

Chapter 1

"Damn. Still alive." Rolling over, Ivan frowned at the young man lying naked by his side. "And you're still here."

He reached out his index finger, ran it over his apprentice's shoulder and down his smooth arm. The sharp nail drew a faint line of blood. He lowered his mouth to the scratch and his tongue lapped the heavy red beads of fluid, allowing himself only a taste. Lying back, he watched the scratch heal.

The young man, his apprentice, his slave, his pet, his toy, moaned, opened large brown eyes, and rolled onto his sleek side. His body was hairless except for the long, waves of blond hair on his head.

The teen was beautiful, as young men go. He was long waisted, with narrow hips, and slim legs. But, to show that Ivan noticed his beauty would shift the power base. Ivan was the Master, the Power, the Punisher, the Giver, and the Taker. The kid had to know who was in charge, who called the shots, and who fucked whom.

His pet's true name was David. A name Ivan would never speak aloud. To do so would remind the kid of whom he had been. That life was over. Tonight Ivan would release the

new convert, his training completed and David would take a new name and his place in their society. Finally get the hell out of Ivan's bed.

The slave's hand reached to touch the master's body.

"We hunt tonight." The master reminded him, stopping the hand in mid-air.

"But I'm hungry now, Master." The seventeen-year-old's eyes were expectant and his full lips as petulant as a child's. His hand continued as he reached to stroke over his Master's muscled chest covered in dark brown hair, over the taut stomach. Edged lower.

Ivan sighed. "Just a little, pet."

"Thank you, Master, thank you." David moaned as Ivan offered his arm. The apprentice rubbed his soft lips over Ivan's skin, and then used his tongue to find the pulse, just as Ivan had taught him. A mewl escaped his lips when he located the large vein. Extending his canines, they sank into Ivan's flesh. David drank, timing the swallows with the steady beat of Ivan's heart, while stroking his own cock, blending the feast with sex. While David sucked on his arm, Ivan closed his eyes and counted the beats of his heart.

"Pet, enough."

Lost in the acts of feeding and self-gratification, David was taking too much blood.

"Stop." David didn't listen. He must be hungry. Ivan snorted. He wasn't hungry, he was horny. He was always horny. That was the problem with converting so young, especially males. Ivan couldn't even watch late night HBO without David jerking off.

Damn it. Now he would have to punish David and that took effort, which Ivan wasn't willing to spare. Still, it had to be done, if only to maintain order.

With one foot, he kicked the kid off his arm, and out of the king sized bed they'd shared each day for the last six months. David landed on his ass with the smack of bare flesh on wood. Immediately, he began sidling away from his master.

Ivan advanced, backing David against the wall.

"What did I do wrong, Master?"

Ivan didn't answer, except with his fist. He pulled his arm back and popped the kid square in the mouth. Blood splattered. David cried out in pain, tears filling his grateful eyes. Ivan knew just how to split a lip without knocking out any teeth. The lip had already begun to heal.

"Who is the Master?" Ivan leaned close and stroked the soft cheek with his finger, his voice low, barely audible.

"You are, Master." David's eyes glittered in hungry anticipation of being punished even more.

Ivan's burning amber eyes held him in place.

"That's right. I give the orders. When I say stop, you stop." He patted the cheek with several hard slaps.

Blood dripped from David's lip and down his chin. Ivan held his pet's chin up with one finger and inspecting the blood. Leaning in, Ivan licked away all traces of it. The boy moaned as Ivan's tongue traveled over his lips and chin.

Glancing down at David's slender erect cock, he shook his head. David was no longer able to tell pain from pleasure. That corruption was something Ivan couldn't take credit for. David had been into pain when Ivan found him selling himself on a corner outside a crack house. To his surprise, David wasn't an addict, just a whore.

"Hell, go on and finish." Ivan released him and David dropped to his knees.

"Will you watch me, Master? You know I like it when you watch me." He face flushed with sexual arousal.

Ivan nodded and sat back down on the bed. Still on his knees, David began stroking, bringing his semi-erect cock hard. He moaned softly as he kept his eager eyes on his master's body.

