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Kaldor
Saga
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The central image of the book cover depicts two muscular, winged men. The man on the left has long, flowing blonde hair and a serious expression. The man on the right has dark hair and is looking slightly off-camera. They are both shirtless, and their large, dark, feathered wings are spread behind them. The background is dark and smoky, creating a dramatic and intense atmosphere.

Scarlet Hyacinth

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

ENRAPTURED

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E-book ISBN: 1-60601-581-8

First E-book Publication: October 2009

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

www.SirenPublishing.com

DEDICATION

For my Puy, without whom I would have never begun writing.

For Kyo, whose constant support kept me going and helped me improve as a writer.

For my readers: I love you all! Thank you for all the kind words, suggestions and comments. I hope to never let you down.

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SCARLET HYACINTH

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PART 1: ALARIA

Chapter 1

The gardens of the Kirgen Monastery were calm and beautiful. The intoxicating perfume of exotic flowers carried by the wind invited relaxation and peace. The whole sight spoke of such beauty and tranquility, yet it was tremendously deceitful. Gabriel winced as he worked. There could be no peace in this place. He knew that better than anyone and he carried the evidence on his skin. Well, for now at least. By tomorrow the bruises and whipping marks would disappear. Courtesy of his Alarian nature, his body would be cured again and he'd be ready for another beating.

If he could have been objective, he would have considered Kirgen the epitome of natural beauty, the pride of Alaria. Lush greenery flourished everywhere and the building that housed the Monastery seemed to spring from the ground, as if one with nature. That had actually been his first impression when he was brought here as a child. He'd stared in awe at the magnificence of his surroundings, wondering what he'd done to gain such a prize as a visit in such a paradise. Young as he had been, he hadn't seen the darkness lurking around the corner, hiding behind the walls of the Monastery.

The gardens became the only place that held some sort of comfort for Gabriel. The plants kept him sane, anchored him even in his darkest days. Still, Gabriel longed for something else. He longed for the freedom of blue skies, he longed to fly and feel the winds caressing his face, to travel to the stars. At night, when he fell asleep in his hard bed, he wished for the warmth of a family. He wished to hear the sound of raindrops clashing with the sea, the whispering of trees as they bloomed and grew, the stories the rivers told as they passed through Alaria and the laughter of children.

A smile ghosted across Gabriel's face as he imagined himself in another place, free of all pain. Dreams always came so easily to him. The rays of the Alarian sun warmed him as he worked, bypassing the walls of the Monastery. The sounds of the people working around him faded as Gabriel saw himself in a different place and time, flying above evergreen forests, protected in a warm embrace and breathing the air of freedom. It was an impossible dream, much like everything else he desired.

Only a moment passed when Gabriel allowed the daydream to distract him long enough for fate to strike. "Hey, be careful!" The voice of the supervisor snapped him out of his reverie, bringing him back to brutal reality. Gabriel spun around at the harsh words, and bile rose as he saw the stocky man's expression. "Stupid boy, look what you've done!"

Gabriel looked at the flower he was in charge of. He watched in horror as a delicate purple petal fell on the work bench. *No! Please no!* But the dreaded voice returned, announcing what he knew to be coming. "That's it. You're going to the superintendent!"

Gabriel's insides twisted at the thought of seeing the awful man again, but he had no choice. He never had a choice, not when living here. He wanted to scream for help, but there could be none. The other workers silently watched as the supervisor practically dragged him out of the gardens' work room. Their expressions varied from indifference to outright disdain. Of course, they hated him. They

knew. Everybody knew.

Tears of shame and fear filled Gabriel's eyes as the man dragged him through the corridors of the Monastery into the iron grip of the supervisor. All too soon they got to the well-known iron doors where his nemesis resided. The supervisor knocked using the huge iron handle. A brief silence followed then and a voice bellowed out: "Who is it? What do you want?"

Despite his stockiness, the supervisor took a step back at the voice, his hand shaking nervously as it hovered over the knob. His voice shook as he announced, "This is supervisor Vizer, Your Holiness. It's the boy, young Gabriel..."

The large dark doors opened, unseen magical forces easily manipulating the old mechanism, and Gabriel didn't even manage to breathe before the supervisor violently pushed him inside. He stumbled in the room and fell to the floor in a heap. Predictably, when he finally looked up, superintendent Lothar stood a step away, observing him. His white hair framed his face, falling to his shoulders neatly. Gabriel unwillingly shuddered at the sight. Lothar's elegant features, perfect skin and aristocratic bearing would have been beautiful, if not for the smirk that marred his face and the evil glint in his grey eyes.

"Well, well. If it isn't little Prince Gabriel..." Lothar's sickeningly sweet voice mocked him. Tears flowed freely now, and Gabriel knew Lothar enjoyed his suffering, just as he knew what would happen in a few minutes. Dimly, he registered the supervisor informing the older man of his transgression. "Your Holiness, you will pardon my intrusion. After his discipline last night, I assigned to Gabriel gardening duties. It would seem that he does not learn his lessons well. In his carelessness and impudence, he damaged one of the prized purple yanids. He needs to be taught his place, Your Holiness."

Vizer's cruel words meant nothing, since Gabriel's fate had been sealed from the moment he stepped inside the chambers of the superintendent. He could hear it in the older man's voice and saw it in

his barely concealed lust.

Lothar paused while seeming to consider Vizer's words, but Gabriel knew better. It didn't take long for Lothar to answer. "Is that so? Very well. Leave us!"

The other man made no move towards the door. He bowed low and hesitated for a second before speaking again, "Your Holiness, with your permission, may I witness his punishment?"

Iciness stole through him at Lothar's words, plunging him deeper into despair. He thought things couldn't possibly get worse, but Lothar thrived on his pain and suffering. Another person witnessing his shame was more than he could bear.

Magic sizzled in the air, slammed Vizer into the beautifully carved wall, tearing tapestries depicting Alarian lore. "You dare question my orders?" Lothar's voice chilled Gabriel's blood in his veins, a tone so angry and evil it revealed Lothar's true nature. It mocked his Alarian legacy, just like Lothar himself. He dared to raise his eyes and observe the scene. The superintendent seemed to have forgotten Gabriel completely. He stood before Vizer's form, holding the other man fast to the wall through his magic. .

Incapable of fighting, his limbs trembling slightly and his gaze unfocused and wild, Vizer opened his mouth in seeming protest, but he wasn't allowed any defense. "Silence!" Lothar bellowed again. Gabriel's eyes then widened in horror at what followed. He could practically hear Vizer's silent screams as Lothar tortured him, burning his insides with magic. Gabriel's stomach roiled, his mind screaming for him to move, but he froze in his spot, as he drank in the terrible scene.

Finally, Lothar turned from Vizer, who collapsed on the floor, the blood flowing from the tortured man's mouth and staining the carefully woven carpets. But Gabriel had other concerns now, namely Lothar, who raked him with his gaze. "Did you enjoy the show, little prince?" Gabriel gasped as he realized Lothar no longer focused on torturing Vizer, but on Gabriel himself. Unconsciously, he tried to

scramble to his feet and run away, but the next thing he knew, he felt the familiar heat of a binding, easily immobilizing him.

The older man grabbed him and pushed him next to Vizer's battered form. He released the binding and pointed towards the bloody body. "Heal him." Perplexed, Gabriel froze for a brief moment and the hesitation cost him a slap across the face. "What are you waiting for? Didn't you hear me? Heal him!"

Gabriel finally managed to gather his strength and stutter out: "Y-yes, Your H-holiness. At once." He scuttled closer to Vizer's body. Oh, for the powers of Light! The man was a mess, covered in blood, sweat and his own residues.

"You don't like my work much do you, little prince?" The sickeningly sweet voice chilled Gabriel to the bone. "But now you can better appreciate my kindness. I treat you so nicely, and you, you constantly disobey." Lothar stood right behind him. Gabriel suppressed a shiver of disgust as the man's hand passed through his long dark locks.

Tears filled Gabriel's eyes yet again as Lothar cruelly pulled his hair. "Come on, already.... Do your thing! I understand you're quite a healer."

This time, Gabriel just nodded and focused on the broken body before him. Placing his arms above Vizer's chest, he closed his eyes and let the power flow through him.

Carefully, he allowed his senses to magically inspect the other man. The disaster seemed even worse on the inside. He lost track of his surroundings and delved himself deep into the task. Poor man... No one deserved to suffer like that. Gently, Gabriel started to mend every broken bone, heal every torn organ and fix every shredded artery. By the time he finished, Vizer was good as new, well, physically at least. His clothes remained an odorous mess.

Gabriel couldn't help but feel quite pleased with himself when the supervisor opened his eyes. He always loved helping other people and the satisfaction of healing an injury or an illness became one of the

few things that kept him going. But all feelings of happiness disappeared when he heard a clap and then the dreaded voice behind him.

“Impressive.” Gabriel looked up at Lothar, who observed him with undisguised lust in his eyes. “You’re so beautiful like that, you know. With your magic flowing, you look like a real angel.” The voice turned cruel. “But I know what you really are. You’re my slut, aren’t you?”

Gabriel couldn’t say anything. All the shame and pain came flooding back. Lothar continued to speak, but this time he addressed Vizer, who struggled to his feet behind Gabriel. “You wanted to witness Gabriel’s punishment?”

Predictably, Vizer said nothing at first then managed to stutter out, “Your Holiness, I—”

“Answer the question, yes or no?”

“Yes, Your Holiness Lothar.” Vizer managed to answer.

“Why is that?” There was a pause while Vizer struggled for words. “He’s a slut, isn’t he? A slut and a cock-tease.”

Vizer obviously decided that agreeing with his superior would be the safest option. “Yes sir, he is.”

Lothar nodded, satisfied at the other man’s words. “Come on, little slut, let’s show Vizer your performance.” He urged the youth to his feet. “Come on, you know what to do.”

Yes, he knew all too well. Even as he undid the fastenings of his robes, Gabriel knew what would happen, and he knew that he had no other choice.

* * * *

Gabriel wanted to throw up. He wanted to run away and wash the taste of Lothar out of his mouth. To be perfectly honest, though, at this point, as much as he hated the things Lothar forced him to do, a certain numbness appeared. He just forced himself to do what had to

be done, and simply disconnected his mind from his body. That only made it worse, knowing Lothar practically trained him as his pet. Of course, Lothar reveled in his suffering, in the disgust and humiliation he couldn't help but feel every time. His laughter pierced Gabriel's heart like a dagger. "What is it, little Gabriel? Feeling a little down? Perhaps not satisfied? Well, don't worry, I'll fuck your little ass soon enough."

Gabriel felt himself pale considerably at Lothar's words. That couldn't happen. The only light in Gabriel's life of shame and pain was that Lothar never actually managed to steal his virginity. Apparently his father gave specific instructions to the man regarding this issue. It was the one thing he was grateful for in all his life. For all his cruelty, Lothar wasn't stupid and wouldn't disobey the orders of the king himself. Even if Gabriel was only an illegitimate child, he still had royal blood in his veins and the customs still needed to be obeyed. Then why did Lothar suddenly seem so sure of himself?

The older man laughed again as his expression. "Surprised, are you? Or maybe you don't believe me?" He paused for effect. "You'll believe me soon enough, little prince. Or should I say prince of whores?" Lothar laughed again, a cruel sound that made Gabriel shudder. "Vizer, that will be all. Take him away. He will not receive any meals today and will be administered ten lashes at dusk."

"Yes, Your Holiness. By Your leave." The doors of the superintendent chambers' shut behind the two. Frozen in terror, Gabriel couldn't move a muscle as Vizer again dragged him through the corridors like a useless doll and pushed him into his chamber. Chamber, ha! It was more like a cell, complete with bars at the window and iron door and lock. Vizer looked down at him and hissed, "Stupid useless whore! You deserved much more than that." The door closed, leaving him behind in silence.

Gabriel hugged his knees to his chest, not surprised at this punishment. The plants of the monastery's garden were extremely valuable, and the truth of the matter was that Lothar would take

advantage of anything, find any pretext to torture him. Gabriel hated to admit it, but it was become almost a routine for them. He learned not to dwell on it too much, as thinking about it only made the entire situation worse. What haunted him was, in fact, the other man's statement. He dared another look at the blue sky through the barred window. Freedom. So close, yet so far away. Curling into a miserable ball on the cold floor, he finally let out all the pain of the day. He cried until he thought he couldn't cry anymore. His tears barely dried at dusk when they came for him.

* * * *

Gabriel awoke in a shower of ice cold water. He struggled to open his eyes, "Come on, little prince! Wakie wakie."

Gabriel dragged his aching body upright. He hurt, and he hurt badly. He didn't remember everything of what happened last night, but if he judged by the things he did remember, being conscious and able to walk was a miracle. Then again, Alarians did heal very fast.

Gabriel knew in the end he'd been lucky. Even if they whipped and beat him until he fell into unconsciousness, he managed to escape Lothar's clutches yet again. The supervisor seemed to have a sadistic vein, since he wanted Gabriel even more when he was bloody, sweaty and screaming. Luckily for him, at the last moment, another adept intervened and saved him from Lothar.

But now, with Vizer's presence in his room, Gabriel knew his luck wouldn't last for much longer. Vizer glared at him and barked out, "Hurry up and eat! You have chores to do. And don't forget to wash. You stink."

Gabriel flushed at the insult, but he couldn't deny it. Not that he could have given Vizer an answer. First of all, answering back was stupid and a tad suicidal, and secondly, the man already left. In any case, he *did* smell. Sweat and blood do *not* make a pleasant mix. And he still had Lothar's scent on him.

Still, he was thankful he didn't soil himself. Then again, he hadn't eaten all that much the day before. Surprisingly enough, he didn't vomit after being forced to go down on the superintendent. Anyway, there was food now, brought in by Vizer. Poor food, but life-maintaining nevertheless. Gabriel made a face, knowing that he would again be forced to eat that dreadful porridge that tasted like sand and worms.

Gabriel forced himself to eat and not throw up now. After all, he'd swallowed worse things. He hurried to the water to wash, hissing as he took off the dirty clothes that stuck to his wounds. *Great! Now the wounds will open all over again. Simply fantastic. Come on, Gabriel. Bath and chores means no Lothar.* With this thought in mind, he dipped the sponged in the water and began to clean himself.

Gabriel nearly screamed as a new wave of pain passed through his body. Damn it. Here at Kirgen, they loved to use specially prepared water, containing spices and all sorts of additives that made washing wounds a torture in itself. When the unfortunate victims of the whippings passed out, their torturers splashed them with liberal amounts of the liquid so that they could feel every minute of their torture. And they'd just given him the same type of water to wash.

How would he be able to clean his wounds with that? It was impossible. Tears threatened again and Gabriel urged himself to calm down. Crying wouldn't help him any. It never did. He needed to calm down and think. There had to be a solution. His hair! He would wash his hair in the water! And clean the rest of his body. He could use the water on the parts of his body that had not sustained significant injury. That would have to do until he could smuggle in some clean water. Maybe he could get some in the gardens. In his long years here, Gabriel learned the valuable skill of picking a lock. Too bad he couldn't use them to escape the Monastery. Magical shields simply did not yield to Gabriel's limited talents.

Hurriedly, Gabriel dipped his long black locks in the water. He scrubbed his hair methodically then passed the sponge over his

slender torso and long legs. He was very thorough with his backside, wanting to burn out even the memory of the superintendent's touch. It hurt since Vizer's whip landed on his thighs and ass as well. He gritted his teeth against the pain, since he could not stomach the very idea of preserving any remnant of Lothar of his skin. Finally done, he grabbed the bowl to throw the water out. For a second he caught his own reflection in the water. What was so special about him anyway? He was a freak among Alarians. All of them had powerful psychic magic, and he was stuck with only healing powers he couldn't appropriately use. All of them had beautiful eyes and strong bodies, and he stood out with his boring black hair and black eyes. Why did Lothar find him so beautiful?

Gabriel sighed. He wouldn't think about that now. He climbed on a small stool to the barred window and threw the water outside. Then he found a rag and cleaned the bars. All his efforts to do things right would probably be useless. Vizer always found some sort of defect in everything he did. Surely that wouldn't change now. Now more than ever since Vizer suddenly became more focused on him.

Why was Vizer acting like that? True, the man never liked him, but still he'd never once beaten him personally or asked to assist a punishment. Did it have a connection with Lothar's threat? And why did the superintendent said that? It was quite obvious that if Lothar was allowed to fuck him, he would have done it already. What could have changed?

An image of himself in the bath water flashed before his eyes. *No!* Could it be? How old was he? He hadn't realized it. When had the years passed? When had he become nineteen? When had the coming of age arrived? Gabriel froze as despair and cold terror hit him yet again. Somewhere along the way he lost count of the years. Obviously, he stayed longer than the six years he expected, but still, it couldn't be.

How was he supposed to find a mate if he'd been locked in the Monastery for nearly his entire life? It wasn't fair! All Alarians, both

male and female, had a special introduction ceremony at sixteen, when they were officially presented to Alarian society. Starting from that point, and from that particular party, they would go on until the age of nineteen, in their search of a mate. At nineteen, with the coming of age, they would be mated to another young Alarian. Often the process took time, so it was only after a few years that a final decision was made regarding the mating. Naturally, it wasn't entirely uncommon for matings with older Alarians to happen. Like, for example, when the initial mate died or if the older man had been unable to choose his mate according to custom for some reason. However, it was widely known that youths of mating age received preference, as well as matings between people of opposite sex. Same sex matings weren't unusual, but weren't considered an entirely acceptable practice, not from a societal point of view, at least.

But in his case, the only person Gabriel knew that would be interested in mating with him was *him*. His worst enemy, Lothar. *Oh, Light above!* Everything slowly started to coming into place. The man probably already had an agreement with his father that cancelled the need for him to be introduced in society. After all, Gabriel lived almost his entire life at Kirgen, supposedly to receive an education. A claim that Gabriel found his mate here would be perfectly believable.

Stupid, stupid Gabriel. He never once considered that this might happen. He assumed that at sixteen his father would be forced to take him out of the Monastery, because even the king had to obey tradition.

Obviously, he'd been mistaken, or maybe he unconsciously deluded himself into believing that he was younger just to hold on to that little spark of light in the future. Here he was now, his nineteenth birthday just ahead of him, and he just now realized it. His father obviously held no concern whatsoever about Alarian customs. Nor did he care that Lothar was a High Priest, and therefore his mating, especially with a young man of Gabriel's age, would be frowned upon. After all, customs were not binding, and in the end, it was the

law that mattered. The law his father made. Overwhelmed by the realization of what was to come, Gabriel collapsed on the floor as the darkness threatened to consume him whole.

When Vizer entered the room a while later, he found Gabriel busy brushing his hair. Gabriel's heart started beating faster as the supervisor frowned. He needed to make sure Vizer didn't realize anything was wrong. "Hello, My Lord Vizer." He greeted politely. "Thank you for the meal. I'm ready for my chores now."

As Gabriel finished brushing his locks and making a long braid, he observed the other man. Judging by his expression, the supervisor seemed surprised by Gabriel's unusual obedience. That could be a good thing, but it could also be bad. He needed to be careful. He would be obedient, but also normal, so that no one would suspect or find out about his plan.

As the supervisor turned and muttered a barely audible, "Good. Come on," Gabriel couldn't help a little smile. He had a plan now. He would escape and Lothar would never touch him, never again.

Chapter 2

Gabriel moved across the garden, silently going about his duties. In the past two weeks, he'd been obedient and careful in all his chores. He'd first been assigned to scrubbing the floors. Taking into account the sore state of his body, it had been an extremely painful and tortuous task, but he'd nevertheless been thorough in everything. Lothar summoned him many times, even when he didn't do anything wrong. But Gabriel wouldn't think about that. His plan was in motion, and soon he would be beyond Lothar's reach.

He'd decided against breaking the lock of his room/cell, unwilling to risk being caught in the gardens or wherever else for that matter. Such a thing would only have led to the failure of his plan, so he chose the longer and more complicated path of simulated resignation. Eventually, Vizer reassigned him to garden duties just like he hoped. The plants were his salvation. He was always supervised, but little by little, when Vizer was distracted, he managed to make some progress. A small smile appeared on his face. In fact, his goal was very close now. Stealthily, Gabriel slowly made his way to the section of red gyonites, watering plants on the way, taking care of small trees. He'd been afraid at first, but despair gave him strength. He simply *had* to succeed. It was the only way.

This particular breed of gyonites produced one of the most intoxicating perfumes in existence. Gabriel swallowed nervously. There was a reason he'd left this plant as the last one on his list. Its scent was known for having potent aphrodisiac properties, amplifying lusts and urges. But he was so close, he wouldn't go back now. He *couldn't* go back.

He stepped next to the flowers and carefully started taking care of the plants, checking for pests and for diseases. At the same time, he furtively passed a piece of cloth over the petals, collecting some of the precious pollen, then stole a piece of root from the next flower and a tiny leaf closer to the base from yet another gyonite. His head pounded and his heart beat so fast he thought it would burst out of his chest. If Vizer caught sight of his location, his plan would fail and all hope would be lost.

Thankfully, Vizer was at that particular moment distracted by another adept who'd dropped a potted plant. By the time Vizer saw Gabriel, he had already put aside all the necessary ingredients and moved from the flowers he'd attacked. "Hey, are you stupid or what?" He turned his head at the supervisor's voice. "Don't you know what flower this is?" He knew of course, but Vizer didn't have to be aware of that.

"Umm, a red galathine?" He guessed, struggling to sound as innocent as possible.

Vizer grabbed and shook him violently. "No, stupid slut! It's a red gyonite. The galathines are over there! Are you asking for it or what?"

Gabriel gasped in faked surprise at the supervisor's words. "No, no. I... I... I didn't realize!" He wasn't faking the fear though. If the stolen flower parts weren't secure inside his robes, and they fell from his pocket, all would be for naught. Ughh, why did Vizer have to shake him like that?

"Of course you didn't, useless idiot." Vizer grabbed him by the neck and raised him off the ground, cutting off his breathing. "I should just take you to the superintendent right now." Gabriel's eyes widened as fear escalated to terror. He never expected Vizer to be quite that angry at such a minor transgression. "But then he'd probably fuck you and that would cause all kinds of trouble for everybody. Go and shower the smell off you, and then back to scrubbing duties."

Yes! Gabriel could have whooped for joy when Vizer dropped him on the ground. Instead, he instantly started coughing as much needed air entered his lungs. The pause needed to draw in air earned him a kick in the ribs. “Move your ass!” Vizer hissed, and Gabriel urged himself to ignore the pain. He’d suffer later, now he had to get out of there. *Put it out of your mind! Put it out of your mind!* Ignoring the pain, he clumsily struggled to his feet and hurried towards the exit of the garden work yard.

As he ran, adepts of the Monastery turned their heads at him, watching curiously for a second. But as the perfume of the gyonites started to take effect, some started whistling and actually took a few steps towards him, smiling lasciviously. Others glared at him openly and dropped whatever they were working on, grabbing stones or anything handy and within reach to throw at him. The perfume made everybody follow their urges regarding his person. Suffice to say, that the stone throwing wasn’t very soul-lifting, but, in any case, running time now, depressing musings time later.

Much to his dismay, Gabriel found his path to be blocked. Did so many people from the Monastery want to fuck him into the ground? Apparently so. Several of the adepts jumped towards him, but he dodged and made a desperate dash for the exit. Another shower of objects promptly stopped him in his tracks, and he fell when something particularly hard hit him on the head. What on Kaldor? A shoe? A wooden shoe? They were throwing their own footwear at him now? Of course, Gabriel didn’t have time to ponder on the absurdity of the situation, because the lust-induced adepts profited from his briefly incapacitated state on the ground to jump him yet again.

Several strong bodies decked him and held him to the ground. Gabriel tried to struggle, lashing out with his fists and his feet, but in the end it was futile. There were so many of them, overwhelming him, lifting him, touching him all over.

The whole thing probably lasted a minute or so, but it felt like hours or days. Suddenly, just when he thought they would succeed in

raping him, the weight of bodies pushing him down disappeared, and he could breathe again. The “thank you” froze on his lips when he realized the identity of his savior. Lothar. The superintendent stared at him, a nearly crazed expression on his face. Not good, not good. Instinctively, he tried to cover himself with his discarded robes. He tried to crawl away, at the same time being too afraid to turn his back on Lothar. He knew how he must look, half-naked, roughed up by the other adepts, who were now watching on the wings. What was he thinking, going to pick that flower?

“Gabriel...” The familiar and nauseating tone returned with a frightening intensity, but this time it held all of Lothar’s demented lust. Without so much as a thought, Gabriel got up in a flash and made a mad dash towards the exit.

As he’d expected, Lothar’s psychic magic slammed him powerfully on the ground. Gabriel tasted blood in his mouth as he struggled to come back to his feet. Any moment now, Lothar would come to him. He had to escape. He had to hide. The fact that he didn’t actually have a place to hide was of no consequence. He just needed to disappear from the garden for the time being.

Steps closing in on his position announced that he was running out of time. He tried to find a way out, but the dizziness prevented him from even seeing straight. Then Lothar’s hands grabbed him and pushed him down. Encouraging shouts sounded in the background as the superintendent flipped him on his back. “Like that. I want to see your eyes when I fuck you,” Lothar growled.

But before Lothar could remove Gabriel’s clothes, the unbelievable happened. A shower of icy water bathed both the superintendent and himself. Gabriel could have cried from the relief when Lothar’s attention diverted away from him, the adepts suddenly silenced by the superintendent’s angry voice. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing, imbecile?” Gabriel didn’t think he’d ever heard Lothar quite so angry. The man’s voice sounded like thunder, and it seemed to him that the Monastery walls simply shook at the sound.

Vizer, the person responsible for the cold shower and now the current target of Lothar's wrath, stood his ground. He was pale, his fists clenched tight, but nevertheless, despite his obvious fright, he answered, "Your Holiness, you have to wait. He's not yet of age."

"I don't care!" Lothar bellowed and magically slammed Vizer to the ground. "I want him *now* and I will have him *now*!"

To Gabriel's surprise, Vizer didn't give up. "Your Holiness, you're not thinking straight. The boy accidentally slipped into the red gyonites. Snap out of it."

Lothar growled in anger, and magically hurled Vizer across the garden. "How dare you give me advice? I don't give a fuck. I've waited enough. He's mine and mine alone, and I will have him now."

The silence of the court yard turned completely deafening, and even the wind seemed to have stopped blowing. Gabriel suddenly feared for Vizer's life as the stocky man refused to give up. "If you take him now, the king will have all our heads. You'll lose him forever."

To Gabriel's surprise and relief, Vizer's final argument seemed to work, penetrating the lust-filled haze that clouded Lothar's mind. The man paused, as if having some inner battle, turned towards Gabriel and screamed, "Get the fuck out! And I don't want to see your ass again until next week, got that?"

Gabriel instantly grabbed his torn clothes and ran madly towards the exit. As he ran out he could hear Lothar select another adept from the crowd to sate his lusts. Tears flowed down his face as he ran desperately through the strangely empty hallways.

When Gabriel finally got to his room, he collapsed on the hard bed, sobbing. He felt dirty and torn inside and more miserable than ever. All those men, touching him... Simply the memory made him sick. He forced himself to get off the bed and threw the dirty clothes aside. They smelled like gyonite and cum. Gabriel promptly threw up as he realized some of the adepts actually got off in the short interval in which they touched him.

He wanted to shower for a decade, but he had no water. Sneaking out to procure some was out of the question. He could run into any one of those adepts. Gabriel's sobbing increased. Why did they have to hate him so? Was it his fault for being born?

The plan was working so perfectly. The forced visits to Lothar aside, he'd actually known a little peace and comfort. It was going *too* well. Gabriel knew there was no way the stolen plant ingredients could have survived the entire ordeal. Nevertheless, with a grimace, he started going through the pockets of the dirty robes until he managed to retrieve the pouch in which he'd placed the ingredients. He opened it with his hands trembling and his heart in his throat. It was stupid to hope, but he had to see, he had to know. As he looked inside, Gabriel's eyes widened. Everything was intact! By miracle, the plants survived his ordeal. Gabriel couldn't believe it. As he stared at the flimsy rag, leaf and little crumpled root, renewed hope filled him. He still had a chance. And now more than ever the plan had to succeed. There was no other way. Gabriel, son of the Alarian king Karon had to die.

* * * *

It was ready. The poison that would end his life was ready. Gabriel swallowed as he looked at the tiny glass vial which held the fruit of his efforts in the past week. Who knew making a deadly poison would take so long? But then again, this particular poison wasn't a common one. He'd just take it, go to sleep and never wake up again.

Well, at least all the time he'd spent learning about herbs finally paid off. Gabriel couldn't help but wonder if the members of the Monastery knew of the potentially poisonous plants in the garden. Sure enough, they weren't dangerous by themselves. But when mixed and left to ferment, the result was deadlier than any venom.

Gabriel took a deep breath and mentally prepared himself. All he needed to do is swallow a little bit of the concoction. It wouldn't even hurt. Yet still he hesitated. Why couldn't he do it?

A chill went through Gabriel's bones. What if Lothar anticipated this action and placed a binding on him? It was entirely possible. The older man was definitely devious and clever enough to do so. He could easily imagine Lothar laughing at his meager efforts of gathering the necessary ingredients for the poison that would never be used. But no, Lothar wouldn't win this time. It was *his* life. He'd never had the chance to decide anything for himself, but he could at least decide when he could stop existing.

Then again, maybe he wouldn't stop existing. Maybe his soul would just move to another place, a better place. It was unlikely though. He'd never actually done anything to deserve going to the Light. Taking his own life would most likely forfeit his chances completely. However, he could see no other choice. Going on living as Lothar's fuck toy wasn't an option. He endured living in Lothar's power for so many years simply due to the hope that one day, he would find a way to escape. Mating with Lothar erased this last hope, and Gabriel couldn't willingly allow himself to slowly waste away as Lothar's pet. Better to die now, when he still had at least a fragment of his dignity.

Gabriel took heart and prepared himself to drink the dark liquid, but he heard steps outside his room. Startled, he dropped the precious vial, which rolled under the bed. Before he could reach for it and hide it away, Vizer burst into the room. The man wore a smirk on his face that didn't bode well for Gabriel's well being. "Hello, Gabriel." What? Vizer never called him by his name directly. People generally addressed him as *idiot*, *stupid slut*, *useless whore* or varieties of them. The change couldn't mean anything good. He unwillingly shivered. "How are you today?" The evil glint in Vizer's eyes froze Gabriel inside.

Yes, something definitely felt wrong. He nevertheless answered politely. "Hello, my lord. I'm fine, thank you."

Vizer just smirked again at his polite reply. "I'm very happy about that. I'd like you to enjoy the last day you'll be spending here at Kirgen."

What? Already? That couldn't be right. Gabriel felt his insides shaking as he automatically repeated, "Th-the last day?"

The supervisor nodded and continued, obviously satisfied by Gabriel's distress. "Yes, the last day. The king will be here to pick you up in the afternoon."

The king, his father! If his father was here, it meant that the moment had finally come. He'd run out of time. Why didn't he take the poison when he had the chance? He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, determined to keep his father from realizing anything was wrong. The vial should still be under the bed. All he had to do was to sneak in and get it. He'd done more difficult things in the past. Once, he almost managed to sneak out the Monastery gates, although after being caught, he never tried that particular stunt again. In any case, he could do it.

The supervisor's voice continued to mock him. "What's the matter? Aren't you happy?"

He opened his eyes and gave Vizer a small smile. "It's not that, my lord. I'm just a little nervous. I haven't seen him in a long time, and..." His words died in his throat when Vizer made a face, as if in pain. "My lord, are you all right?"

The supervisor looked at him, surprise showing for a second then he snapped back with a frown. "I'm fine. Mind your own business."

But Gabriel wouldn't be deterred. His magic stirred as it felt pain in the man before him. "Are you sure? You look like you need help."

He took a step forward. Vizer's frown deepened as he repeated in a harsh voice. "I said mind your own business."

Gabriel knew that what his actions made no sense, but he couldn't help it. He'd always hated suffering in all its forms. So he gave the

supervisor another nervous smile and said, “Let me help you. Please?” Then he hastily added. “It’s my last day here, just like you said, my lord, I want to do something nice. I know it’s a lot to ask, but please, will you let me help?”

Vizer’s expression was unreadable. He said nothing. It suddenly occurred to Gabriel that the man seemed very old and sad for some reason. Not that he showed it. He always seemed so strong, and his chestnut hair didn’t have a hint of grey. But his eyes spoke differently, of a hidden suffering, a longing perhaps. In this particular moment, Gabriel just wanted to reach out and heal Vizer. He took the supervisor’s silence for agreement and stepped closer. Carefully, just like he’d done in the past, he let the healing magic loose, bathing the other man in comforting energy. His heart hurt when he analyzed Vizer. Most of the wounds on the man’s back, ankles and wrists were magically inflicted. Gabriel wasn’t surprised. Lothar again...

