

City *of*
PROMISE

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Dawn Prough



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City of Promise

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CHAPTER 1

There are nights I appreciate my life. And there are also nights like this, when the wind howls off the ocean and Gideon isn't the "City of Promise," but a cage of safety. Sounds messed up, but when you can't leave somewhere for fear of your life, it is a cage. That depressing thought spawns another: *Does the caged vampire sing?* I can answer that: not really.

Around my dangling feet, seawater splashed and churned. I could just see the uppermost of the massive hydraulic fans gently rotating under about twenty feet of ocean, but the dark water hid everything else. Normally, it would be utterly black down there, but the maintenance lights were on. Even I need some light to see underwater at night.

Gideon's turbine fans spin in their tunnels below the city, propelled by the ocean's currents. The energy they generate helps run the City of Promise, powering all the necessities for life. Normally, the fans would be damaged by contact with debris, but each fan was wreathed by defensive nets. I'm not sure what they're made of, but the nets protect the fans from biologics and trash. They keep the fans clean, but the nets have to be cleared out and repaired on a regular basis. Tonight, that was my job. Lucky me.

Usually, it's just a matter of cleaning off the barnacles and other sea life that build up, but occasionally you'll find a surprise. While frames hold the nets taut so that creatures can't get wrapped up in them, sometimes a fish or dolphin manages to get entangled. It's considered one of the more emotionally draining jobs to continually clean carcasses out of the webbing, or at least I've heard my human coworkers say so. They talk about how depressed they feel after finding a dead dolphin. I've never felt

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that sentiment, but I don't clean the nets all the time. Or feel a particular emotional connection to dolphins.

Usually, my job is to repair and maintain the pillars that hold Gideon in the center of the Atlantic Ocean. Not dead center, of course—the saying is mostly poetic. We actually sit on the spine of the Atlantic, where the South Atlantic Ridge lies hidden under the waves. Less than two hundred feet beneath us, the mountains reach upward, providing an anchor for Gideon. The area is a seismic nightmare which precluded the possibility of building on the ocean floor. Because of that, Gideon floats despite being made of concrete and metal, and the anchors and pillars serve as moorings to keep the city in place without using power-hungry engines.

For the last two days, GWE had gotten enough call-outs to create staffing problems, and we'd had to juggle duties around so that everything got done. GWE is short for Gideon Water and Energy, called "Gooley" by those with a lack of respect for authority—like anyone employed by them. The bureaucracy governs all the utilities for the city, and employs many of the city's vampires. There are things that would kill a human that don't faze a vampire, so it's a great deal for the city.

For example, there's less chance that they'll have to pay compensation if the injured worker is already dead.

I tipped my head back and sighed heavily as I stared at the stars. I love Gideon, or at least what it represents, but would I be here if I didn't have to be? Here, I'm a free member of society, but I'm trapped by the fear that grips the rest of the world. Only in this city am I safe; everywhere else hunts for my kind. Outside Gideon, I'd be hunted as an animal, but I would be free. Some people are never happy.

"Hey, girl." Malcolm dropped inelegantly into a sitting position on the catwalk next to me, a sandwich in his hand. "You look like you rolled out of the wrong side of the coffin."

I grimaced and sighed at the curly-haired man, not bothering to hide my fond irritation. Malcolm is a nice guy, but he has a really annoying habit of making bad vampire jokes around me. Occasionally, he tells a good one, which I do laugh at. If I really wanted him to stop, I wouldn't laugh at any of them.

"Very funny, Mal," I chuckled weakly. Malcolm is the only

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person at work that I get along with at all. He's not even afraid of me, which is surprising. The founders of Gideon may have declared that vampires were people, but most regular folks don't believe it. I can't blame them. If I were a lamb, I wouldn't want to work with a wolf. "Got a blonde joke? Those are always good."

"Those are only funny when a blonde is around." He grinned, snaking out a hand to flick one of my dark curls. His grin only widened as he bit into his sandwich.

I watched him eat; he comically over-chewed, trying to get a rise out of me. I've told him that I don't find food appealing anymore, and I certainly don't miss it, but he doesn't seem to believe me. Even if I can remember a time I loved ham on white, I want one like a lion wants a bucket of oats.

"So, I saw we're cleaning the nets tonight," Malcolm added after a moment of chewing. "Who'd you piss off? I know it wasn't me—everyone loves me."

"You mean they don't love me, too?" I grinned before giving a serious answer. "Gabe said the day and evening shifts were short-handed, so they didn't get to clean the nets in Tile Thirty-Two or Thirty-Four." The tiles were the building blocks of Gideon; each one could float on its own. The city was built of hundreds of these concrete blocks strung together to stabilize them. Only part of the tile was visible above water; the rest was a long air-filled tube that provided buoyancy. These tiles were formed into two rings surrounding a central core. The Inner Ring and the Core were a mixture of residential and business. Why have another ring and a separate core? The official line is that it provides further stabilization. I'm convinced that the truth is simpler: the Core is for the wealthy, and having a separate ring keeps the riff-raff away. The Outer Ring shielded the city from the ocean and was the platform where most of the "dirty" work of keeping the city going was done. The fans were part of that effort, generating energy to make life easy for the residents. "The good news is that it's only two nets, and once they're clean, we can go."

It wasn't company generosity; once we were done with the nets, there wouldn't be time left to make the dive to a pillar or anchor line before the end of our shift. GWE couldn't legally require me to work once the sun was up so they couldn't make Mal stay either; they'd never hear the end of it if a vampire got a

special privilege that a human didn't.

"Well, then," Malcolm said and stuffed the rest of the sandwich into his mouth. "Leff's go."

I had to laugh at him with his cheeks puffed out like a rodent's as he tried to choke down his sandwich. Top his already round face with the mass of curly hair and he really did look like a squirrel or some other rodent.

"Why does Sarah put up with you?" I asked him as I bounced to my feet with the perfect poise of the dead.

Malcolm grinned, giving me a grotesque view of his partially-mauled dinner, as he answered, "Sfe saifs I make her lauff."

He moved over to the tile's control panel as I followed him, double-checking my dive suit.

"So does a cat with tape on its paws," I grunted, tightening my tool belt. "I still wouldn't want to date one."

Malcolm gulped noisily one last time as he bent over the fan control panel; I could hear his grin as he replied, "Well, I give better—"

"La-la-la!" I sang out as I clamped my hands over my ears. "I don't want to hear what you give better than a cat!"

