

Chapter 30

Things moved along fabulously. My deal with Gwen carried on, without her trying anything now that she was a little afraid of me. Keir respected me more, for I could beat him at his own game. The slaves practically idolized me, which wasn't so great but it worked for my purposes. And Bram... Well, Bram did see the changes in me and didn't particularly like them. He tried to deal with them in his own quiet way, as he had after our trip. He knew I still had a propensity to kill that I fought every day. He had hundreds of years to control his and still had trouble, so he left me to my own devices.

Kama I thought would be livid after her lecture about being myself, but wasn't. When I asked her about it, I expected to be disciplined especially since she kept bending her riding crop. I cringed when she finally spoke.

"Things have changed; you're a vampire now. Even you must change with the times. This is who you are now. At least you are doing these things for yourself and not to make others happy, that was my main point."

"And what do you want of me?" I stood far from her, examining her. She looked extraordinary even for her in the evening gown she wore. The silver sequins brought out her emerald eyes. I wondered just what her plans were for the evening as I didn't believe she was prepared for my arrival.

"I have a date with Kenneth," she replied to my non-vocal question. Her smile radiated when she thought of him.

She, in return, scrutinized me. I knew I looked like crap in her eyes with my crumpled T-shirt and jeans. I diverted her back to why I was there so I wouldn't have to listen to her judgment of my attire. "Everyone seems to have their own plans for me. You must too."

"Like most other people, my main wish is to survive. You seem my best chance at it." She sipped her wine and fiddled with her riding crop. She thought as if this were an important decision in her life. "If Keir gains control, he'll no doubt have no use for me. The King keeps me for reasons only he knows, but I fear that will end if you lose against him. If Heremon and his lackeys get their way, you know life would not be good for me."

"And if I simply was not here, as if I've never been here?"

"You can not go back in time so there is no 'as if you've never been here.' You've affected many people here like a rock skipping across a lake, many disturbed fish." I became transfixed upon her riding crop going in circles like the rings on the water.

"Wow, don't go all Zen-like on me, Mistress."

"You are well aware that any action you take has consequences. Will running away solve anything?" She was practically clairvoyant sometimes. Then again was it really that hard to guess given my past history? "Only you can answer that. You've made enemies that will follow you anywhere you go. What can I tell you that you don't already know?"

"I can't become Queen." No longer afraid she'd reprimand me I lowered myself into the seat across from her. She straightened at this and I knew I'd made a mistake. I've become too comfortable with her.

"Kneel." She pointed her crop to the floor in front of her. Without questioning her I slid down onto my knees placing my hands behind me waiting for punishment. "What is a Queen?" I felt the crop upon my shoulder and knew if I replied wrong at any time it would sting my cheek.

"A leader of people who is responsible for their safety and welfare."

"And what have you done these last six years?" I wanted to say "nothing" but I felt the black leather stick pressing into my shoulder and figured she wouldn't like that answer.

"People have followed, but I wouldn't say I've led them well." The flat flap smacked my face lightly. At least she wasn't overly displeased with my answer.

“Have you not looked out for others?”

“Not on purpose,” I corrected myself before the crop lifted off my shoulder again. “I mean, yeah, I’ve tried to help the slaves. I want what’s good for them. It seems like I just make things worse at times.”

“You haven’t. And you may fight it all you like, but you’ve already established yourself as a Queen. If you don’t hold the title, then that is your own doing. You can not hide from it forever.” I bowed my head. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t believe I was worthy of the praise, but if I said one word against it, no doubt she’d be upset. I had to accept it.

“Yes, Mistress.”

“Better,” she said, and the crop slipped away. “Do as you feel is right, but don’t think we’ve put this on you randomly. You have proven yourself worthy and you will do fine.” I bit my lip to keep from putting myself down again.

“I hope to live up to your expectations.”

“See that you do.” She smacked the top of my head with the crop and smiled wickedly.

Her disappointment she’d have in me couldn’t compare to hers in Kenneth. Watching certain halls turned out to be more exciting than others. On this particular watch I knew the building we used as a cover was not too far away. It was the most known route to the slaves and perhaps the hardest to guard as it was the most traveled path. Some were allowed while others were not. Some doors were open some days and on others the path was different. Knowing which way a person would come was almost entirely up to Jaques. Today a couple of slaves had taken up camp not too far away, also not an unfamiliar sight, as some found privacy in different ways. I scanned them every now and then to check their intentions but otherwise left them alone. I hardly even noticed when Kenneth approached them with a full plate of food. Had I not smelled the well-marinated steak I probably wouldn’t have paid them any heed. While it tempted me just by memory of its juicy taste, it didn’t make me hungry.

“Hey guys,” Kenneth said as he handed a smaller plate to each, “Lunch is served.”

“You want any, Toni?” Oscar asked.

“No thanks. I’m not really that hungry.”

“Good ‘cause I’m low on blood right now,” Kenneth joked. “Gotta build up my strength for tonight.”

“Seriously, it’s not that appetizing.” I watched them cut into the blood red meat and it did nothing for me.

Kenneth asked Oscar, “You ever notice that when they do eat, it’s fairly simple high in fiber stuff?”

“There’s just things I just can’t stomach anymore.”

“Come on, just one bite. It’s your favorite, you know?” Kenneth waved a little piece of red, nearly raw, meat in front of me. When I still refused, he dipped his fork into the pasta salad. “Not even any pasta?” I loved pasta, even now enhanced taste buds didn’t ruin its flavor. I’d rather taste of his pulsing vein, had I not been on guard duty.

“I haven’t actually had much food since but I know I can’t eat much,” I said as an excuse.

“Yeah, proved that with Heremon, didn’t you?” Colleen said reminding me of the time I humiliated Heremon by giving him a laxative in his food. I smiled broadly remembering Heremon bolting for the restroom.

“He had it coming.” The memory kept me occupied for a short time, long enough to miss Kenneth sidling by me. Had it not been for the silvery glint at his side I might have let him go. At first I thought it was his fork. No, he still held it in his hand. Alarms began going off in my head and I scanned his. He concentrated on his food far too much I saw it in his eyes, but couldn’t tell from his

mind, and that caused me pause. I checked quickly with the King if he had permission to pass, but I knew the answer already. I was upon Kenneth before the King answered.

He reached for the poorly hidden sword at his side, but he couldn't draw it with my fist around his wrist.

"What is this?" I asked him sternly. "Didn't you learn from the last time?" He simply stared at me as if he hadn't heard the words. "Do you want to be punished again? Go back now before you get hurt." His plate crashed against the ground and splashed against my foot. It was the only warning I had of him reaching for a second weapon. Too late I realized he'd taken the same pills Gwen supplied. He must be one of the ones in her little coup.

He put the dagger to my throat saying, "Don't make me use this." I couldn't believe my friend put a dagger to my throat. Insanity, the whole world wallowed in it.