Gabriel carefully healed every torn tissue then opened his eyes, meeting the man’s gaze. That proved to be a mistake, as the supervisor pushed him away violently. “Stupid boy! I don’t need your compassion.”

Gabriel wanted to say that he understood his pain, but he knew that his words wouldn’t be welcome. So instead, he chose apologizing. “I’m sorry. I meant no offense. I only wanted to help.”

Vizer’s anger disappeared as a haunted shadow passed through his eyes. “Stupid, stupid boy. You should really worry more about yourself than about others. What happened to me will happen to you every single day of the rest of your life.” Gabriel’s eyes widened in shock. That had to be the kindest thing Vizer ever said to him in all his time in the Monastery. Not because of the words themselves, but the tone in which they were said. Like the man lamented his fate.

Suddenly Vizer’s eyes narrowed, no longer looking at him but staring somewhere across his shoulder. Time seemed to slow as Gabriel observed the other man cross the room and grab a familiar

vial off the floor. He felt all his hopes crashing down as Vizer opened said vial and lifted it to his nose.

There was a pause, like the silence before the storm. The supervisor met his eyes then crossed the room in a flash.

“What the fuck is this? Have you completely lost your mind?” Gabriel trembled at the supervisor’s fury, but he couldn’t say anything in his defense. It was more than obvious that Vizer figured out what concoction the vial contained. “So this was why you foolishly slipped into those plants last week. You needed it for the poison.” Tears flowed down his cheeks as Vizer slapped him with such force that he crashed to the ground. “You’re smarter than you look, I have to say. But there is no possible way you can slip this to the superintendent.”

At this phrase, Gabriel snapped out of his despair-induced trance. “N-no, no, it’s not like that. You don’t understand.”

Vizer arched his brow in obvious disbelief but his eyes flashed dangerously. “Oh? So maybe you’re going to say that this poison isn’t yours? Don’t you dare lie to me, little boy!”

“No, I mean, yes, it’s mine. But, but...” He brushed his tears away and continued. “I wasn’t planning to use it to poison Lothar. I couldn’t do that. I would never do that.”

“Do you think I’m stupid? If you weren’t planning to assassinate Lothar, why....?” Vizer’s anger disappeared again as comprehension dawned. “I see. You want to use it on yourself.”

From his place on the floor, Gabriel just nodded. He crawled towards Vizer, draping himself at the supervisor’s feet. “Please, don’t take it away! It’s my only hope.” He raised his head and met Vizer’s eyes. “I know it’s cowardly, I know it’s not right, but I can’t live like that! I’d rather die.” Surely Vizer understood. Gabriel didn’t want to die, not really, but anything was better than living at Lothar’s mercy.

A smile ghosted across Vizer’s face. “It didn’t even occur to you that you could use this against Lothar, did it?” Gabriel’s shook his head. “Resourceful as you are, you might have actually had a chance. If you seduced him and drew his attention, it could have worked.”

Gabriel gaped at the supervisor in disbelief. He could never willingly touch Lothar. The very idea made him feel sick. “He’s obsessed with you, you know. He screams your name when he fucks other people.”

Gabriel shook his head, unwilling to acknowledge or think about Vizer’s words. “I-I don’t...”

Vizer’s eyes were hard when they met his own. “Yes, you, with your big innocent eyes and pretty face. Maybe he’d have gotten over you if you once showed interest or enjoyment, but you hate him, you’re disgusted by him and that just attracts him all the more.”

Gabriel closed his eyes as everything Lothar had done to him across the years came back. “I know that he enjoys my suffering, my humiliation. But I can’t help how I feel.” No matter what, he refused to accept Lothar as anything else but his enemy and tormentor.

The supervisor examined him critically. “Indeed. And you’re unique like that, because you’re the only one who would ever say *no*.”

What did Vizer mean by that? Could it be that...? “My lord? Is that why everyone hates me? Because Lothar likes me?”

Vizer laughed. “Likes you? Likes you? That’s rich. But yes, that’s why you’re rejected. They want what you have and what you hate.” At Gabriel’s horrified expression, he added, “Most of the people here, they’d kill just to suck him off. They worship Lothar like a god. His power is so amazing for them. And the fact that you reject him simply makes you arrogant and disgusting to them.”

This entire conversation seemed surreal. Gabriel couldn’t believe his ears. Gabriel couldn’t help himself. He stuttered out, “B-but I always thought they hated me because I was...” He swallowed before finishing hesitantly. “...half-human.”

Apparently, Vizer was either amused by the discussion or in the mood to talk because he answered. “No, stupid boy. They don’t even know. Only Lothar and I are aware of this aspect of your nature. Mostly they hate you because you’re nobility, the king’s son at that, and because they assume that in your arrogance, you think you’re too good for Lothar.”

That wasn't right. He was only the king's bastard son. "But I don't—" Before Gabriel could finish the sentence, another thought flashed through his head. "What about you? Do you worship him?"

Vizer's eyes turned cold again. For a second Gabriel thought he would hit him again, but Vizer said, "Enough of this. I've wasted too much time with this useless discussion." He pulled Gabriel upright and pressed the vial in his palm. "Take it. It would probably be best for everyone. Most of all, for you."

Without another word, the supervisor headed for the door. Despite his shock, Gabriel finally managed to whisper a choked "thank you" at the man's retreating form. Vizer paused in the doorway and turned, meeting the boy's eyes for a second. "Good bye, Gabriel. May we never meet again after this day."

With that, Vizer turned abruptly left Gabriel alone in the room. Gabriel felt so shaken after Vizer's visit and he could only pity the man for having to remain here. Whatever his story was, Gabriel could clearly see that his stay at Lothar's side wasn't entirely consensual. However, he couldn't do anything about it. He needed to stop thinking so much and finally take the plunge.

Gabriel took a deep breath, opened the vial and prepared himself for stepping towards death. As much as he hated giving up on life, this clearly remained his last option. Just as he lifted the poison to his lips, steps sounded at the door again. Gabriel barely had time to put the vial away in his robes before the door opened yet again.

As steps closed in on his position, Gabriel dared to look up. His father, King Karon, was here, and he didn't look very happy.

Chapter 3

For the first time since he'd been brought here ten years ago, Gabriel stood in front of his father. The king frowned fiercely and his eyes flashed intensely in anger. "Come here!" Karon said in a low tone. When his father spoke like that, it didn't bode well for anybody. Gabriel struggled to obey, but his legs refused to work. The familiar feeling of fear seemed to have rendered him unable to move.

The threatening form of his sire closed in on Gabriel. "I-I'm sorry, father. I—" His voice was cut off when the king pushed him to the floor and kicked him hard in the stomach with his boot.

"Shut up!" His father barked at him. "You're so pathetic. You don't deserve to be my son." Karon obviously found satisfaction in his pain, because the second hit came swiftly to his ribs. Oh, Light help him! Gabriel felt something crack and barely managed to suppress a scream. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to greet you in an inappropriate manner. I apologize, Your Highness," he choked out. Distantly, he wondered how long it would take for the broken ribs to heal. He couldn't use his healing powers on himself, so they would have to heal in the normal Alarian way.

Karon seemed placated by Gabriel's excuse. "That's better. At least you're aware of your position and value." The king's eyes flashed dangerously as he said, "Don't ever make the mistake as to think that because we unfortunately share the same blood, you're my son. You're not and you never will be. Is that clear?"

Gabriel yelped as his father abruptly lifted him, restraining his movements with magic. Terror gripped him, and he broke out in cold

sweat as images from the last time he'd been bound by a spell overwhelmed his mind.

Gabriel was working in the garden. He'd struggled with a particularly nasty pest he found on a plant for the past half hour. He was so focused on what his work and so used to being watched, he didn't even pay any heed to his surroundings, putting all his efforts in curing the plant.

But all thoughts of gardening disappeared from his head as he felt a familiar presence behind him, and Gabriel hastily turned. Lothar stood there, watching him with the same expression of lust that seemed to be omnipresent lately. "You seem to have a bit of trouble with that plant there," the man practically purred. "Come, I'll give you a little lesson on the right way to treat delicate things."

A lesson indeed. Lothar drug him out of the garden under the eyes of all the working adepts, taken to the superintendent chambers, where the man bound him, ripped his clothes off and beaten him for no reason whatsoever. After releasing him from his magical bonds, Lothar jacked off and come all over Gabriel's bloody body.

Panic flooding his mind, Gabriel tried to struggle against his father's magical bonds, but Karon didn't take well to opposition. He tightened the bonds across Gabriel's windpipe, effectively blocking his breathing. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Y-yes, Your Highness," Gabriel barely managed to say.

Satisfied, Karon assented, dropping Gabriel to the floor, and Gabriel fought back tears. It wasn't like the king's attitude was unexpected. By rights, he shouldn't even care about Karon's opinion since the man abandoned him in Lothar's clutches ten years ago. Still, it hurt that his own parent treated him like an unworthy piece of trash. Why did everyone have to hate him? What had he done to deserve this?

"Right. If you're done crawling on the floor like a filthy animal, go change and get ready. And hurry! We're supposed to be on our way already." Gabriel nodded hastily, scuttling to his feet. The after

effects of the beating still hadn't passed, however, and he obviously didn't move fast enough, because the king snapped at him. "What are you doing? Move faster!" An evil grin appeared on the king's handsome face as he violently grabbed Gabriel. "Maybe I should go get Lothar. I understand he's quite resourceful in making you obey."

Gabriel's eyes widened. *No, not that, anything but that.* Unwillingly, he trembled, but somehow found the strength to answer his father. "No, no, Your Highness, that won't be necessary. I will go change right now."

The king chuckled darkly at Gabriel's response. "Yes, you certainly will. It was a good choice to put you here, boy. I like that Lothar has instilled some discipline you. Plus, as worthless as you are, for some reason His Holiness likes you." The king's chuckle turned into outright laughter.

Gabriel ignored the sting in his heart and the pain and exhaustion as he struggled to obey his father. He knew that if the king harbored any kind of affection for him, Gabriel would have immediately been healed and ready for the trip. His father was one of the best healers of the land, and Gabriel would be unscathed in seconds. But at the same time, he was well aware that he could not expect that. Karon never did anything remotely kind for him, even during his childhood years. There had been no affection or laughter for Gabriel, even when he'd lived at the palace. The king paid attention to him in that period only to hurt him.

The attitude didn't change with the passage of time, because even now, in the Monastery of Kirgen, his sire showed him nothing but blatant disgust. "Change those rags, we have to go. We have preparations to make for the ceremony, and I don't have time to waste with your stupidity."

What? Gabriel found himself incapable of moving as his father's words penetrated his brain. "C-ceremony? What ceremony?"

Obviously pleased at his distress, Karon continued in a sarcastic voice. “Oh? I didn’t mention it? How silly of me. Why, your mating ceremony of course.”

Already? He’d missed the chance to use the poison. A fearful thought then flashed through Gabriel’s head. What if his father’s beating destroyed the vial? It had been in his pocket, vulnerable to all the hits. If his only hope disappeared, how would he escape Lothar’s clutches? Gabriel paled at the thought that maybe he would be forced into the horrible mating after all.

“Come on, Gabriel, surely you expected this. Why the long face?”

Gabriel made an effort to focus on his father’s words and forced himself to answer. “It’s just that I don’t really understand. Who will I mate with? I don’t know anybody of that age.”

His father smirked. “Don’t worry your pretty little head with that. It’s all been arranged.”

Yes, arranged. Gabriel suspected it, of course. But he had to ask, he needed to know for sure. “But, who?”

“Who, indeed.” Gabriel jumped as Lothar’s voice sounded right behind him. He turned, and predictably found the superintendent watching him with the same predatory expression, just like he had in the garden. A chill passed through Gabriel’s bones as Lothar continued. “I would feel offended by your ignorance, but I know you’re not very experienced in this. I will be your mate, of course.”

Gabriel felt his despair overwhelm him at the confirmation of his worst fear. Probably, somewhere, deep inside, he still hoped his father wouldn’t be as cruel as to hand him over to Lothar like that. Even when his father proved to be so merciless with him, he still unconsciously kept a glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, he wouldn’t be forced into an unwilling mating. After all, in spite of the fact that gender wasn’t an issue in Alarian matings, it was usually consider better for men and women to bond. Perhaps that was what stopped him from taking the potion when he had the chance.

But obviously he'd been mistaken. And his only hope, the poison in his pocket, probably didn't survive the morning. Gabriel forced himself to calm down and say something. He couldn't give up. He couldn't allow his father and Lothar to prevail.

"But Your Holiness is a servant of the Light. How can you mate?" He fully expected some sort of violent punishment since he'd questioned their decision, but he simply couldn't remain silent.

Much to his surprise, Lothar just smirked and said, "I'm flattered for your concern, my little Gabriel. But I've been given a special mating license due to my dedication to the Light and my services to the crown." Gabriel felt faint. He dared a glance at Karon and started at the evil light in his father's eyes. Karon actually looked smug and satisfied. Gabriel wanted to cry. Why did his father hate him so much?

He had no time to ponder this new discovery. "Now, come on already! We've lingered long enough. We have to leave for the capital." Lothar was coming too? Lothar threw a change of clothes at him and stared at him with interest. They didn't actually expect that he would change with company, did they? "Of course, I'll change at once. But could I—"

The superintendent just laughed. "Don't tell me you're shy now. I've seen everything you can possibly show me. Now strip."

Gabriel prayed the ground would open to swallow him right then and there. He could feel the flush stain his cheeks and his heart dropped to his stomach, but Lothar's vulgar words had an unexpected side effect. "Lothar! What do you mean you've seen him naked? I specifically mentioned that he was to remain a virgin until his coming of age!"

The superintendent just arched a brow at the king's outburst. "Calm down, king Karon. I didn't say I fucked him, did I? Just that I saw him—"

Karon gritted his teeth. "Right, like you can keep your cock in your pants if you take his clothes off!"

Lothar's retort didn't delay. "You sorely underestimate me, my king. Unlike you, I can control my cock just fine."

The tension escalated in the room, but Gabriel knew better than to get between the two powerful men, so he didn't bother to stay and hear his father's response. Instead, he took advantage of the fact that the other Alarians were slightly distracted to stealthily search his pockets. He suppressed a sigh of relief upon realizing the vial remained intact. He sneaked into a corner and hastily slipped on the new robes. But he couldn't be as naïve as to think that he wasn't being observed. He couldn't take the poison now. Instead, he fumbled a bit with his clothes, managing to take the potion out of the pocket of the dirty clothes and dropped it instantly into the pocket of the new one.

In the meantime, Karon and Lothar continued to hurl hash words at each other. Gabriel found it unusual that the king would take such offense, even from the High Priest of Light and superintendent of Kirgen. Then again, Lothar was a very unusual person. Gabriel didn't doubt the fact that the sneaky superintendent never lost sight of him for a moment.

Gabriel's attention turned back to the conversation, now led in a dangerously high tone. "Are you positively insane? Do you know what you've done? You've completely shamed my house! He was not to be touched until the mating!"

Lothar just shrugged, disregarding the king's words. "And what have I done, pray tell? He's still a virgin, just as I promised. The fact that I played with him once in a while means nothing, since I never actually fucked him."

Lothar seemed calm, an extremely unusual fact taking into account his violent personality. Gabriel knew better than to be fooled by this mask. The superintendent acted like this on purpose, simply to bother the king. How strange that Lothar would dare to do that. His father was still the king, and Lothar owed him respect and allegiance.

Apparently, Lothar pushed the king too far. Karon took a deep breath and asked in a flat voice, “Gabriel, are you ready?” Gabriel blinked in surprise at the sudden statement. He hadn’t expected to be addressed.

Lamely he managed to stutter out, “Y-yes, Y-your Highness.”

“Good, we’re leaving.” What? Just like that? Gabriel could barely contain his shock upon realizing that his father would actually walk away from the dispute. He knew little about Karon, but what he did know unnerved him. The king never allowed anyone to question his authority and punished any transgression with severity. He felt it himself more than once.

Lothar smiled in satisfaction, but his smile disappeared when the king added, “Oh, and High Priest Lothar... You’re not coming.”

Shock registered on the superintendent’s face for a second and Gabriel inwardly did a happy dance. Perhaps his father would change his mind about the dreaded mating as well. “Excuse me? We established that I was to accompany you to the castle today and we would hold the ceremony at once.”

“Yes, well, we also established that you would not touch Gabriel.” Gabriel could barely contain his glee now. He was free. His father wouldn’t force him to mate with Lothar.

Lothar simply exploded, all composure gone in a second. “Karon, we had a deal. You’re not backing on it now. No one double crosses me, not even the king.” Gabriel’s father paled in front of Lothar’s fury. Obviously he’d never seen the man express himself so violently before. Shards of glass showered the room as the barred window exploded under the pressure of Lothar’s magic. Objects of worship floated as the energy grew out of control. Oh, Light above! Gabriel had never seen Lothar so furious.

Taking into account the circumstances, Gabriel wasn’t surprised when the king said, “I didn’t say that the mating was suspended. I will deal with its organization. When we reach the capital, I’ll make all the

necessary arrangements and announcements. The ceremony will be held in two weeks.”

There was a release of pressure as the objects crashed back down on the floor. “Very well, my king. I will see you in two weeks then. Farewell!”

With that ominous goodbye, Lothar took his leave. Karon turned towards Gabriel and said “Well, what are you waiting for? I said we’re leaving.” The king grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the exit of the small room.

As they moved through the silent corridors of the monastery, Gabriel sighed quietly. Of course he couldn’t be free. Well, not yet at least. He still had a hope, a hope which lay in a little vial in his pocket.

* * * *

Warm, Gabriel felt so warm. He seemed to be enveloped in masculine scent, a wonderful perfume, like ash, leather and Clarion. So strong. Powerful arms held him tightly and securely against a rock-hard chest and elegant, reliable hands caressed his head, clever fingers threading through his hair. It felt so incredibly perfect and relaxing. But Gabriel knew what would be nicer. He squirmed a little on the other man’s lap. There it was, his mate’s erection, right against his ass.

Gabriel’s eyes flew open. Startled, he jumped from his place, landing unceremoniously in his father’s lap. The king scowled at him, “What the hell is wrong with you, boy?” Gabriel blinked for a moment, not knowing his whereabouts. Right, he rode in the carriage heading for Galamar, the capital city of Alaria.

They’d been on the road for three days, during which he was always supervised, either by the king or by some guard. It made him feel supremely uncomfortable not to have one ounce of privacy, even when he took care of his private needs. Of course, that was just a mild

inconvenience compared to the fact that he didn't manage to access the vial again. He changed his clothes under his father's supervision, and the potion ended up somewhere in the bags.

Gabriel put his best repentant smile on for his father. "I'm sorry. I think I had a dream, and it startled me."

His father harrumphed. "What kind of man are you? Being scared by illusions in your head?" But he let the topic go. Gabriel thought that maybe his father lived with demons and nightmares of his own.

In any case, his dream wasn't a nightmare, or a daymare if that existed, since it was day outside. Rather it was a most wonderful dream. Gabriel never felt like that in real life and he certainly never met anyone who wore that scent or who treated him with gentleness and protectiveness. Additionally, there was nothing like Clarion or leather in the carriage. Was his state of mental unrest responsible for the unusual dream?

Furthermore, why did his dream-self identify the man as his mate? There was no way Lothar could be that man, he smelled and tasted bitter. His whole presence reminded Gabriel of the flowers of Calaphas - beautiful, yet poisonous and somehow repugnant.

Probably, he'd just invented his "dream-mate." Gabriel tried to smother a sigh. He would have liked to at least have a face for his dream lover, but he'd only caught the strong scent of Clarion, the beautiful exotic evergreen tree that only grew in the remotest of locations. Oh, and something else, long blond hair. He'd been playing with a long blond braid in the dream. His dream mate... A sigh escaped Gabriel, earning a glare from his father.

The sound of the carriage pulling to a halt interrupted any continuation of the fantasy and prevented any scolding from the king. "If you're done bemoaning your fate, or whatever it is you're doing, we're here." The king pulled the curtains off the carriage door. Galamar majestically stretched before Gabriel's eyes, sparkling in the sun like a jewel.

Somehow, Gabriel assumed that he wouldn't be as amazed at the capital as during his childhood years. He lived at the palace and visited the city a few times. Escaped would probably be a more accurate description. He was positively fascinated by the busy streets, fountains, green gardens and bazaars. Of course, his father punished him severely, but it was worth it. Galamar was splendid, simply because everything worked in harmony.

Alarians were renowned for their perfectionism. The walls of their capital city had been built in ancient times from the whitest marble, and in spite of the many centuries they had seen, they still preserved their original beauty. Their upper levels held inscriptions carved in pure gold, depicting various scenes from Alarian history. Large gems were embedded in the ancient gates, their power making it virtually indestructible. Several tall towers constantly held watch above the busy city.

Of course, the towers didn't actually focus on the city itself. It wasn't necessary. The city functioned simply by the white magic of its inhabitants and crime was very rare. Guards did patrol the streets, mostly to maintain public order and help the citizens in case disaster struck. Usually, there was no need for their help, since Alarians were kind by nature and helped each other out. In Gabriel's experience, though, this kindness had its limits. In any case, their race had many enemies and the tower guards kept constant watch to provide a warning if necessary. Alaria always was a prosperous land and many coveted the wealth of the royal coffers. Their world, Kaldor, could be a dangerous place.

Gabriel didn't know a lot about Alarian politics, since he was mostly kept out of all important matters. He barely remembered anything from his childhood, and his education at Kirgen didn't discuss such issues. He dimly remembered there had been a war, sometime in the past, with mages? Gabriel couldn't exactly recall, but Alaria won after making some strange alliance with a difference race.

Regardless of the unusual alliance so long ago, Alaria's safety seemed to be threatened by something at present, as upon the arrival of the carriage, the ancient gates were locked. In fact, for this reason, they were still waiting on the hill that marked the entrance in the valley of Galamar. Surely the people knew the king would be arriving today. How odd, to have locked the gates like that. What was going on?

This obviously unnerved the king, because he shouted to a guard. "Valdis!"

The guard rode up to the door of the carriage. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Valdis, what the hell is going on?"

Valdis swallowed nervously at the king's evident fury. "We're not entirely sure, Your Highness. We've sent a scout ahead to check the current situation. We will ensure your safety and that of Prince Gabriel, of course."

The knight's reference to Gabriel's royal nature did nothing to placate the king's fury. "Stop being an idiot and find me answers before I have all your heads for your incompetence." Well, so much for Alarian kindness.

The guard hastily retreated to obey his lord's command. It took a while until the scout returned, and judging by the king's expression, Gabriel knew there would be hell to pay for the delay. Valdis came to the door of the carriage for the second time. "Your Highness..."

"Yes, Valdis, what is it? What's wrong?" the king said between gritted teeth, barely containing his fury.

"Apparently a host of Xeetahn soldiers has been detected heading this way."

Valdis wouldn't meet Karon's eye, and Gabriel knew why when the king's fury exploded. "*What?* The demons? What are they doing on my land?"

"We're not sure, Your Highness, but the guards are opening the gates now. Maybe the royal advisors or Your Majesty's sons know

more.” The mere mentioning of the king’s other sons, and Gabriel’s half-brothers, placated Karon’s anger.

“Indeed. Head for the castle at once.”

Valdis nodded and saluted militarily. “With your permission, Your Highness.” Then he rode away and the carriage started moving again, surrounded by its mounted escort.

By the time the carriage rolled down the hill, the gates were completely open. That was the disadvantage of having such strong gates. It took forever to open them when a powerful mage wasn’t present. The guards weren’t capable of opening it magically and needed to use the side mechanism. Gabriel’s thoughts mangled when, as if by some silent accord, both the carriage and the escort sped through the gates and on the streets. He hung on for dear life on the seat, praying to hold down his lunch. His father seemed entirely unfazed at this development. More so, he actually shouted at the driver of the carriage to go faster.

The carriage rattled on the streets, and Gabriel could hear people cursing as they scrambled out of the way to avoid being trampled. Gabriel feared that the material of the wheels wouldn’t withstand the abuse or the horses would break their reins.

Gabriel closed his eyes and imagined himself in the protecting arms of his dream mate. The image comforted him immensely, but still, it seemed like an eternity until the carriage finally started to slow. Gabriel sighed in relief, earning himself a scowl from the king. Luckily, since they arrived, Karon refrained from making any comments and hastily exited the carriage, as impeccable looking as ever.

Gabriel drew a deep breath, and after a few seconds, managed to follow his father. As he descended, he observed two young men running in their direction. “Father, father!” His brothers. They’d grown a lot. They had probably already mated, perhaps even provided heirs for the crown. Tears filled Gabriel’s eyes as his elder brother, Kalin, gave their father a warm hug. His other brother, Orin, jumped

in Karon's arms as soon as Kalin released the king. Why couldn't he receive such affection?

A shudder passed through Gabriel as he saw the answer to his question descending the palace stairs. "Karon, welcome home!" The Queen was as beautiful as ever. Leyra boasted perfect lavender hair and eyes, which Orin inherited. Kalin took after his father with purple hair and dark blue eyes. Together they formed the perfect Alarian royal family. Except him. He was the outsider.

Gabriel knew this, and he knew that the same thoughts passed through his step-mother's mind. In fact, when the royal family turned towards him, Gabriel could practically sense the hostility in the air and took a step back. The Queen's perfect mouth twisted into a sneer. "I see you've brought the bastard." The bastard, that was him. He didn't even have a name to these people. He was just the bastard, the mistake. The bastard son of the king and an unknown human woman.

Karon nodded. "Yes. Lothar will be joining us in a week or so, and if all goes well, the ceremony will be held at his arrival." The Queen watched her husband as he spoke, then observed Gabriel critically with a disdainful look in her eye. It made him feel like an insect, a worthless maggot. Luckily the Queen soon deemed him uninteresting and said, "Well, in any case, we have other problems now. The Xeetah are upon us and we need to make preparations."

"Indeed, my dear, you're right. I heard at the gate. How despicable of them to come in my absence."

The absurdity of his father's remark almost made Gabriel laugh. He didn't know a lot about these Xeetah or their lands, but it was quite obvious that these people couldn't have known about the king's absence. In fact, if one took into account the vastness of the Alarian lands, the Xeetah probably left their country long before Karon left Galamar.

No one pointed out this particular fact, however. The Queen did direct a glare at the king, but for an entirely different reason. "Well, if you listened to me and just sent someone in your stead, or better yet,

if you never sired this bastard, you would have been here to deal with the issue.” Gabriel fought to keep his expression blank. His existence was questioned in his presence. Wasn’t that so very welcoming?

“Leyra, please, let’s not get into that. We’ve discussed this a thousand times. We have other issues to deal with now.” The king effectively changed the subject. “Are the Xeetah hostile?”

“We can’t be sure. After all, a certain king carelessly disregarded the alliance made so long ago.”

Karon paled at his wife’s scolding. As if remembering something, he turned towards Gabriel, “You, why are you standing there eavesdropping?” In a commanding tone he addressed one of the servant girls currently responsible with moving the luggage. “Teera, take Gabriel to his room and make sure he stays there.”

At the king’s command, Teera stopped her frantic efforts with the luggage and curtsied clumsily. “Yes, Your Highness.” Throwing a glare at Gabriel, she said, “Please, follow me.”

Gabriel did as instructed. He didn’t expect to be welcomed. The Queen always hated him. He couldn’t even blame her, since he represented living proof of her husband’s adultery with another woman, a human at that. His brothers were once kind to him, but shortly before he’d departed for Kirgen, they’d turned cold and disdainful as well, influence of the queen most likely. Most of the servants were uncomfortable around him, because they had no clue on how they should address him. On the one side, Gabriel had royal blood and therefore deserved respect and deference. On the other, he was the bastard son of a human woman, generally hidden from the eyes of Alarian society and a stain on the king’s reputation.

It didn’t help his cause that, in his opinion, he looked nothing like his father. Probably the only thing they had in common was their healing gift. So if he thought about it, the very fact that Karon sort of recognized him as a son could be considered amazingly peculiar. A mating ceremony was to be held, right? This meant that Alarians

probably knew and acknowledged his parentage. Gabriel was confused.

In any case, that wasn't important now. Who cared about court intrigues anyway? As Teera led him to his chambers, carrying a bag with his meager belongings, it occurred to Gabriel that this was the perfect chance to look for his vial. The servant girl led him to a room, then unceremoniously dropped the bag on the bed. "You are to stay here at all times. Everything you need has been provided for you." Teera made a face in obvious annoyance as she showed the location of the water and the snacks. Opening another door, she explained that it was the bathing chamber where he could take care of his private necessities.

Gabriel observed her in silence, impatiently waiting for her to leave. At his passive attitude, the girl turned. "You are not to exit this room. Do you understand, boy?" Startled at being suddenly addressed, Gabriel managed a nod. Apparently satisfied, Teera made her way to the door, muttering something unintelligible under her breath. It was probably a curse that she was forced to do the unpleasant task of taking care of him.

Gabriel waited for a few seconds until he heard the echo of Teera's steps disappear in the distance. He hastily jumped to where his bag had been abandoned. He knew he didn't have much time. Someone would come to torment him in a few minutes for sure.

Rummaging through the pack, he soon found the robes he'd first worn after leaving Kirgen. Fervently, he started going through its pockets. The vial was still there, where he'd dropped it during his father's fight with Karon. With trembling hands, he took out the potion. His final hope, Linas: The kiss of death.

Gabriel sat on the bed, absently pushing every article aside. There could be no going back after this. He hated to resort to such a thing in the first place, but he had no choice. He took a deep breath, opened the cork and drank every drop of the bittersweet liquid. Then leaning on the pillows, he closed his eyes and waited for death.

Chapter 4

It had been three days since Gabriel's arrival at the castle. Three days since he took The Kiss of Death, meant to free him from the prison of his existence, three days during which the life in the capital city of Alaria gained an erratic rhythm and court activity became simply chaotic. Even King Karon was nervous and maybe even a tad afraid.

But of course none of this agitation had any connection with Gabriel. But in spite of the imminence of the Xeetah's arrival, Gabriel was still being watched. The king stationed a guard outside his chamber and the doors of the room only opened when servants came to bring him food or change the sheets.

Gabriel paced through his room, chewing on his nails. He didn't understand what was going on. He didn't expect a magical reprieve from having to mate with Lothar. He played his last card, and it failed. How could that be? The Kiss of Death was supposed to be an instant poison, but here he was, very much alive and very much depressed by this fact.

What really bothered him the most was that deep inside, a part of him that rejoiced at the potion's failure, a part of him that wasn't ready to give up on life so easily. However, Gabriel fought life nineteen years. He was tired. He couldn't take what they had in store for him, and if the only escape was death, well, he'd die.

With recent developments, dying also became a problem. Gabriel thought as to why the Kiss of Death could be ineffective. The only reasons he managed to come up with for this failure were that either he screwed up when making it or it had a somewhat different effect

on humans/half-humans. He needed to know, he needed to be sure. Alas, being stuck here in this room didn't allow him to do any research on what could have happened to foil his plan.

Surely, there had to be more important things to deal with than watching over his room. Even from the few snippets of conversation he heard and the few glimpses he saw of the corridors, Gabriel realized the Xeetahn arrival affected the lives of all those living in the palace. These days, even Orin, who Gabriel knew to be the spoiled child of the family, was given some sort of assignment from either the queen or Karon. Kalin seemed to be even busier, since in his role of an heir, he was nominated to supervise most of the preparations for receiving the Xeetahn delegation. If only the guard found some other thing to do as well. If the guard left, Gabriel could pick the lock and find his way to the palace library. It would be hard, but not impossible. But to even try it, the guard needed to leave.

As if in answer of his desperate plea, Gabriel heard the sound of approaching footsteps. He mentally calculated if the time for the change in shift arrived and concluded that it had to be someone else. But who? A conversation began between the guard and the new arrival, and Gabriel leaned against the door, trying to overhear.

With great difficulty, Gabriel discerned the fact that the second voice belonged to his brother, Orin. He felt frustrated beyond belief at his inability to hear the actual words. Alas, Gabriel's half blood nature had a detrimental effect on his senses and he didn't have the physical strength, agility or senses of normal Alarians. What he did have, though, was a way to open this door.

Gabriel took a deep breath and retrieved the pin he obtained with great difficulty, practically stealing it from a servant's hair. Opening the door with both his brother and the guard standing there was more than a little foolish, but he felt the overwhelming urge to hear their conversation. Hopefully, they would be too absorbed in their own words that they wouldn't hear the door click open.

His hands began to sweat and he wiped them nervously against his

robes. He could do this. He'd done it before with locks that were more complicated. Pushing the pin inside the locked key hole, Gabriel worked the mechanism, mentally thanking the Light that it wasn't magically shielded. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the lock yielded and Gabriel carefully cracked the door open, wincing at every imagined sound.

