

The final chords of "Warrior Forever," the latest Metal Brain song, faded on the radio. "And now a quick update regarding one of the band's biggest fans," declared the announcer. "We got a message yesterday that David Technical Expert Libertus had been spotted at Preator Pizza with his new house pet." Rachel paused in her packing and made a face. Surely she was at least as big a fan as Dave. Why wasn't the station talking about sighting the biggest fan Rachel David's of Luther's and her new hOwner? At least this was one station that wasn't *still* talking about Alice. Even though the Sacrifice was over a week old at this point, this might have been the first time she could recall hearing about anything else on the radio since that time. "While we are happy for his good fortune," the announcer went on, "and, by all reports the house pet is *quite* a catch, in this individual's humble opinion, backed up in an interview a few days ago with the eminent Sir. Aaron Armstrong, it is rather a concern that he rushed into this so quickly. While the early twenties are not a bad time for taking one's first house pet, this is with the assumption that one has already been acquiring a great deal of experience previously. Considering David's rather conspicuous lack in this regard, we feel the decision may have been unwise, perhaps even setting a bad example and..."

"You stupid fucker," Rachel shrieked, jabbing the button on the remote to turn off the radio as she placed her traveling hat on the back of her head and put the lid on her final hover basket. She didn't have that many now, mostly just her painting supplies and the few pieces of clothing she felt she could get away with taking from Luther's. Technically, she could go back to the brothel and request fresh supplies if she ever felt the need but she didn't want to deal with Luther's. She would buy her own clothes and, in time, she would have her own clothing dispenser next to Dave's to hold them. There would be a hairdressing unit and a manicure unit too, a perfume dispenser, a nail art machine, and other things. Dave had promised her all this but it would take time. Paying for the Sacrifice had set him back a lot and the exorbitant sum he had to pay each month for Rachel made it hard for him to replenish his savings. Even while they were on vacation, spending the next week or so at his house in the mountains, he would be working long distance though his computer. This was necessary, but he promised he would never neglect her during his leisure time.

But there was no hurry. Already, she had learned to brush her hair and paint her nails the old-fashioned way and, although she was still clumsy at it, she was getting better. Besides, since she wouldn't be appearing in public nearly as much now, she didn't need as many nice things. Around the house, Dave was fine with her wearing some of his old clothes. She did have one entirely new thing in her luggage though, a selection of his books that she intended to read almost every second he was busy. He had promised to give her education just as good as what he had received and Rachel was very excited about this, just as excited as she was about the education she would be giving him in the skills she had learned at Luther's, which he had promised to spend lots of time on as well. She was fortunate indeed that she did not have to decide which she was more excited about, either of them or the fact that she was going outside the city for the first time.

Rachel was suddenly distracted from her thoughts when a message appeared on the wall monitor, saying there was someone outside who wanted to see her. She pushed the button that activated the camera on the landing platform and, seeing that her guest was Susan, not some nosy reporter wanting to dig up dirt on her private life and then use it against her to claim she was being a "bad example," sent down an invitation for her to come up. She had suspected the outing to Preator Pizza might have been ill advised, but had been unable to avoid vindictively picking at the emotional scab by treating herself to the thing Alice had so wanted. With glasses of sparkling fruit wine in their hands, they went to sit in the armchairs by the window alcove--yes, Dave had now added a second chair so he and Rachel could sit together--and Rachel asked Susan why she had come.

"I wanted to see you before you left. It'll be dull not having you around," said Susan. Rachel smiled. It felt good to be missed.

"I won't be gone forever," she said. "And even if we don't live together, we can still go out and do things. Let's arrange to meet at Fedallah's for lunch every Tuesday, starting when I get back, and, while we're there, we can make arrangements to do other things if we want. For one thing, I happened to be talking to Dave the other day and it came up that, since, as Libertus, he can do whatever he wants, there is no reason why he shouldn't try his hand at producing some sensuality novels."

Susan looked at her in confusion. "Does he want me to make plot-line suggestions or something?" She asked uncertainly.

Rachel grinned. "Do you really think he has enough free time to actually write novels?" she inquired teasingly. "He'd much prefer that they just materialize fully written and he can just pretend he wrote them."

Susan choked into her wine in a most undignified manner and then stared at Rachel. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?" she asked, half afraid. Rachel nodded emphatically. "That would be wonderful," cried Susan, once she had found her voice again, breaking into one of her high-speed laughs. "Why didn't I think of that?" Then her expression sobered quickly. "I also have some far less pleasant business to attend to. On my way over here, I found someone had slipped this note inside my purse with instructions for me to give it you on the outside." She held out a crumpled piece of paperite. Rachel snatched it, her eyes narrowed. As she suspected, it was a letter from Alice, though how she had gotten the computer access to type the letter secretly, Rachel would never know.

"I want to thank you for everything you've done for me," it began. "I don't have any bad feelings about you anymore, but please honor my request to stay away from me. You are very bad for business and my career is the most important thing to me. I know my career exists only because of you and you probably feel you are entitled to something because of this. You're probably right but the sacrifice is not one that I can make. I hope you understand. Since I don't hate you, I hope you don't hate me either, so please accept the offer Susan and Stacy are giving you." Alice's influence in the brothel must have skyrocketed far out of proportion with her years if she was aware of private business matters like that.

Rachel felt nothing but disgust at Alice's open and unrepentant selfishness. She had decided she did not hate her and would not take any steps to ruin her life. But this was too much. No one said her forbearance meant she was obliged to respect Alice or forgive her. "Tell her," she said coldly, "that I'm avoiding her, not out of hatred, but out of pain. I don't like being reminded of what I've lost and having it dangled in front of my face is not my idea of fun. As for the rest of her letter, it doesn't deserve to be dignified with a response."

Susan nodded. "I think what she's doing is foolish," she said, "and I don't really understand what she hopes to achieve by it."

"Now, about that idea of yours that Alice mentioned," said Rachel, not waiting for Susan to broach the topic. "I assume that's the other reason you came to see me." Susan had the decency to look embarrassed. "I'll be honest with you, the idea appeals to me very much but I just don't think I can deal with working with Alice and Elissa." She gave Susan a conspiratorial grin. "I guess I'll just have to start my own brothel."

Susan shrieked with laughter. "How would you do that?"

"I don't know but there must be a way. Brothel's die, like Augustine's, and surely new ones must be created to take their place at some point."

"Rachel, you are so arrogant," giggled Susan. "You always wanted to rule everything."

"You shouldn't laugh," Rachel teased back. "You and Stacy would be my foremost associates. I bet you'd like that."

"And what would call the place? Rachel's?" Susan sneered.

"Hell yeah! Rachel's: Lair of the Lady Demons. Our girls could be called the Succubae. It

would be great for business.” Both girls doubled over from laughing so hard.

“Oh, Rachel, you’re hilarious,” Susan gasped finally.

Rachel nodded, struggling to breathe as well, but, at that moment she felt something click in her brain. She sat up and looked at Susan very straight. “No, I’m not. I’m deadly serious.”