Maybe not completely insane. I knew just by the look in his eye that he wouldn't cut me. I didn't move to stop him.

"Where did you get it, huh?" Again no answer, so a little push of pain in his mind did the trick. At least now I knew the pills didn't work both ways. His brow furrowed and he took a step back trying to gain control.

"That room you were in with all the swords," he said through gritted teeth. I think he expected the pills to stop mind invasion as well. "Eiji let me in there, showed me how to handle them." It appalled me: a vampire turning against their own. Yet what could I do? I wanted to escape so many times. Still do.

"Don't do this, Kenneth," I warned. He didn't. Colleen did.

With my back to them, Colleen and Oscar snuck up on me. A cold blade sank into my back. They should have killed me.

I grabbed the sword from Kenneth and used it to knock the sword out of Oscar's hand ignoring Colleen's dagger in my back. They were no match for me, physically and especially mentally as they all collapsed with screams. Using all my built up anger I forced every nerve in their body to send pain signals to their brains. I yanked the dagger out and sank down next to Kenneth. "Why? This is going to kill Kama."

"*Kill Colleen. Bring the others to me.*" Could I ignore the King's words? I remembered what happened last time; I hated seeing Kenneth strung up like a hunk of meat. I didn't want to hurt Kenneth.

If I didn't, someone else would. I looked down at Colleen and I just couldn't do it. No matter how much of a sneak she was, I just couldn't kill someone in innocent blood. "*She is not innocent and will kill you given the chance. Do as ordered.*" I kept her incapacitated but conscious. I tapped the dagger on her chest. She looked at me somewhat confused and angry. I couldn't believe a person could hold so much hate in their heart. I tried forcing the dagger down. It just wouldn't go. Instead I placed it in her hand and released my hold on the three of them. I guess I still had some morals left in me after all.

"Go ahead and kill me," I told her. The three looked on me as if I was a three-headed monkey. She stood but left the dagger on the ground. She only stabbed me in the heat of the moment trying to protect Kenneth. Maybe she knew that if she tried to kill me now, I would kill her, or maybe she didn't have a killer's instinct. The King didn't seem to like my decision to test her as all four of us felt the same anguish now.

I woke to the nuzzling of Sabertooth's hard metal nose. That was my first clue I was in the throne room. The second was the gurgling stream. Quiet murmurs pervaded my thoughts and, as I pushed myself to my knees, I noted hundreds of eyes on me. All slaves. I didn't notice one vampire in

the place, other than the King that is. Three slaves knelt in the water. All others faced us on the other bank. I didn't like the looks of this one bit. Kenneth glared at me as if this was my fault. He Colleen and Oscar were no doubt on trial. Or was I?

The King sat in his throne looking down at me and I knelt accordingly before him. "*Why did you disobey me?*" His voice was level and I had no clue which answer would upset him more.

"*I can not kill in cold blood,*" I answered back in the same manner. It was the truth after all. Except Jocelyn tried to contradict me. Hadn't I killed her in such a way? No, I couldn't do this. Jocelyn was a moment of weakness, blood lust, nothing more. This was about my morals and honor.

"There are no innocents here. Justice must be swift and equable. These three attempted escape, each are multiple offenders, and this time there was blood shed. Would you allow them each to try again, perhaps next time killing instead of minor injuries? An example must be made." His voice remained monotone even when he spoke aloud.

"May I speak?" He nodded. "They refused to kill when given the chance. Examples have been made and only created more rebellion." Obviously I was talking about my own escape and subsequent punishment. Even whipping all the slaves after my escape hasn't done him much good. "The root cause must be sought out and fixed, otherwise you'll have more of this no matter how many of them you kill." The slavery system wasn't working. I hoped he understood that.

"Then what might you suggest?" I shook in my boots. How could I tell the King what to do? It was his gens. Why would he even ask me? It took me a while to push my thoughts away from freaking out into words I might be able to use.

"Yo-you ... Er ... are disciplining the wrong group. There ... um." Why the hell was this so difficult? I have talked to Bram about the same thing a hundred times when he asked me about my escaping. "There are vampires urging them on." Forcing myself forward could perhaps be one of the most difficult things to do. "Eiji provided their weapons. He still is not the root cause." The King raised his eyebrows as if this were new information to him. I fought myself to continue worried he might just be humoring me. I glanced at the large group of humans behind me and nearly lost all train of thought. There were so many. The King continued to watch me, no doubt laughing at my lack of control. It wasn't until Sabertooth circled me that I could concentrate on something. I watched him go around twice before getting my words together. "It is more the manner in which they have been brought here rather than their current living conditions. The system must be cured instead of treating the symptoms." I continued silently rather than give the slaves any ideas. "*The world has changed and people expect much more freedom than even a hundred years ago. They believe they're entitled living how they wish to live. Let them say good-bye to loved ones. Give them a choice. Give these people closure and they might be more content. Like Roy.*"

I saw it in his eyes, the same look the Mistress gave me just a short while ago when telling me I was already Queen. Why was this happening to me? I dug my nails into my palms trying to keep myself from bolting.

"Your words have merit, however they do not solve the immediate issue. Eiji will be spoken to and dealt with accordingly. However, these three servi became your responsibility the moment you refused me. If one more attempt is made by them, you will be held accountable." Great, three more responsibilities, I wondered if Roy and Jose could distract them enough, then all my eggs would be in one basket. Maybe that wasn't such a great idea after all.

"Yes, your Majesty," I said to the ground.

"*Surely by now you also realize the importance of following orders.*" This struck me as wrong, why would he suddenly bring this up and only in my head? "*You were given an order previously. I do not like being disobeyed. Follow it now, or all three die.*" My eyes shot up to him. He was serious. Colleen had to die, for what? Just to prove that I could do as I was told. Or... I felt their fear now, the

drugs must have had time to wear off. The King didn't speak this aloud because he wanted them to believe this was my way of handling my responsibility. He set me up. No surprise there. They'll never believe another word I say in their defense.

I took a deep breath, for what else could I do but follow his order? I looked for a weapon and found none. God, I hated this. I dropped down into the water facing Colleen head on. I wanted her to know everything. Pushing it all into her mind didn't help. Her mind already filled with anger and didn't hear a word I said. She guessed what was about to happen and took a step back. Fear surrounded her, and I hated myself for loving the power it gave me. It felt so good. Running crossed her mind. Fortunately, she knew there was no point. She kept shaking her head, as if begging forgiveness. I could not give it to her, for I was as bound to do this as she was to die.

The entire time, from the moment I bit her to the moment her soul joined the others, I knew Kenneth watched me. He wondered if he was next. He and Oscar shared the same thoughts, but Kenneth was closer to me. He didn't believe that his friend could do this. I guess that made us even. I watched him, blood dripping from my mouth, with sadness and anger. How could he do this to Kama? Yet I knew what he went through and felt sorry for him. I couldn't speak those words here. Perhaps soon. The King excused them all as I stood there focused on him. He didn't move until I mouthed the word "go." It's all the incentive he needed. I hoped the Mistress wouldn't be too upset over her ruined date.