"Don't worry about it." Orin said. "Gabriel is locked in and can't get out. There are more important things to deal with."

"But Prince Orin, I was told—"

"Like I said, don't worry about it. Or are you questioning my orders?"

"No, of course not." With a huff, Orin practically sauntered to the door and prepared himself to insert the key into the lock. Gabriel's eyes widened as his gaze met Orin's lavender one.

"I'll just check up on my brother later." Orin noted, pushing the guard aside. "Come on. We both have work to do."

Gabriel couldn't believe it. No doubt about it, his brother saw him. Then why did Orin leave and take the guard with him?

Shaking his head at his brother's incomprehensible behavior, Gabriel decided he didn't have the time to dwell on the issue right now. He needed to try and find out what could have caused the failure of the potion.

With as much stealth as possible, Gabriel slipped out of the room and into the hallway. This side of the royal wing wasn't as busy, but passing through the main corridors unnoticed would be a problem.

He needn't have worried. In the hustle and bustle of the large hallway, with servants passing through in every direction carrying all sorts of items, everyone seemed to be oblivious of his existence. They were probably too concerned with their own tasks to worry about Gabriel, beyond providing what he needed for survival. In truth, Gabriel wasn't surprised. He overheard a few whispers about the demons coming to establish the conditions of their previous alliance. It was a risky thing, since if the Alarians made the demons mad, a war

would break out between the two nations, a war Alaria could not afford.

Either way, the threat looming ahead helped Gabriel and he managed to slip through unnoticed. Gabriel entered the large section of the palace which held the castle library. It was very spacious, very old and also very empty. Empty of people, that is. Because the large wooden shelves contained so many scrolls and books, Gabriel thought he was going to faint. He didn't have much time before he had to return. How would he ever be able to find what he needed?

At any rate, he was lucky that in all the chaos, no one had time for reading and studying. He could look without being disturbed, and doubted anyone would have assisted him anyway. He couldn't have asked in the first place as it would have given both his presence and his plan away. Gabriel scoffed as he imagined what that conversation would be like. *Would you please be so kind as to direct me to the best books on poisons? I seem to be having trouble killing myself.*

Gabriel couldn't help but feel surprised upon realizing he was actually being sarcastic. Well, anyway, it was better than despair. Plus he still had options, even if the potion failed completely. As he browsed the shelves, Gabriel made a list of alternative methods of suicide. There was always jumping from a very high window. The palace had a lot of high towers that would be suitable for such an endeavor. An additional option would be the use of whatever sharp object he could get his hands on. He could always smuggle in something at dinner.

But of course, there were problems with both plans. The main flaw of plan one was that the castle practically overflowed with guards and people, and he was forbidden to enter the towers, or the highest levels. Jumping from his own window held a high level of risk because it would most likely just cause incredible pain and break every bone in his body, without actually killing him. The problem with plan two was that mostly servants tended to wait until he finished eating to retrieve the tray with the plates. Sneaking a knife

away under their vigilant eye would be much harder than stealing a little pin.

Gabriel sighed. There had to be something that he could use. Just then he was distracted from his musings by the sight of a very thick book. He knew that book. A similar one existed in the extensive library of the Monastery of Kirgen. Gabriel ran to the leather bound volume and extracted it carefully from the shelf. Yes, he'd found it. *The Encyclopedia of Plants, Spices and Poisons*. Author Unknown. Well, whoever this unknown author was, and despite the fact that it seemed supremely strange to put sugar in the same encyclopedia as a deadly poison, Gabriel remained extraordinarily grateful to him.

Gabriel tried to temper his enthusiasm at the find. He couldn't simply jump the book, as its pages were fragile after centuries of use and would disintegrate if treated inadequately. Carefully, he handled the volume, skipping various sections. Linas, Linas, Linas... There it was: Linas! *Powerful poison, containing extracts of several plants. Causes instantaneous painless death*. Right, he knew that. Gabriel read on.

*Recipe: 1 root of Alamar styme,
1 leaf of Yellow Yanide,
2 petals of Cystine*

And the list went on and on. Gabriel mentally ticked everything on the list. Yes, he'd gotten everything right up to the red gyonites root, petal and pollen, obtained with so much difficulty. Then why didn't the potion work?

Gabriel's eyes fell on a footnote written in smaller letters, which he didn't originally see. It read:

Important note: Kiss of Death has a full effect when freshly administered. If taken after a longer period of time, the effect is delayed and the poison will affect the organism as following:

1-2 days of delay: in most cases coma then death

3-4 days delay: no instant effect. The poison activates itself in time. After a few days, the victim will start having feelings of

weakness, nausea and headaches. Additional symptoms include shallow bleeding (most often nose bleeds or coughing blood). Death will come about with minimum inconvenience.

5 days -1 week: no instant effect. The poison activates itself in time and attacks its victim relentlessly. In this case Linas will cause a very painful and slow death.

If taken 1 week after being prepared, Kiss of Death has no poisonous effect.

Well there you have it. He'd die with minimum inconvenience. That was nice, sort of. Gabriel snapped the encyclopedia shut and placed the book back on its shelf. Dimly, Gabriel registered that whoever wrote the book must have been a very strange person. He didn't actually realize it at first, but a recipe for a deadly poison? Like for a cake? And dying at minimum inconvenience? That sounded so macabre somehow. Furthermore, who placed something as important as the effect of the poison over time in a footnote?

Well, at any rate, he had his answer. He didn't need to bother with finding alternate methods of dying. The poison was already doing its job. So, what does one do when he is dying? Deep in thought, Gabriel exited the library through a side door. He absently walked through the corridors, mindless of his surroundings. He knew that at this point, his absence would surely have been discovered, but he didn't care either way. What could they possibly do to him now? In a peculiar way, he now felt freer than he ever felt in his life.

Still, it was one thing to take a poison and die instantly, and totally different to wait for your fate. What would it be like, being dead? It was now very important to know. Before he knew it, his steps led him towards the second level balcony. Funny thing, how the certainty of death rearranged your priorities. But it had been the right choice to make. Well he didn't actually have a choice, because being Lothar's mate wasn't an option. Gabriel nodded sagely to himself. Yes, it had been the right thing to do.

Leaning on the railing, Gabriel observed the beautiful Alarian

landscape. It was too bad really. He'd have liked to see more of Alaria. He'd have liked to see Earth, too. Gabriel's eyes filled with tears. Earth. His mother. It would have been nice to meet her.

Wiping furiously at his eyes, Gabriel forced himself not to cry. He would try to enjoy what time he still had left on Kaldor without thinking of what could have been. Maybe he could sneak into the garden and spend some time among the flowers. He was surrounded by plants and through the past week or so, he'd missed them horribly.

Suddenly, the Alarian hills started to be hazy in front of his eyes as a wave of dizziness hit him. Surprised, Gabriel tried to support himself with both hands on the balcony railing, but lost balance. Instinctively, Gabriel screamed. *Oh Light above! Heeelp!*

Much to his surprise, Gabriel's body didn't hit the hard ground of the palace courtyard, but collided with something warm and reasonably soft. Warm and soft? No way! He'd crashed into a person. His father would surely be furious, but more important, the man or woman Gabriel crashed into was probably hurt. Gabriel struggled to defeat his dizziness and move off whoever was on the ground beneath him. He needed to apologize and maybe help heal this unwilling savior.

Just as these thoughts passed through his mind, a familiar scent enveloped Gabriel. Clarion, ash and leather. Strong arms steadied him, wrapping around his waist like they belonged there. All unpleasant sensations disappeared, and his eyes flew open. There was a moment frozen in time when everything disappeared as ice-blue eyes met his own. Hypnotized, Gabriel could do nothing but stare. It wasn't possible. His dream mate!

Long platinum blond hair, decorated with war braids, framing a perfect face. Elegant, yet stern features and a full mouth made for kissing. An icy blue gaze analyzed him with awe, concern and maybe a hint of lust. Gabriel drank all the details of the vision in front of him. Was he dreaming again? Was he dead?

Loud laughter interrupted his private moment of heaven. Gabriel's

head turned, snapping up to see the source of the intrusive noise. It proved to be bad idea, since the movement caused his head to painfully collide with the chin of the blond god still holding him in his arms. This caused another bout of laughter in the courtyard, and this time Gabriel could see from whom it came. His eyes widened at the view.

A group of large men stood proudly in front of the Alarian palace. They weren't many, but even so, they seemed to occupy all the space in the huge palace yard. Their black steeds were the same color of the black wings on their backs and their dark leather armor. Instinctively, Gabriel's head turned to the man holding him. Black wings on this one, too. He'd been too lost in the man's eyes to observe them. The Xeetah had arrived.

Oh damn, what a greeting for his father's guests! The blond was openly glaring now. Gabriel gulped and tried to move away, but he just held him tighter. Nervously, Gabriel tried squirming away, but to no avail. His dream mate's hold was just too tight. "Stand still, little one! I don't want you fainting on me again," the handsome man whispered in Gabriel's ear.

Gabriel's bones melted at the seductive whisper. Obviously his dream mate wasn't upset with him. And who was he to protest if his demon wanted to hold him? He sat back comfortably in his dream mate's hold, tempted to wriggle a little to see if the hard erection he'd dreamed about was also true. He felt so calm and safe in his demon's embrace that he almost jumped, startled by said mate's sudden outburst, "What the hell, Cade? What's so funny?"

"Are you kidding, Lucien? This has to be the funniest thing I've ever seen." Cade came forward, analyzing Gabriel, obvious mirth glittering in his violet eyes. He was also indecently beautiful, actually resembling the blond holding him. They must be related. Even so, for some reason, it didn't make Gabriel's heart race. Instead, Cade just made him feel very uncomfortable and embarrassed. Particularly when he added, "Now, now, don't glare! I must say I'm actually

jealous. You're, as usual, extremely lucky, with such a beautiful prize falling literally in your lap. That is so you, my brother."

Prize? Gabriel felt his face flame at Cade's words. Lucien was obviously not pleased at his brother's words—well at least Gabriel was right about that—or at Gabriel's embarrassment. "Fires of Kaldor, brother! Are you stupid or are you just faking it? The little one fell a pretty long way. He could have easily hurt himself, and you're laughing." Cade's face fell and the all amusement disappeared from his eyes. Obviously he hadn't thought about that.

Still, Gabriel didn't want to cause strife among the Xeetah or make them feel bad. He didn't want the two siblings to argue. Aside from Orin's aid today, Gabriel knew from personal experience how much it hurt to have your brothers showing you hatred or disdain. "Thank you, but that's quite all right. I'm fine. I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

As he spoke, all the demons turned towards him. Oh, no, Gabriel didn't like being in the center of attention. Of course, Lucien found this perfect moment to make him feel more embarrassed. Gabriel was maneuvered in his dream mate's hold until they practically embraced, their eyes meeting. "Are you sure, little one? You seemed dizzy and affected by the fall."

The mention of dizziness hit Gabriel with a bang. It wasn't the fall. The potion was finally taking effect. Gabriel started trembling in Lucien's hold at this realization. He really didn't want to die. "Shit!" Lucien cursed. "Get a medic, now!" As Lucien seized his legs, holding him with both arms, Gabriel dimly registered Cade's silhouette moving as fast as lightning towards the castle doors. A voice rang out, obviously stopping the other demon. "That's all right. My son has always been fragile, but we can take care of it. Thank you for your concern."

Lucien's hold on him tightened. "King Karon, greetings! I don't mean to intrude on your business, but the little one seems very sick." Incredible, someone actually worried about him. Gabriel suddenly felt

warm and fuzzy all over.

Another voice sounded from the direction of the palace doors. The Queen. “We’re very grateful for your concern, Prince Lucien. But my son is just nervous about his coming of age and mating and he hasn’t been eating right.”

Gabriel felt Lucien tense as the blond repeated, “Mating?”

Leyra answered the question with obvious satisfaction. “Yes, we were actually preparing for the ceremony when news arrived about your visit. You’re invited, of course.”

Lucien’s strong arms instantly released Gabriel, setting him down on the ground. He managed a look at the demon prince. Lucien’s expression was cold and all feeling seemed to have disappeared as if by magic. It hurt, and Gabriel just wanted to disappear off the face of Kaldor. But he couldn’t leave like that. He’d done enough stupid things for the day.

Eventually, in a weak voice, he managed to say, “The Queen is right. Thank you. I’ll be fine.”

As if on a cue, Teera suddenly appeared out of nowhere. “Oh, there you are, Prince Gabriel. I was so worried when I couldn’t find you.” It was a ridiculous lie. Teera was probably just worried about how angry the Queen would be. “We should go to your chambers now. You need to rest.” Gabriel nodded miserably and followed, throwing one final look of longing at the assembly of Xeetah.

As soon as they were out of hearing distance, Teera snapped at him. “Stupid boy, what the hell are you trying to do? Get me in trouble?” But Gabriel didn’t answer. It’s not like he’d done it on purpose. He just walked silently behind the servant girl. Exasperated, Teera ushered him through the corridors and violently pushed him in his room.

The sound of the key turning into the door barely registered in Gabriel’s mind. Oh well, so much for his dream mate. In any case, it didn’t really matter. Even if his step-mother didn’t intervene, he still wouldn’t have a chance with a demon prince. First of all, he didn’t

even know the man. Second of all, even from one glance, he could tell that Lucien was so much above him, unattainable, unreachable, like so many things he'd wanted in his life. But the most important reason was that in a few days, he'd be dead.

Gabriel closed his eyes, cursing his unlucky existence. Why did he have to meet Lucien now? Why couldn't he at least die in peace? Why? Why? He'd never wanted to die, not really, but now, something to live for finally appeared and it was too late. His heart filled with sorrow and longing, Gabriel closed his eyes, imagining Lucien's arms wrapped around him. It was only an illusion, but it made him feel safe and he clung to that dream until he finally fell into exhausted sleep.

* * * *

Two days passed after Lucien's arrival and Gabriel found that it became increasingly impossible for him to stay away from his dream mate. So, he ended up finding more and more inventive methods to dodge the guard, sneaking out of his room sometimes even through the window and following Lucien around. It became easier when Kalin suggested that the guard be reassigned to other duties. Gabriel understood it as keeping an eye on the Xeetahn delegation. He found himself creeping through the halls or yards at ungodly hours, and struggling to stay out of sight of both the Alarian guards and the Xeetahn guests. Once he was actually close to discovery by Cade, but the golden blond seemed distracted by something, allowing Gabriel a chance to escape.

It would actually be ridiculous if it wasn't so sad. Lucien hadn't addressed him once since the day of his arrival. Not even at dinner, which, courtesy of the Xeetahn presence, he now attended. And he really didn't know what to say, or if it was worth it to start a conversation. Particularly since Gabriel started to feel the effects of the poison, mainly headaches and dizziness, but the symptoms were there. It wouldn't be long now.

Still, even as he told himself that it was useless to moon over Lucien, Gabriel couldn't help but try to catch a glimpse of the platinum blond. He knew it was not only extremely stupid, but also pathetic. Yet he still sneaked around like a thief in the castle corridors to catch a view of Lucien, or just hear his voice.

As much as he tried to fight it, Gabriel felt attracted to Lucien like a moth to the flame. Even as he acknowledged the futility and ludicrousness of his actions, he continued to follow Lucien around, like some obsessed stalker. Who was he kidding? He was an obsessed stalker!

However, that didn't matter at all, not now when he looked at Lucien, admiring the predatory grace with which he moved at every step. It was worth the effort, and after all, Gabriel couldn't think of anything better to do than admire Lucien. Even if they had no future together, his very presence comforted Gabriel in his last days of life.

The demon prince exited the palace grounds, probably heading towards the stables. Following him would be somewhat troublesome for Gabriel, but he'd followed Lucien to the stables before, staying at a reasonable distance, watching him from afar. He just carefully sneaked around in the shadows and luckily for him, the servants didn't seem to take into account his presence. He just loved to watch Lucien groom his black steed.

Stealthily, Gabriel made his way through the courtyard, doing his best to stay out of sight. Finally, he came to the stable door and took a peek inside. Gabriel's eyes widened and his heart broke at the scene going on before him. This time Lucien hadn't come to take care of his horse. He was kissing another Xeetahn, simply feasting on the other demon's mouth. Soon the touches became even more heated, as clothes started to fly in all directions. The red-headed demon placed frantic kisses on Lucien's naked chest, then lower and lower towards his taut abdomen. Lucien threw his head back as the other Xeetahn engulfed his erection in his mouth and started sucking hard.

Gabriel wasn't supposed to be watching this. It was a private moment between two lovers. Why was he doing it anyway? Did he enjoy feeling heartbroken? Did he enjoy being confronted with reality? Well, not really, but Lucien was so beautiful in his pleasure that Gabriel couldn't move away. He only snapped out of his trance when Lucien came with a shout in his love's mouth.

Then the unbelievable happened. Both Lucien and the redhead turned in his direction and smirked. They couldn't possibly have seen him, could they? But Gabriel's suspicion was confirmed when Lucien asked, "Did you enjoy the performance?"

No, it can't be. Surely not. Gabriel took a step back and tripped over something on the ground. He hastily scuttled on his feet, ignoring the dizziness that accompanied the sudden movement. No, this wasn't happening! Gabriel ran out of the stables in tears. It hurt to be humiliated like that, but what hurt even more is that the person who'd done it was Lucien. It hurt that Lucien would be so cruel as to say the same thing Lothar would. He'd never considered something like that could be possible. Who was he kidding? He didn't even know Lucien. Yes, the demon prince was kind that first day but after that Gabriel became invisible for him. By rights, Lucien was just like everyone else, just like Lothar.

No, no! Gabriel couldn't think like that. He refused to compare Lucien with that monster, Lothar. It was he who didn't have a right to go around spying on the demon. Lucien was cruel to him, yes, but after all, what could Gabriel expect? Dream mates were an illusion. Love was an illusion. Lucien only came here to deal with diplomatic issues. He meant nothing to Gabriel, just like Gabriel meant nothing for him.

Gabriel ran as fast as he could back to his room. He collapsed on the bed, suddenly feeling very weak. He didn't have anyone, but he didn't need anyone. Lucien could fuck whoever he wanted to for all Gabriel cared.

Ignoring the pang of hurt that last thought caused him, Gabriel made a decision. It wouldn't be long until death finally came for him. He'd just wait for it in his room. It would be better for everybody.

* * * *

Lucien watched as the Alarian prince ran out of the stables in tears. He didn't intend to make Gabriel cry, but in the past days, Gabriel's eyes, and his constant presence had been driving him crazy. Most of the time he was rock hard and he found himself thinking about pale skin and rosy lips in meetings where he should have been discussing important issues of state.

In truth, if that was the only obstacle, Lucien would have already done something to claim Gabriel but the little one was to be mated in a few days. It broke Lucien's heart that Gabriel belonged to someone else, but he had no choice. The Xeetah prided themselves on their commitment to honor, and although they were demons by nature, they never let their passions override their judgment.

For this reason, Prince Gabriel represented a great danger for Lucien. Lucien's control hung from a thread. He hated he'd actually been forced to humiliate the prince in order to push him away because of his own weakness, but there was no other way. If he lost his hold over his demon nature... Lucien couldn't even think about what would happen. It would be a disaster, for everyone.

"Lucien? Is everything all right?"

Zeli's concern comforted Lucien somewhat. The redhead had always been a good friend, almost like a brother, and Lucien knew that what happened between them would not affect their friendship in any way and would remain a secret. "Yes, it's fine. I did the right thing, didn't I, Zeli?"

Zeli's voice held a tinge of regret. "You had no choice, Lucien. By the way it was going..."

Cade's strong voice interrupted Zeli's words. "Didn't he, my friend? I think you're a coward, brother."

Lucien's eyes snapped up dangerously. Cade was always the rebellious one in the family, going against the norms they all accepted as right. "This is none of your businesses, Cade. Stay out of it."

"It is, and you know it. You're my brother and you want that boy. You've wanted him since the first day, since he practically fell in your arms. Would you stop hiding and admit it already?"

Lucien glared at his older brother, anger and frustration making his voice sound rougher than usual, "I never said I didn't want him. What do you think this was all about? I want him too much and I don't trust myself around him. I don't trust myself not to lose my control."

Cade's expression softened, his eyes conveying his understanding of Lucien's torment. "Oh Lucien, stop torturing yourself! Stop making things harder than they are!" He came closer to Lucien, pushing their foreheads together affectionately. "I have one little brother left. I want him to be happy. Fight for him, Lucien!"

Lucien sighed. He couldn't be angry at his brother. Cade meant well and he always wanted to help, but this time there was nothing Cade could do. "I can't. I wish I could, but you know as well as I do what we're here for. It's serious. If we fuck things up because I can't control myself around the son of the king..."

Cade remained silent as if pondering Lucien's remark. After a few moments he added, "That's true. But we're demons, bro, and we have the advantage in these talks. We're the stronger element here, remember that!"

Lucien's head snapped up in surprise. "Are you actually suggesting—?"

Cade shrugged. "Why not? I simply hate that idiot king, always so arrogant like he has a stick up his ass. And the Queen, she could freeze the sun if she touched it. Now the children, they're interesting."

Zeli chuckled at Cade's suddenly wicked tone. "Yes, they certainly are. And delicious as well."

Lucien felt the fire in his blood turn his eyes crimson as he grabbed Zeli by the vest and growled, "Gabriel is mine. You don't touch him."

The redhead just arched a brow, obviously not surprised at his outburst, but it was Cade who actually answered, laughing. "Come now, brother. If you're not interested to play, don't spoil the fun for the rest of us! Maybe little Gabriel would like me instead of you, what do you think?"

An image popped in Lucien's head. Gabriel's naked body entwined and Cade touching that perfect face, kissing those perfect lips, fucking that perfect ass. *No way in hell!* Cade flew across the stable as Lucien's fury hit him at full power.

"And there, Lucien, is the answer to your question." Zeli seemed entirely unaffected by Lucien's display. "You actually hit your brother at the mere suggestion of him touching the prince. Do you think you will be able to stand some stranger mating with him?"

Cade got up from the floor, brushing his black clothes. "Zeli's right. Fight for him, bro! There's still time." With a smirk, he added, "And by the way, when we said that the children were delicious, we weren't referring to Gabriel."

What the hell? What was he missing here? Lucien's eyes widened in realization. "You don't mean...? Oh, for the fires of Kaldor! Those two?"

Zeli's grin turned positively evil. "Oh yes, we'll enjoy teaching the young Kalin and Orin some manners."

Lucien blinked. Obviously, he'd was so wrapped up in his own personal dilemma he hadn't observed Cade's and Zeli's interest in the other two princes. "Right. First of all, should I be worried? Secondly, who gets who?"

Cade laughed. “Well, I’m not a very modest person. So I’ve always liked violet. There’s something about purple hair which just turns me on.”

“For my part, I prefer the colder ones. The colder they are, the more fiery they get in bed. And that lavender is just too cute.” Zeli added.

“I don’t know about that.” Lucien smirked. “I wouldn’t want to get anywhere near the ice queen. She’d freeze my dick off.”

Cade and Zeli made equal expressions of distaste. “Honestly, that was just mean. She falls into a whole separate category, not cold, but frigid.” Zeli nodded at his own words. “And to answer your other question, you should definitely be worried. We have big plans.”

“Aren’t they already mated or something?”

His brother scoffed. “Yeah, right. Like those are actually mates. I’d be willing to bet my right testicle they don’t even share a room with those women.”

Zeli made another grimace. “Yup, seriously, they might even be virgins. Well, at least I would be if I was in their shoes.” Lucien couldn’t agree more. The so-called mates of the two brothers weren’t exactly ugly, but they were plain. They constantly tried to hide it by using all sorts of artifices of jewelry and makeup. The result reminded Lucien of a washed up canvas which was inadequately restored.

“Well, we’re doing the kids a favor. They’re practically radiating sexual frustration.” Lucien inwardly sighed. Shit, so much for Xeeahn honor and control. “And on that note, you irradiate too, my dear bro. See that you solve the problem soon, preferably in the bed of a certain dark-haired beauty.”

At Cade’s mentioning of Gabriel, Lucien’s heart jumped. He was pretty sure he’d totally blown his chance with Gabriel. Still, maybe his brother had a point. He was a demon, he could fight. A smile appeared on Lucien’s face. “I just might do that.”

Zeli and Cade laughed simultaneously. “That’s the spirit, my friend!” Zeli patted him on the back in encouragement. “That’s the spirit!”

The three Xeetah exited the stables, finally saying goodbye and each going in their own direction. After all, they were all busy demons, with seductions to plan. And Lucien knew exactly how to make little Gabriel fall into his arms, regardless of what he’d seen today.

* * * *

Well, this sucked. Lucien’s plan was failing miserably, simply because the intended target was nowhere to be seen. Since last night, Gabriel hadn’t exited his room, not even to eat. Already a day had passed, and Lucien realized the episode in the stables might have a greater effect than he originally expected.

Cade intercepted him with a grin on his face. At least someone got laid last night. “Don’t tell me young Kalin fell so easily.”

Cade nodded, a smug expression on his face. “It’s amazing what a little Cade charm can do, is it not? By the time I was done with him, he was screaming my name, begging, asking for more.”

From anyone else, Lucien would have considered it empty boasting. In this case, it was probably true. But, at any rate, right now, Lucien wasn’t interested in hearing about his brother’s sexual exploits. “TMI, bro, TMI.”

“You’re just jealous.” Lucien glared at his tactless brother. Yes, he was, but that didn’t mean Cade had to rub it in. “Oh come on.” Cade continued to prod. “What’s making you so glum? Things not looking up with Gabriel?”

“If you weren’t busy fucking that insufferable idiot into the mattress, you’d know Gabriel hasn’t exited the room since last night.” It wasn’t nice of him to insult Cade’s latest crush, but he easily

remarked the attitude of older Alarian princes towards their youngest brother, and couldn't help resenting them for it.

Cade snapped back, all teasing note gone from his voice, "You're the insufferable idiot. If you'd have taken your head out of your ass earlier, this wouldn't be happening. Don't come complaining to me now!"

Lucien's face fell, acknowledging the truth of Cade's words. He was always bad at dealing with emotional issues. He was a soldier and he'd never felt this compulsion to be with someone before. He hated to admit it, but he didn't know what to do. He bowed his head in defeat. "Oh, fuck, you're so right. I screwed up royally."

Cade nodded sternly before giving him a smile. "Yes, you did. But never fear, big brother is here. Get your hopeless ass up. We have a visit to make."

Chapter 5

Gabriel stayed locked in his room for the past twenty-four hours. Well, maybe locked away wasn't the best term, since the door was open and he could leave at any moment he wished to do so. The guard mysteriously disappeared, and Gabriel held the sneaking suspicion that one of his brothers could have something to do with it. In truth, it didn't matter anymore. He didn't have the energy to go wandering through the palace, or even to the gardens. He wanted to see Lucien, but every time he got up to in search of his obsession, he remembered the scene from the previous night. Lucien and the redhead demon, kissing and touching, the redhead sucking him off, and the worst thing of all, Lucien's cruelty and the humiliation. More than once, he stopped just before touching the handle and collapsed back on the bed, physically forcing himself from leaving the room.

Gabriel lay on his bed, absently flipping through one of the many library books dealing with the geography of Kaldor. He didn't read any of the explanations, but looked at the beautiful pictures. It was somewhat comforting, even if he would never get to see those beautiful snowy mountains, or those fiery volcanoes, or turbulent seas. He could close his eyes and imagine them in his mind, and it would have to be enough. Time was running out.

Sighing, he concentrated on his reading once more. His eyes fell on the historical description of the plague that had long ago ravaged their world. He shuddered at the number of deaths recorded. So many people died, of so many different races, that in the end, many decided leaving altogether. Thousands of Alarians, elves, mermen and demons abandoned Kaldor and gone in search of a new home. Many countries

were so ravaged that they even decided to change their names after the plague vanished, as a symbol of starting anew. However, by the time this happened, their people already established themselves on Earth, estranged and lost to Kaldor forever.

Earth. The world his mother lived in. Gabriel wished he had a book on the geography of Earth, but then again, he wished so many things, most of them connected with a certain demon prince. No! He wouldn't think about Lucien. Angry at himself and at Lucien, he concentrated on the book. He needed to put the platinum blond from his mind.

Knocks sounded at the door, interrupting the silence of the room. Who could it be? The servants had already been here today and Gabriel couldn't really imagine who else might want to visit him. Gabriel got up, the book forgotten on the bed. He made his way to the door and opened it without a thought.

Ice-blue eyes stared back at him, with perfect eyes on a perfect face. Oh Light above, Lucien! Gabriel froze, not knowing what to do or say.

"Hello, Prince Gabriel. I wanted to apologize for the other day. I was extremely cruel and rude, and..." Lucien paused as if looking for words. Gabriel just stood there in shock, unable to speak. Lucien wanted to apologize?

Lucien continued, "I was worried when you didn't come down today. I wanted to speak to you, apologize. But when you weren't there, I..."

He paused again, obviously waiting for some sort of response. *Say something, say something! Gabriel, say something!* Gabriel willed his body to move and his mouth to open, barely managing to stutter out, "That's... um... ok. I'm fine. It wasn't necessary. I had no business being there in the first place, following you around like that."

Gabriel's eyes widened as he realized what he'd just said. Lucien looked away from Gabriel, seeming vaguely embarrassed. "Right, about that. I sort of knew you were doing it, following me around that

is. It was driving me crazy, which is why I did what I did, the blowjob and all. And again, I apologize because—”

Gabriel didn't even bother to listen to Lucien's final words, slamming the door in his face. Lucien knew he was being stalked! Gabriel was such a nuisance that Lucien resorted to pushing him away in such a humiliating manner. He'd been so stupid! Who else knew? Cade, for certain, the red-headed demon and probably the other Xeetah knew as well.

Gabriel collapsed on the floor, feeling like the worst idiot on Kaldor. Of course they'd known. They were trained soldiers, the elite of a nation of warriors. How they must have laughed! And Lucien, he felt irritated because of Gabriel's unwanted insistence. “It was driving me crazy...” Lucien said.

Tears sprung from Gabriel's eyes as the embarrassment hit him even harder than before. In that moment, he hated Lucien for humiliating him so cruelly. He hated his redheaded friend for touching Lucien when Gabriel could not. And more than everything, he hated himself for still loving Lucien in spite of all the resentment and the pain in his heart.

* * * *

Lucien watched in horror as Gabriel slammed the door in his face. The sound of hushed sobs sounded from the room until they dissolved into sniffing and then silence. Lucien cursed. He'd never meant to hurt Gabriel, but he never knew what to say. When he looked into those big midnight black eyes, all coherent thought flew out of his head.

“Nice going, little bro. You're a real genius at romance.”

Cade clapped sarcastically, making Lucien feel even worse about his failure. “Cade, come on! How was I supposed to know he would react like that? I was only trying to be honest.”

Cade practically snapped at him, his anger making his eyes briefly flash red. “How were you supposed to know? How did you think he would to react when you told him that thing from the stables was planned because his presence annoyed you?”

He actually said that? *Shit, shit, shit.* “I didn’t actually think,” Lucien finally admitted. “When I look at him, it’s like my brain stops working. I can’t explain it.”

Cade finally sighed tiredly. When he spoke again, it was with brotherly affection and understanding. “Little bro, you’re hopeless. You’ve got it bad.” Lucien nodded miserably. “And to think you were actually planning to let this one go.”

For the second time that day, Lucien bowed his head in defeat. “I think this time I have to. Listen to him in there. I totally fucked up.”

Cade grabbed him roughly. “No, you don’t. No brother of mine backs down from a fight. You’re going back to him and fixing everything if it’s the last thing you do!”

Lucien nodded at Cade’s words, but he was beginning to lose hope. He’d never been much of a lover. He fucked and moved on, always on battle grounds where he was needed. Romance wasn’t necessary with the people he slept with. None of them had Gabriel’s fragility and beauty. What was he thinking? They couldn’t even compare to Gabriel. *Shit*, he was totally out of his depth. “*Hey, you’re kinda cute... Wanna fuck?*” was definitely not the best pickup line.

Last night he totally had an elaborate plan of seduction, but the plan became extremely unrealistic under these conditions. What was he going to do? Like Cade said, he couldn’t give up. But how to approach the beautiful Alarian prince?

As if realizing his internal dilemma, Cade finally said, “Well, there’s nothing for it. For now, we have to wait and think up something really solid to fix this mess.”

Lucien nodded. He sent another longing look at the door towards Gabriel’s room. How he wished the closed door would open once more so that he could apologize and explain. But it wouldn’t happen

and Lucien couldn't do anything right now. They walked away from Gabriel's room in silence. Yes, he had to fix this and soon. But how?

* * * *

Lucien finally resolved to deal with this in a military way. He was a soldier. Strategy had always been one of his strong points. Therefore he made a list with the necessary items for this particular mission.