What the hell. Ivan decided to respond. His cock grew hard as he watched the boy's hand slide over the engorged tip of his penis. David's head tilted back made his eyes appear like slits. It must be hell to be young. Ivan could no longer remember his own youth.

David glanced at Ivan and saw the beginnings of Ivan's erection. "It would be my honor and pleasure, Master, to please you. It's been a few days since you took the whore." The boy edged closer and stroked Ivan's leg with his hand. "And weeks since our last time."

"Don't touch me, pet." David withdrew his hand at Ivan's growl.

Ivan had had sex with males and females, over countless lifetimes, but in truth, he preferred females. Wet pussies and full breasts. Besides, they just fit better.

"Please, I'll do it good, you know that."

Ivan had to admit David was good. Three years on the streets doing twenty-dollar blowjobs had taught him well. For only ten dollars more, you could fuck him. Fifty would buy David tied up, willing to be punished.

By the shimmer in David's eyes, Ivan knew David hoped to be punished. Maybe, he'd indulge the kid. After all, it was their last night together.

Ivan leaned back against the pillows and stroked himself with a slow steady rhythm. Soft ripples of pleasure filled him and he let them pass over him. David crawled over the bed to him, still jerking off as he climbed between Ivan's legs. Kneeling, David watched as Ivan let go and closed his eyes.

David's hand wrapped around Ivan's thick cock and took over the stroke. His tongue flicked over its sensitive tip. Ivan felt a jolt of sexual pleasure and turned his reactions inside. He was a master at the internalization of his emotions. It's how he'd stayed alive for so long and how he won whenever he played poker in Vegas.

The kid ran his tongue around the lip of the penis' engorged head. Ivan dampened another jolt of pleasure. David took Ivan into his mouth and his full lips slid up and down. Rapid tongue flicks against the sensitive underside of the swollen shaft stimulated nerve endings. His mouth was warm and wet as he sucked on Ivan like a kid with a Popsicle. Ivan felt his orgasm building deep in his balls. He didn't resist it, didn't try to make it last, just let it rise from within him.

No moans, no sighs, never a sign of pleasure was given to his pet. Ivan didn't cry out, didn't thrust his hips to the rhythm of the hard sucking, and didn't wrap his fingers

in David's silky hair. To do that would shift the power base. For Ivan, it was all about power and control.

He reached down and forced David to take his cock deep in his mouth, holding his head down as his jism exploded. Like the pro he was, David greedily swallowed. Ivan didn't open his eyes and watch, or allow himself to enjoy the moment. Without emotion or participation, it was merely physical release. The orgasm came and went. A slight flutter of Ivan's closed eyelids registered it.

Ivan opened his eyes.

After licking the last of the cum from Ivan's cock, David raised his head from between Ivan's legs and sat back on his knees. David's tongue searched his chin for a stray drop of jism, watching Ivan watching him. Looking down, he watched as he stroked himself like a dynamo to orgasm.

"For you, Master," he groaned as he shot his load onto the bed between Ivan's legs, like an offering to a god. Collapsing to the side, his hand still holding his shrinking cock, David gave a final shudder.

Well, at least somebody enjoyed it.

Standing up, Ivan stretched his heavily muscled body, arms flung back and up. Turning his head from side to side, there was a sharp pop as his neck cracked. He bent down,

grabbed David by the hair, jerked him to his knees on the bed.

"Time for a snack."

Opening his mouth wide, Ivan extended his canines, clamped them down on his pet's neck, and fed.

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A globe at its center bathed the chamber in soft green light. Chairs were stationed like the numerals on a watch along the periphery of the round room. Three old men occupied the chairs, all members of the Council of Twelve. These men had watched the signs, omens, and vibrations in the forces that surrounded them for a very long time. The Council alone knew what was to come.

"Bring in Nicodemus." The words echoed around the chamber.

A curtain parted and a large man strode to the center of the round chamber. He stood at parade rest; muscled legs spread shoulder width apart, hands behind his broad back. Facing the three who were seated at four, six, and seven o'clock, he waited for his orders.