"What kind of visions do you have?" Roy asked as he poured me a drink. I really needed one after the day I had.

"Told you, they're past memories." I had too many memories now. Colleen kept trying to push her way forward and it took a lot of energy to push her behind the wall with the others. I rubbed my forehead trying to concentrate.

"You okay?" He asked handing me a multicolored drink. I sipped it. It exploded my senses with fruits and strong alcohol. That quickly, my mind fuzzed over nicely and Colleen quieted. Being a vampire had its advantages.

"What's in this thing?"

"A little of this and that. You probably taste more pineapple than anything."

"No, the whiskey and..." I swished a little in my mouth, "Tequila? Is the most prevalent."

"Hmmm... Maybe I mixed it wrong."

"No, you just need to learn we are a bit more sensitive to certain things. Maybe you can invent some new recipes to appease our senses."

"Yeah, I'm finding that out. Keir can be rather touchy." I thought he might be referring to how easily Keir's anger was set off, but the vision in his mind had more to do with foreplay. Did he ever think of anything other than sex?

"Have you ever seen me in them?" he asked. Given the context I certainly hoped not. "Your memories, I mean." I couldn't say I had. Given what Bram said, it's not a surprise as I only knew him in Kristen's life, and I haven't relived that one. Or had I? Had I seen him in something else ... I remembered one of my stories.

"Maybe. I'm not sure. I didn't think it was a memory at the time, but it might have been you."

"Was there a dragon in it?" His voice wobbled a little. Why was he so nervous? It had been so long ago that I wrote that, yet I remembered it clearly. The entire thing from the moment I saw it attacking a knight to when I saw the knight's helmet removed and yes, it was his face. For my story I pretended he was King Arthur, but now... The name Bram told me, King Ordovs, yes, that fit much better.

"Yes."

"I had a dream last night, that I fought a dragon, and nearly died but then you came out of nowhere and slew the dragon saving me. Didn't know you were even a girl until afterwards. I called you something ... Tristen?"

"Kristen?" Had I had visions of Kristen after all? If so, and I haven't killed the King, then the prophecy was bunk. Right? Or was it just the King's belief that remembering her would do it? So I've remembered, and I haven't killed him, that should make it easier for me to leave. Once I convince the King. The problem being getting an audience with him was harder than it appeared.

"Could have been." He shrugged. "Is that normal?"

"Could have been a memory I suppose, but mine was completely made up in my mind, planned out, not like the memories I see." Or was it so planned out? Now I wasn't so sure. He didn't need to know that.

"So was I imagining things?"

"Nope, I doubt it. Was Bram there?"

"I didn't see his face, but a knight was talking to you, might have been him."

"Have you ever dreamt of Bram and me dancing at our wedding and flying?" The other dream I had with him came quickly to mind. That one couldn't have been real.

"Uh, no."

"Well, then it's probably just a fluke."

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Sometimes I think I'm going crazy. Like I hear a voice in my head. Velren keeps trying to get me to do things that would get me in trouble. At least I can stop it most of the times. But I think it has something to do with the visions."

"Velren?" I stiffened. If Roy knew Velren, did that mean he wasn't just in my head? Maybe I just heard wrong.

"Yeah, that's what he refers to himself as." Damn.

"Have you ever seen him?"

"Saw him? A voice? No, of course not." He laughed. I tried to laugh it off too.

"Well, I was hoping you weren't insane. Sorry Roy." He laughed more. Propping his feet upon my side table he waved his drink about.

"I figured being half crazy was a requirement here." As if to prove his point, there came a maddening knock on the door.

"Toni, have you seen Gary lately?" came the call of Lacey's harassed voice.

"No, has he gone missing?" I was pretty sure he hadn't passed me while I guarded the hall. She began pacing once I opened the door.

"The old guy seems to have fallen out of favor a bit." I eyed Roy to shut up. Obviously he wasn't aware of the fragile nature of the relationships here.

"You're not one to talk." I pointed to his graying stubble. "You're the oldest one here now, I think."

"Just because you took his place doesn't make you better than him," Lacey snapped speaking over me. Let the cat fights begin.

"I can't help it if he bit into more than he can chew. And he can't possibly be younger than me." He directed the last, and his glass, at me.

"Roy, please." I held my hand to him. Right now Lacey was more important.

"Come here, Lacey." I embraced her and said quietly, "What's really wrong?"

"He's been aloof. I'm worried about him. I was hoping you'd be able to tell me why."

"I haven't the foggiest. I'm sorry." The shadow of an idea did pass through the fog. Mistress Kama alluded to something while we spoke with Lacey before. Was Gary avoiding her for a reason? I couldn't tell her if it was only conjuncture.

“Ah, hell, here.” Roy put his glass in her hand then went to fix another. Her hand shook as she put it to her lips then nearly dropped the glass. Her puckering face looked as if she’d tasted alum. She took another swig to be sure and it seemed to go down better.

“Everyone’s moving away from me,” she cried after a few more sips. “Kama has Kenneth, you have Bram, and now Gary is avoiding me.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.” I didn’t dare tell her what happened to Kenneth today.

“Sure, a little duct tape and we’ll have everything fixed up in a jiffy. He’ll be stuck on you,” Roy quipped. I tried not to laugh but it was funny and even she giggled a little.

I wish I could have done something to help her more. My reassurances were empty. My efforts lacking. I felt helpless over her situation. If my suspicions were correct, things wouldn’t improve very soon.

I couldn’t help Kenneth, I didn’t want to help Gwen, and yet I was. Things were all mixed up. I couldn’t do anything about any of them because I was on a plane headed to another world.

What had possessed the King to send us to Europe to find another slave I had no idea. Perhaps he just wanted some good French cooking. Anyway it was a good time to get away from the gens, gave me a little time to relax and straighten out my thoughts and feelings. He sent me with just three slaves and the Mistress, an interesting combo I think. The atmosphere was light and a good time was had by all.

Gary and Lloyd, were sleeping quietly in the back after entertaining us with games and talk. Kama readied to bed down herself. She hadn’t said a word about Kenneth. I think she just wanted to ignore the entire situation.

I just stared out of the cockpit window next to Steve while he flew the plane. I watched the dark night sky begin to lighten with the faintest hint of violet. Damn I missed watching sunrises. I used to rise out of bed so early in my youth that I’d be awake before the sun. I hardly paid attention to them unless they were spectacular in their colors, most mornings they were dull. Today’s would probably be no different, but that didn’t matter, I wouldn’t be able to watch it now either.

“You had best get inside,” the pilot told me. Yes, of course, before the big bad sun got me. I backed out of the cockpit and pressed the button for the door. It slid shut with a crash.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. I noticed the Mistress looked too contemplative. She had to be worried about Kenneth.