"I was going to say 'back rubs,' you dirty-minded little girl." Malcolm grinned, but I knew from his evil smirk that wasn't what he was going to say. He glanced down at the panel and his smile faded. "Well, crap."

"What?" I asked as I slid in next to him. He put his arm over my shoulder, making room so that I could see too. The workspace is designed for the heroin chic, with just enough room for the operator between it and the concrete wall. There are no two people on the planet small enough to work at the panel together without violations of personal space and possibly physics. Space here is at a premium, but I don't know how the truly obese members of Gideon society manage all the close quarters.

"The bottom camera is out," Malcolm growled, pointing to the panel. It should have been showing its section of net, but tonight it only showed a blue screen. He glanced at the e-board with tonight's assignments, sighing. "The day crew didn't note it. They probably didn't even check to see what's wrong. Sorry, Misty, you'll have to look and see if it's come undone or if it's broken."

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“Part of the job.” I shrugged and wiggled out from behind the panel. Naturally, it was the worst camera to check, as it rested at the bottom-most point in the net. Fun, fun. I checked my equipment one last time, unused to the lighter weight of this gear. My normal job maintaining the pillars requires pliers, wrenches, and any number of heavy tools.

As Mal prepared to monitor my dive, I pulled the hood up, feeling my stomach tighten. I made sure that my hair was all tucked in before I finished pulling the zipper shut under my chin. Last, I secured the goggles, making sure they were set comfortably and that I could see. It was time for the least pleasant aspect of this job.

“I’m ready. Don’t forget to shut off the fans.”

“Don’t worry,” Malcolm said. “First thing I did. They should be stopped by now.”

I fought the urge to glare at him for being efficient. But it would be upsetting for Malcolm to know just how much this part of my job sucked, so I stepped to the ladder and began the climb down. The temperature of the water was neutral to me. I’ve been told that it’s damn cold this time of year, but I didn’t notice. I could feel that it was colder than usual, but vampires are no longer sensitive to temperature extremes.

The ocean holds another unpleasantness for me, one that I can’t seem to get used to.

I reached the end of the ladder and did one final check to make sure I had all my gear on me. It was a pain to have to swim back up to the top of the pen if I forgot something, and I only wanted to do this one time. Once I was sure I had everything I might need, I stepped off the ladder.

I didn’t let myself hesitate; I might not do it if I tried to psyche myself for it. I just did it. I plunged into the salty water and twisted myself so that I was facing down. With a sharp kick I began to descend, and as I did, I released the residual air in my lungs. The bubbles caressed my exposed face, running along the edge of my goggles before disappearing above me. The sensation and sight pulled up unpleasant memories of fleeing America, trapped in a shark cage under the water with six other vampires. It had been the only way to get smuggled out of America and it was terrible: the fear of being caught by officials while nearly

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starving because of the lack of blood supply. The fish had eaten at us, taking nips of flesh while we were packed so tightly into the cage we couldn't move. Long-term exposure to seawater ruined our tough flesh, loosening and degrading it until it sloughed off. No one in the cage was surprised when one of us lost it; when he started to tear into us, we bent the bars and shoved him out. He disappeared into the infinite depths below us, unable to scream because his lungs and vocal cords were infused with water.

I inhaled water. Even dead, the body remembers that this is wrong. I struggled to remain calm, to let the water in rather than choke it out. That stirred memories, too, even older than the cage under water. Before they were taken, my sires and I had hidden in a sewer treatment plant, in one of the tanks. I'd hated that so much—choking down the filthy water and avoiding any intake pipes that would suck me deeper into the system. We'd emerged only to eat and look for somewhere else safe. There had been nowhere else.

See? It's a wonder I can get into the water at all.

Back to work, I chided myself. *You're in Gideon, you're safe. Get going.* That admonishment got me past the ghosts and moving. With my lungs filled with water, I kicked for the bottom of the net. I'd start there and work up.

The fan blades hung like ghosts in the dark water; the security lights stationed periodically around the nets didn't pierce the darkness so much as accent it. I left my powerful flashlight off. If I didn't see a problem, I didn't have to fix it.

Mentally, I ran down the checklist of things to do. No signs of a barnacle infestation, which was good. Usually, they're more common close to large land-masses but it was still minutely possible for them to travel out here and take up residence. I thought checking was mostly a waste of time and busy-work since Gideon's scientists had devised ways to keep the pests' populations and growth low. I caught flashes of fish moving outside the net—none inside tonight, thankfully. Trying to catch living fish that have snuck through is more annoying than picking their rotting corpses from the nets. It also meant that I didn't have to search for the hole they got in through, the very definition of looking for a task.

So far, so good. The camera was still below me, and I kicked

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downward powerfully, eager to get this done. As I approached the bottom of the net, I saw a shadow floating in the water, backlit by the bottom light. It was large, large enough to be a dolphin. There was no movement beyond the sway of the ocean, and it looked like I had a corpse to clean out after all. But as I got closer, I realized that this wasn't a fish. I snapped on my flashlight to get a better look at it, flooding the water with blindingly bright light.

A woman floated gracefully in the murky water, her head tilted back as if she were watching me approach. That was unlikely; she was clearly dead. I locked eyes with her, surprised by the intimacy of her lifeless gaze. I had to fight to tear my eyes away from her dark ones.

She was in her early twenties, with a delicate, Asian face. She looked like she laughed a lot; there were smile lines around her eyes, and she had lips that seemed inclined to expressions of joy. Her straight, thick hair drifted in a black cloud around her face and body; it looked long enough to reach the middle of her back. She was wearing a cute yellow dress that I wouldn't have worn, and a denim jacket that made me miss my old fringed jacket, bought while I was still alive and lost somewhere in New Orleans after I died. You can take the girl out of the '80s, but the love of denim jackets and hot pink leg warmers is forever.

I can't communicate with Mal verbally; my larynx was filled with water, so I didn't have a communicator on me. GWE doesn't waste resources on unnecessary support for their undead workers, like air tanks or life vests. It makes sense; it's not like I could get into any trouble that would kill me, not unless someone turns on the fans. All I had was the touchpad on my arm; a slender keyboard with a screen that sent messages up to the control panel.