Dressed completely in black, from his boots to the turtleneck sweater under his flak jacket, he was like a shadow. Even his hair was ebony. The silver hilt and pommel

of the great sword that hung at his side and the eager glint in his dark eyes were the only things that captured or reflected light.

He dropped to one knee, head bowed. "I am ready."

"We have seen, Nicodemus. Dark forces are gathering tonight. The feast will begin at midnight. Already, they have begun their hunt. Those innocents captured will satisfy their blood lust, if you do not succeed."

"I will not fail." *I never fail.* He rose to his full height, six foot three inches, and waited, his hand on the pommel of his sword, as if ready to draw it.

"Take this orb. It is tuned to their evil and will lead you to them." The third man held out his left hand, palm up, revealing a small blue orb about the size of a billiard ball. Lifting his right hand, he levitated the orb, and then with a pushing motion, sent it floating across the room. Nicodemus plucked it from the air, holding it between his thumb and middle finger. He looked at the sphere, felt its weight and power as it rested in his hand.

Tossing it high into the air, he watched as it reached its apex and then came back down. Snatching it in mid-air, he stuffed it into one of the pockets of the jacket. He grinned and straight white teeth flashed. It was not a

comforting grin, but a wolfish grin. A grin that told the old men he looked forward to the night's work.

"And when I find them?" His lip curled in a sneer.

"Then, you rescue the virgins, kill everyone else, and report back."

"It's always virgins with these parasites." Nicodemus shook his head.

"Yes, and these days, virgins are in short supply," Three snorted.

"And getting younger," Two reminded the others.

"Whatever happened to the good old days?" asked One. "When you could still find virgins over twenty?"

The three old men shook their heads.

"Rap music, I tell you, is undermining the youth of today. Deplorable," Three said.

"That's what you said about rock 'n roll, if I remember," added One.

"And jazz." Two waved his hand. "I like jazz."

"Oh, never mind," Three said. "Let's not argue in front of the help." He jerked his thumb at Nicodemus.

"Enough of the trip down Memory Lane. Can we speed it up?" Nicodemus snapped his fingers, ready to get on with what he did best.

"Yes, of course." One cleared his throat. "Warrior Nicodemus, go forth and destroy our enemy."

"At your command." He bowed to each of them, turned on his heel, and strode out of the chamber.

Nicodemus couldn't tell you where in the world or if in the world the chamber was actually located, he was only told where he could find the door each time he was summoned. As for the twelve men who sat on the Council, he had no idea who or how old they were and he couldn't even guess as to where they got their powers or the true extent of those powers. What he did know was they were seldom wrong and like him they were committed to destroying the fanged pestilence plaguing their world.

The curtain closed behind him. Once again, he stood in the wide hallway where he'd entered the chamber. The wood paneled wall behind him was now solid, no signs of the curtain remained.

As always, the old man, dressed in the same plain black suit, waited in the hall. In the palm of his translucent-skinned hand sat a sleek green lizard, about nine inches long, its tail wrapped around the old man's thin wrist.

"Thanks for watching Cho; he gets into trouble if I leave him alone." Nic held out his hand, palm up.

The sleek lizard transferred itself to Nicodemus and skittered up his arm, to ride on his shoulder, its tail curled around his neck. The old man looked relieved to see the reptile go. The color of the lizard's skin turned in a rapid gradation from a dull green to matte black.

Cho spoke to Nicodemus, the only human who could hear him. *It's because I get so damned bored with no one to talk to.*

<You have the attention span of a gnat.> Nicodemus answered with his thoughts.

Now, you're making me hungry, Nic. It's my high intellect. I crave stimulation.

<The only thing you crave is food, Cho. We have some work to do tonight.>

I knew it! The Council wouldn't drag you here unless they needed your skills. Same as last time?

<Yeah, find the virgins. Kill the vampires. Rescue the virgins.>

"Yeesh, virgins! All those young girls, passing out, weeping uncontrollably. We get to kill, right?"

A quick flick of Cho's tail signaled his excitement.