“No, nothing, I’m fine.” She put on an air of confidence, back into mistress mode. I almost believed her.

“The hell you are.” Despite her mind being stronger than mine she let me in. I saw Kenneth’s bruises when she examined him after his escape. There were many far from where I touched him.

“Who did this?” I gritted my teeth.

“Toni, don’t go stirring the beehive.” She almost seemed as if she’d given up. I couldn’t have that. The Mistress was supposed to be strong and a pillar I could lean on, not the other way around.

“Mistress, Kenneth is my responsibility according to the King. If he’s causing trouble, even inadvertently, I need to do something about it.” I hardly noticed the plane banking as I paced going with the flow of it.

“That’s not what the King meant and you know it. If you hurt another vampire...”

“Oh, come on, they hurt me all the time.”

“Stop playing dumb.” Ah, that was the spirit I was used to. “They don’t treat you using the same rules as others.”

“Yes, annoying isn’t it?” I finally sat when a bit of turbulence made me trip. “Mistress, I know Kenneth isn’t happy with me, but that doesn’t mean I should stop treating him as a friend.”

“I suppose you should know he doesn’t really trust you anymore.”

“No big surprise there. He thought I was going to kill him, twice.”

“Would it surprise you to know that he asked why you and I are still friends?”

I sighed. It wouldn’t. I don’t change my friends just because of a mistake. I wish I could tell him, but we were already halfway across the Atlantic. Speaking of which the warning light went on.

“Ladies and gentleman we’re approaching the day line. The shades will automatically be shut. For your safety, we suggest you stay in the main cabin.” With his words the windows slid shut blocking all light but the artificial ones out of the cabin. The lights dimmed for sleeping.

“Well, let’s not worry on this until we return. In the meantime, you have work to do.”

“Me?”

“Yes, have you not received... Oh of course not, that must be part of my punishment for not controlling Kenneth. I have the pleasure of letting you know the real reason for this trip. Per your suggestion one of the root causes of the servi unrest is lying there.” She pointed to Gary and Lloyd. “It’s your duty to change his mind.”

I wanted to play dumb again and ask if she meant Lloyd. I knew he wasn’t thrilled with his place, but he was no leader. I also wanted to believe that by changing Gary’s mind meant I was supposed to talk him out of some event he had planned. No, I knew what she meant and I saw it in her mind.

“You’re kidding, right?” I prayed she was.

“No.” She nodded in his direction. I didn’t want to.

I dragged my feet across the room turning off the light for complete darkness and slid into the bed next to Gary.

“Now.” I heard the word in my head. I knew what Kama wanted. I knew what had to be done, but Gary didn’t. He didn’t have the faintest clue of what was about to happen, he thought this was a simple pickup trip. I was warned months before it was to happen to me, and he would only have seconds if he were lucky. I began to question it. Was it something he really wanted? I probed his unconscious mind. He was loyal, perhaps the most loyal we’ve seen, but that meant nothing in the long run. Deeper I went. He had dreams of a family in a place far from where he would really spend the rest of his life. He had aspirations to go back to the career he once had. He had been good, he could have made CEO of his company, but that will never happen now.

He wore no shirt to bed, and I hoped he had pants on. No way would I look. As it was I noticed he had several tattoos, all were old, perhaps from before he became a slave. There was the typical “mom” tat on his arm with a heart, a faded bulldog on his back (Keir must enjoy growling at it), and what looked to be a bright, fairly recent, rubber ducky above his heart. What the heck was that? It didn’t fit with his other ones. I rubbed it to see if the skin was still sensitive.

“I never knew you had a tattoo.” I saw a whiff of a smile curve his mouth and he mumbled something. His mind woke at my touch even if his body hadn’t and I saw the thoughts he had about me touching him. I had to divert his mind. “Did you get it for Lacey?” My thoughts rolled back to one of my late night chats with her talking about childhood toys. She mentioned the one she remembered most was the rubber duck her mom used to make her take a bath.

“Let’s not talk about her.” He rolled on his back so he could look at me. I avoided looking at his face. I knew what I’d see there. I fingered the veins leading to his heart below the yellow duck trying to decide which I would bite. Why was this so hard? Maybe because I didn’t want him to be a vampire?

“*Stop stalling, Antoniette.*” I winced at the Mistress’ voice in my head.

“I want you.” He drew out the words and reached for me. I pushed his hand back and followed the brachial vein down his arm. Apparently just my touch was enough to arouse him. “I’ve wanted

you for a long time.

“Oh you finally get to have me,” I assured him. He suckled on the crook of my elbow, and the idea came to me that I wouldn’t have to drain him.

I fingered the dagger Bram gave to me long ago. I wanted nothing to do with the damn thing since I used it to attempt suicide. However, after my last trip to Phoenix he insisted I carry it whenever I went out. I fought with him for some time over it before Kama came to get me for the flight. She backed him up and forced it in my hands before shoving me out the door. How ironic it is then that I used it on myself again, but not for suicide.

The dagger sliced my skin just above where he kissed me. I winced not realizing how much pain I could cause myself. I knew even though I didn’t cut deep it was enough. It closed almost immediately but the blood had already touched his lips without him realizing what I’d done. He opened his eyes when he noticed the wetness and licked it from his lips.

“What the-” He sat abruptly staring down at me.

“I’m sorry.” I told him. His mind processed what happened slowly, but his subconscious knew instantly, he simply was in denial.

“You fed me your blood? I’m going to be a vampire?” His voice trilled with excitement like a girl’s.

“Not for a while. It was a small amount.” I couldn’t look at him. I stared at the spot on my arm as I wiped away the remaining drops. He touched his lips. His fingers came away clean.

“I don’t want to go through this for years. Finish it now. Please.” Here I thought I was getting away with completing my orders the easy way.

“Gary, it’s painful. This really is better.”

“I don’t care. Do you realize what a great thing you’ve done for me? But I need it sooner. I can’t wait any longer.” His mind filled with possibilities. So many great things he could do with Lacey and me. “I love-”

“Don’t even say it Gary. I’m your genitor. I’ll be your teacher, but you know how I feel about this.”

“I know, but really, you must know how I feel. What this means. I can be with her. Make this happen now, please.”

“Yeah, I know this will make Lacey quite happy.” His face fell. Fear filled him.

“You think they’ll let me?”

“You’re free now Gary. They’ll encourage it. In fact I encourage it. However, can I make one suggestion?”

“Of course.”

“Wait. Don’t rush into it. Get control of your instincts first.”

“I want to be animalistic with her. She likes that sort of thing.” He bared his teeth. Nope, no fangs yet.

“I know. Just think about it. Remember what happened the first time I drank from her?”

The memory flashed through his mind instantly as clear as a bell. Alarms going off, Lacey prone on the infirmary bed, I standing over her, hate washed over him. Then suddenly, fear and confusion as he realized it’s a memory he relived.

