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## Unbound

To say my head hurts is an understatement. To say I wish my vision were black instead of gray would be closer to right. If my vision was black, I would still be unconscious. But I'm not. I'm alive and awake and wishing that my head belonged to someone else. The taste of cotton on your tongue after a long night is a symptom of the fun you had. For me, it channels the stale air straight into my pallet.

I can feel the muggy air around me and I can hear the shuffling feet in front of me. But I won't open my eyes all that way. I don't need to. The sour stench of death floats through the air and invades my nostrils. It smells of something in between the decay of old meat and the wretched sweetness of the yellow sponge cake snack. The one that has cream filling. Somewhere between those two smells sits the morbid stench that's continually puffed into my face.

A moist spot on my cheek forms each time the person on my right breaths. I can tell from the measured tempo of his breathing that he's timing me. He's wondering and waiting for me. I can quietly wait here and secretly gather my strength if I want to. I can let the jackals around me starve from the lack of emotion I project from myself. Then a scent I know as well as my own hits me.

It's not Her... No, it's Tessa:

Shame wars with disappointment and longing in my veins. I'm supposed to be controlling my emotions. I can't give them anything to feed on. The door opens and quickly closes. I lift my head at the sound of shuffling steps. My reaction to Tessa was noticed, I don't need to open my eyes to know that much. Why did it have to be Tessa? Why couldn't it be?

Her.

If it were Her, I'd have the strength to break these chains and destroy anyone in my path. How do I know Tessa isn't Her? I know... I just know. But why here? Why now? The darkness above me robs me of strength. My passion and anger bolsters their own power. The pounding in my head rages against my temples. I open my eyes and a muted yellow room appears before me.

One vampire is at my right. He's so close that I can taste the sweat on his lower lip. I shiver from my core at the salty and musky taste. It's a light pleasantry compared to the decay on his breath. Two more are crouched in the corner. They are looking over the smoldering remains of one of their brothers, curled against the wall. Another is on my far left, twirling my revolvers like a western gunslinger. The last is directly in front of me. He's holding Tessa like they are old lovers. Perhaps they would be, if not for the long black painted nails threatening to scratch her skin from her bones. A sharp hiss from my right brings all attention my way, but my eyes are reserved for...

Tessa.

"Finally awake I see," the lover with the long nails smiles as he moves Tessa to the side.

The others close around him but manage to keep their distance. All of them except for the mouth-breathing jackal on my right, he moves closer but still doesn't touch me.

"I was getting hungry," the lover moves Tessa's hair to the side and exposes her neck.

Her catatonic stare is unnerving. Her eyes beg me to help her, to get him off of her. He touches hair that I washed every day and I brushed every night. Hair that I made sure smelled of roses. It looks like silk in his pale hands. Her eyes plead with me just like the night I saved her life.

"I love tender flesh," the lover licks his lips.

They feast on my rage as I struggle to break my bonds. The hisser lets out another low warbling tune. It travels through my ears and rattles around in my head. The lover strokes Tessa's chin with his long black nails. He defiles her soft skin with his touch, with his eyes, with his essence.

"I love it more than anything in this world," he continues as rage pours through me.

It's like a drug to these greater vampires. They feed on blood, but they can feed on strong emotions too. Some even feed on the soul itself. The lover's touch is soft and gentle and mocking. They siphon my rage and Tessa's fear with each breath. Tessa won't fight him, she can't. She's looking at her life through a mirror right now. The beasts around her know this and stoke the fires of her terror.

"What are you?" The lover wonders as he steps behind Tessa.

He wraps his arms around her waist and nuzzles her neck. His words flow through her. The rest of his companions watch me. The two in the corner shoot me death stares as they look up from their smoldering friend. The one with my revolvers stops for a moment then returns to his tricks again. A wet and sticky drop of saliva from the hisser touches me and I fight to keep from heaving.