<Oh, yes, and if we're lucky, we'll be outnumbered.>

The wicked grin flashed again. The pair continued down the hallway to a door. Nicodemus put his hand up to the

security plate. A green light scanned his palm and it beeped. The lock snicked open.

Stepping into the backroom of a small Greek restaurant, Nic closed the door behind him. Crossing the supply room, he went through another door opening into the kitchen. The outside door was propped open by an empty keg of beer and the thin Greek man who sat on it, smoking a cigarette. Nic held out a ten-dollar bill. The Greek snatched it with nicotine stained fingers and it disappeared into a pocket of his dirty, torn jeans.

Nic hit the remote and unlocked his black Porsche. Unbuckling the leather belt holding the sword, he slid into the seat, resting the sword against the passenger seat. Turning the key, he gunned the motor and drove down the alley to the street, where he slipped the gear into neutral and stopped.

Pulling the orb from his pocket, he focused on it. The blue glowing increased and images formed in his mind.

Darkness. The moon was hidden by a cloud. As the cloud moved, rows of tombstones and large crypts emerged. Then, another cloud covered the moon, and it was dark again. Nic rubbed his eyes to force away the slight ache using the orb always gave him.

"Why is it they always use cemeteries?" Nic asked Cho aloud. "Is it their lack of imagination?"

Maybe it's because they're close to home. Everyone knows commuting sucks. Get it? Vampires? Suck?

<I get it, Cho.>

The lizard's tongue flicked against Nic's neck in a soundless version of a raspberry.

"And I just thought it was the creepy atmosphere. All those dead bodies." Nic shrugged.

Well, sure, that, too.

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The guy smirked at her.

That bastard doesn't know it yet, but I'm going to wipe that shit-eating grin off his face.

Fiona's eyes narrowed as she took the measure of her attacker. He moved with cocky ease as he circled her, the long bamboo staff held in his hands. At a head taller than she was, he definitely outsized her. Size doesn't matter, she told herself. It's all in how you use it.

He'd landed a few blows at the beginning of their match. She could still feel their sting on her thigh. Pushing those thoughts from her fore brain, she pivoted with him, keeping the distance of the staff away from him. He stepped forward, bringing the staff across her body in a

slashing motion. She ducked, feeling the whish of air just miss her. Stepping forward, she brought the bottom of her staff up at an angle to slam against his shins. The bamboo made a hollow thunk as it struck him. He grunted and stumbled backward. She smiled. Time to end this.

Shaking off the blow, he threw himself into a shoulder roll. As he came up, he swung his staff at her knees. Fiona cart wheeled over it and slammed her bamboo down hard across his shoulder. He dropped his staff as he collapsed, splayed on his back across the mats.

Fiona straightened, rolled her shoulders, and lowered her staff to her side. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but several strands fell over her face. She blew a puff of breath upwards to move them out of her eyes, but they were stuck to the sweat on her cheek.

Grand Master Toung stepped up to end the match. Fiona went to one side of the mats. Her attacker, a black belt from a rival dojo, got to his feet. After he adjusted his uniform, they bowed to each other, bowed to Toung, and then to the dojo's flag. Stepping off the mats, they leaned their staffs against the wall. Walking away, the man didn't look so cocky now. Fiona tried hard not to look too smug.

"Well done, Ms. Meadows." Toung stepped up beside her as they watched the next pair compete. "He underestimated you."

"Everyone does. You'd think I'd be used to it by now." She might be small, and a woman, but she was formidable. Touching the black belt she wore, her fingers counted off the bars that marked each of the seven degrees she'd earned.

"Not I." He gave her a small quick smile. He was the same height as she; five feet four inches, but she outweighed him. Toung was at least sixty years old. "I, too, am often underestimated," he added in his soft accented voice.

"You? It must have been someone very foolish." She grinned back at him. That's a story she'd like to coax out of him over their weekly dinner.

"As you say." He tilted his head to her. "You, today, however, have instructed me." He motioned out towards the dojo.

"Grand Master, I would never presume to teach you." Fiona's eyes widened, fearing she'd insulted him.

He waved a hand to dismiss her worries.

"I would like to speak to you, in my office."