The first item on the agenda was to establish contact with the target. Once he managed to this, the next step needed to be safely clarifying previous misunderstandings.

After that, Lucien needed to make Gabriel feel comfortable. For this reason, he would establish common grounds with the target. Once he analyzed Gabriel's response to the first two steps, he could then commence romancing the target. This would mainly imply casual touches and caresses.

If the response to this was a positive one, Lucien could then proceed with more daring caresses and attentions. If the response was negative, fall back to step, he would have to fall back and try again. Naturally, he hoped it wouldn't be necessary, but Lucien would not give up, no matter what.

If Gabriel accepted his attentions, Lucien could finally proceed to kiss his target. He would then solidify his position and ensure the target was comfortable with the new status.

Finally, if all these steps succeeded in bridging the gap between Lucien and Gabriel, Lucien could propose more intimate relations. Naturally, even if Gabriel agreed, Lucien needed to proceed with caution. Gabriel would most likely be shy and new at such experiences. Should Gabriel refuse, Lucien would be patient and try again in a near future, after making sure Gabriel was ready.

It was entirely logical. He could do it with a little organization. He even showed his brother the list. Cade barely contained his laughter,

but in the end he said, “It’s probably best if you do this your own way. After all, it’s your romance.”

But Lucien’s logical plan proved to be useless, since he was still stuck at step one. Gabriel didn’t show up at this meal either. He tried going to his room again. The first time, Gabriel cracked the door open then promptly snapped it shut. It wasn’t very encouraging to say the least. Lucien meant to insist, but the Queen courteously requested the demons stay out of the living quarters.

Lucien didn’t know exactly what reason the Queen could have for that particular request, but he blamed it on either Zeli or Cade. His brother had been fuming after the Queen’s announcement. And Zeli wasn’t any better. The redhead was so angry he’d punched a hole in one of the marble walls of the castle. Lucien strongly suspected both of them were more smitten with the other two Alarian princes than they wanted to admit.

He couldn’t be at all sympathetic of Cade’s and Zeli’s plight. Because of their fucking around, he was also banished from that part of the castle and therefore he couldn’t put his plan into motion. Well, he couldn’t just stay here and wait. He’d just have to sneak into Gabriel’s quarters. Lucien grinned. He had wings for something, right?

Just as he extended his wings and was about to take off from his bedroom balcony, he heard a noise behind him. Instinctively, Lucien grabbed the dagger he always kept hidden in his sleeve and threw it in the direction of the noise with a practiced movement. “Well, it seems that you’re angrier at us than I thought.” Oops. It was only Zeli. “You really should rein in your violent tendencies, my friend. It could have been anyone, a servant perhaps, and they wouldn’t have caught your dagger like me.”

Lucien’s eyes growled angrily, turning to glare at his foolish friend. “The servants know better than to sneak up on a demon.” As Zeli returned his blade, he slipped the dagger back into its place. “You should know better, too.”

Zeli immediately retorted. “What about you? Thinking about flying to your dark-haired beauty? That’s not very smart. With these lights and all this white marble, anybody can see you.”

“And what are you suggesting, Zeli? I’m not as lucky as the two of you. My own prince won’t even get out of his room. And I can’t just wait around and do nothing, can I?” Admittedly, it was his own fault, but it still irked him that he remained stuck in his inability to get close to Gabriel, while Cade and Zeli went on happily fucking the other two princes. He actually ran into Orin while he slipped out of Zeli’s room at dawn.

“Right, about that, we’ve been talking. It’s not fair, you being left out and all.” Well, at least they admitted it. “And we have a plan.”

Lucien arched a brow. “We? Who is “we?” You and Cade? Allow me to be skeptical of any plan the two of you may have. You’re banned from that section of the palace too, courtesy of your own idiocy.” Not that he was much better, but still, at least he could keep his cock in his pants.

Zeli actually showed enough decency to look down, seemingly ashamed. “Well, actually, me and Cade and Orin and Kalin.”

Lucien arched a brow in surprise. “And you expect me to believe that those two can cook up anything to benefit Gabriel? Don’t make me laugh. It’s obvious that they couldn’t care less about him.”

Zeli wasn’t entirely pleased at this remark. His friend didn’t enjoy anyone saying bad things about his lavender-haired lover. But to Zeli’s credit, he obviously reined in his temper and said between gritted teeth, “It’s not like that. They love their brother a great deal.”

“Actions speak for themselves, Zeli, and they’ve only ever acted coldly and hatefully towards their brother. If they do that in our presence, who knows how they act behind our backs?”

Zeli’s temper flared, and his bronze eyes turned a threatening shade of red. “Don’t you dare judge them, if you don’t know them! They’re good people, just stuck in the wrong place and the wrong time.”

All the tension in Lucien finally exploded, “You don’t say! Then tell me, oh wise one, what they ever did for Gabriel. I’m fairly certain they don’t even care that Gabriel barely eats, that he fell that day over the railing. Just because they’re good fucks doesn’t mean they’re good people.”

At that blatant insult, Zeli punched him in the nose. Lucien punched back, hitting Zeli in the stomach. The other demon doubled over in pain, but swiftly recovered, head butting Lucien. Soon kicks and fists started flowing freely on the balcony. A kick in the stomach, a wing hit over the back, a fist in the face... Lucien grabbed Zeli and threw him through the glass of the balcony door into the room. Angrily, Zeli spread his own black wings and used them to catapult a vase towards Lucien’s head.

Lucien barely dodged the flying object, before more things started assaulting him. Oh, that wasn’t very nice! *Well, two can play at that game.* In two seconds, furniture and decorative objects started flying across the room from one demon to another.

Lucien didn’t know how long the fight took exactly, but by the end, they were both breathing hard, had several broken bones and cuts, and the room was practically trashed. Oh well, Lucien had been in worse fights. He grimaced as he felt the cuts on his face and wings heal and his bones set themselves in place.

“Are you ready to listen now?” Zeli’s voice remained as strong as always, but it held an undertone of fatigue and irritation. Lucien sighed and held out a hand towards his friend. He could at least give Zeli and Cade the benefit of the doubt. Now that he was thinking clearly, he realized that Zeli and Cade wouldn’t let their libidos influence their decisions. He nodded apologetically. “Yes, Zeli. I am sorry for my outburst.”

Zeli practically beamed. “Ok, here goes.”

Lucien’s eyes widened as he listened to Zeli. He might actually have a chance. He smiled back at his friend, nodding again. “Yes, I like it. It could actually work.” Without another word, Lucien headed

towards the door. He looked back at his friend only to see him still in his place, staring at Lucien in surprise. “Well, what are you waiting for? Let’s do this thing.”

Zeli just arched a brow, “Pardon me for saying, but you’re not exactly dressed for seduction.” Lucien blinked as he processed Zeli’s words. He looked around the room. It was a mess, his things scattered all over the place. Observing his friend, Lucien realized that, although Zeli’s body seemed unscathed, his previously elegant clothes ended up torn and bloody. Undoubtedly, he looked the same. Lucien cursed under his breath. Where the fuck could he get some clothes?

As if on cue, Cade cracked the door open. His blond head appeared in the doorway, analyzing the situation in the room. “Oh, good, it’s safe.” Cade then turned and addressed someone in the corridor. “Come on, guys, we have a lot of work to do.”

Lucien watched in shock as Cade sauntered in the room, followed by Kalin and Orin. They were all carrying bags, undoubtedly containing clothes and toiletries. What the hell? “Stop staring, bro. You and Zeli are extremely predictable. I entirely expected this development.”

“Okay then... If you’re done destroying each other, you, mister, need to wash and change,” Kalin commanded. Lucien felt irritated with being ordered around by Kalin, but he didn’t get a chance to voice his displeasure.

Orin continued Kalin’s thoughts, making a face in distaste. “Yes, we won’t have our brother being wooed inadequately.” Before Lucien could say a word, Orin pressed a change of clothes in his arms and hastily pointed to the bathroom. “Change, now!”

His brother dropped some sort of perfume and soaps on the pile. “And wash that blood off you! And comb your hair!” Lucien just stared. What the hell? He glanced at Zeli, hoping that his friend would tell him this was a joke. The redhead smirked, actually looking smug.

Noticing this, Orin snapped at Zeli, “Stop with that stupid smile, you! I’ll have you know you will be receiving the same treatment. I’m not fucking you like that.” Zeli’s smile instantly disappeared.

“But for now, it’s your turn, Prince Lucien.” Kalin’s voice turned serious. “We don’t have a lot of time. The mating ceremony is scheduled in a few days. If you’re truly serious about having feelings for Gabriel...”

Lucien didn’t wait for Kalin to finish. Kalin was right. There wasn’t much time. So what if he had to wear all this fancy stuff? He’d do anything if it meant getting the little one’s forgiveness. As he hastily cleaned the blood and sweat off his body, Lucien smiled. Maybe there was still some hope.

* * * *

Beautiful pictures of green plains, depictions of exotic flowers and animals... Kaldor, his world. Everything about it was so splendid, and yet Gabriel couldn’t enjoy it. He stared at the pages blankly. It had all become a blur. As much as he tried to forget, he could still hear Lucien’s words from the day before.

Gabriel was startled as blood dripped on the book he absently browsed. His nose... That was definitely not a good sign. He hastily sat back on the bed, hoping it would pass soon. It would be extremely inconvenient if someone came and saw him like that.

Every night Gabriel asked himself whether he would wake up the following morning. He didn’t want to die, but he didn’t actually have anything to live for. The one thing he’d ever wanted, except his freedom, was Lucien, and the demon prince was beyond his reach. Falling for Lucien was a terrible mistake. The last two days proved that beyond any shadow of a doubt.

It still hurt of course, but Gabriel reasoned that each passing day represented one more step closer to his death. It wouldn’t be long now. Why become close to a person he would eventually abandon? It

wasn't fair, for either of them. It would only cause unnecessary pain. Lucien's rejection would be for the best.

He still wished that maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't die alone. Maybe someone would hold his hand, say comforting words as he closed his eyes for the last time. Perhaps he could be held by strong arms to keep him warm even when the chill of death settled in. Yeah, right, like that was ever going to happen. Probably the most realistic thing to hope for was to die in his sleep.

Gabriel snapped out of his depressed musings upon hearing a strong knock at the door. It could be Lucien again. He visited Gabriel again shortly after their brief discussion, but Gabriel refused to see him. Unwillingly, Gabriel's heart skipped a beat. He didn't know what Lucien wanted anyway. He'd been quite clear in his rejection of Gabriel, and quite honestly, Gabriel didn't want to hear anything else Lucien had to say. He closed his eyes and waited, knowing Lucien would soon give up and go away. But the knocks just grew more insistent. "Gabriel? Gabriel? Open up! I know you're in there." Gabriel's eyes snapped open. It was Orin. What did Orin want? Gabriel felt sorely tempted to ignore his brother. He wasn't in the mood to try to understand Orin's incomprehensible attitude towards him. However, he'd always cared about his siblings and if he had a chance to spend some time with them, he'd take it. After all, despite maintaining their distance, his brothers had in their own way helped him since his arrival at the palace.

He got up from the bed, barely remembering to clean his face of all trace of blood. Then he made his way to the door of the room, which was now being abused by Orin's frantic knocking. Who knew that slender and quiet Orin could cause so much noise? A smile spread across his face. His brothers were something all right, even if they didn't love him.

Gabriel sighed at that thought. Some things simply had to be accepted because there was no hope of changing them. Gabriel opened the door, facing his older sibling.

Orin wore an exasperated look on his face and his lavender eyes sparkled in agitation. “Well, finally! What do you think you’re doing, cooped up in here?”

“Umm, I haven’t been feeling very well. I want to rest a little before the mating.” The final word ended up as barely a whisper. Gabriel didn’t even know why he would still be worried about that. He wouldn’t be mating anyone anytime soon.

Orin obviously noticed Gabriel’s uneasiness because he frowned. It seemed to Gabriel that Orin’s tone of voice wasn’t as icy as usual and he lacked his usual hostility. “Well, anyway, father’s searching for you and he sent me to get you.”

Gabriel’s eyes widened. “What? Why?”

Orin shrugged. Gabriel was incredibly confused and unable to interpret Orin’s demeanor. “How am I supposed to know? He just told me to go get you. He wants to urgently see you in the gardens.”

Gabriel smelled a rat. Why would his father want to see him suddenly, or in the garden for that matter? And why would he send Orin and not a servant to get him? Something wasn’t right. “The garden? But—?”

Orin shrugged again, interrupting Gabriel’s question. “Yeah, I thought it was strange too. He just mentioned a test of sorts. It’s probably just the sixteen-year-old ceremony. Since you didn’t have it three years ago, they’re organizing something now. Nothing to worry about.” Right, there were some rituals that had to be performed to mark a young Alarian’s readiness to enter their society. Gabriel didn’t know that much about it, but it made sense that since that ceremony had been skipped, the rituals would happen before his coming of age.

Gabriel nodded at Orin, struggling to at least appear calm. What would he be required to do? He couldn’t help but interrogate Orin again. “Do you know what exactly will happen?”

Orin just glared at him, irritation and impatience obvious in his voice. “I told you, I don’t have a clue. And honestly, I really don’t care.”

Gabriel suppressed his retort. Despite the fact Orin passed through the same rites, he refused to tell Gabriel anything about them. Orin wasn't always like that, somewhat off in his own world to the point of extreme selfishness. If Gabriel thought back, way back, he could distantly remember Orin smiling at him, but now, he simply couldn't understand his brother.

These days, however, the only one who could get through to him was Kalin. Even Orin's mate, princess Viana, received the same cold treatment from him. Totally oblivious of Gabriel's inner turmoil, Orin hastily said, "In any case, you're coming with me. Hurry and change! If we delay much more, you'll get me in trouble with father."

Gabriel didn't want to make his father angry with Orin. Their differences aside, Kalin and Orin were his brothers, and Gabriel loved them. He hastily started going through his robes, choosing the first clean outfit he came up with. "Don't you have anything better?" Gabriel looked up at the question. Orin was analyzing the tan robes with a clear expression of disgust.

"Umm, I don't think so. Let me look." Rummaging through the drawers again, he finally dug out a black robe, strangely enough the one his father gave him the day he left Kirgen. This one had to be his best, since it had been woven from soft material, unlike the other robes that were rough, sometimes actually hurting his delicate skin. "I found something." Showing the article of clothing to his brother, he made a move to change.

"Wait. Black? Are you kidding? You look horrible in black." Orin sighed, "It makes you look even paler than you are, and thinner too. Just wait here a second."

With that, Orin ran out of the room, leaving Gabriel stumped. What would he do now? Should he wear the black robes and go to the gardens? But his brother said to wait. Eventually he didn't actually have to decide because his sibling came rushing back in, carrying something and breathing hard. Orin pushed the change of clothes into Gabriel's arms. "Wear this." Gabriel took it, but was instantly

shocked when he saw what his brother brought. A beautiful waist-length white coat with silver lining and a matching pair of tight pants. So soft and elegant, Orin's own clothes.

"Wow. It's so beautiful, I couldn't possibly—" His brother cut him off, his voice illustrating his exasperation.

"Oh, shut up! Just put it on already, will you?" At the ordering tone, Gabriel could only agree. He nodded his head, and waited expectantly for his brother to leave the room so he could change. "What? You want me to leave? We're brothers, and it's not like you have anything I don't." Gabriel blushed at Orin's scolding.

"I...I'm just—"

"Shy. Right, whatever. In any case, we're actually discussing this for no reason. I expect you don't even know how to put that on, so you need my help." Gabriel blinked in surprise as he observed the beautiful clothes once more. Yes, Orin had a point. Gabriel would definitely have difficulty putting them on. Ugh, it looked like he was stuck with Orin in the room.

* * * *

Gabriel looked into the mirror in disbelief. He was finally dressed in Orin's borrowed suit. Additionally, his sibling insisted on braiding his hair and clipping it with some special shining adornments. But now, as Gabriel observed himself in the mirror, he felt reluctant to leave the room.

The tight pants hugged his thighs, sticking to his legs and backside like a second skin. The coat didn't provide for any modesty. Despite the fact that it wasn't as tight as the pants, it didn't even cover his ass. Long white boots complemented the attire. He looked like a completely different person and Gabriel wasn't entirely sure he could deal with that.

Gabriel turned to Orin, fully intending to plead his brother to let him wear the black robes, but Orin looked so pleased with himself

that his eyes were sparkling. Gabriel inwardly sighed. He didn't have the heart to spoil this for Orin. If it made Orin happy that he wore this, he'd do it, even though he felt so uncomfortable in the white suit.

His sibling found this particular moment to express his satisfaction at Gabriel's appearance. "Yes, that's much better. You'll blow him away." Him? Gabriel turned towards Orin in confusion. Who was this "him" Orin spoke of?

"Blow who away?"

Orin just looked at Gabriel, an expression of total innocence on his face. "Why, father of course. He'll be pleased about you wearing this attire."

Gabriel wasn't so sure Karon would be pleased at him wearing Orin's clothes. In fact, he really didn't think it was a very good idea to go out looking like this in the first place.

"Would you stop fretting? You look great!"

Orin was probably right, but to Gabriel, the new clothes felt foreign and awkward. He always wore large monk-like robes of course material, nothing like these delicate tight articles.

"I just feel strange, not right."

Orin just laughed, "Don't worry. You're not used to them, that's all. You'll get there eventually. Now let's go. We're going to be late."

With that, Orin pulled Gabriel out of the room. Gabriel's boots echoed loudly on the floor as he was practically dragged through the silent corridors of the castle. Even as they went down the winding marble stairs, no one came their way. Gabriel felt thankful for that, although he did find it rather odd. Maybe there would be a gathering in the garden?

Orin hastily moved out of the castle and towards the gardens. Gabriel allowed himself a moment to enjoy the beautiful sight of the Alarian gardens. He'd always liked it here as a child, and the passion extended to when he'd been at Kirgen. Being surrounded by nature always gave Gabriel a feeling of utmost peace. The night flowers

were in bloom now, hypnotizing Gabriel with their intoxicating perfume and the soft whisper of the fountains soothed his senses.

The beautiful sight of the gardens distracted Gabriel for a second but as his brother dragged him along, he realized something odd was going on. The gardens were completely empty.

“Umm...Orin...Where is everybody?”

Orin just shrugged Gabriel’s concern away. “We’re not there yet.” Not there yet? What did Orin mean?

Gabriel’s eyes widened as realization hit. He asked in a trembling voice, “Umm, O-Orin? We’re not going to the l-labyrinth, are we?”

His sibling just smiled. “Of course we are. Where else would we be going?”

Oh no. Gabriel loved the labyrinth as a child. It was very beautiful, and the greenery entwined with all sorts of exotic flowers. The center of the labyrinth boasted a beautiful gazebo that held a magical harp. Once you touched it, the harp would sing the song of your heart.

Gabriel always delighted in finding his way through the labyrinth to the gazebo. He’d touch the harp, and its magic would make the flowers all around him bloom beautifully. The birds would come and join in the song, and Gabriel would just lie down and enjoy the peace and the solace that nature provided. But once, when he escaped to the capital city, Karon left him there overnight, in the middle of the labyrinth and blocked the common exits Gabriel learned by heart. He told the child that no one would come get him, and he had to get out himself. He got out eventually, after two days of continuous wandering.

If the physical injuries or the effort were the only consequence of his father’s cruelty, Gabriel wouldn’t have cared much. Alas, his panic prevented him from ever returning to the place he loved so much before. He still remembered being afraid of not ever being able to get out of the huge labyrinth. He wanted to go back so many times, to touch the harp again, and see the flowers bloom under his eyes, but

he'd never managed to do it. Soon after that, they sent him at Kirgen. Was the harp still there? More importantly, why would his brothers or his father take him to the labyrinth today? Even as he thought this, Gabriel knew it was too late to turn back now. Orin was already pulling him through the entrance of the structure. The darkness seemed to swallow Gabriel whole as the walls blocked the light from the blue moon and stars almost completely. Gabriel held on to Orin's hand tighter, suddenly afraid. He didn't want to get lost again in the labyrinth. He didn't want to run into the dead ends over and over until his feet ached from exertion and his hands were bloody, bearing the marks of thorny bushes or unfortunate falls.

All of a sudden, Orin's hand disappeared. "Orin, Orin? *Orin?*" But it was useless. Gabriel's voice rang out in the darkness and Gabriel knew they'd left him all alone again. Tears filled his eyes at the realization that his brother's apparent kindness was only a lie. *Stop, Gabriel, just stop! You can't stay here. Just go back the way you came! You've done harder things. A little labyrinth can't scare you, and besides, you used to come here all the time. Finding the way out should be easy.* But could he really? Orin made so many twists and turns and so much time passed since Gabriel was last to Galamar.

Biting his lip, Gabriel considered his choices. He was so deep in thought that when a voice sprang out from the darkness, he jumped, startled beyond belief.

"Lost, little one?"

What? Who?

"Maybe I can help."

Confused by the sudden sound of the voice, Gabriel took a step back, slipping over something, probably a root. Déjà-vu... But this time, Gabriel didn't fall. A shadow moved at the speed of light and caught him before he hit the ground.

Gabriel's heart almost stopped in his chest as he realized the identity of the person now holding him tightly. Lucien, his demon prince. As always, Lucien was so beautiful. The few rays of the moon

made his blond hair shine blue, almost the same color of his eyes. Even in the darkness of the labyrinth, those eyes shone. Actually, they practically glowed, the blue surrounded by nuances of deep red. It was completely mesmerizing. Gabriel smiled, suddenly feeling thankful to his brother.

* * * *

Lucien watched from above as Orin and Gabriel advanced through the labyrinth, his powerful black wings easily maintaining him in the air. Next to him Cade held Kalin tight to his chest. Zeli also hovered just a few feet away. The three demons and their Alarian companion followed the progress of the two princes, knowing the importance of this night.

Lucien could practically feel Gabriel's fear echoing in his own heart. But if what his brothers said was correct, and he liked this place as a child, Lucien could give him a new memory, heal his heart and his mind. Following the plan, Orin let go of Gabriel's hand. On cue, Zeli swooped down and silently picked up his lover, lifting him from the ground.

"Ok. Now it's your turn, Prince Lucien." Orin indicated as Zeli flew them both next to Lucien.

Cade smirked. "Yeah, little bro, go play hero!"

Kalin elbowed his demon lover in the stomach, briefly glaring at him. Glancing at Lucien, he added, with a slightly concerned note in his voice. "Be careful, though. He's been afraid of the labyrinth since that time when he was little. So it won't be an easy task." In spite the fact that it was his idea, Kalin was the one who now showed most reservations about the plan. Like Orin, he wanted to give something back to Gabriel, a gift of sorts, but he was concerned of messing things up because of Gabriel's fragility.

Lucien shared Kalin's concern. But as he hovered over the walls of the labyrinth, observing the lone white silhouette, graceful even in

its agitation, he knew things would be just fine. He would protect his little one come what may.

Swooping down, Lucien silently landed a few feet from Gabriel's position. "Lost, little one? Maybe I can help." In obvious surprise, Gabriel stepped back, tripping over a root. Lucien caught him just in time.

Well, wasn't this convenient? Gabriel again ended up in his arms, his slender body next to Lucien's own. It wasn't exactly what Lucien planned, but he was entirely willing to skip a few steps. Fires of Kaldor, Gabriel was so beautiful. Those teary big eyes watching him in fascination, and those lips, just begging to be kissed. Lucien couldn't take it anymore. He pressed his mouth to Gabriel's, yearning to know if those lips were as soft as they looked.

Passion exploded between the two as their lips touched. Gabriel moaned as Lucien expertly coaxed his mouth open. *Oh... yeah... baby... Make those sounds for me, moan some more!* Lucien inwardly grinned as he began ravishing Gabriel's mouth with his own, thrusting his tongue in and out, swirling, exploring and massaging.

Much to his dismay, however, Gabriel pushed away from him, breaking their kiss. "What are you doing here?" Gabriel asked, somehow still managing to sound reproachful in spite of being practically out of breath from their kiss.

Lucien winced at the question, knowing that he had to be more careful now, else he lose his last chance with Gabriel. "Since I couldn't get to you, I enlisted your brothers' aid to get you to talk to me."

Gabriel took a deep breath, his dark eyes a pool of confusion, passion and indecision. "I don't know if this is a good idea," he whispered softly.

"Don't worry about it. Just let me take care of everything." Lucien soothed, reaching to cup Gabriel's cheek.

Gabriel leaned into his caress, and just like that, they were in each other's arms again. Lucien's mouth coaxed Gabriel's open, his kiss conveying all the passion he felt for his soon to be lover.

Gabriel let out a whimper of protest as Lucien abandoned his mouth, but Lucien had bigger plans. Lucien gently lowered Gabriel to the ground, sheltering his lithe body with his big wings. He proceeded to place little love bites on Gabriel's neck. His fangs lowered as the instinct to drink Gabriel's blood kicked in, but he couldn't do it, not yet. It was too soon. Instead, ripping the beautiful shirt open, he started feasting on a little pink nipple.

Gabriel gasped at Lucien's assault. Moans and whimpers and inarticulate sounds started filling the darkness of the labyrinth. "Oh...Oh, yes... Please... Oh, please more!"

Lucien abandoned the nipple he'd been playing with. "Tell me, baby! Tell me what you want!"

Gabriel whimpered. "Come on, Gabriel!" Lucien urged once more. "I want to hear it. Tell me what you want!"

Trembling slightly, Gabriel met his eyes. When he spoke, his voice was strong and clear. "You, I want you. I want you to touch me, I want you to kiss me and I want you to make love to me."

Chapter 6

Gabriel could read shock in his lover's beautiful eyes, but Lucien asked and Gabriel answered. That's what he wanted. It was selfish, but he wanted to know what it felt like to be loved, even if it was only once. Just for this night, he would forget everything else. He would allow himself to feel and enjoy the time he had left. "Please, make love to me!"

Lucien swallowed. "Are you sure, little one? I don't want to push you into something. We have time, I'm not going anywhere."

Maybe you're not, but I am. I'm going to a place where you can't follow. Gabriel thought. Shaking his head, he fought to push the depressing reality out of his mind. He wouldn't think about that now. This was his night, it was his dream and he would enjoy it. "No! I mean, I don't want to wait. I'm sure! Please?"

Still, Lucien hesitated. Maybe his demon prince didn't want to do this. Gabriel hastily added, "But if you don't want to, you don't have to. I mean, just because I want to mphhhhh—" His voice was silenced by Lucien's passionate kiss. Wow! His demon really knew how to kiss. Lucien didn't seem to be able to get enough of him, and his kisses were getting more and more passionate.

As they finally stopped for breath, Lucien whispered in his ear, "Oh, my beautiful Gabriel, you have no idea what you do to me, how much I want you. I'll ask you one last time. Tell me now because I don't think I'll be able to stop later. Are you sure?"

Gabriel looked into his demon's eyes. Gabriel somehow knew Lucien would stop now if Gabriel said no. But Gabriel didn't want to say no. He wrapped his arms around his dream mate's neck and

pulled him down for another kiss, hoping to communicate his decision through his passion. He knew exactly when Lucien abandoned all resistance.

What started as a gentle kiss from Gabriel's part turned into a fiery, passionate one as Lucien practically fucked his mouth with his tongue. Dimly, Gabriel registered himself being lowered onto the ground yet again, Lucien's body on top of him and their mouths still fused. Instinctively, he spread his legs, wanting everything Lucien had to offer.

Lucien went wild. He practically tore the already ripped shirt from Gabriel's body, throwing it aside without so much of a glance. The tight pants followed the fate of the shirt, also casually discarded in mere seconds. For a second, Lucien got off him, and Gabriel felt his boots removed as well. He was naked, completely naked. And Lucien was completely dressed. Just like when Gabriel was at Kirgen that time, himself completely naked and Lothar still dressed, hurting him, punishing him just for being born.

Gabriel's body trembled violently. Lucien obviously noticed his distress, because he lifted Gabriel, hugging him to his chest. "Shh, shh, I won't hurt you, I promise."

Gabriel buried his head into the crook of Lucien's neck, inhaling his comforting scent. Clarion, ash and leather and another underlying smell he couldn't quite identify. The memory of Lothar faded and a question slipped out of his mouth before he had time to stop it. "Why are you wearing perfume?"

Even taking into account the darkness, Gabriel could swear Lucien blushed. "Um, don't you like it?"

The question took Gabriel by surprise. On impulse, he blurted out, "I like your normal scent better."

"Oh?" Lucien was obviously interested. "And what do I smell like, Gabriel?" Lucien's voice turned into a seductive purr, but it held a slightly smug undertone.

“Um, C-Clarion and ash and leather... It makes me feel s-safe.” It also made him hot inside, but he couldn’t say that out loud. No way!

“You don’t say. You know what you smell like, baby?” Gabriel shook his head. It would have been a stupid thing to do, but demons could see in the dark. Gabriel wished he could see like that too, just to better observe Lucien’s expression as the demon spoke. “Like ripe cynathole fruit and fresh water. And you taste like cynathole, too. It turns me on so much, you can’t even imagine.”

It didn’t escape Gabriel’s attention that Lucien successfully avoided answering his previous question. He wanted to say as much, but all coherent thought flew out of his head as Lucien suddenly dropped him on the grass again and took his erection in his mouth in one fell swoop. *Ohhhhhh... Ohhhhhh... So good...* Lucien was doing something with his tongue that was driving Gabriel crazy, swirling it around his organ, going back to sucking hard in the most surprising moments. Gabriel wanted to control himself, he really did, but instinct took over as his body urged him to thrust into Lucien’s mouth. Lucien took him with no difficulty, sucking hard and fully deep throating him. Gabriel was going mad, “Please, I’m going to—”

With a shout, Gabriel came in his dream mate’s mouth. He thought he blacked out for a second, as Lucien swallowed all his seed. Vaguely, he registered this would be his first actual conscious orgasm. The few wet dreams he had growing up stopped, as he was brutally punished for soiling his sheets. And Lothar, well, Lothar never gave him pleasure. Far from it. But he couldn’t, he wouldn’t think about his nemesis now. He wouldn’t allow Lothar to spoil the moment.

Gabriel didn’t know exactly when Lucien’s weight disappeared off him, but as he felt Lucien’s presence disappear, his eyes flew open.

Lucien was still there and luckily for him, in seeing distance. Gabriel licked his lips as he watched his lover discarding his last article of clothing, a pair of tight black leather breeches. The vest and

boots that went with them were abandoned on the ground. In mere seconds, Lucien sauntered towards him, his long black wings spread. *Wow, just wow.* Lying on the grass, Gabriel struggled to control his thundering heart. So beautiful, his demon was just so beautiful! All that bronze, naked skin, that flowing platinum blond hair, the magnificently hard organ between those rock-hard thighs and those beautiful black wings completing the too-perfect package...

Following the direction of his gaze, Lucien asked “Do they bother you?”

Drinking in the vision before him, Gabriel barely managed an absent “Mmm?”

Lucien repeated more strongly. “Do they bother you?”

Gabriel blinked, snapping out of his trance. “Does what bother me?”

“My wings. You’re staring at them.”

Gabriel’s face flamed. It was stupid to feel embarrassed at being caught staring, especially since in mere moments they would probably share more than just kisses. But he wasn’t entirely logical in his emotions. “Umm, no. I mean, sorry for staring. They’re just so pretty! Could I maybe touch them?”

Lucien’s surprised expression made him feel sorry for asking. Maybe there was a demon thing he didn’t know about wings. Maybe they were private, or Lucien just didn’t want them to be touched. He actually wanted to apologize when his demon arched his wings towards the front, covering most of his body in the process. Gabriel regretted that immensely. A body like Lucien’s should never be covered up. Then again, that would make everyone drool over Lucien, and Gabriel didn’t like the thought of Lucien being with someone else. “Please do. Touch them.” His demon prince said and Gabriel barely contained his glee as he got up and took a few steps towards Lucien’s position. He extended his hand, gently petting the demon wings. They felt soft to the touch, yet strong and leathery, powerful,

yet protective. It was actually kind of strange that he didn't do this until now, but his hands were mostly occupied with something else.

Taking a few more steps, Gabriel made his way to his lover's back. His attention was thwarted by Lucien's perfect backside. His demon had an absolutely delicious rump. Gabriel wanted to touch it. Wings? Ass? Wings? Ass? Well, he'd take them in order. He was suddenly attracted by a particular spot on Lucien's back. The base of the wings just seemed to melt inside Lucien's body in a wonderfully artistic way. With a finger, Gabriel traced Lucien's spine, where the wings met his body.

The demon prince's breath caught. Gabriel repeated the movement and a growl sounded from Lucien. Well, that was interesting. Following a sudden urge, Gabriel passed his tongue over his lover's spine.