I quickly typed, *Mal, found body.*

His reply was unhelpful. *Fish it out. Do I need to tell u how to do ur job? ;)*

No, I punched into the pad, a human body. Call the police & any1 else who NTK.

There was a long silence. *Don't touch anything. Get out.*

I agreed but I had to give a full report. Yes, I told him but I didn't start up. Instead, I swam underneath the woman, trying to see if she was the reason that the camera wasn't working.

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She wasn't, but the cinder block that was tied to her feet was. It had landed on the camera, busting the casing and half-ripping it free of the support beam that housed it. It would need to be replaced completely, but that would have to wait for her body to be removed.

I began to head up, but a flash of color caught my eye. A pink ribbon was wound around the fingers of her left hand. It was thin and short, and the color didn't match her current outfit. I floated closer, careful not to brush the hand as I stared. It reminded me of a child's hair ribbon, and had I not found it around her fingers I wouldn't have given it another thought. It seemed too important, as if the woman was trying to say something from beyond the grave. But her message eluded me, and I pushed away from her and began to swim to the surface. Strangely, the image of that ribbon remained with me, a delicate touch of beauty in the face of death.

CHAPTER 2

My nights aren't usually this interesting, I thought as I looked down at the woman. She was in a body bag, but I remembered how she looked when they pulled her out. She'd been pale and gray, though she hadn't been in the water long enough to destroy her skin. I knew all about salt water effects on dead skin. Her black hair had hung limp and stringy; her face was dragged down into an empty mask by gravity's pull on her loose muscles. The once-bright yellow dress had been wrinkled and lank against the concrete floor.

I couldn't reconcile that limp creature with the floating angel I had found under the cold waters of the South Atlantic. It made me a little sad, like I'd done her a disservice to find her.

Malcolm had been separated from me by the police when they arrived. I'm sure they were questioning him, and I wondered if his inquisitor was as annoying as mine.

"Misty Sauval?" I turned at the question. A tall man was approaching, his height and medium build emphasized in a good way by his long coat. He would have looked good without the coat, honestly. The word for him was *swarthy*: dark hair, eyes and nut-brown skin all put together in a nice package. The flaw to his appearance was the eyeglasses; no one should have to wear them with all the laser surgery, so they were cosmetic. They looked good on his face, but they made him stand out in a crowd.

"Yeah?" I asked. It was both confirmation and question. My voice was tired and more than a little surly.

"I'm Elias Haase, *Gideon Daily*." The reporter pulled out a recorder. "I'm covering this story—"

My eyebrows rose and I looked around before interrupting. "Really? The cops let you in?"

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He grinned mischievously, a very sexy expression. “Well, *let* isn’t the word I’d use, to be honest.”

I didn’t smile back; I wasn’t in the mood despite my appreciation for flaunting authority. “Nice.” I glanced at the cops milling around. “Hope you wore your running shoes or have a good lawyer.”

“Don’t worry about me,” That cocky grin was still on his handsome face.

“Oh, I don’t,” I assured him, crossing my arms.

“So I understand you found the body?” Elias glanced down at the body bag as if trying to see through the opaque material.

“I shouldn’t talk to you.” My statement was delivered without inflection.

“C’mon.” Elias stepped closer. His voice dropped to a friendly murmur; everything about him implied that we were buddies. “Help a guy out here.”

“Fine.” I turned and pointed the way he’d come. “You can leave through that gate.”

He had a sense of humor; he laughed despite my refusal to help. “Cute. Look I’m just looking for some info here—I don’t even have to name you as the source. Misty, I protect my sources, so the police won’t—”

“Hey!” A voice rang out and I turned to face the newest thorn in my side. I groaned as the tall, thin man with blond hair stormed toward me, his long coat snapping around him like an angry bird. In the last few hours, I had become very familiar with the angular, fey features of the man scowling at me. He was Peter Benoit, Gideon detective and all-around tough guy, in his own mind. I’m sure that’s what he wanted people to think about him. His delicate features were more suited to an artist or a dancer than a cop, and I had no doubt that worked against him in his profession. That’s probably why he was such a jerk. Must be hard to intimidate a perp when he can easily picture you on stage in full *Cats* regalia. “Get away from the body!”

“Yer offica left me here,” I said, my thick New Orleans accent flowing out. I hid a wince; I hate it when others can pinpoint my heritage. I’m Creole, born in New Orleans in the mid-nineteen seventies, and I look it with dusky skin that had confused a lot of people trying to peg my race. It had given me a look that others

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called exotic, as I had the dark complexion with light eyes, but it had given me an annoying accent, too. People hear that sugar-sweet accent and make stupid assumptions. Sixty years is a long time to lose an accent if you really try at it but I hadn't been completely successful. When I get upset or sad or angry, it can creep out. Guess which one I was right now?

Behind Benoit, another man in a suit approached. He was a darker form compared to the blond Benoit, short black hair and cinnamon skin. He was not as tall as Benoit or as handsome but there was something appealing about him. While I'd instinctively disliked Benoit, I instinctively liked his partner, Oliver Criado. He was Latino like the reporter, but where Elias was smokin', Criado was more ordinary. His attraction was largely personality.

I think that Benoit took the sudden accent as a sign of incrimination; his thin face haughtily assumed a dark scowl. Ignoring my statement, he asked, "Getting another look at your handiwork?" Benoit had been hot to pin this death on me since he got here. Without waiting for my reply, he grabbed my arm and dragged me away from the body. I bit back a growl at that, knowing that even if I was justified in taking offense at the handling, it'd only be used against me later.

Elias' eyes were wide as he glanced at me for my reaction. I swallowed, counted to ten and pointed at Elias. "Do you always let reporters on your crime scenes?"

Two sets of eyes snapped to Elias; two expressions of consternation crossed male faces. Elias rolled his eyes and scowled at me. I realized that they'd been so focused on me that they hadn't really seen Elias. "Officer!" Benoit's voice cracked like a whip. A young man standing nearby hustled over. "Get this man off the crime scene."

I smirked as the cop gestured Elias to the exit I'd just pointed out to him. My superior good mood didn't last; Benoit caught my arm and spun me around, marching me away from the dead woman. Criado trailed us, quiet and calm. He was definitely going for the "good cop" vibe in this conversation. The Southern Atlantic wind blew my dark, tightly curled hair wildly around my head, half-covering my face as we staggered to a stop a short distance away. "There're no bite marks on her." I was as calm as I could be while wrestling my wet hair out of my mouth

and eyes. I have some patience for this kind of game, but his constant accusations were irritating. I had accepted his first accusation with grace and his second with patience, but I was running out of both. And I was still wrestling with my accent. "If ya find one, get a warrant for a radius check."