"I think I know," the lover smiles and slithers around Tessa again.

The lover's grace and predatory motion as he glides around Tessa make me wonder if the hisser is simply the cobra and the lover is an anaconda.

"You're not one of the Fallen, that's evident," the lover acknowledges my feathered wings. "But you're not one of the Divine either. So I don't know exactly what you are."

"I am unique," I reply with a voice of broken glass and malice. The lover's teeth are dangerously close to Tessa's vein and he stops only when he hears my voice. "I am protected," I give them a wide-toothed smile and revel in the smoldering corpse in the corner. "You cannot feed on my blood, because I stand apart."

"That tells me nothing," the lover nods and the two from the corner approach slowly.

The hisser smiles as his friends approach. The putrid smell from his throat slams into my face as he grabs the top of my head and my chin. The hisser tilts my head backward and another covers my nose with his undead hands.

"There's an idea I want to try," the lover smiles. "But you might not like it."

The vampire from the corner steps closer. The lover kisses Tessa on the cheek. The approaching vampire takes a long black nail and slices it across his own wrist. The thick viscous liquid oozes out dark purple and trails down his arm as he stands over me. It drips off his elbow and into my open mouth. The team of vampires fights to hold me in my bounds. The blood sears my tongue the moment it touches me. The struggle to lock my jaw open is fruitless. The vampires force my mouth closed and I swallow the liquid decay.

My mouth opens again but no scream escapes my lips. The pain that courses through my body has defied my ability to release. Even a shriek is too articulate. Fingers of fire crawl and

claw their way across my chest. They rip through my blood and boil the iron within. Decay races through my body, trying to consume every part of me that used to be whole. Death appears before me as blackness races through my body and leeches into my lungs.

He looms above me and pulls at my soul through the portal of blood and decay in my veins. I see Death, but now I feel Her too. I've searched for so long, but until today I couldn't feel Her. I KNOW she exists now. She's my last thought as the hisser tilts my head back again.

"Just like I thought," the lover laughs as he traces the lines of Tessa's hips.

The hisser and his friends feed me another serving of vampire blood. My skin threatens to shred from the bone. It wants to escape this prison of decay and death. The smells and sounds of vampires have faded into distant memory. My entire body is consumed by fire made from the black blood.

I finally open my eyes and wonder why I'm not dead. Something is at war with the fire racing in my blood and the entropy force fed to me. A dizzying burst of power builds in my chest. The vampires can't feel it. Their eyes speak other their obliviousness. They continue drinking in my agony like a drug. They gorge themselves on my anguish and grow fat with the feast.

"We will defile and destroy you. The Gates will be forever closed to you," the lover laughs while his hands crawl over Tessa again.

He licks along Tessa's neck and up her cheek.

It happens in an instant.

One moment, I'm writhing in agony and on the precipice of demise. The next, I explode from my restraints and land on the chest of the lover. His graceful dance around Tessa separated him enough for me to drive into him. We go flying across the room. When we land, my teeth are in the soft flesh of his neck. Perched on top of his lithe frame, I look like a lion that has just taken a gazelle. His helpless eyes plead dark prayers to me. I tear my mouth from his neck and his windpipe comes with me. Vampire blood pours into my throat again, but this time there is no agony, only the peace of rage.

The others stand in muted shock. Bloodlust races through my heart gets trapped somewhere in my eyes. A pale blue glow rims my face in light and changes the dingy yellow room. I cry with a loud voice, like when a lion roars. And when I cry, seven thunders utter their voices. The room disappears in a brilliant blue flash of light and my Descended war cry.

"Who are you?" A voice shatters my illusion of never-ending dawn.

The smoldering corpse in the corner and the throat-less lover are all that remain of these Great vampire scavengers. My dance with death is over. But now Tessa is on the far side of the room. She watches at me with the same terror-filled eyes that I saw so many nights ago.

This could be a sweet dream or a beautiful nightmare.