In a flash, Gabriel suddenly found himself back on the ground, Lucien's naked body on top of him. "That wasn't very wise, baby." Lucien whispered in his ear. "That spot is very sensitive. You licking it feels better than sucking me off." Lucien's blue eyes were completely red now, and his wings turned scarlet as if by magic. "I need you, I need you now."

Gabriel nodded at Lucien, giving his agreement. He needed Lucien, too, needed to feel him deep inside. His demon smiled at him and turned him over, urging him on all fours. Then a low purr sounded in his ear, "Open yourself to me, Gabriel."

Wait, what? Light above, he didn't mean...?

"Come on, Gabriel! You know what I want! Show me that pretty hole of yours!"

Gabriel whimpered at his lover's husky tone of voice. He could come again just from that. Hypnotized by the seductive voice, Gabriel could only obey. Trembling, he used his own hands to spread his ass cheeks, maintaining his balance only because Lucien's wing supported him. A feeling of nervousness flashed through Gabriel. Was this really wise? That huge cock would surely rip him apart.

Lucien was even more “gifted” in that field than Lothar. Oh, Light above, Lothar... A familiar fear gripped him, as a flashback from Kirgen passed through his mind’s eye. His hands dropped useless at his sides. He couldn’t do this.

“Shhh... Don’t worry. Don’t be afraid. I promise I won’t hurt you!” Lucien’s voice soothed him, comforting, gentle, understanding. The fear slowly subsided, and his nightmares retreated in a dark corner of his mind as Lucien caressed his hair, placing gentle kisses across his spine. He didn’t have anything to fear. This was Lucien. Lucien wasn’t like the superintendent. He was safe.

Obviously feeling Gabriel’s gradual relaxation, Lucien focused again on his ass. “Tell me if I do something that feels bad, ok?” Gabriel couldn’t speak. He just nodded, hoping his lover could see him. Obviously, Lucien could, because before he knew it, Gabriel felt something wet pass across his opening.

What was Lucien doing? It was... a tongue. Lucien, licking him, eating his ass. Gabriel dissolved into incoherence as he felt Lucien’s tongue thrust in and out of his rump. Gabriel thought he heard himself saying something, or moaning something, but he couldn’t think. It was so good. It was too much.

Gabriel shouted as he came for a second time that evening. He saw stars before his eyes, collapsing against Lucien’s wing. Gabriel prayed his weak body could withstand the sensual assault. He didn’t want to black out or start bleeding. *Just for one night, a little strength, please, just for one night!*

Thankfully, his body listened to him. Panting in exhaustion, Gabriel turned into the leathery embrace of his demon and smiled. Lucien’s cock was still hard, thick and red and oh so magnificent. Gabriel swallowed nervously. “Lucien? I’m ready. Take me now! Make love to me!”

Lucien’s nostrils flared as he registered Gabriel’s words. His fists clenched, as he obviously struggled for control. But Gabriel didn’t

want his lover to hold back, he wanted his passion. “It’s fine, don’t worry! You can let go, I’m not afraid anymore.”

Lucien cursed softly, his voice husky with passion. “Baby, you drive me crazy. Fuck!”

Gabriel smiled. In spite of his nervousness, he felt protected in Lucien’s arms, and he wanted his lover to touch him, to make him forget all the pain of his life. “Yes, fuck, now!”

Lucien growled. Gabriel felt fingers ghost across his hole, then one finger penetrated his opening. It felt a little strange, different, not like the tongue, but it was strange in a good way. He gasped as Lucien’s finger hit something inside him. More, please!

Lucien added a second finger, then a third finger, hitting that special spot expertly. All awkwardness disappeared, swallowed by the pleasure. It felt so incredibly good. Gabriel was fairly certain he looked like a total slut, riding Lucien’s fingers, but he couldn’t care less. He wanted more, more!

Then the fingers disappeared. Gabriel wanted to argue at their absence until he felt the blunt head of Lucien’s cock at his hole. Their eyes met for a second and then Lucien pushed his organ inside Gabriel’s welcoming body. Gabriel forgot to breathe as he was slowly impaled on that wonderful cock. It burned and it felt a little uncomfortable. But it also felt so very nice, so full and so good. Gabriel closed his eyes, overwhelmed by feelings and sensations. Lucien, his Lucien, his dream mate. *Thank you, thank you for giving me this. I love you!*

* * * *

So tight, so perfect. Lucien prayed for control as he struggled to stand still. Lucien gritted his teeth. It wasn’t always a good thing to have a demon-sized cock, especially in the case of a virgin lover. For this reason, he knew he had to wait for Gabriel’s body to get used to the invasion. He couldn’t risk hurting his lover.

Gabriel, his little one, so brave, so beautiful. Gabriel's eyes were snapped shut, his cheeks rosy from the passion, his lips swollen from Lucien's kisses. At some point, his braid came undone. He looked positively debauched, like a beautiful fallen angel.

It was so difficult to stand still and not follow the urge to possess him savagely. Lucien's demon nature stirred, unleashed by his erratic feelings, but he reined it in. For the good of his lover, Lucien needed to be patient.

Then Gabriel squeezed his ass cheeks, causing spasms of pleasure around his penis. A lifetime of discipline flew out the window as Lucien saw red. Growling, Lucien pulled back from Gabriel's channel, pushing back in forcefully. He shifted the position a little, hitting Gabriel's prostate with every thrust.

"Please, please! Yes, Lucien, harder! Oh, more!" Gabriel pleaded, desperately reaching out to grip Lucien's shoulders. Well, if Gabriel wanted it hard, Lucien would do his best to oblige. Lucien forgot all reason as he thrust into his lover, all his passion unleashed. Grunts and groans filled the darkness. He couldn't think, couldn't focus. He forgot all notion of where he was, who he was. Everything lost importance but the writhing form beneath him.

Hard and fast, passionate... An explosion of pleasure... Gabriel arched his back and screamed hoarsely, as he came again, just from Lucien's cock inside him. His ass clenched around Lucien's shaft, and Lucien found himself unable to hold back his release. His roar overwhelmed Gabriel's own passionate shout as he released his seed deep inside Gabriel's body.

The two lovers finally collapsed against each other, their sweaty bodies still entwined. Lucien hugged Gabriel to his chest and his lover smiled at him drowsily. "It's okay, baby. Rest now, you're safe." Gabriel nodded and closed his eyes, instantly falling into an exhausted sleep.

Just then a thought snapped into Lucien's mind. His brother, Zeli and the other two Alarians. It was too much to hope that they didn't

see. Oh well, he'd beat those two demons to a pulp later. Everything could wait. The world could wait. For this night, he had his beautiful Gabriel.

Lucien slowly lowered his mate to the ground, shifting him carefully so as not to separate their bodies. Well, they hadn't completed the mating process, but as soon as Lucien discussed with Gabriel, he would ask his lover to consider a permanent union. But even without that, Lucien knew and felt Gabriel as his mate. There could be no mistake. He loved Gabriel and completing the mating would be only a matter of time.

Covering Gabriel's body with his wing, he set his own body next to that of his mate, spooning Gabriel in a comfortable position. Then the exhaustion of the day took over and he joined his Gabriel into a deep sleep.

* * * *

Gabriel woke up sore, warm and strangely feeling happy. Now, the soreness wasn't anything new. He woke up in Kirgen in great pain more times than he could count. But the happiness, that was definitely new.

Still, the ache felt peculiar in itself simply because of its location. Gabriel's face flamed as he realized his body was still connected with Lucien's. He'd actually slept with that demon-sized cock inside of him? No wonder he felt sore.

He stirred a little, fully intending to remove himself from the position. But all thoughts scattered in his head as the said demon cock suddenly thrust deep inside of him. "Mmm, you're finally up. That's such a good thing, we can continue where we left off." Lucien rumbled in his ear.

Gabriel's vision went blurry as the pleasure overwhelmed his senses. He tried to say something, anything to convey his feelings to

his demon lover, but his voice came out as a pathetic panting sound. “I—” *thrust* “I—” *another thrust* “Please!”

Unfortunately, Lucien obviously took his plea as something entirely different because Lucien’s cock suddenly disappeared from Gabriel’s body. “Sorry, baby! You must be feeling sore from last night.” No! Lucien couldn’t possibly be serious. He whimpered in protest, wanting the wonderful sensation of fullness back.

Lucien turned him, touching their foreheads briefly in a gentle gesture. With a brief peck on the lips and a wink, Lucien smiled. “Don’t worry. We’ll continue this in a little while. I’m not exactly normal-sized.” His expression turned serious. “And you were a virgin last night. I don’t want to hurt you, Gabriel. We have lots of time.”

Gabriel’s eyes filled with tears. Someone cared about him, and someone loved him. It felt so wonderful, but they didn’t have time. He was going to lose it all because he’d been stupid and desperate.

“Hey, Gabriel. Hey, don’t cry! Don’t be afraid. I’m here.”

Holding Gabriel’s body tightly, Lucien forced their eyes to meet. “I think maybe we should talk, yes?” Gabriel froze for a second, then nodded. Obviously feeling his hesitation his demon said, “How about I start, ok?”

Lucien took a deep breath. “Well, first of all, I guess you already know that I’m the second son of the Xeetah demon kings Seyran and Lyan. Both myself and my older brother Cade, whom you know, are generals in the Xeetah army.” Lucien’s voice turned sad. “I had a younger brother, Cain, but he died in battle.”

Gabriel’s heart hurt for Lucien. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what I would do if something would happen to either of my brothers.” He shrugged. “I know you said they helped you last night. I don’t even understand them anymore, but no matter what, they’re my brothers and I love them.”

Lucien sighed at Gabriel’s words. “They love you too, you know.” Gabriel arched a brow, feeling skeptical. True enough, Orin and Kalin

had been helpful, but the fact remained that they didn't address him once since his arrival, not even to greet him.

At Gabriel's expression, Lucien rubbed his eyes. "I'm saying this all wrong again. Maybe I should just start over.

"So, I'm a general in the Xeetahn army and I've always been a soldier, at all times focused on my duty and my honor. I'd never fallen in love, until I met you." Lucien's smile turned beatific as he continued. "That time, when I first saw you, when you practically fell into my lap, as Cade said. You were so beautiful and I wanted you from the first moment our eyes met. I wanted to claim you right then and there."

Gabriel felt himself blush at the thought of what that claiming entailed. Lucien kissed his nose fondly, obviously amused at his embarrassment. Then Lucien continued with a serious tone. "But then I found out you would soon be mated to someone else." Gabriel's heart stopped for a second. Did his lover regret what happened between them last night?

"I- I don't—"

Lucien smiled, nodding fondly. "I know you don't love him. If you did, you wouldn't have surrendered yourself to me so fully last night." Gabriel's blush intensified as snippets of the previous night came back to him. He suddenly became very aware that they were still naked and still in the middle of the labyrinth.

Lucien smirked. "What? Are you cold? Or just embarrassed?" Gabriel forgot whatever he wanted to answer when he was enveloped in a warm, leathery hug. Lucien's wings felt so good around him. He sighed as he relaxed against Lucien's shoulder. As he squirmed closer to his demon, Gabriel realized Lucien was still hard.

Lucien just laughed. "Don't worry, we'll deal with that later. It's a natural response to just being around you."

He sighed and continued. "That was exactly the problem from the very beginning, the fact that I lusted after someone who'd already spoken for." Gabriel opened his mouth to say something, but Lucien

just interrupted him again. “Hush! I need to say this. I want everything to be clear between us. No secrets.” No secrets, could Gabriel do that? Could he tell Lucien what he’d done?

Oblivious to Gabriel’s sudden dilemma, Lucien went on with his story. “So, I thought I lusted after the mate of another. You must understand, baby, that the Xeetah are a very honor-bound nation. We respect the mates and connections of others at all costs. It is also essential for us to keep our control. And in those circumstances, it hurt, but I knew I had to stay away from you. There was no other way.”

Gabriel fought to maintain silence as Lucien spoke. He’d had no clue that Lucien felt so strongly about him. “But then I noticed you following me around. It drove me crazy, yes, but not like you assumed that day when we talked in front of your room. I wanted you so much, and I was losing the battle with myself and all semblance of control. I knew that if the situation continued, I would probably just jump you one day out of the blue or worse.”

Gabriel never meant to be cruel to such an extent, to torment Lucien like that. In fact, at the time, he’d actually thought he was discreet. “I-I never, I never wanted to... I never expected ...”

Gabriel felt Lucien’s nod against his hair. “I know. You’re too pure to realize, but it’s not your fault. Demons are like that, creatures of fire and passion. Our control stems from years of discipline and when we lose it, well, it’s not a good thing for anybody. I have to say, I’m worried that I may have lost it a little with you last night, Gabriel.” Lucien met his eyes. “I couldn’t help it. I just wanted you so much.”

Gabriel smiled at Lucien’s anguish. “It’s fine. I’m a little sore, but it’s natural. It doesn’t actually feel bad, just a little strange. And I heal fast, so don’t worry.” Lucien watched Gabriel carefully as he spoke, as if analyzing the truth of his words. Then after a pause, he resumed his story. “So, I was at my limit. In despair, I thought the only solution to the whole situation would be pushing you away. I turned

to my best friend, Zeli.” Gabriel’s body tensed. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear this part. The scene in the stables remained fresh in his mind. “Please, please, just listen.” Lucien’s voice had a distressed undertone. “Zeli is a good friend, almost like my brother. I know that may sound strange, but it’s true. He was skeptical at my request, but he knew how hard it is sometimes to withstand overwhelming passions. So at my persistence, in the end, he accepted.

“I see now, as I look back, that it was a stupid thing to do. It was stupid and undignified, and I’m ashamed of it like I’ve never been ashamed of something in my entire life. I only hope that you can forgive me and give me another chance.” Gabriel blinked back tears as Lucien’s heartfelt voice. He wanted to, he really wanted to, but they couldn’t be together, all because of his cowardice and stupidity.

No longer able to contain his tears, Gabriel burst into sobs and collapsed against his lover’s shoulder. Why couldn’t he have met Lucien a few days earlier? Just a few days earlier. It was too late now. The knowledge of what he’d lost through that one desperate decision made him want to scream.

“Shhh, don’t cry.” Lucien tried to soothe him. “Talk to me, baby, Talk to me!”

Lucien’s voice was gentle, obviously worried. Gabriel didn’t know what to say, didn’t know what to do. Half of him recoiled from the very idea of opening his heart like that. *No, you can’t tell him. He’ll hate you.* The other half of him wanted to speak, wanted to let everything out, to finally trust. In the end, trust won out. *No secrets*, Lucien said.

* * * *

Lucien’s heart hurt at the sight of his beautiful mate in tears. Gabriel suddenly seemed broken somehow and Lucien had no idea how to make it better. “I want to, I really do, but you see, I don’t know if I can.” Gabriel wiped at his eyes furiously, as if trying to

stem the tears flowing from his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he began telling his own tale. "I lived in a monastery until two weeks ago. There was a man there, my supposed mate. H—he forced me to do things. I didn't want to, but he forced me."

Instinctively, Lucien knew what things Gabriel had been forced to do. Lucien wanted to find that man and tear him to little pieces, then revive him and tear him to pieces again. He gritted his teeth, fighting the instinct to kill whoever hurt his loved one. His anger would have to wait. Gabriel needed him. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, Gabriel. I understand."

Gabriel shook his head. "I have to. You need to know. You need to understand, before it's too late." What was his lover talking about? "Please, just let me..." Gabriel took another breath and continued. "He forced me to pleasure him many times since I first arrived there." Gabriel's voice went very small, almost defeated, and ashamed. Hot red fury gripped Lucien as a volcano of anger and murderous intent flared to life inside him. He knew his wings were crimson now and he could feel his claws extending, his fangs lowering. He cursed as his demon nature demanded that he take retribution for his mate. But his lover wasn't done with his tale.

"Sometimes he asked others to beat me. But that's not the point, that isn't the point at all."

There was more? Lucien couldn't believe it. "Baby..."

"Please, just listen! I think you know all Alarians, or most of them, at least, mate at nineteen when they come of age." Lucien just nodded. He couldn't say anything if he wanted to. His mind was suddenly clouded by ferocity. He knew he had to pay attention to Gabriel's words. It kept his fire away, pushing him away from the edge.

Gabriel took a deep breath, wiped his tears and continued speaking. "Normally at sixteen, Alarian youths get a party welcoming them to society, an introduction of sorts. I never got that, because my father decided I would be Lothar's mate." Gabriel swallowed, his

body as tense as a bow string. “When I found out about it, about my mating with Lothar, I grew desperate. I did something, something bad.”

An impending feeling of doom suddenly gripped Lucien. “What, Gabriel? What did you do?”

Gabriel’s voice was so low, Lucien wouldn’t have heard without his demon abilities. “I– I took something, a poison. It’s deadly.” Anger washed out of Lucien, replaced by sheer terror and agony. It couldn’t be. No, it couldn’t be. Gabriel burst into sobs once more, hugging his neck. “Please, please forgive me! I tried to stay away. I knew it wasn’t fair, getting close to you, but I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. And last night, I wanted to feel happy, to feel loved, and to feel you. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Gabriel was dying. It was real. Lucien could feel it in the pain of his lover. But no! Lucien refused to accept that. He wouldn’t allow such a thing to happen. There had to be a way, a way to fix it. “Baby, listen to me. Shh, just listen.” Gabriel looked at him with big teary eyes. He looked so beautiful, Lucien’s brave love. Lucien couldn’t lose him. “We’ll find something, a cure. Alarians are healers, right? Surely there has to be some remedy?”

Gabriel shook his head. “Not for this poison. It’s very strong, the strongest poison there is. The only reason I’m still alive is because I delayed in taking it. Taken fresh it causes instant death. As it is, I’m slowly withering away.” Lucien wanted to scream at Gabriel’s words. “And there’s no Alarian I could ask that could help me.”

At this last phrase, an idea appeared in Lucien’s mind. “Yes, there is.” He grabbed Gabriel’s slender body in his arms, extending his huge black wings. “There is someone we can ask.”

Gabriel’s eyes went wide. “Wait! Where are we going? We’re still naked. We can’t just fly around like that.” His poor baby, worrying about stuff like that. Unfortunately, Lucien couldn’t cast disguise spells here, since the whole perimeter had solid wards. “Don’t worry, I’ll fly high, and the castle is close. No one will see us.”

Gabriel was obviously not convinced by this argument. Well, Lucien wasn't convinced by his own words either, but he didn't have time for trivial matters such as clothing. He had to hurry. His mate's life was at stake, and the road to salvation began at the castle. Spreading his wings, Lucien took to the air, holding his lover close to his chest. There was no way he would allow Gabriel to die. Lucien refused to lose another loved one. Not while he still had breath in his body, not this time. This time, death wouldn't win.

Chapter 7

They were soaring high above in the skies. Gabriel had never seen anything so beautiful in his life. The Alarian dawn cast surreal colors on the clouds, painting them in magnificent shades of crimson and purple. Gabriel always wanted to do this, to feel the freedom of flight one day, but now he couldn't really enjoy it. He didn't know exactly where they were going and he wasn't sure what Lucien's reaction to the news of his impending death meant.

Gabriel snuggled in closer to Lucien's warm embrace. The morning air was chilly, especially at this height and in their undressed form. He blushed profusely as he realized how they must look, completely nude, after a night of passion and flying in the morning air. In truth, he couldn't bring himself to care much about things like that. They simply weren't important, not when Gabriel finally allowed himself to fall in love, only to be a step away from losing this precious gift because of his own mistake. Gabriel knew hoping would be foolish but still, maybe, just maybe, if Lucien said so, there could be another chance.

Gabriel inwardly sighed. Lucien wasn't familiar with poisons. In general, the demon race didn't use potions of any kind, and this particular concoction could be made only in Alaria. Nothing could cure Linas poisoning, not even Alarian healing magic would be strong enough. Still, if there was even the slightest hope, Gabriel would take it. He'd give anything for a chance to be with Lucien.

He didn't have any chance to continue in his musings because they obviously arrived at their destination. Lucien abruptly swooped down, landing in what seemed to be a balcony in the castle premises,

probably adjoining Lucien's room. He wasn't familiar with this wing of the castle. In fact, Gabriel wasn't familiar with the castle at all. He'd always stayed in his little room at the other side of the palace. True, he resided in the section of the living quarters of the royal family, but there was nothing really royal about it. It still amazed him how he'd somehow managed to get stuck with seemingly the only living chamber in the palace that had no balcony.

Lucien knocked powerfully on the glass doors. Gabriel couldn't help but wonder why Lucien would knock and they weren't they just going in. Weird. When there was no answer, Lucien knocked again. "Wake the fuck up!" Lucien shouted. Gabriel let out a gasp of disbelief. No, it couldn't be!

A shuffling of sheets, then furious steps sounded inside the room. Gabriel froze as he observed Cade's nude form appear in front of the glass doors, pushing them open, "What the hell, brother?" Gabriel could ask that very same question. He wasn't feeling too comfortable being naked in the balcony, under Cade's gaze and that of anyone else that would look up and see them, even if he was sheltered by Lucien's black wings.

"Is he here?" Cade's expression showed a mix of puzzlement and irritation at Lucien's vague question.

"Is who here? Look, you're my brother. I love you and naked visits are nice and all. But really, what the fuck are you talking about?"

"Kalin, is he here?" Lucien snapped back.

What? Why would his demon prince be looking for his eldest brother? And why look for him here, of all places? Another sleepy voice suddenly sounded from the room. "Cade? Who is it?"

"Go back to sleep, love. It's my naked brother with your naked brother." After a brief moment, there was another shuffling of sheets, and Kalin appeared, his purple hair ruffled and his body baring the obvious signs of a night of passion with Cade. Still in Lucien's leathered embrace, Gabriel could only stare. *Whaaaa...? No way!*

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Kalin’s voice seemed angry with an undertone of distress. Things seemed to be getting weirder by the second. True, Lucien said Kalin and Orin loved Gabriel, but Gabriel couldn’t help but be surprised at the worry he could detect in Kalin’s dark blue eyes. Worried for him?

Lucien pushed both their siblings inside and placed Gabriel gently on an armchair. He nodded at Cade’s consideration when the other demon threw him something to cover Gabriel’s nude form. They waited in silence a few seconds before Lucien manage to blurt out, “He’s dying.”

Cade was the first one who spoke. “Little bro, if that’s supposed to be some kind of a joke, your sense of humor is sorely lacking.”

“I assure you, I’m not joking. I need you to help me—”

A blast of magic hit Lucien, interrupting the phrase. Kalin’s voice was a menacing growl when he spoke. “You fucking bastard! We trusted you! What did you do to him?”

Gabriel had to do something. Even if he’d been locked away for so long, Gabriel knew Kalin’s warrior skills were unmatched between the Alarians. During Gabriel’s childhood years in Galamar, Kalin, still a young man, was defeating much older and more experienced soldiers. Still, Lucien was a Xeetahn, belonging to a nation of warriors par excellence. Both of them could get really hurt. “He did nothing, brother. It was all me.”

Lucien was next to him in a second as if the magical blast didn’t affect him at all. “No, baby, it’s not your fault. None of this is your fault.”

Obviously Cade found it an appropriate moment for a diplomatic intervention. “I believe that before we figure out whose fault is it, you should actually tell what this famous *it* really is.” He gave Kalin a gentle smile. “Love, put some clothes on, will you? Obviously this is the kind of conversation you want to have dressed.”

Kalin glared at his lover. He was obviously trying to regain his calm, his knuckles white from tension, but Cade ordering him around

didn't help one bit. In the end he did as he was told, probably seeing the wisdom in Cade's words. Of course, that didn't help improve his mood any. A change of clothes flew at high speed in the Cade's direction.

Cade sighed, shaking his head. "Tell me what all this dying business is about."

Lucien obviously had trouble in handling this, so Gabriel decided it would be up to him to explain. After all, he had to take responsibility for his own actions. He took a deep breath and swiftly declared. "I-took-a-deadly-poison-and-now-I'm-slowly-dying."

"Say again?" Kalin barely managed to choke out, astounded. "You took a poison? What the fuck? Why would you do that?"

"Isn't it obvious, brother? Because of his despair." Orin's voice sounded from the doorway, and Gabriel's head snapped up. Orin came into the room, followed by the redhead from the stables. Zeli? What on Kaldor...?

"What do you know about this, Orin?" Kalin asked.

"Not more than you, I'm afraid." Orin answered sadly. "I suspected something last night. I felt weakness on him, something dark in his aura, which is why we were coming here, to talk to you two."

"Why wait?" Lucien growled, his voice rough with accusation. "Why not say something yesterday?"

Orin's voice turned small and ashamed. "I didn't actually think it was so bad. I wanted to make him happy and I knew you could do it." Was Orin actually crying? Orin never cried.

Kalin took a deep a breath. "Focus here people! Maybe it isn't so bad. What poison did you take, Gabriel?"

Everybody looked at him expectantly. Gabriel looked down. He didn't want to face them, didn't want to tell them what he'd done. "Linas," he murmured softly.

Kalin cursed violently. "I know you didn't just say Linas. Gabriel? Tell me you're joking!"

Gabriel barely managed to speak. He dug his fingers into his palms, hoping to keep himself from crying. “It’s true,” he choked out. “The only reason I’m still alive now is because I didn’t get to take it at Kirgen when I first made it.”

Just like that, the last of his control went out the window and sobs swallowed his voice. He didn’t want to die. He wanted to live, for himself, for Lucien, for his brothers who seemed to love him. He felt the scent of Clarion envelop him as Lucien came closer, holding him with strong arms. “Don’t worry, Gabriel. There has to be a way, there’s always a way.”

But there wasn’t. Gabriel buried his face in his lover’s neck. There was no hope. There was no cure. The only thing left was to die in the arms of his loved one.

* * * *

Gabriel’s tears broke Lucien’s heart. Lucien knew his lover blamed himself for this entire situation. He looked expectantly towards the two Alarian princes. Kalin stared at the wall, a blank expression on his face. Orin buried his face in Zeli’s chest. “There is a solution, right?” Silence met him yet again.

“What the fuck?” On impulse, Lucien moved off Gabriel grabbing Kalin by his shirt and lifting him the air. “Don’t you care at all?” he said between gritted teeth.

“Brother, you might want to let go of him, and I mean *now*!” Cade growled, voice low and dangerous.

Lucien glared at him, pushing Kalin into his lover’s arms. Then he glared at Zeli. “And you said they loved him so much.”

“Fuck you! What the fuck do you know, bastard?” Kalin’s voice suddenly rang out, as if he’d been in a trance until then. “You think you can show up here, suddenly claim you love Gabriel and throw accusations at everybody? You don’t know shit about us!”

"I know enough, and it makes me sick that you wouldn't help your brother when he's in peril."

Kalin had obvious difficulties in maintaining a modicum of calm. Exasperated, Zeli moved between the two, effectively blocking any possible manifestation of violence. "Guys, shut up. I understand how you feel, Lucien, but do you really think this is helping?"

"Shut up," Lucien spat at his friend. "Just shut your mouth. You can't possibly understand anything."

Before Zeli could reply, another voice sounded, surprising them all. "Stop! Please, just stop," Gabriel pleaded.

He curled up in a little ball, buried in the sheet, but in spite of his obvious pain at the situation, his eyes shone with decision and strength. "Fighting never does any good."

Gabriel's words made everyone pause. Lucien felt ashamed of himself for only considering his own pain. He couldn't even begin to imagine how Gabriel felt, knowing he would die soon and at the same time, forced to see his loved ones bicker and fight amongst themselves like children over a toy.

Lucien didn't want this. He only wanted to make Gabriel happy. And now, everything was falling apart, and he was handling it all wrong.

No longer paying attention to Kalin, he moved towards the armchair, touching Gabriel's cheek gently. Gabriel jumped and his eyes flew open. "Baby, I'm sorry, I'm so, so very sorry. I'm doing this all wrong."

Gabriel sniffed, shaking his head and offering him a tremulous smile. "You have nothing to be sorry about. It's all my fault. I'm so stupid. If I hadn't taken that thing, or at least if I'd taken it at Kirgen..."

Lucien couldn't control his anger. What was that all about? He grabbed Gabriel violently, squeezing his shoulders harder than he would have wanted. "Don't you ever say that! Don't ever feel sorry for having met me!" He met his lover's eyes, trying to convey all the

love he felt for Gabriel through his gaze. “You’re my everything. We’ll fix this, I promise. Just don’t give up yet. Fight for me, Gabriel! Fight for us!” He hugged his lover tightly to his chest, feeling relieved when Gabriel nodded.

It was Orin who broke the silence. “I think that we can at least try. We are not powerful enough to heal it completely, but we can delay the effects and maybe we can find an alternative solution in the meanwhile.”

Lucien felt hope grow inside him. “You mean you can actually do something for him?”

Kalin sighed, observing his two brothers. “The problem with poison is that it doesn’t react to our magic like normal injuries do. If it isn’t eliminated completely from the body the first time the magic of an Alarian is used, it just takes over again and repels the magic a second time. As I see it, we have two options. Orin and I use our own healing powers to do what we can and hope we find some sort of antidote, or we find a more powerful healer that can actually heal him fully.”

Gabriel broke away from Lucien and shook his head at the last phrase. “There isn’t one. There isn’t a healer that can eliminate Linas. It’s too powerful.”

Orin hesitated for a second before saying, “There is someone who could have a chance. But...”

Zeli frowned at his lover’s reluctance, his bronze eyes clearly showing his concern. “What is it, pretty? What’s wrong?”

Lucien looked at Gabriel and arched a brow, realizing his lover’s surprise at Orin’s words. Obviously, he didn’t know of a healer that could have the so power to heal the poison he’d taken. Gabriel’s voice trembled as he asked, “Who is it, Orin? Father? If it’s father, surely we can convince him somehow.”

Still, Orin hesitated. Lucien wanted to shake him, to make him tell everything he knew. “It’s not father. He’s powerful, but not enough. It’s—”

Understanding finally dawned and Lucien's heart fell as he finished Orin's phrase. "Lothar. It's Lothar, isn't it?"

Orin assented with a nod, not meeting his eye and silence fell over the room. Lucien wanted to scream at the unfairness. Lothar, his worst enemy was his only hope. What were they going to do?

* * * *

Gabriel tried to process Orin's words, but he couldn't seem to get his mind wrapped around that concept. Lothar, the strongest healer? It couldn't be right.

"There has to be some mistake. The king has always been the strongest healer." Gabriel shook his head in denial. Lothar was powerful indeed. Gabriel witnessed it himself many times and his father *did* act strangely when they faced each other back at Kirgen. But still, there was no way. "If Lothar was the stronger healer..."

Kalin nodded, a glum expression on his face. "It would mean that he was the strongest Alarian mage." His brother sighed, looking away with a distant expression on his face. "There are things you don't know, Gabriel. Many, many things."

Cade looked startled as his lover's suddenly old voice. "Hey, love, what's wrong?" He asked voicing his concern. "You know you can trust everybody in this room."

Kalin hesitated briefly, but nodded again. "Yes, I know that. However, I have never said these things to anybody, only to Orin and that probably wasn't entirely right. Burdening him with this..."

Orin snapped as his sibling. "Stop it, brother. Would you stop blaming yourself for what happened? It wasn't your fault."

What was going on? Did this have something to do to why his brothers rejected him as a child and now they actually seemed to care? Gabriel didn't know what to believe anymore. Still, in spite of his confusion, Gabriel knew that whatever things Kalin was talking about, they weighed heavily on his soul.

Gabriel wrapped himself in the sheet, protecting his still nude form as best he could. He made his way towards his brother, hesitantly hugging Kalin's waist. "I'm sure it's not that bad. Surely, you'll feel better if you tell us."

When Kalin looked at Gabriel, his eyes showed pure agony. "Oh, Gabriel." As if by their own will, Kalin's arms wrapped around Gabriel, holding him so tightly he could barely breathe. "You're saying that because you don't know, you don't know..." Kalin suddenly seemed lost. His brother, always so strong, was somehow broken inside.

Orin's voice broke the heavy silence. Strangely enough, it was Orin's normal tone of voice, cold and sarcastic, the same tone that many times made Gabriel think his brother hated him. "What if I tell the story? I don't know the details that well, but we're getting nowhere with you wallowing in your absurd guilt." In spite of the cruelty in his tone, Orin's eyes showed the same pain as Kalin's. What was going on?

"No, you're right. I have to do it." Kalin took a deep breath as if gathering his strength. "So, here goes. It all runs back to when we were all children. Well, Orin and I at least, you had not yet been born. Back then, father and mother didn't have a very happy marriage. Well, they still don't, but at that particular moment, it was because father refused to give mother more leverage at court, and insisted on her staying to take care of us.

"I have to say that I am not entirely certain of the details either, but I'm fairly certain that the reason mother married father was for power. I think he loved her once, but even love can die out when faced with cruel reality. At any rate, when it became apparent for Leyra that it wasn't possible to manipulate the King as his Queen, she made this plan."