"How about we get one now?" Benoit leaned forward to intimidate me. Immediately, I imagined him dancing and singing about catching mice and bit back a laugh. I doubted that would help me, so I set my jaw and stared up into his fair face with its classic, Franco-aristocratic lines. I made sure to keep my face straight; no point in making things worse. I know my rights; I didn't have to give them a radius check even if they found a bite. I could insist on a warrant, and was within my rights to do so. I'd cut them a lot of slack up until now because I understood that they were freaked out by my presence. The cops don't generally handle us well. We are parasites living off the people they swear to defend. Oil and water, and it showed in all our interactions.

My salvation showed up in the form of Rick Foreman, my case worker.

"How 'bout we... Oh, thank god. Rick!" I waved at him, relief relaxing my hardened expression.

He waddled over, smiling uncertainly at the detectives and me, his coat turned up against the cold wind cutting off the ocean. He was clutching a plastic insulated mug of coffee in his hand and looked miserable. He's the stereotypical mid-level bureaucrat; overworked and underpaid, overweight and poorly dressed. "Hey, Rick," I said, nodding to him. "If you're going to keep your hair that short, you really need a hat in this weather."

"Misty." He mirrored my nod, ignoring the hat comment. His eyes flicked toward the ocean anxiously; he must stick to the central part of the city if seeing the open water was this nerve-racking. Some people become really comfortable with the idea that they lived on a giant, stationary, concrete raft moored to the ocean floor by pillars; some didn't. Or it could be the fact that a dead body was not a twenty feet away from us.

"Rick, this is Detective Peter Benoit. He would *really* like me to be guilty of murder. The other guy is Detective Oliver Criado. I'm not sure about him yet. He seems decent, which is confusing me."

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Criado smirked as Benoit scowled at me; Rick choked on the sip of coffee he was taking. I loved flustering my case worker, and I really needed to amuse myself right now. It's easy since he's so straight-laced; he's always surprised by off-the-wall statements. He's also a good case worker, one of the few who actually cares about his clients. I heard stories from the other vampires about caseworkers who won't do anything to help or worse, actively work against the vampires they're supposed to help. I got lucky with Rick and I know it. As soon as I'd reminded myself of that, it occurred to me belatedly that tonight might not be the night to try to agitate him.

Rick had no doubt dealt with this before; even in Gideon, vampires were easy targets for the cops. It was sad that we were supposed to have all this power—that we were these creatures that were so feared—but we had to have caseworkers to protect us from the authorities of Gideon. Sure, the Unity of Gideon, the governing body, passed laws that gave us protections, but those warm feelings hadn't quite worked their way down through the rank and file. We'd protect ourselves, but most of the elders had been killed in the early days of the Great Hunt, leaving us babies relatively defenseless. Yes, we're still stronger than humans, but there are a lot more of them. We can't really rebuild our numbers, since only the elders are strong enough to create more vampires. We have to survive until some of us reach "breeding-age," which is not as easy as it sounds. A lot can happen to someone over the course of three centuries, which is the minimum age for attempting the creation of "babies." Daffyad advised me not to worry about it before my fifth century, to increase the probability of change. So we have about a century to wait for the oldest members of our race to start reliably turning more vampires. That's a long time and unless there were elders hiding out somewhere, off the grid, we were looking at an uphill battle.

"What's your evidence against my client?" Rick asked in his soft, casual way as he took another sip of his coffee. Apparently, he'd recovered from my big mouth.

"She called in the crime." Benoit's voice was intense as slender fingers rose to tick off his points. "She has access and motive. She—"

"Motive?" Rick broke in, and Benoit's eyes narrowed at

being interrupted. I gleefully took note of his irritation. "What's her motive?"

Benoit was now cornered and everyone knew it. If he said that my motive was that I was a vampire, I had the legal right to press a discrimination suit against the Gideon police force. And I know he didn't have any evidence on me, because I didn't kill this woman. I didn't even know *who* she was. Sure, I found her, but it was just bad luck that it was me. It could have been any one of the GWE divers.

"We're still ascertaining what happened." Criado spoke in a soft voice that suited him well. "Ms. Sauval is a suspect, until we clear her."

"Saying too much would impede the investigation." Benoit's nostrils flared. Oh yes, there was aristocracy in ol' Petey's family tree. It seemed hard to believe that he could be this naturally arrogant as a civil servant in Gideon. I could be wrong, but I didn't think I was.

"Are you arresting my client, then?" Rick asked as he took another sip of coffee. He was outwardly casual and calm, but I could see that nervous tick of his eye that meant he was fighting some extreme reaction. I was personally hoping for righteous fury.

"Not at this point." The words hurt Benoit to say; you could see it in his pretty blue eyes. I'm a sucker for attractive eyes. Normally, I don't like blonds, but Benoit was handsome enough to be an exception, were I interested in dating. Like most vampires, I have zero sexual interest in humans except in unusual circumstances. I could still feel disappointment that with a face like that, he was a bigoted jerk. Why are the pretty ones always the ones we should avoid?

"So is Ms. Sauval free to go then?" Rick pressed.

At Benoit's sharp, reluctant nod, Rick took me by the arm and led me away. I was spared the "don't leave town" cliché, since I *couldn't* leave for my own safety. As we walked, I glanced over and saw they were loading the woman's body onto the stretcher.

As soon as we were out of earshot, Rick sighed, "So, tell me what happened."

I really didn't like his tone, but given the problems that would spring from having a client who was the prime suspect in

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a murder case, I could give him *some* slack. But not much—I'd had a bad night too. As clearly as I could, I told him how I'd found the body. Rick listened with his usual quiet demeanor, nodding occasionally, but he was clearly unnerved.

"This isn't good, Misty." Rick looked tired.

"Really, ya think?" I snapped, my temper giving way finally. "But they're not gonna find anything, Rick, not a damned thing. I didn't have anything to do with this! I don't even know her!"

My voice had risen to a shout, and some of the officers turned to watch me with cold eyes.