“You’ll get used to it.” I reached to him. He lay down with me again and I fingered the same spot on his arm where he drank from me. “It won’t be so disorientating after a while.” He nodded.

“I’ll be careful.”

“Yeah, well just in case, maybe I should be there for the first time.”

“Great. You’re going to want to join in too?” Again that girlie excitement broke through.

“No, Gary, that isn’t my idea of a good time. This is.” I bit him. Unfortunately, it still tasted

like human blood, the virus or whatever it was, hadn't gotten all the way through his system. I so wanted to taste vampire blood. I looked to Kama. No, there was no way I'd drink from her. I could kill her.

When I noticed his mind getting fuzzy I did the only natural thing I do with daggers. I slit my wrist. I knew I wouldn't die this time which saddened me a little. Quickly before much spilled or the wound closed I shoved it in his mouth.

I watched him drink it in and almost gag on it. I didn't force it on him as Keir had me but I made sure he drank quite a bit until my own head became dizzy. Finally I moved my arm away and I became aware of certain changes in him. As he gripped his stomach his movements became faster and smoother. His eyes stared at the ceiling but that's not what he saw. His own memories played out before his eyes. He looked as if he was in a trance. I wondered if that's how I looked when I went through suborior.

He didn't speak, even when the blood finished working its way through his system. He knew instinctively that the hunger he felt wasn't for the fruit set on the table near us. He practically pounced on Lloyd without thinking. I shared a look with Mistress Kama who watched with very little interest. She knew he'd die, that was the whole point of bringing them both, killing two birds with one stone as it were. Lloyd, like Gary, was becoming a loud voice among the slaves. Gary they wanted to control as he'd been loyal for so long. Lloyd, not so much.

There is, after all, a natural order around here. The weak and useless are the ones chosen to die. Al, for instance, had grown weak and served his purpose. He was no longer needed, that is why he was chosen to be my first victim. Every once in a while, if no person was to suborior anytime soon, then the vampires are allowed to kill. Fred, for instance, the man who died just after I arrived, was killed for that reason.

Lloyd didn't last long under Gary's fresh hunger. He didn't even wake from his slumber. Who knew I'd be a little disappointed that I couldn't share in it via feeling Lloyd's fear of death. At least Gary's satisfaction welled in my heart some. His own confusion over Lloyd's memories and soul caused him pause and I watched his face squish as he went through them.

When it finished, I tried to console him. He wouldn't have any of that. He left my side and went to the rest room.

"When he returns," the Mistress finally spoke to me. "Have him move the body to the cargo hold. Steve will drop it in the Atlantic." She said it so matter of factly that I froze. Did she really not care about him? I hoped when my time came, she wouldn't just drop my body into the sewer or something.

"It's just a shell, dear. Your soul is the part keeping you alive and together."

"Really? 'Cause I feel like I just lost mine."

"Are you all right?" I placed a hand on Gary's shoulder. He sat very quite for the past few hours. He wasn't the same person he was yesterday and it didn't have to do with his new blood directly. He was more humbled now. Honestly, it was the opposite of what I thought would happen to him. I thought he would immediately start to use his new skills to his advantage. Instead, he quietly contemplated what transpired. Most of the time he thought about his life before coming into slavery and what he had done to deserve this fate. There were other thoughts too that were near the surface, and that was what he addressed. He definitely had a lot of learning to do.

"It's not like I expected it to be." His voice hardly rose above a whisper.

"How so?" I sat down next to him cross legged while he looked out at the Paris lights.

"I thought my world would change. That the sky would look different. That I could hear things far away and smell every little nuance." He paused for a moment.

“You thought you could read minds.” I finished for him. He only nodded ashamed that he couldn’t, at least as far as he knew. “It will come in time, Gary. You need to feed more. You have very little blood flowing now. After that, you’ll notice more heightened senses. The sky won’t change, but you’ll be more aware of things around you.”

“Didn’t everything happen fast for you?”

I nodded. “I had a little more time to prepare, and some believe I was just stronger to begin with. Telepathy does not come naturally. Bram and I could communicate long before my suborior, but it took a lot of practice to be able to do it. Then I could only speak with him, no one else, in that manner. It will take you a while, but you’ll be able to do it eventually. I’ll work on it with you. Don’t be disappointed though if it’s not as powerful as you thought.”

I jumped down from our second floor balcony into the hotel garden. I landed with hardly a crunch of grass. I waved to him to follow. He looked back into the room where Steve slept soundly. The Mistress already left for the night and we still had to bring back a slave.

“Come on, Gary. Not like you’d die even if you were human.”

He looked down. It wasn’t very far, but he still had doubts. “I am human.”

“Nah, you’re superhuman.” I half smiled at the memory of Jose calling me a superhero.

Finally he decided to take the plunge and carefully moved one leg over the rail then the next. He closed his eyes and basically fell as he took a step. I didn’t bother catching him. With a thump he landed face first into the rose bushes.

“Ow! Fuck!” He tried to raise himself when he came across a couple of broken bones not to mention getting scratched up more. “Shit, that hurts!” He cried as he cradled his ribs. I stood there and watched as he experienced his bones fixing themselves for the first time.

“Yeah, I should have warned you, I guess.” I forced myself not to laugh as he fought his way out of the bushes ripping half his shirt off.

I pushed my way into Steve’s mind to wake him and toss Gary a new shirt. Once dressed I started walking with him to the street keeping my mind on those in the vicinity for one that might be worthy.

“I’ve noticed some vampires are not as strong as others.” He said as he flexed his muscles around the fixed broken arm. A couple of girls walking by thought he was showing off and laughed at him. I growled in their general direction. “I always thought it had to do with their closeness to the King.”

I had thought so too at one point. I learned quite a while ago I was wrong. “It depends on who the person was before they went through suborior. Keir was a strong warrior, Bram a knight. So of course they’d be stronger. The blood enhances our natural abilities.” Now I was leading him on a path towards those deeper feelings and unbeknowingly the red light district. Ah well, no one did explain these things to me. “You’ll find you can do things I can’t and vice versa. Mostly you’ll find you will have a strong sense to be with me or do what I say, you might even take on some of my attributes. I seem to now have Keir’s temper, but I can’t fight him despite how much he might upset me.”

“Wow, so I’ll have even more desire to sleep with you?” The loudly clothed tourists gave way to gaudy dressed women and smelly men as we turned down Boulevard de Clichy.

“God, I hope not.” I laughed. I caught one or two minds around me being disappointed in my answer and that keyed me into where we were. This was not the place to bring Gary on his first night as a vampire. I swiftly turned him around and back the way we came, saying, “Hopefully, you’ll just want to learn from me.” Then finished in his head, “*Like right now. Don’t go looking for trouble. It will find you eventually so don’t help it along.*” His mind registered astonishment when he realized he heard my thoughts.

“Did I just...”

"Use your mind, not your mouth," I reminded him.

"Did I just read your thoughts?"