Lucien interrupted the narration. His eyes sparkled with emotion. At some point, he put some clothes on, because now he now wore a

black leather suit, similar to the one he had on at his arrival. Great, now Gabriel was the only naked one in the room.

All such thoughts flew out of Gabriel's head when Lucien spoke. "Wait. A plan? Of your mother's? What plan? And what does it have to do with Lothar?" Lucien's voice sounded overwhelmed by a mixture of despair and anger. Gabriel didn't know what to do. He wanted to go comfort his lover, but Kalin also seemed to need him.

Kalin sighed again, continuing the story and not giving Gabriel time to decide. "Yes, well, I was getting there. See, I'm sure you aren't aware that Lothar is my mother's cousin." Gabriel's eyes widened at the shock. The question flew out of his mouth before he could help it.

"What? Your mother's cousin? But how?"

Kalin shrugged. "I am not entirely familiar with her family tree. However, in this case, it's important. Apparently, my dear mother and her cousin had a very close relationship, and I'm fairly sure even back then Lothar was pretty powerful. Therefore, she asked him for help to dethrone father. The plan was that after my father's fall, she'd then place me as king on the throne with her and Lothar acting as my regents. I would be a puppet in their hands."

Everybody in the room seemed stunned at the revelation. "Wait. If she urged such a plot, why is she still acting queen? Why haven't you told your father?" Zeli inquired, giving Kalin a somewhat suspicious look.

Cade seemed incredibly irritated at Zeli's rough attitude, so Kalin let Gabriel out of his embrace and moved towards his lover. Gabriel took advantage of the occasion to run back to his own demon. Sinking into Lucien's embrace, he nearly missed Kalin's following words. "I don't know how much Orin has told you of our lives here at the castle."

"Not that much," Zeli replied. "But I do know how she treated you, how she beat you. I've heard about her cruelty." What? That couldn't be right Gabriel's body started shaking at the phrase, causing

Lucien to tighten the hold on him. It couldn't be. The Queen loved her sons, didn't she?

Kalin nodded. "Mostly the beatings she reserved for Orin. For me, our beloved mother had other special treats. Gabriel, I know you don't know what to believe, because you thought mother loved us."

"Well, you always seemed to be happy when I wasn't around." Gabriel said sheepishly.

Kalin sighed again, his eyes clouded by the burden of the past. "Appearances can be deceiving. The reason I could do nothing for Orin or myself is that father is very much aware of the treatment we receive. These days, his leadership is hanging by a very thin thread. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

"So, as I was saying, mother enlisted Lothar's help to dethrone father. Due to Alarian traditions, she needed a male figurehead to act as regent. In the meantime, she also assured the collaboration of two of the most important members of the High Council by betrothing both Orin and myself with their daughters. But perhaps dethroning is not a right word, since the plan basically meant Lothar assassinating father, if I'm not mistaken, particularly by using Linas."

Gabriel blinked at the mention of the poison. Now that he thought about it, it was quite odd that all the plants necessary for the concoction could be found in the monastery gardens. True enough, it hadn't been easy for him to make it, mostly because he had to sneak around in the library and find the recipe first. By some miracle he'd done it, without being caught. But for someone like Lothar, making an elaborate poison would be particularly easy. And Linas left no trace whatsoever.

"At the time, Lothar still had a low rank at Kirgen." Low rank? How come? "The position of superintendent belonged to Lothar's half-brother. Now, Lothar's half-brother was a very powerful man, but he was also extremely kind. Sometimes he would come visit us, me and Orin, that is, and bring us sweets or play with us while at the castle for official business."

"I didn't know Lothar had a brother. What happened to him?" Gabriel asked.

"Ironically, Mother's plan blew up in her face because of Lothar. When he came here and found out that she betrothed me to Dallea, he became incredibly angry and turned against her." Cade visibly tensed at the mentioning of Kalin's mate. "He wanted me for himself, to be his mate."

"Say again?" Cade yelled, obviously unaware of this story up until now. "What's up with that? When I get my hands on him..."

"Get in line, brother. I have a score to settle with him." Lucien's voice sounded so cold and ruthless, it startled Gabriel. It simply radiated hate.

Orin stepped in at the two demons' outburst. "Do you want to hear the story or not?" At the two princes' nods, he continued. "Then shut up, rein in your tempers and let my brother continue. It's hard enough as it is."

Kalin threw a grateful glance at his younger brother and resumed. "So, Lothar protested against my betrothal, threatening that he would not help her assassinate father if she didn't arrange my mating with him. That, of course, would have been quite impossible to achieve. Mother already announced both future matings in the Council, even Orin's, still only a baby at the time. Plus, mating me with a male meant that I would not be able to provide direct heirs. So instead, she promised Lothar power and revenge over his brother.

"I don't know exactly what she did, to be honest, since what I'm telling you is a conversation I heard when I was fourteen years of age. She didn't mention exactly the methods she used, but suddenly Lothar became much more powerful, throwing his half-brother off the position of High Priest and stealing the title for himself."

A terrible suspicion snuck up in Gabriel's mind. "Kalin, do you remember the name of Lothar's brother?"

Kalin seemed to pause, searching his memory. He looked at his younger brother. Orin shrugged. "I don't know. I was just a little kid,

but I think it may be something with a Z or with a V. I vaguely remember having difficulties pronouncing it.”

“That’s right, you’re brilliant. I don’t know how I could have forgotten. His name was Vizer. I wonder what happened to him.”

Vizer was Lothar’s brother? So many things made sense now. Gabriel couldn’t help but gape in astonishment, too shocked to speak.

Kalin was the first one who spoke. “Gabriel, do you know something? Do you know what happened to him?”

“I don’t know if this can help me or if I should say anything, but you’ve all been so honest so far. See, Vizer is currently a supervisor at Kirgen.”

Orin sounded obviously surprised at that. “Supervisor? That’s strange. Why would he still be there?”

“I don’t know, but that’s not the reason for my reaction.” Gabriel suddenly felt ill and darkness started to encroach on his vision. “Throughout my stay, Vizer was like Lothar’s right hand man, no, like his dog. I never actually questioned it but in truth, that’s not the point. I’ve seen him so many times being tortured by Lothar, left almost at the edge of death. Even on my last day at Kirgen, when he came to announce father’s arrival, he’d obviously suffered from a terrible beating. Often times, he was punished when I did something wrong.”

Scenes from his days at Kirgen flashed back in Gabriel’s mind. Vizer. Lothar. The image of Lothar seemed to magnify, surrounding him, swallowing him whole. Everything suddenly crowded on him, images of the time he spent at the Monastery choking him, making him unable to speak, unable to breathe.

He tried to cling to Lucien, but he found that he could no longer feel Lucien there. In fact, Lucien had disappeared entirely. Gabriel was back at Kirgen, back at the Monastery he’d never left.

Gabriel cracked his eyes open, struggling to focus. The room seemed to spin around him and he didn’t know exactly where he was. Right, he’d tried to escape the Monastery. Picked the lock and

everything. He almost managed to get out, but the magical doors snapped shut in his face. The last thing he could recall was being dragged into the dark torture chamber and whipped bloody.

His entire body burned and itched, but Gabriel struggled to stand, supporting himself on the ragged blanket that served as a pillow. Strangely enough, he detected a pitcher of water on the small chair situated at the side of his bed. That wouldn't happen normally, but Gabriel wouldn't complain. He could only hope the water wasn't drugged or poisoned with anything, because he needed it badly.

Gabriel lifted an arm to reach for the water, his throat feeling dry and hoarse, but his hand froze in midair. Wide-eyed, Gabriel stared at his own arm, disbelief and horror coursing through him. When he finally managed to snap out of his shock, he pushed the sheets off himself, analyzing his body. A scream was torn from his throat when he realized what happened.

All over his chest, Gabriel's legs and his arms, a name was carved in bloody letters. Lothar. Lothar everywhere. Marking him, branding him as that man's property. No, it couldn't be. Gabriel would never accept it. He would never allow it.

Lothar's name on his skin burned him, and Gabriel hissed as he tore at the still healing wounds desperately. Just as he busied himself with tearing off an L off his torso, Vizer burst into the room. "Stop it!" Vizer snapped, slapping Gabriel across the face. "They'll heal by themselves eventually."

"They will?" Gabriel repeated inquiringly, vision blurry as tears of pain and humiliation filled his eyes.

Vizer gave him a disgusted look. "Yes. But if you go on to claw at yourself, you'll just make this entire situation worse." The supervisor grabbed Gabriel's shoulders, forcing their gazes to meet. "Don't you dare try anything like this again. Don't you even dare move. Next time, it will only be worse."

Gabriel tried to break out of Vizer's hold. The man's touch on his skin seemed to only magnify the pain in his body. Why couldn't he break free? Why did he have to be trapped here at Kirgen?

That last thought made something click inside Gabriel's mind. He'd left Kirgen behind. He wasn't alone any longer. Neither Lothar, nor Vizer could hurt him ever again.

Suddenly angry with himself, Gabriel looked away from his past. He already went through this once and he refused to relive it again and again. It was only a memory. Clinging to the love he felt for Lucien, he struggled to find a way out of Kirgen, out of the recesses of his own mind. Suddenly, a voice sounded from the darkness. "Gabriel, my Gabriel. Come back to me."

Relieved, Gabriel followed the voice, knowing that in spite of everything, Lucien would never lead him astray.

* * * *

Lucien watched in horror as Gabriel's eyes rolled in his head and his body went tense, as if fighting a battle only he could see. Gabriel's fingers dug into his arms, desperately trying to reach him, gasping as if he couldn't breathe right. "Gabriel! What's wrong?"

Everyone hastened at his side, concern painted on their faces. "Gabriel, snap out of it." Kalin slapped his brother across the face.

Lucien would have attacked the Alarian prince if not for the fact that Kalin obviously attempted to aid Gabriel. It didn't work, however, and Lucien tried to hold Gabriel tightly, preventing him from hurting himself. Gabriel struggled in his hold, as if trying to break free from an unseen monster.

"Help him!" Lucien barked at Orin. "Do something. You're healers, right?"

Orin shook his head, clenching his fists. "If we use our magic on him now, we won't be able to do it to heal the Linas poisoning."

In despair, Lucien turned Gabriel around and hugged him so tight their bodies practically molded together. “Come on, Gabriel. Come on baby. Come back to me. Gabriel, my Gabriel, come back to me.”

Much to his surprise, his efforts actually bore fruit. Gabriel’s body lost its rigidity and Lucien breathed a sigh of relief as he watched Gabriel slowly open his eyes. “W-What happened?”

“You blacked out.” Kalin explained simply. “How do you feel?”

“A bit dizzy.” Gabriel admitted. “I’ll be fine.”

“You need to rest.” Lucien immediately took his mate into his arms, intending to lay him down on the bed only to realize that the bed still presented signs of Cade’s and Kalin’s coupling. In fact, Lucien was somewhat surprised that the sheet wrapped around Gabriel managed to survive the night. Cade gave him a sheepish look and proceeded to strip the sheets off the bed.

As soon as his brother finished, Lucien gently placed his mate on the bed. “Lay down for a bit. It’ll be fine.”

Gabriel cuddled into Lucien’s side and closed his eyes, although Lucien could tell he wasn’t actually sleeping. Inwardly sighing, Lucien accepted the fact that they’d have to talk about this with Gabriel present. He would have wanted to spare his mate of the torture of hearing talk of poison or death, but he couldn’t see any other way. “So what now?”

Orin gave his now calm brother a glum look. “The poison is going too fast. Too much has happened to him today. It made him almost lose the battle with his own mind.”

“How can you possibly know that?” Lucien snapped.

“It’s in his aura.” Orin replied, sounding frustrated. “I can’t explain it right, but it’s like he’s there and yet away.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Lucien shook his head, no longer paying attention to Orin’s words. He caressed his lover’s hair, wanting nothing but to steal him away from this awful place and make him happy for all eternity. “How can we fix things?”

“For now, we need to keep him calm until we find a permanent solution,” Orin replied.

“You said Lothar could heal him, right?” Zeli intervened. “So we need to force him to help.”

“If you think about it, it probably wouldn’t be so hard. Lothar would probably want to heal Gabriel so that they could mate, right?” Cade said.

“No.” Kalin immediately snapped. “That man is capable of turning Gabriel into a vegetable, twisting his power so that he could have Gabriel live as his helpless plaything. It won’t work.”

Cade gave his lover a concerned look at the sudden outburst. It did seem a bit peculiar that Kalin would hate Lothar so much.

Kalin sighed and started to explain. “Lothar isn’t easy to defeat or force into anything. See, after this sudden replacement in position, Lothar openly challenged father. He wanted to become king, and whatever mother did gave him the ability to actually defeat father in battle. And that way he would get me as well. At the High Council’s protest, he threatened to kill them all.”

“How do you know all this, love?” Cade inquired. “One conversation isn’t enough to find out such details.”

“Indeed. After having heard mother and Lothar talk for the first time, I started snooping around. Anyway, that is of no consequence. What matters here are the facts themselves, because they concern Gabriel directly. Confronted with Lothar’s demands and near chaos, father made a deal. He said would give his next offspring to the High Priest as a mate if he renounced his claims and challenges.”

“For some reason, Lothar agreed. I suspect he wasn’t that keen on leading a country bordering on civil war. At any rate, this is where Gabriel comes in. Mother refused to give one of her own children for this deal, especially since her plan was thwarted. At the time, I suspect father didn’t know about her involvement, but when he did find out, he couldn’t actually do anything, because his influence in the

High Council is limited and he is more or less a puppet king these days.

“In any case, in order to fulfill the deal he made, he disappeared, returning shortly after with Gabriel in his arms.”

Gabriel opened his eyes at Kalin’s words, no longer able to remain calm. “You’re saying I was born for him?” He stuttered out.

Kalin nodded, looking incredibly ashamed.

“It’s not your fault, for any of this.” Cade immediately soothed Kalin. “Think of it like this. If not for Lothar’s manic obsession with you, the king would most likely be dead, and Gabriel would most likely not even exist. Probably, we wouldn’t have even met.”

Lucien suppressed the urge to clap at his brother’s ability to sweet-talk. Truly, he would probably be taking notes, if he didn’t have other priorities.

“Orin, Kalin, are you sure Lothar can heal Gabriel?” The two nodded almost simultaneously.

“Baby, when is he coming here?”

Gabriel paused, seemingly calculating in his head. “Umm, tomorrow, or the day after, in a few days in any case. Father said that the mating would be two weeks from when we left Kirgen, which was, umm, almost a week before you guys came here.”

“What I need to know if you can wait until he shows up.”

Gabriel took a deep breath. “I think I can make it.”

Lucien wasn’t so sure. Considering Gabriel’s blackout, Lucien didn’t know if his mate would be able to withstand the poison for much longer.

“Baby, I need to know for sure. I won’t risk you.”

Gabriel just gave Lucien a wide smile. “I’ll make it. I won’t lose you now that I’ve found you.”

Kalin’s voice interrupted the sweet moment. “Lucien, what are you planning? It’s not like Lothar would help us.”

Cade frowned at Lucien, his expression displeased. “You’re not thinking of—”

“Of course I am. If what you’re saying is correct, then it’s the best solution for all our problems.”

Zeli nodded in assent. “You have my full support. Just tell me what I can do to help.”

“Well, I suppose you’re right. I’m in, too.” Cade said.

Kalin and Orin looked at each other in confusion, but telling them wasn’t entirely safe. Gabriel would probably object, but Lucien would not be deterred.

There was a way to save his mate and to punish his enemy at the same time. It would work, Lucien just knew it. He was good at preparing battle plans, and with his brother’s and Zeli’s help, he could make all the necessary preparations for an ambush. Lucien smiled in satisfaction as he clutched Gabriel to his chest. Lothar wouldn’t even know what hit him.

Chapter 8

It was taking too long. That bastard Lothar was taking too long in showing up. Apparently, some weather difficulties held up his voyage. During this time, Gabriel slowly withered away before Lucien's eyes and Lucien could do next to nothing for his mate. Just be there for Gabriel, make him happy in his final days. Gabriel didn't have any other blackouts, but his strength waned with every passing day, and Lucien could only watch helpless by his side.

They established every single detail of their plan. They went over it a million times in the past two days. Eventually, after much insistence from their part, Orin and Kalin were let in on it, although as suspected, their first reactions weren't entirely positive.

However, at present after so much debate, the plan was flawless, with one little exception that made all the difference in the world. The target remained nowhere in sight.

Lucien gritted his teeth as he watched his lover's still form on the bed. They'd finally convinced him to rest, to conserve his energy in an attempt to stall. Gabriel agreed, albeit with a great deal of reluctance. In his heart, Lucien knew Gabriel had almost given up hope. He hung on by mere force of will, but even that started to falter.

Lucien was startled as he noticed movement on the bed. His lover was awake. "Hey, Luce!" Gabriel had taken to calling him Luce in the last few days, which was cute and so endearing it sometimes broke his heart.

"Hey, baby. How are you feeling?"

Gabriel stretched a little then smiled. "Better, now that I've rested a while. Can we go out a little, please?"

Lucien considered his lover's request. Then, with a smile, he nodded. "Sure. I have the perfect thing we can do. You'll love it." He could at least give Gabriel this, and if his mate died, Lucien would die with him.

* * * *

They were flying again, and Gabriel never felt so happy or so sad in his life. Everything would be perfect if not for the weakness that overwhelmed him these days and the dark shadow that loomed over the horizon.

Neither Lucien, nor his brothers or the other demons told him anything about whatever plan they had to cure him. Either way, it had something to do with Lothar. Gabriel knew that much. And considering that Gabriel's nemesis had yet to arrive...

Gabriel knew he'd promised to hang on. He knew everybody counted on his resistance, but his body failed him as much as he fought it.

He wouldn't think about it now. He'd enjoy his time with Lucien, his warmth, the beautiful way the rays reflected on the clouds and the Alarian landscape. His heart filled with gratitude for Lucien, with love. He sometimes wondered how it was possible to love someone so much. But Lucien was just so, so perfect.

"Do you like it, Gabriel?" Lucien said in his ear, holding him to his chest.

Gabriel nodded. "I love it, Luce." *And I love you for giving it to me.* He wanted to say it out loud but somehow saying "I love you" now sounded too much like saying goodbye. Gabriel wasn't ready to say goodbye. Not yet, not ever.

Lucien smiled. "One day, when we get you cured, we'll go to my home country, and I'll fly you over our capital city and over our forests, and I'll take you to the sea. It's very beautiful there, baby."

His lover's tone of voice lowered. "But not even close to being as beautiful as you."

Gabriel swallowed. He wanted so much to go and see the seaside and fly over the evergreen Xeetahn forests, but most of all he wanted to be with Lucien, to share his entire self with his demon prince. And now he didn't know if their dream had any chance of succeeding. Even now, he could feel his eyelids dropping, exhaustion slowly taking over. He was so very tired. "Luce?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"I love you."

With those final words, everything went black.

* * * *

It was getting worse. Gabriel lost consciousness during their flight and he hadn't woken up since. Lucien buried his head in his hands. Had he accidentally sped up the poison? Had he killed his lover in an attempt to make him happy?

"It's not your fault, Lucien." Orin buried himself in Zeli's embrace, and his voice shook as he spoke. "It wasn't the flight."

The three of them stood watching over Gabriel's still form. Zeli looked positively glum, not meeting Lucien's eyes and holding Orin to his chest tightly. Both Zeli and himself had lost loved ones to death, and Lucien knew Zeli couldn't help but imagine that it was Orin in the bed and couldn't help being happy that it was Gabriel instead.

Lucien inwardly scoffed. When did he get so good at analyzing feelings? It must be Gabriel's effect. His little mate.

"Zeli, Lucien, would you two stop already?" Cade's voice sounded from the doorway.

"Stop what?" Zeli snapped back.

“Well, in your case, acting like a fucking child. Stop feeling guilty over having your lover close when his is not. It’s not like anyone is blaming you. Lucien, get your act together. We still have a chance.”

What was Cade talking about? “The only chance we have is Orin or Kalin healing him temporarily and me spending some more days with him before he dies.”

Cade moved so swiftly he reached Lucien in a second, pinning him to the wall with a strong hand. “Don’t you dare give up. Don’t you fucking dare.” Cade dropped Lucien to the floor. “Is this your love for him? I have to say, I’m not impressed.”

Lucien snapped, as all the pain of the past days gathered together in a great accumulation of agony. He threw Cade across the room with a magic blast. “Fuck you! You have no idea how I feel. This helplessness is killing me inside.”

“You’re not helpless, Lucien.” Kalin entered the room as well. “What my beloved here is trying to say, and failing sublimely as always, is that we’ve just received notice of Lothar’s arrival in a few hours.”

Lucien suddenly felt hope flare back to life inside him. “Are you certain, Kalin?”

Kalin nodded solemnly. “We need to be prepared. I have not mentioned this before, but you haven’t been very careful with your visits of Gabriel.”

Lucien opened his mouth to protest, but Kalin just shook his head. “I understand entirely. I wouldn’t dream of criticizing you on this. But mother is furious, and between Orin and me, we have barely managed to convince father to allow us to take care of our brother ourselves.” Kalin shrugged. “It was a stroke of luck, that at least with father’s help, we kept everyone else away. It would have caused much more difficulties if we had to worry about servants snooping and whatnot.”

Reiterating his lover’s previous statement, Cade insisted, “In any case, since Lothar is arriving, and in these exceptional circumstances,

we need to prepare everything. We don't have a lot of time and we need to work fast."

Lucien nodded, feeling life slip back into his limbs. "I think someone should stay here to take care of Gabriel. Orin?"

Orin nodded, absently caressing Gabriel's limp hand. "I'll do it. Go get him." With a gaze towards the pale unmoving form on the bed, he glumly added. "And hurry. He doesn't have much time left."

* * * *

The courtyard was silent when Lothar's carriage finally rolled in. Lucien sneered. No wonder it took so long. A real caravan followed and Lucien wondered how many people the bastard brought just to feed his vanity.

The royal family awaited the High Priest's arrival at the palace entrance. They were a sight to behold, dressed in their finest clothes. But behind all that finery, there was so much filth not all the jewels in the world could cover it up.

Even from Lucien's position, Karon looked nervous, his back stiff with tension. The king suspected something. According to Kalin, he confronted his two sons, but for some reason, he decided to back off. Lucien suspected that the king's dire situation in the council could have been the cause. As far as he could tell, Karon's authority had almost completely disappeared, and the one who actually made the military decisions now was Kalin. It helped a lot in the negotiations regarding the Xeetha-Alaria alliance.

Now the Queen had not been as easy to deal with. Her demeanor remained as ice cold as ever, but judging by her evil glare when she'd passed him earlier, Lucien could tell that she knew something, and hated him for interfering with her plans. Of course, what could one expect from a murderous back-stabbing bitch like her? Still, Lucien couldn't exactly comprehend why she remained on Lothar's side, since the bastard abandoned her once in the past. Then again, trying to

understanding what the Alarian royal family was a lesson in futility. They were a fucked-up bunch, each and every last one of them. Lucien didn't know how the offspring ended up so well in spite of their parentage.

These days, Lucien became convinced of the two princes' genuine concern for Gabriel's welfare. Kalin proved to be a true military genius, and Lucien had renewed respect for him. During the negotiations, he'd been a true professional, but this time his help had been invaluable. Now the trap was set. Lucien could only hope it wouldn't be too late.

The two princesses, otherwise known as supposed mates of the brothers, also arrived in the courtyard, as always trying to be beautiful and failing miserably. However, their existence didn't matter for now. Lucien swiftly moved from his position in one of the balconies where he'd awaited Lothar's arrival to the receiving chamber. Apparently, it wasn't appropriate for the demons to meet the new guests outside with the royal family. So the Xeetah delegation gathered as close as possible, waiting for the moment in which to make their movement. They were all posing casualness and indifference, but they all knew the importance of what would soon happen.

Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, Lucien heard voices from the direction of the foyer. The royal family seemed to be approaching the entrance to the receiving chambers.

The Queen's falsely cheerful voice echoed from the hallway. "Thank the Light you're finally here, Your Holiness. We were so worried when we found out about the avalanche." If not for the knowledge that he could lose his mate to death if their plan didn't work, Lucien would have laughed. Leyra invoking the Alarian deity was a blasphemy. Astounding really, how much the beautiful Alarian race could decay.

Kalin's serious tone continued. "Unfortunately, my brother is unable to greet you. He has been feeling quite ill in the past few days."

A voice Lucien didn't know inquired, "Oh? Is it serious?"

"We're not entirely certain." Kalin paused. "But I feel that the mating should be temporarily postponed."

The other voice snapped back, "Excuse me? And who are you, runt, to decide such aspects? Gabriel belongs to me."

The king who spoke next, "Now, I'm sure Kalin didn't mean that. Isn't that right, son?"

The steps stopped, and the argument continued in the hallway. Lucien gritted his teeth. He didn't have time for this. He got up from his armchair, throwing a glance at Cade. His brother obviously agreed because the other demon prince made no movement to stop him.

Silently moving towards the hallway, he observed the scene before him. The royal family accompanied two men he didn't know. The taller one had white hair and was glaring at the king and Kalin. The second man had chestnut-colored hair and a stoic air, vaguely indifferent to his surroundings. Lothar and Vizer.

Smiling arrogantly, Lucien made his way to the group. "Good day, my lady, my king, prince Kalin." It was a vaguely useless greeting, since they've seen each other today before, but common courtesy demanded it. "Welcome, Lord Vizer, Lord Lothar." Lothar's anger visibly increased at his phrasing. Vizer arched a brow. Kalin had an almost invisible smirk on his lips, while the King and Queen threw him angry glares.

"And who pray tell are you?" Lothar practically growled.

"Don't tell me you didn't introduce me, King Karon?" Lucien asked. "I am Prince Lucien, second son of kings Seyran and Lyan of Xeetha and general of the Xeetahn Army. And I am also the future mate of Gabriel, third son of king Karon of Alaria."

At this declaration everybody was astounded, well, everybody but Kalin. Kalin obviously expected this development and slowly melted into the shadows to prepare his own part of the plan. After all, Lothar brought quite an entourage.

Lothar was positively fuming. “How dare you make such an appalling declaration? Karon, what is the meaning of this?”

The king had paled, but to his credit, he answered the High Priest. “Apparently, there are some significant issues we have to address regarding Gabriel’s mating.” Oh, yes, the king knew, well, about him and Gabriel at least.

At this, the High Priest went positively ballistic. Furniture shook and objects levitated in the room. Lucien faced his enemy with a smirk on his face. Impressive... not.

“Is there a problem?” Lucien asked with fake confusion in his voice. He was nowhere near as calm as he appeared. This was taking too long and all the while Gabriel slowly withered away. But he couldn’t just attack Lothar. It would cause all sorts of trouble, maybe even sabotage the plan entirely.

“Yes, there’s a fucking problem. Gabriel is mine. He’s been mine since birth. I will not tolerate interference!” Lothar was getting more and more furious by the second.

“Well, I’m afraid no one asked Gabriel. So, technically speaking, whatever deal you made has no value.” Lucien knew that in every country, royal families used arranged marriages for political purposes, but the lengths to which Karon went were amazing and grotesque at the same time. It wasn’t just another arranged marriage. It was an abomination.

“This is none of your business,” the king said. “You came here to deal with the Xeetha–Alaria alliance. But if you care for said alliance, you will stay out of this matter.”

“Oh, but my king, our houses are bonded by more than just a mere alliance.” Cade chose this moment to deal the final blow. He entered the room, his arm around Kalin’s waist. The Queen paled and the King just stared in shock. Behind them, Dallea gasped. Well, it’s not like she and Kalin were actually so close. The bond between the two Alarian princes and their supposed mates could easily be dissolved. In fact, Cade and Zeli were probably already considering it and they

would take care of the issue as soon as they arrived in Xeetha. If everything went as planned, of course. Lucien didn't want to even think about the alternative.

"Look here, demon," Lothar growled. "I don't care if you've fucked every last one of these people. Gabriel is mine, and I will have him."

"Oh? Is that a challenge?"

Say yes, say yes.

Lothar's lips twisted into a smirk, his eyes burning with malice. "It is. I will tear you into little pieces, demon. And then I'll fuck Gabriel on your remains."

Lucien felt his eyes flare red, as his calm mask disappeared. He'd gotten what he'd wanted. The challenge was in place. "Bring it on, you bastard!" He sneered.

This was it. Lothar took the bait. Everything was in movement. He'd save his mate yet. *Wait for me, baby, wait for me!*

The hallway erupted into chaos as Lucien smirked at Lothar's stupidity and arrogance. Lothar didn't realize Lucien had been taunting him on purpose, to cause a challenge. Then again, Lothar was probably so sure of himself and his power he didn't even care.

By the customs of the realm of Kaldor, challenges of this magnitude only happened in cases of extreme offense and when the problem could not be solved otherwise. Additionally, a foreigner had to wait to be challenged and could not make the challenge himself. It was a stupid law, in Lucien's opinion, but these general customs had been upheld all throughout Kaldor since the beginning of time and to ignore them would probably forfeit any possible challenge, and in this case, any chance for Gabriel's life.

When a challenge such as this one happened, there were no rules, only "the strongest one wins." Any weapon could be used, any means at the disposal of the combatant. Lucien would win. There was no other way.

The hallway emptied of every living soul. Lucien waited for Lothar's first strike. It came in the form of a magical blast. Lucien flew through the hallway and into the receiving chambers. Well, wasn't that convenient? Lucien's smile widened. It was working out almost too well. He had to be careful and hit at exactly the precise moment.

Lothar sauntered in, his magic sizzling in the air. He made a move to blast Lucien again, but this time Lucien dodged. Expertly moving in the room, he extended his right wing, tossing a piece of furniture at Lothar's head at great speed.

Lothar barely had time to deflect the projectile. It hit him in the shoulder, but he swiftly recovered. Of course, Lucien didn't expect Lothar to go down easily. He summoned the elements of fire that his demon nature allowed him to control.

Shielding himself from another magical bolt with his now crimson wings, he tossed a fireball at Lothar. Lothar dodged, causing the fireball to crash through the windows. Still, it had been a close call. Lothar was athletic, but slower than Lucien. Lothar's main strong point was the magic. Indeed, it had an almost unnatural strength and Lucien could feel the burn where his wing had been hit. But that would, in the end, be a good thing, since it meant his mate had a chance.

Ignoring the pain in his wing and side, Lucien created other two fireballs. Lothar didn't have the opportunity to dodge them both. Full hit.

Lothar screamed in pain as flames started to consume him. He lost focus as he focused on extinguishing the fire. That was all Lucien needed, a chance to get close. He spread his wings, pouncing on the man at full strength. Then, not giving Lothar a chance to recover from the double shock, he sank his fangs deep into the man's throat.

Lothar's blood had a bitter tinge to it. Lucien felt the urge to vomit. It almost distracted him from his task. Then adrenaline kicked in as his prey started to struggle. The blood flowed freely in Lucien's

mouth even while Lothar's magic tried to repel the attack. Lucien felt blow after blow of magic as Lothar struggled, but in this state, pain disappeared somewhere in the background, like a distant memory, something easily set aside.

His Xeetahn savage nature emerged as he searched for the power inside of Lothar. Delving deep, he easily found it, the energetic core, filled with magic. Just as he suspected, the energies of the core weren't even and not the least bit alike. Well, there was nothing he could do about it now. He attacked the source of Lothar's magic, draining it through the man's blood.

As the magic flowed through him, fury started to grow exponentially, overwhelming his consciousness. His demon instincts, the curse of his kind, started to take over, and Lucien suddenly felt the overwhelming urge to kill this bastard for everything he'd done. He wanted to drain him dry, leave him a festering corpse on the ground, or better yet cut him to little pieces, starting with his privates while he still lived, and finally burn his remains.

A powerful magic hit to his side distracted him. Who could be this new enemy that dared to interfere? He abandoned Lothar's now limp form and turned to the interloper.

His new opponent stood there proudly, facing him fearlessly. Puny insect! How did this he dare intrude in his business? Fire emerged at Lucien's fingertips, hitting his adversary before the other man had a chance to dodge.

Walking closer, he was getting ready to finish off the insect. Wait. Blond hair? Violet eyes? He knew the insect. Lucien hesitated, enough for his new enemy to say something.

"Brother, you have to hurry. Gabriel..."

The last word was like a fountain of cold water on his fury. Everything extinguished inside of him, and Lucien gasped. For a moment there, overwhelmed by the power, by the demon fire burning inside of him, he forgot about Gabriel. He hit Cade, probably hurting

him significantly. Lucien collapsed on the floor, suddenly feeling very light-headed.

Cade urged him to his feet. "We have no time for this, brother."

Lucien fought against the dizziness, clinging onto Gabriel's image to keep the fire at bay. When demons feasted on somebody else's power, it was like a very powerful drug. It caused a feeling of ecstasy in the demon, making him feel like a god, urging him to commit extreme acts of violence. It brought them extremely close to their limit, the edge that all demons feared.