"Misty, calm down. Sit." Rick directed me to the far edge of the pool. He knew that I liked to dangle my feet in the water, and that was clearly what he wanted. I complied with his request only because I'd dragged him out of his office and out to the edge of the city, and he was on my side. Other than Mal, still somewhere being questioned, he was probably the only person here on my side. "I need you to stay calm. The last thing the cops need to see is an angry Tick."

I felt my fists clench and I forced them to relax rather than punching Rick. I knew why he'd used the derogatory term; he'd wanted to remind me how the cops were seeing me. I was a Tick, here on the scene when a body hit the ground, and I had access and motive. The motive was a lie and *I* knew that, but until the tests showed no exsanguination, I was their first suspect. I remembered that much from my criminal justice classes so long ago.

"Fine." I gripped the concrete edge of the fan-pool. "I'm calm. Happy as a lark."

"Good." He put a hand on my shoulder. "Now stay here, and stay out of trouble, ok?"

My only answer was a short nod. Rick wandered away to work his magic, and I had nothing to do except watch the dark ocean roll under a star-filled sky and hope that Rick's talk with the cops was successful.

* * *

I hate the police. Don't get me wrong; they're probably great people when at home, around their grills or watching the game. They're probably fine parents, siblings or friends. But I remember the Great Hunt in America during the 2020s, which was led by

the police and the clergy working hand in hand. I remember being chased through the street by the police, being driven to the waiting clergy with their “holy fire” and their wooden stakes. I’d nearly died at the hands of the law; I’ve had to kill police to remain alive. It’s not something easily forgotten. And I’m sure that the GPD has heard those stories.

When I got here, I had to list all my crimes. I was given amnesty, under Gideon’s Necessary Desperation Act, but I’d killed before, and I was sure that the cops had pulled my record when I’d identified myself tonight. As a citizen of Gideon, I was legally obligated to aid them as much as I could, but my skin crawled the entire time. The predator in me knew that I was in trouble, and it wanted me to act, not wait for others to act for me.

“Ma’am?” The voice pulled me out of my reverie and I looked up to see one of the other Detectives, Morrison or something, approaching.

I glanced past him to see Benoit glaring at me. Things must have gone my way, because he was scowling.

“We have your statement, but we would like to know if you have anything further before we send you home.” The man’s eyes wouldn’t focus on me; he kept looking past me, his expression almost perfectly neutral. I say almost because the fear was still apparent in his eyes.

“I guess you discovered she has all her blood, then?” I’d been afraid that she had been drained and dumped, though I probably shouldn’t think of her that way. It made her sound like bad plumbing.

“I can’t discuss particulars of the case with you, ma’am.” The detective’s brown eyes were wary. I could smell dried blood on him, and he had a bandage on his finger. He paled when he saw me glance at it, and his right hand twitched toward his gun. Did he think I was going to eat him right here? “Do you have something to add to your previous statement?”

“No, sir,” I answered, trying to keep the anger out of my voice. I didn’t think I was successful, but the detective just nodded at me.

“If you think of anything else, anything that would help, just let us know.” He extended a card to me with shaking fingers. He should have been worried. Were I hungry and flaunting the

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laws of Gideon, he was too close a temptation to ignore. It'd be too easy to grab him with arms stronger than any he'd ever felt and pull him close, whispering soothing noises to ease his struggles before biting down and claiming his blood for my own.

I let the fantasy go. I liked being free and safe; eating a cop in front of other cops would reverse that. They wouldn't bother with deportation; I'd likely be executed. Vampires are hard to contain, so the policy was deportation or execution. I'd heard that the Unity was filled with "regret" that things couldn't be different. I'm sure they lost sleep over it all the time.

I glanced at the card, as if reading it, but I didn't try to retain the information. The card would be "lost" in the first trashcan that I found, if not sooner—saltwater would destroy it pretty quickly, too.

"Sure," I said and climbed to my feet. The detective backed up, giving me room and getting out of my reach. "Can I go back to work?"

"Eh, sure, but not on this net," he said, waving at the water below us. "No one will be given access to this tank until we're done with our investigations."

* * *

We moved to the nets in Tile Thirty-Four and found Gabe waiting. My boss is a heavy man, mostly from the tire around his gut. Another victim of the sedentary bureaucratic lifestyle, Gabe was also losing his brown hair. Mal called him when we found the body; for a moment I thought he was going to tell us to fish it out of the pen and dump it into the ocean. As the general manager of the third shift of GWE, he was responsible for things happening on the shift, good and bad. Having one of the fans tied up in an investigation would generate a *lot* of paperwork and a lot of heat from above to get the fan operational again. Meanwhile, the police would do their thing on their own schedule and Gabe was likely to be caught in the middle.

"So what's going on over there?" he asked us, his large form blocking access to the control panel.

"You can ask the cops," Malcolm snapped. "They weren't exactly forthcoming with us. Maybe you'd have more luck."

"No, I mean about the fan." As Malcolm scowled, Gabe focused on me. "Misty, what could you see down there? How did

the fan look? Any thoughts on when we could have it operational again?”

I shrugged. “Gabe, I don’t work the fans, normally. I have no idea. Get someone down there who’s had more than the basic training. All I can say is you’ll need to completely replace the camera.”

Gabe sighed. “All right, sorry.” If you gave Gabe any lip or attitude, he immediately backed down and apologized. It meant he wasn’t a good manager from the upper echelon’s point of view, but he was great to work for most of the time. I’d heard stories about how he was always being bowled over by other GWE employees. I tried not to push him too much; I didn’t want to break him before I really needed to.

“Well, I’ll go over there and wait for them to clear out, I guess.” He stepped away only to pause and look back. “Misty, be careful, all right?”

I stared at him, confused. “Uh, sure. Yeah. Careful.” I watched him nod and leave before I turned to Malcolm. “Was it just me, or was that weird?” All I got in response was a grunt from my normally talkative coworker. It must have been “Everyone Act Weird Night” and I missed the memo.

Work was blessedly normal compared to the last tile. I did my dive and cleaned the nets, fishing out three small sardines and then patching the hole they’d used to enter. Throughout, Malcolm remained quiet and subdued. Around the end of the shift, I couldn’t take the prolonged silence anymore. We were in the finishing steps; Malcolm was updating the maintenance logs and I was cleaning and stowing the equipment. “What’s up? You’ve been awfully quiet. I’m a little worried that the cops confiscated your tongue for crimes against humanity.” I grinned.