"No, I forced your mind to hear me. We'll work up to you hearing me without me doing anything. Now, what's this about Lacey?"

"You can do two things at once?"

"Of course. So you still want a relationship with Lacey? Why does that concern you?"

"Well, I thought I'd be stuck on you and only you." He shrugged. "I even wouldn't mind Keir, but it's really Lacey that I keep thinking about."

"I'm sure she'll be happy to hear that." I was. We moved back towards the less crowded but safer streets.

"Are you sure she'll be okay with this?" I got the strong sense that he wasn't okay with it.

"Being a vampire isn't all it's cracked up to be. I've been beat, stabbed, and emotionally flushed down the toilet. We work, I still do a lot of computer work, and guard the halls. The others all contribute in one way or another. You're still a slave in one form or another. Will she be okay with it? Yeah, I'm pretty sure." I looked into the windows shopping not for clothes or perfumes but the people inside.

"Why don't people tell us this sort of thing? I mean we see you guys lying around sleeping with everyone and having parties."

"Don't ask me. They like mysteries for some reason. Me, I like straight forward things." He stopped at a window running one of those guess the number of beans to win games. I'd noticed him counting from time to time, more in the last ten minutes than in his life and wondered if the blood enhanced that quality in him.

"There's 986 beans. Let's go enter. I'll win for sure."

"And what address would you give them exactly?"

"One in town. It's one of the reasons it's there." He shrugged. Strangely enough Gary still knew things about the gens I did not. I waved him inside. Why not make a little something for the vampires? It might help the slaves a bit too.

A short time later he stopped at a restaurant with a large fish tank inside and counted over a hundred fish. I had to admit it was getting a little annoying, and apparently I wasn't the only one who thought so.

"Why the hell do I have to count everything in our path?"

"You used to be an accountant remember?"

"Oh yeah, I thought it was a vampire thing." Oh yes, I'm sure Kenneth shared the myth about how to stop vampires by putting a pile of stones on their grave because of their compulsion to count them.

"Next you'll be running from crosses." I took his arm and pulled him along. *"Come on."* I pulled him into the bookstore towards an interesting young woman in the romance section.

"They say you're the one to talk to when you need answers." There had been a knock on my door a moment ago and this is what it opened to. Wonderful. I hadn't been back from my trip with Gary more than a few days before people started pounding down my door. At least it wasn't Leala, the woman we picked up in Paris. I let Gary drain her, but stopped him from killing her. She should still be in the infirmary, but I wasn't keeping tabs on her.

"You're the bartender, Roy. You're the designated problem solver now." I patted him on the back. I was done. I wouldn't be the fixer anymore. Bram and I were leaving this place the moment I talked to the King. I began to close the door until he squeezed his way under my arm.

"Not this one. After all, you're more of an expert on Keir than I am." I rolled my eyes at this.

Me, know Keir? Yeah, right. I doubt I'd ever understand that man.

"Well now, I wouldn't say that." I never had Keir on his knees as Roy did after all.

"Okay, you've known him longer. What does it mean when he up and disappears?" I couldn't help laughing. Him too? Did he think just because Lacey came to me for this, he could too? Besides this is the very problem I always have with Bram. Keir swore he wouldn't ever do something like that. I laughed harder and Roy just frowned. "I'm worried about him."

"You shouldn't worry. Keir's a very big boy. He can take care of himself. We're assigned 'missions' from time to time outside. I just came back from one. He's likely out there having fun beating someone to a pulp."

"Keir wouldn't-" I just shook my head. Roy could believe what he wanted to believe about Keir. Lord knows I always did ... Still do, about Bram and Bram was a murderous monster. "He's not like that."

I gripped my neck as if the whip clung to it. His hands forced my body into contorted positions as he raped me. "Whore," his words rung in my ears. The memories flooded me and I fought to keep them from making me shake. Even so, my words caught in my throat.

"No, I guess not. You ... make him a better man." I couldn't look at him. I didn't want him to see the pain in my eyes. I tried connecting to Keir's mind to make sure I wasn't right about him. Come to find out, the sun shone wherever he was and sleep clouded his mind. "He's fine, Roy. No need to worry. He's sleeping right now."

"Is he-" Roy gulped loudly. "Is he with anyone?" How strange for Roy to be so insecure. I wanted to laugh. Instead I tried poking Keir's memory to no avail. From what I could tell, no one was with him.

"No. Any slave he took with him is likely out on an errand."

He nodded and puffed out his chest. His mind reassured him that he knew it all along that Keir was loyal. His heart still fought it. The rumors he heard bounced off the walls of it. The slaves had been talking about how cruel Keir was. Roy didn't want to listen, but who could block that out?

"Sit down, Roy." He did as I went and poured him a glass of wine. A bartender I was not. "Every vampire here is not loyal. Even Bram and I ... We love each other very much, but he still sleeps with slaves and I still sleep with other vampires. Sex is like food to us. We live off the endorphins released by others. Still, some don't get enough out of that. Some ... Some need the darker emotions to fill their hunger. Some beat the slaves to feel their fear. Some even kill."

"I know all this." I wondered if he did truly know it in his heart.

"Keir's kept you buffered from some of the more painful experiences of being a slave." The thought crossed my mind how ironic this was. Keir claimed he was making me a better person by exposing me to those experiences.

"Yeah, it's one reason I feel bad." The statement confused me until I saw what his real problem was in his mind.

"We order you to please us, now present yourself and kneel before your Queen." She pointed to the ground as if he was a dog. He didn't feel she was a threat. He found her a bit laughable really. How long could he hold his laughter in? Naturally, he didn't do as she demanded. Big mistake.

The resulting attack made me cringe and a tear fall from his eye before I shut down the memory and tried to make him forget it. A tough task considering his mind didn't take to memory manipulation that well. I gave up and went to him, but he didn't let me console him. He pushed me away and tried to pretend to be fine. I let him.

"He's going to leave me. I know it. I've betrayed him."

"Oh, come on, Roy!" He let me rub his hand at least. "That's the Queen. She's likely the one that sent Keir away so she could get you alone. They manipulate each other around here. He knows

how it is and won't blame you."

He pulled his hand from me. "I feel so filthy."

"Yeah, I know how it is." I downed the rest of my wine and poured more in his glass though he barely touched it. "I can't fix that, Roy. But if you like, I'll contact Keir if he's awake. Warn him now. Maybe he'll get all of his anger out before he gets back."

"Would you? I'd appreciate it."

I relaxed for a moment while I tried to poke at Keir's brain again.

His clouded dreams gave way to light in the room. Keir's mind was still unfocussed. He must still be dreaming.

"You have no idea what runs through your veins," a woman purred through the haze. She was elegant. Her fit body was almost too thin for his taste. Her red hair, tied tightly, made him wish to see it flowing about her shoulders. Her clothing was nothing more than leather bridles lashed around her. Blood stained the brown leather in places, and he licked his lips eager to taste hers. He admired the fair skin underneath; not even the Romans were so pale. In contrast to his own dark skin, she looked like a ghost.