After the effect wore off, the demon would be left feeling exhausted and ashamed. If it wore off, that is. Often times, the power would push the demon into insanity. For this reason, this act had been forbidden by Xeetahn law. Even attempting it was folly, but in this case, they had no choice.

Lucien struggled to his feet, fighting his body, still overwhelmed by sensation and feeling so very alien. He wanted to fly to his mate's side, but his wings wouldn't listen. It seemed to him that they weren't even there anymore. He needed to be with Gabriel, at once.

Cade grabbed him in his arms, obviously having the same thought. They crashed through what remained of the windows of the receiving rooms. His brother's black wings swiftly carried them both to Orin's room, where Gabriel lay dying.

As they practically blasted through the glass doors, Orin was hugging Gabriel's head, crying. *No! It can't be!* Lucien struggled to speak, the alien power still swirling around in his body, "Tell me he's still alive."

Orin looked at them, tears in his big lavender eyes. "He's at the border of life and death. I-I'm not sure we can bring him back."

Cade pushed Orin aside, dumping Lucien unceremoniously on Gabriel. This was it. Lucien screamed as he set loose the alien energies over his mate, feeding it with his own magic. He tried to focus it, but he wasn't a healer. He swamped it, ignoring the pain that came from using a magic that wasn't his own in such a manner. He

gave and gave and gave until there was nothing left, and then everything went black.

* * * *

Gabriel was floating on a fluffy onyx cloud. Wow, nice. It felt soft and familiar, like a safe haven of sorts. Even so, his attention was drawn to his surroundings. Clouds of many beautiful colors flew all around him, red, lavender or purple, like flowers in a field. Gabriel liked those clouds. Well, he wasn't entirely sure about the red one, but the lavender and purple ones seemed really nice. Farther back, a distant form of white and brown made him shiver with fear. Gabriel urged his gaze from the stormy clouds.

Instead, he focused on another cloud formation. It shone golden with swirling blue and violet and so beautiful. Somehow, Gabriel floated towards the formation. So comfortable, so warm. Gabriel sank deep into the floating mass, where the yellow met the blue. For some reason, he didn't like the violet as much.

Dimly, he wondered where he was, where he was going. He couldn't remember anything, not even his name. Looking above him, he could see a beautiful shining light. Gabriel felt a nagging urge to go there, but something stopped him.

A stronger urge burned deep inside him, like a silent voice pushing him away from the shining light. He looked towards the clouds surrounding him. Why did they seem so familiar? Why did he feel so comfortable in this one?

Gabriel frowned. For some reason he needed to remember everything. He needed to stay in the cloud and not go to the light. He looked at the clouds around him, struggling to find his past.

The effort paid off though, and the colors made room for images in Gabriel's memory. Purple. A flashback of his brother Kalin flew into his mind. Kalin, teasing him when they were children. Kalin

practicing in the training room. Kalin giving orders to the soldiers. Then Kalin hugging him and kissing him on the forehead.

Lavender. Orin. His brother's sarcastic smile. Orin demanding new clothes or new jewelry. Then Orin braiding his hair, Orin crying in his room.

Gabriel made a face, feeling something else in the lavender and in the purple. It wasn't nice, so he resolved not to remember. He passed onto the next cloud.

Red. Zeli. An evil smirk. Then a kind voice, a strong voice. Bronze eyes lighting up as they gazed at Orin. Orin and Zeli in a loving hug. Zeli comforting Gabriel's brother, caressing his lavender hair.

White. Gabriel shivered immediately. White meant Lothar. Evil laughter and disgusting touches and bitterness. It was repulsive. He didn't like it. Next! Brown. Vizer. A mass of pain, fear and pity, so much pity.

The white and the brown seemed to push him to the light, so Gabriel discarded them. The golden cloud was safe though. Golden violet. Cade. Cade's amused look. Cade's carefree voice. Cade and Kalin together, lost in each other's eyes.

But the most important one was the golden blue. Gabriel smiled dreamily. This one was the reason why he clung to life. Lucien. His Luce, flying him over Alaria, making love to him in the labyrinth, holding him with strong arms, whispering adoring words in his ear.

Lucien would come for him. Gabriel just had to wait a little. He could do that. The cloud was nice and comfortable, and it reminded him so much of his demon lover.

Gabriel closed his incorporeal eyes, relaxing in the cloud. When he got back to the normal world, they'd all go to Xeetha, and Lucien would fly him over the evergreen forests. Maybe Zeli and Cade would fly Orin and Kalin too. That would be nice. He'd be free and he'd finally have the family he'd always wanted.

Gabriel was suddenly startled as he felt his form float again. What? He felt himself float off his golden blue sanctuary towards the light. *Nooo!* He had to stay on the cloud. He simply had to. He struggled against whatever force dragged him away. He couldn't go to the light. No way, he'd promised.

But the force seemed stronger. Slowly it gained ground. Gabriel fought until he felt exhausted, but the cloud seemed to be drifting away. *Please no, no.* He knew now he was dying, but he didn't want to abandon his family. The white seemed so distant now, so unimportant. He remembered only the symphony of colors, the gold and blue and purple and lavender and red. It was home. He didn't want the light. He needed to be home.

Insubstantial tears started to flow freely on his cheeks. Dimly, Gabriel wondered how he could cry in this spirit form, but he was drifting away ever so slowly and he could do absolutely nothing to stop it. He couldn't help but cry.

Suddenly, a jolt stopped the motion of his floating body. Another jolt and the light seemed to move away. Yay! Falling, falling back. Gabriel could now see his safe cloud, the beautiful golden blue that kept him safe. However, to Gabriel's horror, he fell right through his safe haven. The golden blue disappeared, as did the lavender, purple and red. Even the white was gone.

He fell through darkness until he hit a swirling mass of pain. *No!* Gabriel wanted to go back to his beautiful golden blue cloud. *Help!* But the pain swallowed him whole. Jolts and jolts pushed him further into the agony.

Gabriel screamed. Well, at least he thought he screamed. It hurt so much, too much. He couldn't take it. And then, something like a comforting scent, a familiar warmth beckoned him farther. Could it be that Lucien had come for him?

No. The warmth was deceiving. He could sense it invaded by something bitter and evil. Gabriel made a face. He didn't like whatever power urged him on. It wasn't his Lucien. Or was it?

Gabriel felt confused. He could almost hear Luce calling him, but the pain and the power... He just didn't understand anything anymore.

A final jolt of magic pushed Gabriel further in the swirling mass of pain. With a silent scream, Gabriel called out to Lucien, surrendering to the unknown magic and unconsciousness.

Chapter 9

Darkness. Darkness. Lucien was swimming in darkness, floating in an unknown space. His body felt distant and foreign and his mind clouded, uncertain. But the darkness instantly receded when Lucien found himself suddenly engulfed in an explosion of freezing cold. His eyes flew open, only to realize that Cade had just woken him with a shower of ice cold water.

“Wake up, sleeping beauty.” What on Kaldor? His brother stood above him, an empty bowl in his hand.

“Don’t mean to be cruel, little bro, but you’ve been passed out for a while now. And the shit is seriously hitting the fan. We need to get our asses out of here like *now*.”

Lucien struggled against the dizziness. Everything hurt, his entire body ached and he felt exhausted. Even so, his demon nature was slowly taking care of the problem. He still felt incredibly exhausted, but he fought to overcome the lethargy. He needed to feel better. He had to know about his mate.

He blinked several times, forcing his head to stop spinning. “Cade, is Gabriel—?” He stopped before he could finish the phrase, unable to even vocalize his worst fear.

“We’re not entirely certain.” Cade started, but he seemed to be avoiding Lucien’s eyes. “Orin says he’s better, but...”

Lucien struggled to move, analyzing the wound on his side then that on white wing. Wait. White wings? That wasn’t right. “What the fuck?”

Cade shrugged. “We don’t know that either. It must be some sort of side effect.”

Well, shit. He would be the first Xeetahn with white wings, but he'd deal with that later. The damage on the wing and on his side had already healed. Its color would have normally bothered him, but in truth, he couldn't make himself care about his wing right now.

He knew Cade was hiding something by the way his brother avoided his eyes. "Cade, Gabriel... Tell me, what's wrong?"

Lucien received his answer in the form of a muffled shout coming from the direction from the bed. Oh no! Gabriel. Everything else disappeared as Lucien hurried towards the bed, and he froze on the spot.

Gabriel's beautiful body was shaking all over, his dark hair covered with sweat, his elegant hands fisting the sheets unconsciously. He was writhing in pain, struggling against some unknown foe. Orin stood next to him, laving his forehead with a wet cloth, attempting to calm the tremors. *What have I done?* Lucien collapsed on the floor, feeling all strength he had left seep out of him.

Cade's comforting presence instantly appeared at his side. "Little bro, he's better. He'll be fine." Fine? How was that fine? Lucien wanted to scream at Cade but couldn't seem to form the words. "Orin, tell him."

"It's true." Orin looked up as he wet the cloth again. "Right now, the body is fighting the poison. Had you not used the healing power on him, he'd have slowly drifted away. But this particular poison is resistant, and he was quite far gone when you got to him."

Lucien struggled to respond, "What exactly are you saying?"

"This," Orin said pointing towards the bed, "is quite normal considering the circumstances. The magic and the poison are fighting inside his body. I won't lie to you, Lucien. He is in pain, but he will get better, of that I can assure you."

Lucien moved fast across the room, grabbing Orin's slender shoulder. "Are you certain? Are you certain he will live? Because if I killed Gabriel, I just..."

Orin nodded, with an understanding expression. The cold façade disappeared. His lavender eyes now read only genuine affection for his brother, combined with a silent pain. “I’m sure. You weren’t here. When you went down in the receiving room, with Lothar...” Orin closed his eyes, as if trying to hide a secret anguish. “He stopped breathing, and just before you showed up, his heart stopped beating too.

“I wanted to give him what little help I could, keep him alive, at least for a while longer. Tell him how sorry I was for everything I’d done.” For a second, Orin’s voice had a somewhat distant quality, like he wasn’t speaking to Lucien. “But I knew I couldn’t, I knew you were the only hope.”

Lucien felt so many emotions swirling inside of him. He felt happiness, sadness, helplessness, terror, agony and doubt clashing into a hurricane that threatened to swallow his soul whole. And the most important thing above all else, he felt love. He’d been so close to losing his mate. According to Orin, Gabriel would be all right. Still, his little one seemed in so much pain. What if Orin was wrong? What if Gabriel died?

Coming closer to his lover, he caressed the trembling form. Demon tears fell on Gabriel’s pale cheeks. His poor Gabriel, hurting so much, and there was nothing Lucien could do. He collapsed next to Gabriel’s chest, just wanting to breathe in that beautiful comforting perfume of cynathole fruit, wanting to feel him close.

“I hate to be insensitive yet again, but the reason I woke you up in the first place is that we can’t stay here much longer.” Cade’s voice sounded stern and serious.

Lucien took a deep breath, gritted his teeth and after a moment raised his head from Gabriel’s chest, looking at his brother. “How bad is it?”

“Very bad. We hadn’t expected that many adepts in Lothar’s entourage. Luckily, the palace guards are generally reluctant to fight their own, so most of them are staying out of the fight. Still, we have

the Queen's Personal Guard against us, the adepts, as well as the soldiers of the High Council."

Lucien grimaced. He didn't kid himself. He'd been lucky in defeating Lothar. Lothar's arrogance had been his downfall and the magic boost of the blood drinking healed Lucien from the wounds suffered because of his attack. However, a mob of fanatics angry at the fall of their beloved ruler wasn't something Lucien would be looking forward to facing on a normal day, and especially not right now. He just wanted to be with his mate, hold him while the pain faded. Unfortunately, he didn't have the luxury to do that.

"What's the status of our troops?"

"Zeli has spread out half the demons on the second floor and half on the first floor. We have the Princes' Guards currently maintaining position at the stairway. If I was to compare the number, I would say the proportion of troops would be maybe seven to one."

Lucien absently nodded, registering the information. "We need to get Gabriel out. Do you think you can cover my back if I fly?"

Orin shook his head. "The towers will have been alerted by now. Even with magic protection, you'll be most likely shot out of the sky."

"It's a good thing we prepared plan B then." Cade made a face. "In any case, we have to hurry. Bro, I'll need your help with this."

Lucien watched his brother and Orin. Orin nibbled on his lip in obvious nervousness, and Cade seemed to be fidgeting on his feet. He understood perfectly. Their lovers were out there, fighting. He nodded at his brother. "Call everybody back. We follow plan B."

Just then, a crash sounded outside, and Zeli rushed in, carrying a body. Oh no... Cade screamed at the sight of his lover's still form, as Zeli carefully placed him on the couch. "Kalin was hit by a magical blast. I wasn't there, but I was told the Queen attacked him."

"I'll kill the bitch." Orin snapped, voice so cold and furious it amazed Lucien. His lavender-colored eyes sparkled in fury and he'd

retrieved his jeweled daggers from his hidden pocket. Zeli rushed to his lover's side.

"Focus, pretty, focus. You're the only one with enough healing powers here right now. You need to help your brother."

Orin nodded, as if through a haze. He dropped the daggers back and came closer to the couch, placing his hands above Kalin's chest. Reluctant to leave, Cade held on to his lover's hand. Soft purplish light started emanating from Orin's fingertips, glowing over his brother, healing the broken body.

Lucien felt torn between nurturing Gabriel and comforting Cade. He settled on standing by the bed, holding Gabriel's trembling hand and observing the scene. In minutes, the ugly wound on Kalin's chest, as well as all the cuts and bruises, disappeared. Orin collapsed against Zeli, just as Kalin opened his eyes. "What? Where?"

Cade practically pounced on his lover, showering him with kisses. "Oh, love, I thought I'd lost you. You're not fighting ever again."

Lucien smiled at his brother's enthusiasm, but he couldn't be happy. When Gabriel suddenly stopped moving on the bed, panic seized Lucien. That couldn't be good. No, it couldn't be! His desperate scream echoed in the beautiful room of the Alarian palace. "Baby!"

* * * *

The first thing Gabriel heard upon waking up was the sound of a desperate voice. "Baby!" Luce, his Luce. He sounded frantic, and the hand that clutched Gabriel's squeezed him so tightly that it almost hurt. Of course, Gabriel wasn't entirely sure of what hurt now, since his entire body felt weak and exhausted. "Baby, don't leave me!" Lucien screamed again.

Steps rushed in and then Gabriel heard several voices attempting to calm his lover down. A strong voice started saying something, and Gabriel thought he heard an inquiring voice ask, "Gabriel, can you

hear me? Gabriel?" Then Gabriel felt a slap across the face. *Owww*. Dizzily he raised a hand to cup his cheek.

A collective sigh of relief sounded in the room, as Gabriel felt himself enveloped in a warm, Clarion-scented hug. "Baby, my beautiful Gabriel, you're back. Say something. Say you're back. Say you won't leave me."

Gabriel interrupted Lucien's erratic rambling. "Luce, I'm fine." Gabriel's eyes widened. "What happened to your wings?"

Gabriel didn't get a chance to have his question answered. A loud noise drew his attention as well as that of the other persons in the room, to the door. One of Kalin's guards burst into the room. The Alarian's uniform looked ragged and bore obvious signs of battle. "Pardon me, my lords, but we just lost the first floor." Hesitating a second, the guard asked, "How is the captain feeling?"

The captain. Kalin? What? Something happened to his brother. Instantly alarmed, Gabriel made a move to get off the bed. Lucien pushed him back sternly.

"I'm fine, courtesy of my dear brother." Gabriel sighed in relief when he noticed Kalin's reclining form on the couch looking unscathed. Orin lay in Zeli's arms, obviously exhausted. It seemed that Orin healed Kalin from a serious injury. And the guard talked about something like losing the first floor. "What in the name of the Light is going on?"

"Gabriel, we'll explain everything, I promise, just not right now."

Kalin got up and said to the Alarian soldier, "Notify the men. Tell them to fall back."

The soldier frowned at Kalin's words. "Running away, captain?"

"I'm placing the safety of my brother and my men in front of such trivialities. I will not accept my orders being questioned. This is not the time, nor the place." The soldier saluted and left without another word.

The three Xeetahns shared a look. “Will you go talk to them, Cade?” Lucien said. Cade seemed reluctant to leave his lover, but he nodded. Who were they talking about? What was going on?

“I’ll come too.” Kalin sighed tiredly. “They’re uneasy. I’m asking a lot of my soldiers. They’re loyal to the core, and running isn’t in their constitution.”

“This isn’t about running, Kalin,” Orin interjected, his voice weak and exhausted. “It’s about being around to fight another day.” He gave his brother a small smile. “This is the right thing to do, brother, and we both know it.”

Kalin nodded in assent to his brother’s words. He took a step towards the door then stopped, turned back, hurriedly coming to the bed. He wrapped Gabriel in a warm hug, whispering in his ear, “I’m glad you’re back with us, baby brother.”

With that, Cade and Kalin left to do whatever it is they had to do. Gabriel was confused. Well, now was his chance to ask. Obviously anticipating this, Lucien said, “Later, Gabriel, we’ll tell you later. Zeli, stay with them. If anyone even comes close...” Zeli nodded in understanding.

Luce gave Gabriel a soft kiss on the mouth. “I have something to do, baby. I’ll be right back.”

As Lucien exited the room, Gabriel suddenly felt very lonely and afraid. He didn’t like this. He didn’t like any of this. He wanted Lucien to come back and hold him. What if something happened? *Be safe, Luce, be safe.*

* * * *

Lucien swiftly made his way across the hallway. It irked him to no end that he had to leave Gabriel, but he didn’t have a choice. He had to do this, for all their sakes. They had to leave Galamar at once, and Lucien was the only one with the ability to take them out safely now.

He headed towards the room they prepared in advance for this purpose. He suddenly felt that maybe he should have taken Gabriel along. Every step away from his mate felt like agony. What if something happened? What if Gabriel fell ill again?

Lucien abruptly stopped and just in time too, because a magical bolt hit the place where he was just about to step. What? His eyes snapped to the direction from where the magical bolt came. Fuck. The Imperial Guards. They'd somehow broken through. Gabriel was in danger. Time had run out.

With a practiced movement, Lucien dodged the next sphere of magic hurled at him. The Queen's guards, though well trained, couldn't compare to Lucien. He belonged to the Xeetah and fighting was his life, or at least, it had been before he met his mate. At this point, Lucien only cared about getting Gabriel somewhere safe, and fast.

Lucien spread his white wings and attacked the ten guards. The first one fell immediately, Lucien's fangs having slashed his throat open. One of the guards tried to hit him with magic, but Lucien ducked, and the magical blast hit the first victim's fallen body instead. The next guard dropped screaming as Lucien's fist easily penetrated his rib cage and demon claws squashed his organs.

The other Alarians retreated behind thick columns of white marble, hurling balls of magic at him. Fuck, this was taking too long. Lucien smirked as he let his Xeetah power flow through him. The conjured flame appeared, obeying the call of its master. With barely a thought, Lucien increased the flame to a veritable inferno, hurling it into the direction of the hiding place of the guards.

Ignoring the screams and the writhing bodies, he passed through the space, heading towards his destination. Mentally, he called the fire back. Those few that survived couldn't be considered a threat. He did not want to kill needlessly.

Lucien breathed a sigh of relief as he got to the prepared chamber without further interruptions. They'd found a guest room with a

somewhat awkward location. The staff more or less neglected it, so it was perfect for their backup plan.

Backup plan. Lucien inwardly scoffed. He'd known from the very beginning it would come to this. He'd half hoped he could get everybody out using normal means, but he wasn't stupid. Of course, he didn't actually anticipate quite that many adepts, but as a soldier, he was trained to expect the unexpected.

He made his way to the center of the room, removing the strategically placed rug. Uncovering the symbols drawn on the floor, he took a deep breath and started chanting.

The energies of his blood swirled, and the symbols on the floor started glowing. Yes, it was working. He'd been a little worried that with the exhaustion of the fight and the healing, he wouldn't have enough strength to perform the ceremony as well. It didn't help that they didn't have all the runes they normally used for dimensional transporting, but since their destination would be Xeetha, they could manage without them.

The symbols glowed harder and harder until rays of bright light burst out of the floor. As they met, a whirlpool of energy appeared. Lucien wiped sweat of his brow. So far so good. Now he hoped everybody did their own part right.

Before he even finished his thought, Zeli, Kalin and Cade burst in the room. Gabriel and Orin were with them. The demon delegation and the Princes' guard followed in their tracks. From what Lucien could see, some of the guards had also sustained severe injuries. Some were being carried in their companions' arms. Obviously, they'd healed each other. The demons had been hit as well, as their armor looked torn and bloody. Luckily, they healed fast on their own so their bodies ended up unscathed.

Cade met Lucien's eyes, examining him discretely. His brother knew it took a lot of energy and concentration to maintain such a complicated spell. Cade and Zeli had never been able to master it entirely.

Finally, his brother ceased his analysis and turned to the assembly of soldiers. “OK, everybody. Listen up. As you probably realize, the whirlpool behind us is a portal. It will lead us to Xeetha. If anybody has doubts...”

Lucien knew Cade referred mostly to the Princes’ Guards. They were Alarian after all, and asking them to leave their own country would be unreasonable and cruel. Of course, if they stayed behind, they would be punished for going against the Queen’s Guard, but in the end, they’d probably get through it with a light sanction. After all, they’d only obeyed their direct superior. Had they refused, they could have been accused of treason.

Several of the guards looked uncertain, as if not knowing what to do. Obviously noticing this, Kalin smiled at them. “It is all right. I understand anybody who chooses to stay behind. Your actions followed my direct orders, so you should not be punished if you stay.”

Still, those who hesitated didn’t meet Kalin’s eyes. Lucien suspected that they had families or were simply reluctant to leave their homes. Indeed a green-haired Alarian said, “Commander, you know we would follow you anywhere in battle.” The soldier paused, as if forcing himself to say the words. “But some of us have mates and children. We—”

Kalin agreed with a nod, interrupting the guard’s apology. “You needn’t worry. You are following your heart, as I am following mine.” He gave Cade a small smile. “For all those who are staying, it has been a true honor to fight by your side. I consider all of you my friends and truly lament the fact that I will not be your commander anymore.”

The same soldier said hastily, “You will always be our commander, our friend and our prince.” Several guards seemed very sad, and they probably would have cried if they weren’t hardened soldiers.

After an awkward pause, an older Alarian guard stepped forward. “I will come along, my prince. I have known you since you were a child, and you are like my own blood.”

“Thank you, Galer. I assure you the feeling is mutual.” Kalin gave the old guard a warm look.

Another soldier echoed Galer’s movement silently, and Lucien suspected a bond of blood between the two, since they looked a lot like each other. A few more soldiers did the same, gathering behind Galer. But this was taking a little too long. “Ummm, guys, could we hurry this along?” he discretely urged.

Cade got the message. “Right. Last call for Xeetha.”

“Thank you, everybody, for being so nice to us all this time.” Orin whispered weakly from Zeli’s protective embrace.

Kalin gave a last look to his loyal soldiers and saluted. “Goodbye. May you always be protected by the Light.”

The Alarians mirrored their commander’s salute as Kalin and Gabriel disappeared into the light. Zeli and Orin stepped in next. Then the demon delegation and the other four Alarians followed, disappearing into the portal. Finally, it was only Cade and himself remaining behind. It was getting harder and harder to maintain the portal stability. Cade took his hand and took a deep breath. “Ok, little brother, here we go.”

The energy swirled out of control as Cade pulled Lucien into the portal. Fires of Kaldor, just a little longer or he’d never get to see his beautiful Gabriel. He’d never get to make their mating official, like Gabriel deserved. Just a little longer. *No!*

* * * *

Gabriel waited anxiously in Kalin’s arms for the remaining two demons to exit the portal. Everybody came out safely and from what he could tell, they had arrived in Xeetha.

To his shock, the portal closed and for a moment, Gabriel didn't register what happened. What...? Why...? No, it couldn't be!

"Luce!"

"Cade!"

The two simultaneous screams of Gabriel and Kalin shook the Xeetahn forest. Gabriel wanted to crawl into a hole and die. His Luce had been left behind. How could that happen? Doubtlessly, Kalin was thinking the same thing.

Zeli finally snapped them out of their misery. "Hey, calm down."

Kalin glared at the redhead. "Easy for you to say. What would you feel if Orin was the one—?"

"Stop, just stop before you say something you regret," the demon interrupted, his bronze gaze understanding and concerned. "Don't worry. Things like this happen when the portal goes out of control. They probably just ended up someplace else."

Probably. Someplace else. That wasn't very comforting. Gabriel felt his heart break as the reality of being separated from Lucien yet again sank in. Tears gathered in his eyes and he buried his face in Kalin's chest, feeling miserable. He'd known something would go wrong.

"Hey, don't cry. It will be fine." Kalin's voice held kindness and comfort, and Gabriel would have felt better if he wasn't perfectly aware of the fact that the attempt at optimism was a mask. "You heard Zeli. They'll be here soon. You'll see."

Gabriel could easily tell that Kalin forced himself to be strong. Even so, his brother didn't actually believe his own words. He could see it in the pain in those dark blue eyes. Kalin truly loved Cade, and the loss of the older demon prince hurt him deeply.

As if by magic, the hopelessness disappeared. "Right! We need to move. If Zeli's right, they'll make their way to the castle." Kalin winked at Gabriel. "Maybe they're already there."

Gabriel couldn't help a flare of hope inside him. Yes, there could be a chance. Maybe they landed in some other part of the forest. It

would be logical to head out towards their intended destination. He nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes, surely they will go there. They’ll be there.”

They had to be there. If he lost Luce, everything would be for naught. Their fight, saving his life, everything would be useless without his demon prince. Luce was all right. He simply had to be.

Slowly the group made their way through the Xeetahn vegetation. Dimly, Gabriel registered that the forests were indeed as beautiful as Lucien said. The evergreen trees seemed to open a path for them as they walked, whispering legends of the people who inhabited these lands. The flowers seemed rarer than in Alaria, but when they did make a shy appearance, their colors shone even more precious than the galathines and yanids of his own home country.

Gabriel could have felt happy at the discovery. He always felt most at home when surrounded by nature. But now the plants, their beautiful scent and the colors and life all around him couldn’t reach out to him. All he could think about was Lucien’s promise: *One day, when we get you cured, we’ll go to my home country, and I’ll fly you over our capital city and over our forests. And I’ll take you to the sea. It’s very beautiful there, baby. But not even close to being as beautiful as you.*

Gabriel closed his eyes as tears threatened to overwhelm him again. He’d survived the poison, and they’d arrived in Xeetha, but Luce wasn’t with him. What if they never got in the portal in the first place? Or what if they ended up far away, in some wasteland, with no provisions?

Gabriel whimpered at the thought. He looked at his brother for reassurance. Kalin seemed glum again, his eyes absently searching the horizon. Yes, there was a very strong chance that Luce and Cade wouldn’t be in the capital city.

The minutes seemed to stretch as the group moved across the Xeetahn countryside. Lost in his depressed thoughts, Gabriel was suddenly startled when a sudden *Halt!* sounded right ahead of him.

Several demon guards rushed from the undergrowth. Zeli didn't seem shocked, saluting the guards with a nod. The demons acknowledged Zeli, bowing slightly. They exchanged a few words and then all Gabriel's hopes disappeared in an instant, dashed as the guard asked, "My lord Zeli, what of the princes?" The question was enough to make Gabriel realize that Luce and Cade didn't come this way. Gabriel struggled not to burst into tears again as he felt Kalin tense.

Zeli looked in their direction, obviously not knowing what to do. Gabriel didn't like what he saw in Zeli's eyes when the redhead finally answered the guard. "They should be here soon."

The demon soldiers looked confused and skeptical, but didn't question Zeli further. The Alarian group received a glare, as if the guard knew they had something to do with their princes' absence.

Zeli came closer to them and whispered, "Don't worry. There are many roads they could have come from." Gabriel just nodded numbly, but didn't meet Zeli's eyes. Kalin remained silent.

The demon guards let them through, and they made their way to a beautiful paved road. In the distance, the Xeetahn capital shone like a dark jewel. In the background of the Xeetahn vegetation, it was truly a beautiful sight. Gabriel couldn't care less. He felt cold inside, so cold and so afraid. *Luce, where are you? Where are you?*

PART 2: XEETHA

Chapter 10

“We’re here.” Zeli’s powerful voice signaled a halt as they finally reached the gates of the capital of Xeetha, Yazix. Dimly, Gabriel remembered that his books recorded Yazix as one of the oldest places on all of Kaldor, the mysterious and unbreakable stronghold of the Xeetah. In another time, he’d probably feel impressed at the sight of the high dark walls, surrounding the citadel with no gate in sight. The walls shone like dark diamonds, and Gabriel’s body shuddered as he felt the magic emanating from them. If it was so strong that even he could feel it, he could only imagine what Kalin and Orin felt.

Even so, the magical walls and the majestic landscape left him cold inside. He barely registered the reaction of his body in front of the magic. His mind flew to an entirely different place and he didn’t even know where. He could only think about Lucien, his Luce, who disappeared without a trace in the vortex that brought them here.

Gabriel absently registered the walls of the big citadel magically parting to allow them entrance. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. He was supposed to be in Lucien’s arms, and Lucien was supposed to show him his city, his lands, the country his demon loved so much.

As if feeling his silent pain, Kalin’s kind voice attempted to sooth Gabriel. “Don’t worry, little brother. It’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

But Gabriel knew his brother shared his sorrow. He felt ashamed of his tears, of his own weakness, ashamed of the fact that Kalin had to force himself to be strong for him. Looking at his brother’s smile and his sad blue eyes, he fought for control. But even as he tried to

suppress his emotions, his mind reeled with unanswerable questions. Why had they been left behind? Where were the two princes of Xeetha?

* * * *

“Hey, little bro. Bro, wake up!” Lucien reluctantly opened his eyes at the well-known voice of his brother. Well, he probably could have ignored the voice, but the prodding and pushing would have been harder to disregard.

“Oh, good, you’re finally awake.” Cade whispered. Huh? Why would his brother be whispering?

“What the hell, Cade?” Suddenly, flashes of the day passed before his eyes. Lothar, Gabriel, the healing, then the guards, the portal. Shit! Lucien groaned. “We didn’t get through, did we?”

Cade sighed. “Right on the first try, little bro.”

Lucien made a move to get up from where he sat, only to be overcome by dizziness. Cade pushed him down gently. “Lay down. You’ve overused your powers today.”

Lucien ignored his brother. He needed to know one thing. “Cade, Gabriel? Did he get through?”

Cade nodded. “The portal remained stable until the end. You lost control when we jumped inside.”

Lucien couldn’t help a sigh of relief. He threw his brother an apologetic look. “Sorry, but I—”

Cade just smiled. “I understand perfectly. We both know how unstable portals can be and we were aware of the risk. What’s important is that they’re safe. We’ll manage to get out of here somehow.”

Lucien frowned. “By the way, where is here?”

“About time you asked.” Another voice came from Lucien’s right. A voice he didn’t know. Who...?

Lucien gaped when he saw who spoke. He knew that stoic figure and chestnut colored hair. No way! Vizer. “What the hell, Cade? What are we doing here with this guy?”

“Now, now. No reason to be hostile.” Vizer seemed to be trying to calm him.

“Yeah, right. You remember what Gabriel said, that this guy was Lothar’s right hand man.”

Cade nodded solemnly. “I also remember the rest, little bro. And he did help us.”

Lucien glared at his brother. He couldn’t accept this. He instinctively knew that whatever Vizer did to Gabriel went beyond “being mean.” His mate told him in the labyrinth that he’d been beaten by others on Lothar’s orders. It stood to reason that this man participated in it. Back in the receiving room, Lucien stayed too focused on Lothar to direct his hatred towards Vizer. But now? Now he just wanted to tear Vizer apart for daring to lay a finger on Gabriel.

Vizer sighed. “I know what you’re thinking, and I will not deny it. It is true. I did beat Gabriel. I tormented him many times. I know it doesn’t mean anything to you, but I am truly sorry for it.”

Cade had seemingly figured it out, too. His tone turned sharp as he snapped at Vizer. “Now is not the time for such useless apologies. You’ll only make my brother angrier. And we’re not the ones who should listen to them.”

Directing his voice to Lucien, he added, “It’s not the time to settle old scores. The portal left us right in this room, and I have to say, Lothar’s chambers are not the best place to be right now.”

Lucien cursed under his breath. The whole area would probably be so well guarded he couldn’t even think about an escape. “Why didn’t you hand us in?” he asked Vizer.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Vizer answered, his normally stoic voice betraying a certain amount of mental pressure. “I owe you and I owe Gabriel.” Vizer rubbed his eyes tiredly. “I have made many mistakes. The worst was that I let hatred poison my heart. I forgot that not

everybody is evil in this situation.” He glanced towards the bed. “But still, even knowing this, I cannot forgive. I cannot leave everything behind.”