He didn’t take my bait. “I’m not used to finding bodies,” he said in a hushed tone. “I keep thinking about her, wondering who she was, who’s at home waiting for her. I think about her and wonder—what if that were Sarah? What would I do if I waited forever for her to come home, and they found her at the bottom of the nets?”

I blinked at him. I hadn’t given her another thought, really; my concern had been for my own safety, since the police seemed to want to pin this one on me. The woman was just a body—I

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had seen and caused a number of them in my days in America. I hadn't stopped to think that she was a person who had a family or loved ones. To be honest, I'd learned not to think that way pretty quickly. When you feed off a creature, you do what you must to separate dinner from being. Humans buy meat pre-packaged and never think about the animal it comes from. Most of them don't talk to their food source, smell it and live with it. I have to face my prey every night, look into its knowing eyes and acknowledge to myself that I am their monster. Am I proud of that? Not particularly, but it wasn't a matter for pride. It was a matter of survival.

But I would feel outrage if Sarah had been down there. She wasn't a human I would feed off of, even if the laws allowed me to feed. Most humans I didn't feel anything for; they were food. But I cared about Malcolm; he'd been the first person at GWE to treat me with any respect. And since I liked Mal, I wouldn't hurt Sarah, and wouldn't be real happy about others hurting her either. It was a double standard, and I supposed that should bother me, but it didn't, not really. Sarah and Mal were mine to protect and my vampire family was long dead; no other humans or vampires mattered to me.

But Mal still looked at me with haunted eyes. I tried to console him. "Malcolm, it wasn't Sarah. Don't go borrowing trouble."

"Trouble?" he asked, frowning. "A woman is dead, and that's just trouble?"

"I meant," I said, trying to pick my words carefully, "that she's not Sarah, and you don't need to worry about it. Sarah is fine. You didn't know that woman, did you?"

"It didn't matter whether I knew her." Mal's pleading gaze shifted to anger. "You don't care," he spat. "A woman is dead and you just don't care!"

"I don't know her," I answered, confused and feeling the first stirrings of my own anger. What was the big deal? She was no one to me, and as far as I knew, no one to Mal. "What is there to care about? If it had been Sarah, I'd be risking imprisonment or worse to find out who had hurt her."

Mal stared angrily at me. I wasn't sure what I'd done to deserve his anger, but I was starting to get pissed. His next

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statement didn't help. "Maybe all those people who say you guys are just monsters are right. Maybe you guys shouldn't be allowed to live and work here."

I restrained my temper—barely. "You're upset," I said carefully, emphasizing each word. "I can see that. I may not understand why you feel pain for a woman you don't know, but that does not make me a monster. I have no one to put her face to, like you do. So *back off*, Malcolm." The last was little more than a growl. I didn't want to growl or talk. I wouldn't eat Malcolm, but that didn't stop the instinct that demanded he recognize me as his possible killer. I wanted to grab him, slam him to the ground and demand his respect. I also wanted him to stop looking at me like that, to go back to just being my friend. The two desires warred and I think it showed.

His face was pale as I restrained my violent urge to dominate him. This was the sort of scenario that made me wonder if we had any business trying to live with humans at all. They didn't understand us or our drives and in their arrogance demanded that we conform to their values. They found us to be bestial. Maybe they were right. "Misty," he started, but I waved him off.

"Not right now, Mal. I'm not in the mood for a fight."

I hurried away, eager to put some space between us. When I heard him call my name again, I took a shortcut.

The pool was roughly hexagonal with a catwalk that ran across it. I didn't go around the pool; instead I jumped over the water to land on the catwalk. As Mal cursed and started to cross the outside of the pool, I leapt again and landed by the exit. Well before my human friend was a quarter of the way around the pool, I was gone.

CHAPTER 3

I avoided Mal by hiding in the girls' room. I needed to go there anyway, to change clothes. The dive suit protected me from salt water, but it was still good to take a quick rinse. While it helped my hair and skin, it did nothing for my anger. I was still fuming when I stepped out of the shower, all the seawater off my body and down the drain. The hour was a little late; most other people were already done with their shifts. So I was alone in the room. I took advantage of the privacy to let myself act out, throwing things and disregarding their structural integrity. It was only after I nearly ripped buttons off my shirt that I forced myself to calm down.

I exited the shower room in my street clothes. People sometimes expect something glamorous, but I usually wear jeans, simple shirts and ankle boots. Most of them resemble '80s fashions, but I don't actively seek replicas. I like what I like, and what I like happens to be what was popular when I was alive.

There were two options for getting home: the public transport system or my own feet. Taking the suspended cable trolley that ran over the Inner Sea of Gideon would be faster, but I felt like a walk. Keeping an eye out for ambushing Mals, I passed by the elevated trolley station and headed for Curie Bridge that ran between the Outer Ring and the Inner Ring. The bridge served to keep the outer ring of tiles the proper distance from the Inner Ring, but a covered walkway was built on top of it. As with everything in the city, it served two purposes because of the space constraints.

Behind me, someone yelled my name. I tensed and looked back, frowning when I saw the man running toward me. His name was Basil, the Russian kind of Basil. It had been no surprise

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to learn that he was part of the Russian Mafia. Unlike some of the other organized crime syndicates, the *Volga bratva* wasn't a splinter from the main gang. They were full members of the mother gang, and worked in concert with her.

I knew all this because he'd told me, with no small amount of pride. And he'd told me because they really wanted to recruit me. Russia had a particularly bad history with vampires. I mean, all countries besides Gideon had bad reactions, but the stories coming out of Russia were particularly hair-raising. They had a lot of myths about ways to kill vampires, but not all of them worked. They were all painful, from what I'd heard. They didn't just kill us, they tortured us. As a result, vampires harbored a profound unfriendliness toward that nation.

That had left the *Volga bratva* in an awkward position. Most of the other crime syndicates were recruiting vampires, but because of the way we were treated in their homeland, we didn't want much to do with them. So they were always creeping around, trying to find someone willing to join up. Or someone desperate enough. For some reason, they thought I was willing or desperate. "No," I said before his mouth was open.

"Misty, I wait for you by the trolley," he said in his accented English, following me onto the bridge.

"And I've told you," I said sharply, "I'm not interested."