As she followed him, she wondered what trouble she'd gotten into now. Fiona couldn't remember shooting off her smart mouth, her usual crime or missing some courtesy to another combatant. She'd been on her best behavior for this match. Biting her lip, she stood stiffly in front of his desk as he eased into in his leather chair.

"I know how many years and how hard you've worked, Fiona. And of the obstacles you've faced on your journey. Rarely have I seen such a... damaged child grow into a determined, successful adult."

She waited, still unsure about where this was going. As he stared at her, she felt as if he could see inside her, into the inner recesses of her mind. Perhaps he did.

"Fiona, I've been watching you for some time trying to decide if what I wish to offer you is right for both you and me." He paused. "I want you to teach the advanced sword class next semester."

"The advanced class? Really?" Fiona's head snapped up in surprise.

"Yes. There is no one better, and I have witnessed your patience with the students, young and old." He nodded. "It pays one hundred dollars for the month. Only twelve dollars a class." He held his hands out as if apologizing

to her for the pittance he offered. The money didn't matter to her.

"Thank you so much, Grand Master, for this honor." She bowed, her arms stiff at her side. "You won't regret it." Fiona beamed at him and turned to leave.

"Fiona." She stopped and turned back. "Each of us must defeat the demons within ourselves. Over the years, I've watched you work hard to banish yours. Remember, we each chose the paths we walk. If we are lucky, we don't walk them alone."

"Luck, Grand Master?" Her eyes crinkled with her smile. "I didn't think you believed in luck."

"Luck." He shrugged. "Opportunity. Chance. Destiny. Whatever you wish to call it."

"Are you trying to tell me something?" She grinned at him. They'd had this discussion before, about setting your feet on a path and not knowing where it would take you, over a few dinners.

"Yes. Don't forget to go out and have a good time. Enjoy life. It's too short," he advised her.

"As a matter of fact, I'm going to meet Beth at a bar tonight. There will be men there. Lots of them."

"Ah, the poor men. They don't stand a chance, do they?" He shook his head, his eyes held his sadness.

Fiona shrugged. "Not really."

Bowing to him, she left to hit the showers.

She was rushing to meet Beth at the bar in thirty minutes. Waving goodbye to several other members of her dojo in the crowded parking lot, Fiona tossed the bag into the trunk of her car and slammed it shut. She jogged around, opened the door, slid inside, and started it up. The speakers pumped a fiery Latin beat into the cabin of the Toyota Camry.

Flying. On cloud nine. Walking on air. The advanced class!

"I must be living right," she said aloud. It was her favorite explanation for the few good things in her life.

Grand Master Toung had finally asked her to teach. For Fiona, it wasn't the money; she made more than enough at her job with the design firm. It was the recognition of her skills by one of the few people she truly admired and respected.

Fiona knew she was good. Saying she was the best swordsman in the city would be bragging, and incorrect. The only person to beat her was Grand Master Toung and he kicked her ass every single time. But, each time, it took him just a few more moves to beat her.

Tonight, she won her match against a rival school's biggest man using the bamboo staff. Swords were her weapon of choice, but a good long staff, now that could be a girl's best friend. She laughed at the double entendre.

Not that she'd know what a good long staff would feel like.

Fiona waited in a line of cars leaving the match, then pulled out of the lot and headed to the bar, tapping her fingers to the rhythm of Santana's "Evil Ways."

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"That's her, right?" David asked, sitting in the passenger seat of the van.

"That's her. She's pretty. Great tits. She told me the area she lived in before she blocked my email. From the other things she told me I put two and two together." Ivan stared out the windshield at the young brunette getting in the Toyota. She definitely had jiggle. Nice ass, too.

"That was a smart idea, using an on-line dating service to find the women we need. I would never have thought of that."

"Well, after four hundred and fifty years, you learn a thing or two." Ivan had been hanging around the lair watching late night cable television when he saw the ad for the Internet singles service. "The ad guaranteed I'd find

my match, and so I did." Ivan loved the Internet. It made everything so available, for the low, low price of... plus shipping and handling.

"Awesome. When do we pick her up? The invitation said the frenzy starts at midnight." The young man rubbed his hands together.