No, we couldn't see into dreams. Then what was this? I watched him wrestle with her for a short time like a TV show. They didn't notice me there. Keir's emotions weren't in line with his actions. He pushed her into the dirt, but he didn't want to kill her.

His grip on her wrists loosened. The water of the river kissed their feet and the sand glittered upon her face. She reminded him of the statues he'd seen of Cleopatra; shining and Godlike. Her breathing became deeper and he felt her chest rubbing against his. He longed to take her. His hand, acting on its own slid from her wrist to her palm then intertwined with her fingers.

He smelled the blood on her lips, flowing within her. He wanted to taste it for his own. He leaned into her and she didn't resist.

A cry came from above him. Just as his lips were about to touch hers, claws embedded themselves in his neck. He roared in pain as a hard, pointed beak punctured his skull like a nut. He abruptly stood batting at the bird missing entirely. He picked up a rock and hurled it at the black menace as it flew away.

When he looked back to the woman, she stood with her sword pointed at his neck. He saw his over twelve feet away. He watched her in awe knowing the wide wonder of all the land seemed not to compare to her. How could he not have seen it before? She simply was hypnotic, a golden goddess in human form.

"What are you?" he asked all bravado gone.

"What you are. What you yearn to be. You were born to own the night. It calls to you doesn't it?" Her voice seduced him. "Come with me." Her hand gripped his hard body closer to hers as she kissed him.

Oh lord. Just then it finally struck me: this was a fantasy. Perhaps built off some memory. His hand already went to work and I wanted to experience no more of this.

"Keir," I butted in. His eyes flew open to his nearly dark hotel room and he jerked up in bed. I think guilt at being caught angered him more than the intrusion.

"What do you want?"

"Was that Sophia?" Why the hell did I ask that? I really didn't want to know. Not like I was jealous or anything.

"Do not ask questions that will get you killed."

"You seem to still have something for her. Why don't you go after her like Bram did me?"

"Some relationships are meant to remain in the past. Now leave me."

"Um... Roy asked me to contact you."

“*Why?*” His anger subsided rather quickly. His question wasn’t harsh at all. Too bad it wouldn’t last much longer.

“*He um... He wanted to apologize to you before you returned to learn on your own.*” I could feel Keir’s hold on me tighten as if he were strangling me. No doubt, his impatience wore thin. “*The Queen seduced him, and he worries he’s betrayed you.*”

“*That bitch, she tricked ... No, she couldn’t have. You! What will you get out of telling me this? Why did you invade my mind? What are you up to?*” God, and I thought I was paranoid. I didn’t have time to think on it though for his anger at me caused him to begin tearing up the room. In a weak attempt he pushed pain my way. When it didn’t affect me, he severed the connection.

“Well, it didn’t exactly go as planned, but at least he’s not upset with you,” I told Roy and indicated I wished him to refill my glass. We talked about nothing for a good fifteen minutes or so until I felt some unconfined anger coming our way. I knew it couldn’t be Keir. I tensed just the same. My door burst open without so much as a knock. I don’t know why I even had a door.

“What’s *he* doing here?” Gary’s voice bubbled with spite.

“I have the inclination to ask the same question.” Roy couldn’t reach Gary in height but I think he had more spunk. I rose to get between the two. I didn’t need another cat fight in here. Worse, I saw what ran through Gary’s mind.

“Calm down, Gary,” I commanded. Despite that, Gary bristled and acted as if he would push past me.

“That’s right, you little man whore. Be a good boy and go find another vampire to screw.”

“Roy!” His comment surprised me, of course what should I expect of someone that hung out with Keir. Still, I warned him for other reasons. “Don’t antagonize him. He can kill you.”

“What that microphallus?”

“Yes, he’s a vampire.”

“Him?” I thought he was about to fall over laughing.

“Can I kill him now?” Gary really did wish to. He could practically taste Roy’s blood. I suppose that’s something I’d have to teach him to control as well.

“Why are you here Gary?” I needed to get rid of him quickly before I had to call a slave to clean up the mess.

“Because that little shitball pissed off Keir and he sent me to deal with him.”

“Ah no.” I placed a strong hand on his chest backing him out the door. “If Keir wanted to do anything with him, he would have told me. I’m the one that told him about the issue anyway.”

“*Get Roy away from that bitch.*” I heard the exact phrase in his head in Keir’s voice before he even finished his next sentence.

“But he told me—” Why did Keir always have to get so upset with me? It made me so angry that he kept treating me like dirt, even though I was his progeny and no longer the one he concentrated on. God, it just made me want to leave more.

“I said no, Gary.” My words weren’t sharp but he acted as if I slapped him.

“Yes, ma’am.” That wasn’t defiance. He really sounded defeated by me. That simple?

“I’ll meet you in your room after a while. We have things to talk about.”

“Lacey’s coming over,” Gary started defiantly until he cowered from my gaze and slunk out. I let go of the breath I didn’t know I held in.

“That worm, I don’t know what Keir ever saw in him.”

“Yeah, well I wouldn’t get too comfortable with your position either.”

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous too.”

“No, you just don’t know what I saw when I contacted Keir.”

“Sophia? Oh don’t act all surprised.” He didn’t even give me a chance to. “Keir’s completely

honest and up front with me. He's told me things that would curdle blood, but he trusts me with it. That's how I know he's in love. He may be thinking of her, but he faps off to me."

"God, Roy, too much information again. You could have just left off that last sentence." I tried to joke about it, but his words hit home. Keir wasn't the only one who wasn't always honest with me. It took me years and building an isolated room for Bram to tell me anything. I still wasn't sure how honest he'd been with me. This place was full of secrets and I had enough of it.

Despite all the drama, life did go on for everyone else. The pieces of my puzzle were slowly falling into place, but not as fast as I'd like. I watched over each of my clientes — that's what the vampires called anyone who owed a specific vampire pietas or "dutiful devotion." I was Bram's cliens and I'd pay him all the devotion in the world. Anyway, I watched them from afar making sure none of them got in any more trouble. Gary wasn't as reluctant as I to use the slaves in every way. He managed not to harm them too much. Jose kept quiet and away from most people, so he wasn't any trouble. Kama helped me keep an eye, and control over Kenneth and Oscar, as they became her new favorite playthings. She put them both in the infirmary after punishing them in her own special way. Poor Kenneth had to have a "toy" surgically removed. Roy, well Keir kept him fairly busy or the other way around. At this rate I'd soon have a list a mile long to keep track of. I didn't worry about them overmuch, they wouldn't be my problem soon enough. Bram was another story.