"I didn't even know this bridge was...walkable. To be walked on," he said. I eyed him, wondering again who had given them my name. He was not a light man: not fat, but built solidly. Sandy blond hair and beard whipped around his face as he smiled at me. "Did you know?"

"Yes, Basil, since I'm walking here," I shot back, scowling. It didn't faze him.

"I would think to take the trolley," he said, and looked down. I saw him pale as he saw open water under us. I looked down too, noting the water for the first time. "I do not like to come to the Outer Ring," Basil said, his voice a little shaky.

I wondered what he'd think of going all the way out to the edge of the ring. I'd gone there once, because I'd heard it was something to see. The outer edges of these tiles were long slopes, which dispersed the force of the currents that would otherwise tear Gideon apart. It looked like giant hundred foot

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long slip-n-slides all the way down into the ocean. They didn't appear strong enough to withstand waves, much less storms, and they weren't; nothing on Earth was. But they did divert most of the force of the storms. The ocean even ran up the top of the long slope, making waves that mimicked a real beach. So the designers of the city designated some of the areas public beaches and let the citizens enjoy them, though there were complaints it wasn't the same without sand. It was one more example of Gideon's duality: just when you thought this place was all sterile functionality, people managed to find some creature comforts. Of course, some things were lost on people, especially people like Rick and Basil. Living on a chunk of floating concrete can really mess with humans, and I wonder about the kind of humans who think that building a floating island is not only a good idea, but build it and move their families out there.

But I have to admit, the scientists who built this place did it well. I'd heard about some bad storms that came through about forty years ago and did some real damage, but that was before construction finished. In the thirty years I'd been here, there had never been a major catastrophe as a result of the weather or the ocean. There had been some man-made disasters, and not all accidents; there are some unscrupulous people with power who don't like scientists running around unchecked. Despite them, Gideon is still around.

"Then don't come," I offered as sage advice after realizing I hadn't said anything. I probably shouldn't say anything, but some habits die hard. He was still there, moving slower and gripping the railing. I didn't change my pace; maybe I could leave him behind.

Normally, the long walk back to the Inner Ring would have allowed me to calm down and start to think again. With Basil tagging along, it didn't do much. He kept trying to talk to me, somehow keeping up despite his nervousness. I tuned him out, trying to think—specifically, about why Mal was so upset. I thought back to my humanity, but the old emotions aren't there anymore. I had been fundamentally changed by my turning. I could conceptualize the fact that it bothered Mal to find the woman, because it made him consider losing Sarah. He was able to empathize with someone he didn't know, and I couldn't. It was

part of the problem with human-vampire relationships.

It had hurt when Mal called me a monster. I was a monster, but Mal had never treated me like one before. He'd been the first person I'd called friend since dying and I'd gotten used to that. For him to see me as something else made me sad and angry, like I'd lost something I didn't know was there. It had been a long time since someone was in a position to hurt me like that. Not since my sires had been burned in New Orleans had I allowed someone so close.

The problem was that I liked him, and I liked him enough that I didn't want him mad at me. I had been honest about the woman and what she meant to me: nothing. Grunting, I decided I'd just apologize next time I saw Malcolm. Not about the woman; I'd upset him, and that's what the apology would be for. He was my friend, and if that helped him feel better, I could do that.

The steel bridge, encrusted with salt and rust, melded into concrete walkways as I reached the ring. Behind me, Basil was still talking, his voice becoming much more even now that we were back on "dry land." I turned to him, causing his words to trail off suddenly. "Basil, I don't care. In fact, I don't care enough that I have no idea what you've said for the last twenty minutes. I haven't paid attention." His smile didn't fade but it became hard and brittle; I'd angered him.

"Someday, you will care, Misty," he told me, and I felt a shiver of unease. There was something true and sincere in his words, as if he would make sure that I would care. "Here," he said, handing me a small wand. "Take it." Unnerved, I did. The moment it was in my hand, I knew what it was: a phone jacker. If you plugged it into your phone, it would do all sorts of neat things, like auto-dial a number, scramble calls or even fry your SIM card. "If you need me, just use this. Good morning, Misty." He nodded and turned, walking off.

I watched him leave, puzzled. I wasn't sure what to make of his statement, but I realized that I couldn't delay much longer. Dawn was on its way, and I needed to go shopping. A glance at the watch told me I had less time than I had thought, and I broke into a run.

The Inner Ring is mostly mixed residential and commercial; stores were usually on the first few floors with the levels

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above that being living spaces. In this section, the sidewalks were filled with people just starting their day. Most of the store fronts were still dark; they'd open in the mid-morning. A few restaurants were open, serving breakfast and coffee to sleepy humans. Green areas bordered the buildings, offering flowers and decorative plants for the eyes, though the pre-dawn gloom hid most of their glory. My feet thudded repetitively on pale, almost white, concrete, a shell covering the ferroconcrete. Everything here was kept clean and bright with great effort, alive and thriving to keep the humans living here happy.

But when I crossed over onto the next tile, the change was distinct. It was another world on the other side of that thick line of black padding between the tiles. This tile was for the dead.

Gideon tried to keep humans from forming culturally or racially segregated communities, but they didn't try so hard with us. The Bunkers, the less-than-fond name many had for the style of building designed for us, offered apartments to the humans, too. But the Bunkers were concrete boxes—no windows or exterior designs, and most humans found them too depressing. Some gardens might have helped, but we didn't merit that kind of decoration. Trash was more prevalent, as well as a fine layer of gritty sea salt that bleached the color out of everything. It was unavoidable in Gideon, but the street crews took more effort to keep other tiles clean.

The stores here were fewer but they catered to us: blood shops were the most common. It was one of these stores I hurried toward now, Brad's Blood Bank, or just Brad's to the regulars. Brad was a certified blood dealer, and while he wasn't the closest one to my house, I trusted him. He'd never watered down his stock with animal blood, which we don't synthesize very well, and I'd never caught him trying to cheat me out of blood credits.

He was about to lock his door when I planted my palm on the glass and shoved it open. "You're cutting it close, Misty," Brad remarked, but he stepped back and let me in. Like anyone in the blood business, he was good at not arguing when a vampire showed up in a hurry looking for food.

The shop was small, just a counter and a fridge, and room for a couple of people to stand in front. A secured steel door behind the counter guarded a massive walk-in cooler, filled with

blood. The fridge only held a few bags of each blood type, a blood store's equivalent to convenience store signs declaring, "The cashier only has \$100 in his drawer."

