about the general incompetence of the day staff, he parked and made his way into the building. He stopped when he heard a faint sniffing. Ivy.

He found her wrapped up in a ball behind the coffee machine, crying to herself. So that's what Blaze had meant. Coffee. Damn. He should have listened to him.

“Ivy...” He kept his voice gentle as he approached, afraid that she might startle and run again.

She curled up further into the corner behind the counter. “Don't,” she whimpered. “Please... not again.”

His heart almost broke. “It's okay, I'm not going to spank you,” he reassured her, giving her some space.

She lifted her head and he saw her tear stained cheeks.

“Why would you do that to me?”

“I am sorry. I have failed you,” he said seriously.

“What do you mean?” She wiped her eyes and scrambled into a half sitting position, putting her weight largely on the sides of her thighs.

“I mean that tonight should not have been the first night I disciplined you. It should have been a private affair.”

"It shouldn't have been an affair at all," Ivy sniffled self-righteously.

He smiled a sad, sympathetic smile. "I know it is not pleasant, but it is necessary."

"It's necessary to hit me whilst a psychotic crazy preys on the unwary?" Her outrage was palpable.

"Blaze will be dealt with by higher authorities if it is necessary for him to be dealt with at all. It is not your place to attack him in the middle of a dinner party."

"Why? So you don't feel socially awkward? I'm not going to be some quiet little woman who does as she's told. I won't be your little social ornament. I don't care what you say. I don't care what anyone says."

"You are so stubborn," he said, shaking his head at her.

"I will leave," she said. "I won't live this way. I won't be beaten like a dog who peed on the carpet."

"If you wish to leave," he said with a heavy heart, "you are free to do so." The heartbroken look in her eyes told him instantly that was not what she had wanted to hear. "But I don't want you to leave," he continued. "I want you to be mine."

He held out his arms and waited long moments before she crawled over to him and allowed him to draw her frame against him. He loved the way she felt in his arms, small but strong. She buried her head in his chest for a time, breathing him in, then looked up with eyes still stained with tears.

"How can I be yours if you beat me?"

"I will not beat you. I will spank you, but never that way again," he promised.

"If not that way, then what way?"

He smiled down at her and kissed her nose. "It will always hurt, physically, but it was not the physical pain that disturbed you so, was it?"

"I thought you hated me. I was just some embarrassment to you."

"Don't get me wrong, little vampire, your behavior was out of line, wildly so and yes, it caused me some embarrassment, but that was not why I spanked you. It was because you put yourself in danger. Blaze could tear you in two if he so desired and you were on the verge of giving him a reason to do so."

"I hate that guy," she sniffled against his chest.

"He's not all bad," Jon stroked her hair. "He's mostly bad," he corrected himself when she looked up at him askance, "but he's not all bad."

"That's nice of you to say," a refined voice came from the shadows. They both turned to see Blaze lounging effeminately in one of the booths as if he hadn't a care in the world. He had been sitting quite

still, not being noticed until he wished to be seen. It was a talent Jon loathed him for.

“Someone had to make sure she didn't burn herself to a cinder when the sun rose,” Blaze said by way of explanation as they both stared at him askance. “You were far too busy driving around in circles like a chicken with his head cut off. You're both as bad as each other,” he yawned. “As for you, girl, be glad he only slapped your bottom,” he said, looking at Ivy as he stood and stretched. “I'd have used a belt and I wouldn't have stopped for a few tears.”

Jon felt Ivy stiffen in his arms. “Don't,” he warned her.

“You want to test me, little girl?” Blaze grinned, showing his fangs.

Ivy shifted in Jon's arms, using the curve of his strong body as a defense against the powerful vampire who was now threatening her directly. He could sense her weighing her options and hoped that she would make the right choice.

“You're not worth it,” she replied eventually.

Blaze threw back his head and laughed. “Oh for five minutes with you and a decent switch” he declared.

“Easy brother,” Jon warned him. “I might take offense to your continued threats towards my lady.”

He felt Ivy giggle in his arms and smiled slightly.

“You both need a good beating, silly children,” Blaze said with dire condescension. “I shall leave you to your little tryst. Try not to kill each other.”

With that parting shot he went striding confidently out into the night without another look back at either of them.

Staring after him, Ivy shook her head. “I can't work out if he is a bad guy or not.”

“Oh he's a bad guy, but even a bad clock is good twice a day,” Jon said, butchering the analogy.

Ivy giggled again and Jon lowered his head so that his lips were close to her ear as he spoke softly, but firmly. “I'm not going to stop spanking you, Ivy, no more than I'm going to stop guiding you in any other way. You won't like it, but you're not meant to like it. You're a fledgling on the cusp of your powers. What you do now will have lasting effects. You are fortunate it was only Blaze you went for.”

Sighing in Jon's arms, Ivy wondered if she could ever get used to such treatment. Her bottom still hurt and she could remember every thundering slap that had landed against her backside.

“What do you mean it was fortunate it was only Blaze?”

Jon smiled down at her as he stroked her hair, comforting her. “Blaze is harsh and arrogant, but he allowed you to test yourself against him without doing what comes naturally to him.”

“What comes naturally to him?”

“I think you already know,” Jon said, kissing the crown of her head.

Ivy shuddered as she pressed closer to the comforting bulk of his body. It made little sense, to feel so safe in the arms of the one who had caused her so much pain, and who was telling her very bluntly that he would do so again.

“He is mean,” she said softly. “As are you.” She felt Jon's deep rumbling chuckle as it rolled through his chest. “You're both domineering and bossy and arrogant, and...” Her tirade was cut off as Jon's mouth descended and claimed hers in a deep kiss.

“You, little madam,” he said when he saw fit to release her, “are a spoiled brat.” He pressed a finger to her lips as she began to protest. “But that can be fixed. I love you, my little fledgling.”

“I love you too,” Ivy admitted softly.

He smiled and held her close. “Are you ready to go back?”

She wrinkled her nose. “We have to go back tonight?”

Jon smiled. “We are going back tonight.” He was being firm again. Although he smiled at her, Ivy knew she would not be getting her own way.

“But they know, they all know,” she whined.

“You think you're the first vampire to ever be punished? There's not a creature in the place that's not been where you were today.”

“So everybody has wanted to kill Blaze?”

Jon laughed. “Probably, but not what I meant. Discipline is part of our way of life. You need not be embarrassed.”

Ivy buried her head in his chest as he held her close and rubbed her sore bottom, giving her time to come to terms with her new reality.

“Come on,” he urged eventually. “It is time.”

She allowed herself to be drawn up by the hand and together they set off into the night, back to the security of the coven, to a new world for Ivy. She did not know what awaited her, if she would ever be on friendly terms with those Jon called family, but she knew that she was his and by extension, theirs.

Behind them, a wind blew down the mostly deserted high street, dislodging a piece of paper that had been grimly holding onto a crack in the pavement. As the paper tossed about in the wind and rose with a gust of warmth from a grate, the words on it were briefly visible.

Help Wanted.