I went to him for a reason departing from the norm. Sure I loved watching him work; all ripped and sweaty, pounding on hot metal. His work area, in the opposite area of the dungeon from my computer room, seemed old fashioned to me with bellows and hot coals. It surprisingly was well ventilated so no smoke clogged my lungs. I entered without knocking, which had become my custom with him as we could read each other easily. He'd been humming *Ode to the Dragon Knight*, his mind fully occupied on it and his work. He didn't notice me enter. I wrapped my arms around his hard stomach when he dipped the metalwork into the water giving me an instant steam bath.

"Hey!" He almost dropped his work. "Back up a little."

"Hey back. Everything okay?" He tenderly removed my hands as he examined the piece.

"Yes, fine." He seemed rather intent on it, taking longer than normal on deciding if it was good or not. The tune reinstated itself in his head louder than normal causing it to become stuck in mine. I immediately got the sense he was hiding something.

"What's going on?" I asked sternly.

"Nothing. Just a memory I'm not supposed to let you relive." He smiled wickedly. "Though we could reenact it in a little bit." He bent across the hot metal to kiss me.

"Oh really? Have a lot of these memories do you?"

"Not as many as I like. Let's make new ones." He now put his work down to grab me.

"Woe there, big boy, I'm here for another reason."

"Oh? What other reason could be more important than making love to you?"

I didn't mean to laugh in his face, but I couldn't help it. I think he was honestly hurt. "I'm sorry. I love being with you, but you know my life."

"Yep, you haven't lived long enough to learn to relax and enjoy it."

"That could be part of my problem, but I think I'm just paranoid by nature. I'm sure there's something more you want than to make love to me all day long, despite how you act. And we both have other things going on."

"Unfortunately, true. Just imagine a world where we could lay around all day. We wouldn't get anything done." He still had *that* look in his eyes. It was something I was imagining, or something like it, and that's what drew me here.

"If you wanted to ask a favor of your genitor, what gift would you get him?"

"I don't know." He picked up the next piece to begin working on it while he thought. It helped to distract him from his more naughty thoughts. I waited a little impatiently as I sat on his workbench and kicked my feet towards the hot coals not caring one bit if they caught fire. "X-ray glasses?"

"Come on, I'm serious."

"Okay..." He pounded and thought of his genitor more than he really had in a while as a genitor and not the King. Still, the King had everything. "What would you get Keir?"

"Argh! Bram! If I knew that, I wouldn't be asking you, would I?" He hammered some more to the rhythm of *Dragon Knight* and it restarted itself in my head.

"I guess it depends on the favor," he finally said. Clank, clank, clank. The sharp sound seemed to bring back memories in his mind as the song played out. I was losing him and didn't even get to share in the fantasy. Must be a good one judging by the glow on his face.

"Bram, stay with me. Aren't all favors big favors with the King?"

"Okay, some are big and some are gigantic." I sighed wondering why I'd come here in the first place.

"Okay let's say this is a gigantic one I'm asking of the King. What would I get him?"

"Toni, I know you, if you're asking a favor, there's something wrong and if you're not in trouble, you soon will be."

"How perceptive." I felt him trying to peek into my mind and I hid those thoughts deep.

He finally put down his hammer and came to me. He didn't look as if he wanted to make love anymore. Concern clouded his face.

"Toni, I'm serious. I'm worried about you. Whatever you're up to, I don't want you to get hurt."

"What makes you think what I want is dangerous? Give me a little credit please."

"Okay," he pulled me in. His sweat didn't bother me. Curiously, I thought the smell masculine and sexy. I almost gave into his desires he'd been pushing for. He felt so good pressing against me. My anxiety melted away, he became my strength. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to stay here with him. His lips slid across my neck and I fought the moans that bubbled up my throat.

"Bram," I sighed pushing at him. I had to concentrate and this wasn't helping. "Please." He stopped and anger flashed across his face.

"You always do this!" He turned away from me and picked up his metal tongs. "Each time we get cozy, you shut down. What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing, I want you."

"No, you don't." He hurled the tongs across the room and they embedded themselves in the wall. I looked towards the door planning my escape. When would his anger snap and turn towards me? His words kept me there. "You don't know what you want. You go around trying to get momentary pleasure, but the second you and I get close you back off."

"This isn't about physical closeness. It's not about pleasure. It's about you and me and spending the rest of our lives together. I don't want your perfect body. I want you. The soul. The man. The whole. I love you, Bram, not your body or what you can do with it."

"No." He gritted his teeth and his refusal confused me. "That's them speaking. I know you. I've seen you when you've wanted me. You don't right now. You want only one thing and I don't know what to tell you, all right? I can't think of a damn thing you can get the King that he wants, not even a blow job."

"Bram!" The comment shocked me coming from him. He's never so flagrant.

"Maybe it's time I've started. You don't seem to understand anything else. You want my advice on what to give the King? Nothing. You need to back off. Stop scheming."

"Nothing? What? You want me to just sit around and meditate hoping things get better?" This

pissed him off, I could see it in his tense muscles, and the bent piece of metal he held, destroying his art work instead of taking his frustration out on me. Me, I caused that and my heart fell. I hated doing this to him. That's not what I intended when I came here.

"Yes, that's exactly what I want. Go and meditate." He snapped turning his back on me.

"What's wrong with you?" He's never been this snippy with me.

"What's wrong with *you*? Why can't you just be content here? Why do you have to keep going and making things harder on yourself?"

"Me? You're the one that keeps leaving at his will. I can't be content in captivity. And I can't stand you being held captive as well."

"Why can't you be happy with me? Yes, there are hardships we must endure. In general, we can be happy."

"Bram," so this is what it's all about. "I'm doing this for us. Us away from all of this." Oh great, there I go. Now they knew.

"No, you're doing it for you." He pointed his hot metal at me and I took a step back. "You're doing it for your own selfish wants. You can't accept that I'm happy here? You don't want what will make me happy, only yourself."

"You want me to lie around here with you and let them run all over me?"

"You don't have to. You're letting Keir control you. Think for yourself for once."

"I am."

"Toni, if you were, if you loved me, you'd want to make me happy." Damn, more guilt trip, did he think he was my mother? "I'm not saying you have to. Lord knows you'll do whatever you want anyway. But at least think about it. Think about someone other than yourself for once." I was thinking about him. He seemed strangely intent on changing my mind. Maybe I wasn't the only one letting someone control me. "It would make me extremely happy, if you just settled into being happy here with me."

"Is the King making you do this?"

"No, I am." He pushed up against me with his sooty, sweaty muscles. The hot metal in his hands sizzled and brought extra heat between us. "I want *us* to be happy here."

"Ewww... Bram... You're all sweaty." I tried to protest. Even I knew it was a weak attempt. I couldn't resist him when he came this close.

"You know you love it." He was right, but I wasn't going to let him know it.

"What should I get the King?" I asked under his lips.

"Whatever the hell you want." I wrapped my arms around his neck and gave into him. I knew he couldn't stay mad at me for long.

"I suppose it's okay to give into this selfish want?" I kissed him and he didn't argue.