The black market for blood, called the Crimson Market by those who thought they were clever, was populated by vampires who didn't play by Gideon's rules. There were a few individuals who didn't like to be on the books, and they needed to eat, too. Collecting illegal blood sometimes meant stealing it and sometimes meant someone died. Because of the danger of someone stealing legally-distributed blood, none of the blood stores could keep access to the blood open constantly, as a deterrent against theft. Instead, the coolers were only opened when a city Blood Administration Representative was there with a heavily guarded delivery.

Brad circled around the counter while I hunted in my bag for my ration card; he was already digging my preferred type from the fridge before I had it out. "How many?" he inquired, as he punched some numbers into his computer and started the purchase.

"Just one." I handed him the card as he shook his head and dropped the bag of cold blood on the polished steel counter.

"If you bought more than a day ahead," he advised as he swiped my card, "then you wouldn't have to stop here every day."

"I like it fresh," I muttered, even knowing he was right. I peered at the draw date. "Is this the freshest you have in O-negative?" Meanwhile, the view screen flashed a confirmation, verifying that I had enough credits to last the rest of the month. Nodding to myself, I entered my pin number and glanced at the clock, waiting for the transaction to be completed. Brad was right; I *had* cut it close, and it only took one worried look over my shoulder at the slowly brightening sky to confirm that. I should have taken the trolley over; the investigation and my angry shower had taken more time than I had thought.

"Yes, it is the freshest I have," Brad said shortly. He logged the receipt into my account without asking for the numbers, a true sign that I was a regular customer. "Get out of here. Go home."

"Night!" I called as I grabbed tomorrow's dinner and hustled

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out the door, stuffing the bag into the backpack I preferred over a purse.

“You mean, morning, Misty!” he shouted after me. I barely heard him over the door closing and the pounding of my own feet as I dashed for home, but his words were further fuel for me.

A few people I passed stared at the young, dark-skinned woman running flat out in boots, but the smarter ones knew what was going on, and they got out of my way. I was almost to my block when the wind shifted, bringing the aroma of fresh blood.

That stopped me in my tracks as my nostrils flared to catch more of the scent. I’d heard scientists compare a vampire’s ability to smell blood to the shark’s same ability. Unlike a shark, we need more than a drop; it has to be a significant amount, more than a cup, and relatively fresh. We have similar ranges though; I can recognize blood in the air miles from the source.

This blood was so fresh I could almost sense the heat and wet that went with it. I knew I should ignore it. But I didn’t want to. I wanted to follow the blood to the source and drink it down.

A vampire enjoys feeding. A lot of people will tell you it’s a sex thing. They’re either blood-sticks—people who willingly donate to vampires—or vampires using a line to get a meal. Some people get off on being bitten and fed from; I try not to judge. Some vampires find feeding a suitable replacement for the intimacy of sex. For me, it’s not a sex thing, it’s an all-thing. Blood is everything; it’s the first day of spring, the first bite of a good meal—anything that revitalizes and refreshes you feels like blood.

It’s illegal for a vampire to drink from a human donor, even indirectly. Gideon saw a lot of over-feedings in the first few years after they opened their borders to vampires, so they initiated a system where donors were paid to donate blood for vampires, and vampires worked for wages and a blood allowance. The system was boring for the vampires, but it stopped the accidental over-feeding. The punishment was deportation to your country of origin, straight into the hands of whatever authority had been charged to deal with the “vampire problem.” America still hunted vampires. That was ordinarily incentive enough to keep me out of trouble.

I knew that I should go home. But my feet turned toward

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the source and my legs moved faster. I followed it relentlessly; by the strength of the smell, it was nearby. Hunger for hot, fresh food propelled me forward; the instinctive need to get there before other vampires drove me faster. My frenzied brain remembered the rising sun, but only to decide that it meant other vampires were less likely to find the food.

Stepping into an alley, I spotted a ribbon of blood on the pale concrete wall of a Bunker, the ruby liquid dripping down the wall. I looked up, and saw a ledge thirty feet above me. Mouth watering, I scanned the side of the building, but it was a Bunker, and I didn't see a good way up. Buildings that house vampires don't have exterior fire escapes or windows, though most of the buildings do have faux windows, and empty ledges sticking out in a pointless imitation of human housing.

Leaping as high as I could, I grasped one of the fake window sills. My fingers found a purchase that a human's couldn't, forcing a grip through stubbornness and strength. I pushed myself up with my feet, scrabbling up the side of the building. I couldn't really find permanent traction, but the cumulative efforts created forward progress. I managed to get a foot up on the ledge with one hand locked around the fake window frame, and I kicked upward again, catching the next sill. I was rewarded with a gust of wind, bringing another mouth-watering scent.

I pulled and pushed harder, doing feats a human would have been hard pressed to repeat. When I reached the blood trail on the wall, I was compelled to stop, one thought in my head: *blood!* I licked at the dripping fluid with a hungry whimper. The liquid was cold, and I could taste the concrete underneath it, but nothing mattered as I savored fresh blood again. I groaned with pleasure; it had been decades since I'd had it this fresh—it was better than my memories of my mother's gumbo. My instincts coaxed me to forget everything else, save that garnet path glittering inches from my nose. And I answered that call, climbing and licking, feeling the pure *life* in the blood.

My eyes reached the ledge and I saw red-coated fingers just inches from my face. The fingers were dry, but I could smell fresher blood. A tremble shot through my body, and I almost lost my grip on the wall. I had enough self-preservation to finish my climb and pull myself over the edge.

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The source of my free drink was an injured man, lying on his stomach and bleeding from numerous cuts. He was Asian, at least in part, with an unruly haircut and a lean frame. Said frame was clearly visible as he didn't have a shirt on; given the profusion of cuts on his body, it may have been shredded. Thick jeans had offered his legs more protection. The only blood on them was what had rolled down his skin from cuts on his torso. Bruises danced over his angular face, which seemed to be set in a permanent frown.

I bent over him and in that moment, I was lost to instinct. His shoulder wound was still seeping blood, and I bent my head down, my lips trembling with desire for that crimson stream. Perhaps I brushed his skin; perhaps I exhaled a sigh of mad desire, sending a gust of cool air over his body. His visible eye fluttered open, dark and compelling.

"Help me," he whispered, his voice tense and shaky. "Please, help me."