"There are too many people here. We have plenty of time. Patience, pet. We'll follow her and look for a better opening."

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Fiona arrived at the bar, parked in the lot, and found her way to Beth. It wasn't hard, where the crowd of men were, that was Beth. Pushing her way through them, Fiona climbed up on the barstool Beth had saved for her.

"You're late, Fi." Beth pouted as she flicked her wrist to check the time on her Rolex.

Her best friend since high school, Beth was everything Fiona wasn't. Beth was honey blonde, blue-eyed, five foot ten inches, with just enough intelligence to make her smarter than the average blonde. Of course, brains didn't really matter, because Beth was gorgeous. Not just pretty, but drop-dead, goddamn, slap your mama, gorgeous.

"Sorry, the competition went long." Fiona grimaced.

"Did you win?"

"Of course." Fiona grinned and rolled her eyes.

"Really, you'd think with all the guys that do that karate thing you do, one of them would hit on you." Beth was more upset about it than Fiona.

"It's not karate. I intimidate them, I guess. They're more like friends, anyway. And most of those guys are married, too."

"Excuses." Beth rolled her eyes. "Can't you find a less violent way to release your pent-up sexual frustration? Come on, it's like algebra. You're never going to use that tae kwon do stuff in real life." She took a sip of her drink.

"It's not tae kwon do. And it's not sexual frustration. I'm not frustrated. I'm re-channeling my sexual energy. It's different. Less frustrating. And it's not about using my training in real life. It's about personal fulfillment and growth." Fiona summed it up for Beth.

"Growth, huh? You're going to *grow* into an old maid with a dozen cats if you're not careful. So, what are you going to do about it? You have to meet men somewhere. All you do is work and that kung fu stuff."

"It's not kung fu." She shot Beth a menacing look. "I joined that dating service you told me about so now you can

get off my back and *shut up about it.*" Fiona made a face at Beth and then laughed.

"Great! It's about time, Fi. I was beginning to believe that you were going to die a virgin." She finished her martini and signaled the bartender for another.

"I still may, if I don't find Mr. Right." Fiona gave him her order for a ginger ale. He put a new martini, with three olives on the spear, in front of Beth.

"Mr. Right, huh? And he would be... let me guess. Someone who does that jujitsu stuff, right? And isn't easily intimidated by you, of course."

"It's not jujitsu. I'm not sure what Mr. Right looks like right now. That's why I'm going to stay a virgin. Until I know for sure what I want in a man."

Beth shrugged. "Whatever. To 'Virginity'. A fate worse than death." Beth shivered and raised her glass in a mock salute.

"Hey, I can think of worse fates." Fiona stuck up her chin in defense.

"Name two." Beth took a sip of her drink. It was a game they played, with Fiona coming up with suitable fates.

"How about being eaten alive by wolves? Or being trapped on a deserted island with Petey Barnes? That goofy kid from high school?" Fiona and Beth giggled.

"Fi, the *only* good thing about virginity is that it's curable," Beth said, sucking her olives, one by one, off the tiny plastic sword. Fiona watched four men eyeing Beth swoon as the large green olives disappeared between her luscious red lips.

Fiona was envious of Beth's casual attitude about her sexuality. Of course, Beth didn't grow up with Fiona's dysfunctional family. Beth's rich lawyer father didn't desert his family when she was born and her socialite mother wasn't a whore who turned tricks to pay the rent on their lowlife apartment in the bad part of town.

Fiona was determined she would never be like her mother, never sell herself to some man or give it away as if it were worthless. As if, she was worthless. And she sure as hell wasn't bringing a baby into the world without a great job to support the kid and a father who hung around past the date of conception.

Beth called her a 'diamond in the rough'. Somehow, she always saw what Fiona could be, not where she came from. Friends like that were rare; Fiona learned that the hard way.

"So, did you get hooked up online? Spill it," Beth asked, leaning forward. The bartender walked past, checked

out her cleavage, gave Beth a wink, and headed to the other end of the bar.

"To my complete and utter amazement, I was matched with a couple of guys. I never expected one, much less three. But, I've already had to cut one of them. Too weird." Fiona shook her head and took a sip of her drink.

"What was wrong?"

"When I told him I was saving it for marriage he came on strong, emailing me, asking questions, telling me how he admired me. He pressed to meet me. My spidey senses went off, so I blocked his email." Fiona shrugged.

"Are you going to meet the other two guys?" Beth ordered another drink.

"Not yet, are you kidding?"

"Why not? Strike while the iron's hot and your tits look good." She laughed.

"I only started talking to them this week. That's a *huge* step for me. I'm not ready to actually *meet* someone." Fiona shook her head. "Besides, it's going take a lot more than a few emails and cyber chats before I let any of them near me. Trusting men is *not* in my skill set."

"Fi, you have got to get a move on. You're twenty-six and not getting any younger. Before you know it, all the good guys will be taken and you'll be left with only

creeps, gay guys and divorced men with kids." She grimaced as she shuddered.

"Well, at least you're getting married. How are the plans going?" Fiona made a blatant attempt to change the focus and onto Beth, and it worked. It usually did. After Fiona's lack of sex, Beth was Beth's favorite subject.

"Daddy is going all out, no expense will be spared, he promised. Mom's handling everything. Jason and I just have to show up." A three-carat square cut diamond glittered on Beth's finger.

"Beth, you are *such* a princess." Fiona rolled her eyes, certain she'd never be anyone's princess.

"Well, between Daddy and Jason, they treat me like one. I don't deserve Jason. You know that don't you? I don't deserve the good things I have; I never earned them. Not like you. You're a self-made woman. The only bootstraps I've ever pulled are the ones on my black leather Dolce-Gabbanas. For me, it was location, location, location. Strictly real estate. I was born into it." She tossed the last of her drink down her slender throat.

Sadness clouded Beth's beautiful eyes as she struggled with her own set of demons. "When everything you have is handed to you, how do you know what you're truly capable of doing or of being?" Beth shrugged.

"Don't start that again, Beth. Deep thought doesn't become you. Besides, you're a great person, despite real estate. If you weren't, I wouldn't hang around you." She gave Beth a playful nudge with her shoulder.

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"How long is she going to stay in there?" David glared out the window of the van at the bar across the street.

"Patience. When you get to be around two hundred and fifty, you will learn patience." Ivan couldn't imagine another two hundred and fifty years. Kill me now, he groaned.

"Yes, master."

"It's a privilege I'm giving you, you understand. To be one of us. And one you asked for, must I remind you."

Ivan had planned to kill David that night, but David had begged to be converted. Said it would be better than the life he had. Ivan didn't have the heart to tell him it wasn't.

Oh, it looks good from the outside, living forever, stronger than you were, sleeping all day. But, from the inside, Ivan had come to the conclusion about a hundred years ago that it sucked. No pun intended.

Training a new convert was always so tiresome, but he'd been alone for a very long time. As was usually the

case with spur of the moment decisions made in dark alleys, Ivan had regretted it often over the last six months. David was a pain in the ass most of the time, but at least Ivan didn't have to go outside the lair to have a conversation. Hanging out in a smoky sports bar, paying for drinks he never drank and talking about football with the same guys had been getting old. Well, not the talking about football part.

"Oh, yes, I know I did! I understand and I'm so grateful." David pulled the older man's hand to his mouth and kissed it. "For everything you are teaching me."

Ivan's eyes focused on the door to the bar. Without turning his head, he reached out and stroked his apprentice's smooth cheek, like a dog. And like a pet dog, David leaned into his hand, seeking pleasure from his master's touch.

The slap was unexpected and hard. David's cheek reddened, and he moaned and rubbed it. "Thank you, Master."

Burning amber eyes watched the door of the bar. The virgin and her friend exited. Ivan sat up.

"Night, Beth," Fiona called as she got into her car.

"Bye, Fi!" The one called Beth waved goodbye as she slipped into her red BMW convertible. She gunned the motor and pulled out of the parking lot, gravel flying.

Fiona started her car and pulled out.

The van followed.