Lucien arched a brow. If Vizer attempted to seek compassion through his surprising confession, it wouldn’t work. Had Vizer not hurt Gabriel, Lucien could maybe feel pity for him. Now, even if he understood the suffering Vizer endured, he could not forgive.

Apparently aware of that as well, Vizer waved a hand as if trying to shoo a pest away. “Anyway, I can help you get out. And you have to leave soon, before anybody else shows up to see the bastard.”

Lucien fixed his gaze on Vizer. “Right. About that, I have two questions for you. Is Lothar dead? And how on Kaldor do you plan to get us out if you have no magic?”

Vizer stared in obvious surprise at Lucien. “No, you didn’t kill Lothar. He’s currently catatonic.” Vizer chuckled darkly. “I owe you for that as well. Also, although I don’t actually have inner magic, I am resourceful.”

“Okay. Can anybody explain what you guys are talking about? What do you mean you don’t have magic?” Cade asked, looking terribly confused by the exchange.

Vizer shrugged. “In short, the bastard on the bed and the bitch queen stole my inner magic. I am not entirely sure how you figured that out though, Prince Lucien.”

Lucien finally got up from the couch. The dizziness had all but disappeared, and he felt a little more like himself. “Doesn’t matter. Now, how can you help us?”

* * * *

“Welcome to Xeetha, Prince Orin, Prince Kalin, Prince Gabriel.” King Seyran’s voice shook the windows of the chamber they were waiting in. Seyran was obviously the sire of Cade and Lucien. They

had the same aura of power and imposing stature, and the king shared Cade's golden hair and violet eyes.

With an effort, Gabriel got up from the couch he'd been resting on, steadying himself on Kalin's arm. Orin already stood proud at Zeli's side, not giving a sign of the weakness Gabriel knew he had to be feeling. As always, Kalin saluted militarily. With his usual grace, Orin elegantly bowed. Gabriel knew he was supposed to do that too, but he wasn't well versed in court manners.

He gave his best attempt to imitate Orin, but he still felt weak. Luckily, Kalin caught him before he stumbled on the floor. His face flaring with embarrassment, Gabriel wished for Lucien. If Lucien were here, he wouldn't feel so inadequate, so stupid and helpless.

The king just smiled kindly, ignoring his unimpressive display. "I'm very glad to meet you. I apologize for making you wait, but it was necessary while Zeli informed me of the situation."

"We perfectly understand, Your Majesty," Kalin answered the golden-haired king. "We are the ones that should be apologizing for intruding like this unannounced." Kalin seemed perfectly collected, but Gabriel could feel the tension in his body. It didn't surprise Gabriel one bit, since the Xeetahn king bore a striking resemblance to Cade.

Seyran chuckled. "Why so formal? You are the mates of my beloved sons. All three of you." He smiled warmly. "Please make yourselves at home."

"Thank you very much, Your Majesty," Orin politely answered.

"My consort will be here soon as well," Seyran continued. "But for now..." Gabriel barely suppressed a gasp of surprise as Seyran came forward and took his and Kalin's hands. "Do not fear, my sons! Cade and Lucien can take care of themselves. Trust that they will be back to you."

Seyran's words hit a sore spot in Gabriel's heart. The tears he'd contained with difficulty as he entered the beautiful castle burst out

again. "I'm sorry." He softly apologized. "I can't help it. I just miss him so much."

Through tears, he registered the surprised look on the king's face. Kalin enveloped him in a warm hug. "Hush, baby brother. It'll be fine, you'll see."

King Seyran's kind voice interrupted Kalin. "Perhaps it would be best if everybody rested a little? Who knows, maybe by the time you wake up, we'll have some more news."

Gabriel wanted to protest. He didn't want to rest, even thinking about it made him sick. How could he rest when his Luce was nowhere to be found? Kalin nodded at Seyran, "Yes, it would be best." Kalin squeezed Gabriel, silently stopping his protest. "Gabriel has passed through a lot lately."

Seyran smiled kindly again. "I understand. Nyre!" A tall demon guard appeared immediately at the king's order.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Nyre will see you to your quarters. When you have rested, feel free to visit me, and we'll talk more. I take my leave now."

The king made a little bow and exited the room. Nyre said, "My lords, if you will follow me, please."

Supporting himself on Kalin's arm, Gabriel nodded. "Yes, of course."

The group also exited the room, moving to the main corridor in silence. No one was in the mood for much chatting. Gabriel could only think about Lucien, about how Luce should have led him through the castle, not some unknown guard.

He was startled from his musings when at a certain point Zeli said, "We split up here."

Wait. Split up? Why would they split up?

Zeli threw them an apologetic look. "Orin and I will be lodged in my personal quarters, while you will temporarily stay in the guest chambers."

Kalin tensed, but said nothing. Orin glared at this demon lover. “What the hell, Zeli? They should stay in the rooms allocated to the princes.”

Nyre gave Orin an unreadable look. “My apologies, but it is not possible. At this time the royal quarters cannot be entered, but this is only a temporary arrangement, until the princes arrive.”

Obviously, Orin wanted to say something else and Gabriel inwardly sighed. He could tell his brother felt guilty about his own happiness when Gabriel and Kalin suffered over the disappearance of their mates. “It’s all right, Orin. If they’re not there, it doesn’t mean anything. And besides, it’s only for a little while.”

Kalin squeezed his hand reassuringly. “Yes, only for a while. They’ll be here.”

Orin sighed, but relented. He hugged his brothers. “Rest, all right? Especially you, Gabriel.”

Gabriel gave Orin a little smile. “Don’t worry about us. We’ll be fine.”

His brother gazed at him, uncertainty clear in his lavender eyes. Gabriel didn’t want Orin’s concern for them to cloud his happiness. “Go, you have someone waiting for you.” He pointed towards Zeli, who stood a little farther away, looking embarrassed.

Kalin nodded. “Yes, little brother. Don’t worry. Go already.”

Orin sighed, gave Gabriel a kiss on the temple and a final hug for Kalin. “All right. But we’ll see each other soon.” With another reluctant glance, he disappeared with Zeli into a different corridor.

Gabriel sighed quietly. He felt happy for Orin, of course, but his heart struggled with jealousy. He was such a terrible brother.

Kalin seemingly read his mind. “It’s normal, Gabriel. Don’t blame yourself for being in love.”

Nyre cleared his throat in an attempt to attract their attention. “My lords? Are you ready to go now?”

The demon guard seemed uncomfortable, as if he didn't know exactly how to act around them. Gabriel smiled at him and nodded. "Yes, of course. Thank you very much."

Nyre smiled back, visibly relieved. "Right this way, please." He immediately indicated a different direction. The demon guard led through the labyrinthine Xeetahn castle in winding corridors filled with peculiar decorations. Nyre was saying something about the structure of the castle, but Gabriel couldn't pay attention. He couldn't concentrate on anything. He felt so very tired.

Finally, they stopped at a big wooden door. "Prince Gabriel, this is your chamber. It has been supplied with everything you need." The guard swiftly and efficiently showed him the supply of water, the bathing room, as well as where the rich variety of fruit and snacks was stored. "If you desire anything at all, just pull that string." Nyre pointed to a string at the corner of the big bed. Gabriel nodded, just wanting the guard gone.

"I'll stay with you for a while, to make sure you'll—"

"No." Gabriel swiftly interrupted his brother. He didn't want Kalin here. He needed time alone. "I'm sorry, Kalin. I just want to be alone."

Kalin seemed taken aback, but he nodded, his dark blue eyes sad and troubled. "I understand. Please, take care. I'll come by later." Kalin hugged him and exited the room with the guard.

As soon as they left, Gabriel collapsed on the big bed. *Luce, please, please come back! Come back to me!*

* * * *

Gabriel inwardly sighed as he walked in the dining hall. His brothers finally convinced him of the uselessness of staying inside the guest room. Not only that, as Kalin said, "It would be supremely impolite to ignore the invitation of the royal family, especially since we have yet to officially meet the royal consort."

He couldn't help but wonder what the consort would be like. He hadn't been here long and didn't know that much about this place. It depressed Gabriel that he knew so little about Luce. They'd spent so little time together and knew so little about each other. Would they get ever get the chance to learn everything together?

Gabriel struggled for composure as he observed the huge dining hall. Due to the princes' absence, it would be a somewhat private dinner. All in all, invited to the meal were the three Alarian princes, Zeli and a group of demons Gabriel had probably been introduced to, but too out of it to care.

One of the unidentified demons spoke. Gabriel thought he might have been a royal advisor or something like that. "The king and his consort will be here shortly. Until then, how do you like it here so far?"

Gabriel blinked at the demon advisor's words. Was he kidding? He *hated* it. It was awful, because he felt so lonely, and he needed his Luce. Gabriel fought to maintain his composure and managed to whisper an answer. "It's a very beautiful country." He wasn't lying. Even if he'd only caught a brief view of Xeetha, it seemed like an incredibly beautiful country. Gabriel just couldn't enjoy it.

Luckily, Orin managed to distract the attention of the councilor? Advisor? "Indeed, Lord Tharis, even the walk through the forest was enchanting. It is so different from Alaria."

Orin continued to blabber about the virtues of Xeetha, things that were no doubt true, but Gabriel didn't have the heart to admire. Luckily, Orin's little speech distracted Tharis who chose to leave Gabriel be. Several other demons at the table engaged in a heated conversation with Kalin. Gabriel observed his brother as he spoke. He seemed lively and involved in the discussion, Gabriel didn't doubt the fact that Kalin's mind remained on Cade's absence.

Gabriel wasn't that much better off. Everything in the room disappeared as he remembered Lucien's eyes, his loving caresses, his strength and kindness. He only realized he zoned out and that the

dining room suddenly became very quiet when a soft, yet strong voice drew his attention in the direction of the door.

“Welcome to Xeetha. I am Lyan, royal consort. I apologize for not being able to greet you before. I—”

A glass shattered interrupting the words of the king’s consort. Dimly realizing it was his own glass that caused the intrusive sound, Gabriel stared at the second demon king. *Light above, give me strength!* Platinum blond hair, ice blue eyes... Lyan looked so much like Lucien. Well, it was probably the other way around, but still.

How did Kalin do it? How did he maintain his calm in front of the obvious similarity between Seyran and Cade? Gabriel wanted to run away and hide, preferably somewhere as secluded as possible. It was all too much. But he had to maintain at least a modicum of calm. He couldn’t insult Luce’s family.

His hands trembled as he bent over to pick up the broken shards. “I’m... I’m sorry. I was just startled.” Gabriel felt thankful for having something to do, somewhere else to look at to avoid the royal consort.

“Prince Gabriel, are you all right? Please leave that, you’ll hurt yourself.” Lyan rushed to the Gabriel’s side. “I apologize if I startled you. I assumed you knew about how Xeetahn society is.”

Huh? In total confusion, Gabriel forgot his initial reaction and stared at the king’s consort.

“What Lyan means is that you were surprised by his gender.” Seyran sighed. “Although I suspect your reaction didn’t have a direct connection to that, we might as well make things clear. In case you didn’t know, we Xeetah are a race of all males. The mechanics are a bit complicated, but basically, we decide at our mating which one of us will be the bearer of children. Here we call the child bearer Kazyan and his mate Destyan.” Bearer of children? What on Kaldor?

Gabriel gaped at the king’s proclamation. He glanced at his brothers. By the expression on their faces, neither of them knew. Orin was currently giving Zeli a venomous look, while Kalin seemed, for once, lost for words and frozen in shock.

Lyan gave a little laugh, obviously trying to disperse the tension, “Let’s just leave that for some other time, all right? Come, let us dine.”

Gabriel let himself be to the dining table by the king consort. He was in a daze. What had he gotten himself into?

* * * *

Same time, different place

Lucien scowled as Vizer exposed his plan. He didn’t trust the Alarian. In fact, he completely disliked Vizer and wanted to beat him bloody. His past with Gabriel wasn’t something Lucien could discard just like that, but he had to accept that Vizer represented their only chance and he hadn’t betrayed them so far.

Cade wasn’t much more optimistic. He frowned in distaste, having obvious reserves regarding Vizer’s plan. “Right. This plan of yours seems plausible, but it has one main problem. How do we know you won’t go back on your word and betray us?”

Vizer sighed. “You don’t. I guess you’ll just have to trust me.” Vizer paused, seemingly searching for words. “Look, had there been another way, I wouldn’t propose this harebrained idea. I must admit, it is complicated, but if we cooperate, it’ll work. Additionally, it’s not like you really have a choice.”

Lucien’s nerves snapped. No longer able to contain his temper, he jumped Vizer, pinning the man to the wall. Effectively cutting Vizer’s air supply, Lucien growled. “Do not presume to tell us what we can and cannot do.” Squeezing the Alarian’s windpipe, Lucien couldn’t help but feel a sadistic satisfaction when Vizer struggled for breath and choked in his powerful grip.

Luckily for Vizer, Cade interrupted Lucien. “Little bro, come on. Calm down. Let him go. Damn it, he’s turning blue!”

At his brother's urge, Lucien dropped Vizer on the floor. Vizer coughed violently as he tried to breathe again. Observing him with cold eyes, Lucien finally said, "Very well. We'll do it. But if you betray us, it'll be the last thing you ever do."

With that threat heavy in the air, Lucien turned his back on Vizer, idly collapsing on the couch. He was going out of his mind. He missed his mate like crazy, and he knew that at this point Gabriel probably suffered from his absence as well. Vizer's presence irked him terribly, and it didn't help that his wings remained white.

"Hey, bro, I know how you feel." Cade's voice sounded strained. "I miss Kalin too. That's why we have to keep our heads and get out of this place. They'll be waiting."

Lucien gritted his teeth, making a desperate attempt not to snap at his brother. Cade didn't understand. Not really. He wanted to ask Cade what he would do had he been in the presence of a person who hurt Kalin. In the end, he didn't answer Cade. Instead, he told the still-recovering Alarian, "I think we better get moving."

Vizer nodded and got up. Hastily he scribbled something on a scroll piece. "Here we go."

Lucien said nothing. Together with his brother, he found hiding places inside Lothar's chamber. Cade seemed tense as well, as if he just realized the situation Lucien was forced to withstand. But they couldn't speak about anything at that particular moment. Vizer was just opening the door to the chambers.

"You, there, Rathor." Vizer's voice boomed in the corridor.

The silhouette of another Alarian appeared in the doorway. "Rathir, my lord Vizer, it's Rathir."

Before Rathir could continue his answer, Vizer cut him off abruptly. "Never mind, it doesn't matter. I need you to bring me the following plants from the garden." Vizer pushed the scroll to Rathir. "It is urgent, and I cannot leave His Holiness' side."

"Yes, my lord Vizer, at once." Without another word, Rathir took the list, made a curt bow and disappeared.

Vizer shut the door, turning towards Lucien and Cade as they exited their hiding spots. "Ok. Now we wait."

* * * *

Five. Gabriel screamed as the whip hit his naked back again. It was too soon, much too soon and the injuries from the beating he took just the other day hadn't yet healed. Six. Tears flowed liberally and his throat turned hoarse from his shouts. Seven. He cried out in pain and in fear, terror of what was to come. Eight. Agony gripped him as a particularly cruel hit crossed his back with brutality. If he could think, he would ask himself why Vizer was being particularly cruel today. But it didn't matter. He almost blacked out before the ninth hit of the whip fell.

Of course, he would have been too lucky had they just let him lay there and continue the whipping with him unconscious. As it was, Gabriel found his weakness repaid by a shower of ice cold water. He screamed once more as the contents of the water penetrated the fresh wounds. The sadistic bastards always put salt and pepper and all sort of concoctions in the water, to punish those who fainted in the beatings. It hurt so much, so much. Nine. The agony was unbearable. He couldn't even scream anymore, but if he blacked out again, it would be worse. Ten. The final hit. Vizer made it count too. It hurt like all the others combined.

Finally released from the chains that bound him, Gabriel fell in a heap on the floor. Steps closed in on him and he knew who it was without opening his eyes. "Well, well. Looks like Vizer was a little enthusiastic today." Lothar's chuckle brought renewed horror through Gabriel's heart. He uselessly tried to drag his broken body away from the source of his plight. The chuckle transformed into outright laughter, as he was again immobilized by magic. Lothar grabbed Gabriel's long hair and pulled him up close, whispering. "But you're even more beautiful like that. Bloody and naked and

suffering.” Combined agony and disgust struck him as Lothar started licking the blood of his back. Lothar’s saliva burned him more than the ice water ever would, but all his struggles were in vain. He was powerless here and everybody hated him.

Terror gripped him yet again as Lothar abruptly separated his thighs. In desperation, he struggled against his bindings, even though he knew he couldn’t break them and would probably just get beaten again. Anything, anything, but that. Maybe Lothar would finally kill him. Just not that, not that.

Predictably, Lothar easily stopped his struggles with a yet more powerful binding. Gabriel felt himself lifted upright and forced to stand in all fours. Completely naked, his legs spread, like a common whore. That’s seemed his future after all.

He felt Lothar’s hands across his ass. “Oh, I love it when they fight. Makes it all the more pleasurable.” Lothar spread his ass cheeks, touching his anus with a finger. “No, no prep for you. I’ll fuck you raw, like the slut you are.” A rustling of clothes and Gabriel felt his nemesis position himself behind him. This was it. Lothar would finally rape him. Please, oh, please, no.

“Your Holiness.” A voice ghosted through the darkness. “Pardon my intrusion. But may I remind you that...?” There was a pause and the owner of the voice, which Gabriel dimly recognized as probably belonging to another adept, crashed against the wall, struck by Lothar’s magic.

Remarkably though, the superintendent stopped his advances on Gabriel. “It seems that you’re in luck today.” Oh thank you, Light above, thank you! Gabriel’s relief was short lived though, as Lothar added. “Not for long though, not for long...” Then towards the other adept, who struggled to come to his feet “You, you want my cock so badly? My chambers, now! Go!” The boy scrambled out the door, probably towards the superintendent’s rooms. Please, please, please leave.

But Lothar didn't leave. He turned Gabriel over, observing him for a moment. From his place on the floor, the man seemed scarier than ever. His grey eyes were stormy and since he was only half-dressed, Gabriel could see the superintendent's strong physique. Even without his magic, Lothar could probably break him in two. But the scariest part was the truly impressive cock, red and leaking, proudly jutting between Lothar's legs. He wanted to stick that inside me?

Before Lothar could say or do anything else, a peculiar noise sounded from above them, as if an earthquake hit the Monastery. "Gabriel, Gabriel!"

Yet again, Gabriel clung to the voice. It didn't belong to Luce, but it sounded familiar and comforting.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself no longer at Kirgen, but in Lucien's bed at the Xeetahn palace. His head hurt and he felt sore, as if the beating actually occurred minutes ago. Gabriel covered his head with a pillow, attempting to ignore the insistent knocks at his door. His brothers had apparently been trying to get him out of this room for some time now. Supposedly, he wasn't allowed in here, but Gabriel picked the lock and snuck in Lucien's chambers nevertheless. He needed to be around Lucien's things, to feel him closer. He felt so very alone, lost and confused. He needed his Luce so badly.

Gabriel sighed loudly. He didn't want to be a burden for his brothers. They worried about him. He knew he needed to eat, but Gabriel just couldn't swallow anything. They didn't even realize Gabriel's blackouts continued in spite of the fact that he was cured of the poison.

Gabriel curled into a ball, hugging a vest to his chest. It had Lucien's smell, Clarion and ash and leather. He found a small amount of comfort in that. If Lucien was by his side, these nightmares would stop plaguing him. Luce could drive the shadows of his past away.

Gabriel closed his eyes, remembering Lucien's smile, his warmth and the way he'd take care of Gabriel, like he was the most precious thing in the world. He just had to have a little faith, to believe Lucien

would return. If he didn't, Gabriel would simply allow these nightmares to consume him. Living would be useless without Lucien to hold him, to love him.

"Come on, baby brother. You have to eat something." Kalin's strong voice on the other side of the door made Gabriel feel guilty and selfish. He hated himself for being so weak, but he couldn't help it. He couldn't face anyone. He feared that his brothers would see right through him and realize that the nightmares hadn't stopped, that Gabriel's sanity hung by a thread if Lucien didn't return.

"We'll break the door, Gabriel. I swear we will." Orin sounded beyond angry. Gabriel winced. His normally cool brother actually had quite a temper. Gabriel wouldn't be surprised if Orin did indeed make good on his promise and burst the door open. With a sigh, Gabriel abandoned the bed, moving towards the door, still clutching the vest to his chest.

Reluctantly, Gabriel opened the big wooden door. He would have to see his brothers eventually and keeping them away would only make them feel more suspicious. "Finally!" Orin marched inside, irritation obvious in his movements. He grabbed Gabriel and glared at him, angry fire emanating from his lavender gaze. "What are you thinking starving yourself like this?"

"I'm not starving myself. I've only missed a few meals. It's not like I'm not used to it." Orin paled and took a step back as if he'd been hit, and Gabriel wanted to kick himself. His brothers still blamed themselves for his life at Kirgen. And he was being so insensitive.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

Orin didn't meet his eyes. "It's all right. You don't have anything to apologize for." Orin took his hands and gazed into his eyes. "But please, you don't have to skip meals anymore. You need to eat, to regain your strength."

"Besides, you're not helping anyone through this fasting of yours. You have to heal up for when they arrive," Kalin continued.

Gabriel tensed. His brother seemed so tired and his normally collected attitude all but disappeared. “Kalin? What about you? Did you eat? Did you even sleep?”

Kalin looked away and then smiled bitterly at Gabriel. “I can’t. I’m such a hypocrite, right?” His eyes suddenly looked haunted. “Whenever I try to sleep, I keep having this dream. I don’t know what to do.” Kalin’s voice broke.

Gabriel hastily hugged his older brother. Kalin, his brave Kalin. Kalin had almost lost hope, and it tore him apart. But it had been two days since their arrival, and no news had come. The king still tried to show optimism, but his blue eyes betrayed his feelings and the king’s consort fell ill. The whole atmosphere at the Xeetahn palace was beyond glum. Sometimes, Gabriel thought he could feel hostility in the air, but maybe it was just his impression, probably only the nightmares getting to him.

“It’s all right. Come on. We’ll go eat something now. And then you’ll rest a little, all right?”

Kalin looked at him, his dark eyes filled with emotion. He hugged his little brother then nodded. “Yes, let’s do that.”

Gabriel felt a little warm inside as he noticed his brother was wearing a small patch of leather at his neck. His brother apparently raided Cade’s wardrobe as well. “Wait a minute. Orin, can I borrow your dagger for a minute?”

With a smile, Orin handed one his jeweled knives to his little brother. “Be careful not to cut yourself. It’s very sharp.”

Understatement of the century. Gabriel took the dagger and carefully cut a piece of leather from the vest he was holding. He would have liked to wear it like Kalin, but he wasn’t so skilled in crafting. He’d just take it along and it’d have to do for now.

Placing the precious leather piece in a pocket of his robe, he put the vest back where he found it and arranged the sheets. “Ok, now we can go.”

They exited the royal chambers and moved towards the dining halls. The Xeetahn palace looked even more impressive than the one of Alaria. Gabriel felt grateful for Kalin's guidance because he'd never find his way through the never-ending corridors of black marble.

Reaching the main staircase, Gabriel noticed something going on. The guards and service staff were hurrying to the courtyard. A shiver of excitement and fear passed through Gabriel. Maybe Luce and Cade finally arrived? Or maybe something bad happened to them?

The three brothers started running at the same time on the winding staircase. Kalin grabbed the first servant and growled, "What is it? What's the matter?"

The demon servant blinked, obviously surprised at Kalin's behavior. "Apparently, there's news of the princes. But I don't know—"

Kalin pushed the servant away, and they continued to make their way down. But the courtyard just held more useless gossiping staff. Gabriel wanted to scream in frustration. Where could they find out something concrete?

"Guys, come on." Orin pulled Gabriel's hand. "The kings have to know something."

Of course, Seyran! Seyran and Lyan were bound to know. They dashed again through the castle, ignoring the looks they received as they ran and practically burst into the throne room.

Gabriel froze at the view. Lyan collapsed in Seyran's arms, crying, his platinum blond hair a curtain over the king's shoulder. Why was the king's consort crying? Had there been bad news?

Lyan turned his ice-blue gaze towards the three Alarians but his eyes read nothing but happiness. Tears flowing, the king's consort said, "They're coming home. They're coming home."

Gabriel felt tears of his own filling his eyes. They were fine, and they'd be back. Luce would be with him again. Soon.

Chapter 11

Lucien sighed tiredly, gathering his wings around him. He still couldn't believe it. They'd managed to get away. Vizer's plan had actually worked. They'd also been able to send a magical message to Xeetha so that his mate and Kalin would know that they were fine. Well, they would have sent it anyway. He didn't want to imagine his Kazyan's reaction at their absence. Since Cain's death, Lyan had always been overprotective of them to the point of obsession.

It would take them quite a while to get from Alaria to Xeetha using just their wings. However, Lucien knew casting the spell again would be incredibly risky. The chances of success were slim, if any. Not only because they didn't have the necessary supplies, but simply because he felt exhausted. True enough, Vizer's potion granted them the invisibility necessary to elude the guards. But in the end, it was their own wings which carried them to their current location, just over the borders of Thralnia, the land of the elves.

Lucien looked back in the direction of Galamar. He closed his eyes, urging himself not to think. He couldn't have done things differently, of course, but it still irked him.

"What are you thinking about, little bro?" Cade asked as he soundlessly passed through the bushes, carrying their future dinner.

"You know what I'm thinking about, Cade. Why do you ask questions when you already know the answer?"

Cade sighed, abandoning the procedure of skinning the result of his hunt. "And why do you burden your mind with useless wishes when you also realize we couldn't have done things any differently?"

Lucien felt his anger flare. Yes, he was well aware of the necessity of them leaving Alaria, just as he was well aware of the precariousness of his situation. Nevertheless, Cade telling him this in the face didn't help his temper.

"Look, Lucien. I know you don't want to hear this. But we'll be sure to get shit for all this business when we get back." Cade made a face, obviously imagining the situation at the Xeetahn court. "I suppose in the end we'll get through all right with only a minor punishment. But if you killed him—"

Lucien snapped at the last phrase, feeling his eyes flame. "Fuck, I know that. I knew I couldn't kill him from the moment we decided on the plan but the things he did to Gabriel... I can't be logical about this, I just can't."

Lucien glared at his brother, hating Cade for his necessity of pointing out the obvious. His brother stopped him from killing Lothar when he first bit the bastard, and he stopped him once again, before they left. Just barely.

"Lucien, what is more important, revenge or your life with Gabriel?" Cade used the same argument in Lothar's chambers and it served perfectly now as well. Gabriel was waiting, waiting to begin a new life together. He had so many dreams for them, dreams of a family, children with Gabriel's smile and Lucien's eyes.

The thought blew all notions of revenge from his mind. Taking a deep breath, he nodded at Cade. "I'll owe you forever, Cade, for keeping me from doing the stupidest thing in my life."

Cade just smiled, and knelt back down to resume his previous activity. "Hey, don't mention it. What are big brothers for?"

Cade started skinning the deer. They remained a while in comfortable silence, Lucien's thoughts floating to a future where he would sleep every day with Gabriel at his side and he'd teach their sons to fly and...

Lucien snapped out of his reverie, suddenly thinking of something. His heart sank when he realized he had no clue whether or

not they could have children in the first place. Interbreeding wasn't exactly something well looked upon in Xeetha. In fact, Lucien had never heard of a demon mating from someone from a different race in the first place.

"Hey, Cade!"

"Mmm?"

"Do you have any clue if we'll be able to have children?"

Cade blinked in surprise at the question. He opened his mouth and closed it again. Eventually, he said, "I don't have a clue." Cade paused, seemingly contemplating the issue further. "I truly believe there's a very high possibility. Actually, if I think about it, there's no reason why we couldn't. You know that our bodies are adapted to breed in any circumstances."

Lucien acknowledged Cade's words with a nod. They all knew the story. Long ago, a strange plague killed off all the Xeetahn women. It affected all of Kaldor, but its effect on Xeetha was particularly harsh. But because of that plague, the bodies of the males somehow adapted in order to be able to perpetuate the species. The seed of the demons contained a special hormone that could create an artificial womb if the demon coupled with his mate, and only with his mate, at the same time, allowing the mate to temporarily produce the eggs necessary for conception. Lucien couldn't be sure, but most likely, his body would help Gabriel's adapt to conception, even if Gabriel was Alarian and not Xeetahn.

"But you know, little bro, if we do have children, I don't have a clue what they'll be like. I mean if they'll be—"

Lucien paled as he finished his brother's phrase. "—demons at all." Fires of Kaldor, how could he have not considered this issue?

Cade dropped the half-prepared meal. Lucien knew the same thought passed through his brother's mind. "We can't afford to go the long way, little bro."

Lucien nodded. They had to get to Xeetha, and fast. He cursed under his breath. If only he hadn't fucked up the spell... Back in

Alaria, he'd known the situation wouldn't be exactly perfect with his father. Seyran had been adamant about an alliance with the Alarians. However, at the time, Lucien dismissed all thoughts of such complications and focused only on saving his mate.

He hoped that they would manage to explain Seyran the situation. But with only Zeli around, his father would be furious. Lucien's heart sank as he realized the extent of their mistake. It wasn't only the Alarian alliance. It was the actual mating.

That night, in the labyrinth, Lucien hadn't completed the mating process with Gabriel on purpose. He'd known at the time how complicated things would be with his father. Therefore, he wanted to speak with Seyran before he took the final step. After all, according to tradition, demons would mate only after having consulted their parents. There were still things he didn't know, things he had yet to learn about the whole mating itself.

Cade cursed. "Fuck! Why didn't I think of this? Why didn't I realize?" But Lucien knew why. Cade and Zeli had never actually thought about having children. They didn't believe in matings, not really. Until recently, Lucien had never actually seen his brother get attached to any of his play things. It distressed their Kazyan for a long time, but in the end, Lyan became resigned to the fact that Lucien would probably be the one to provide heirs.

And Lucien had been too overwhelmed with worrying Gabriel's death to think about anything else. They'd been too busy plotting and planning to even consider the consequences of them choosing the Alarians as their mates.

They screwed up royally. They sent their mates to face Seyran and Lyan alone, when it should have been so obvious that their sires wouldn't be very happy about their sons mating outside their race. Not only would such a thing be severely against all Xeetahn norms and customs, but Lucien didn't even know how the Alarians' body would react to the Xeetahn way of reproduction. Perhaps, in the end, they wouldn't be able to provide heirs for the crown. At this point,

their sires had surely found out about all of this. They also lost any chance of cementing the alliance with Alaria. What a disaster!

The demon princes extended their wings and took to the skies again. They'd assumed that their mates would be safe in Xeetha. What if they'd been mistaken? What if in the end, Xeetha was the most dangerous place for the Alarian princes? Lucien would never forgive himself.

* * * *

Gabriel hadn't felt so happy since he left Alaria. His Luce would be coming back, he was safe and he'd soon return at Gabriel's side.

Kalin felt the same joy as Gabriel because on impulse he hugged his two brothers repeating Lyan's words. "They're coming home. They're coming home."

Gabriel felt tears of happiness flow on his cheeks. Luce would be back and everything would finally be like they hoped for. They'd fly together over the forests and sleep in each other's arms. And they'd live here with Orin, Zeli, Kalin, Cade and the royal couple.

Gabriel suddenly felt the overwhelming urge to thank these people who received them with open arms without asking questions. Seyran was so nice to them, and Lyan went out of his way to make them feel comfortable, despite their own worries. Gabriel always longed for the warmth of a real family, and now he would finally get his wish. Luce, his brothers and all these nice people would ensure he'd never be alone again.

Breaking out of Kalin's embrace, Gabriel turned to the two kings. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words froze on his lips at Seyran's expression. The Xeetahn king looked like a stranger, the friendly smile gone and replaced with a nearly predatory expression.

"Right, now that we've assured that our sons are coming back, we have a discussion pending."

Kalin stiffened at his side and Orin slipped into his cold mask. What was going on?

“What would that discussion be, Your Majesty?”

Lyan touched the arm of the king and whispered something in his ear. Seyran shook his head. “No, not this time. I’ve stalled enough because you’ve asked me to, but not anymore.”

Seyran turned to them, just as Zeli burst into the room. “King Seyran.” The Xeetahn monarch frowned at the other demon.

“Yes, Zeli? What do you want?”

“Please don’t do this.” Zeli took position at Orin’s side. “At least wait until Cade and Lucien arrive.”

Seyran shook his head. “I have already waited more than I should have.”

Gabriel could feel Zeli tense as he pushed Orin behind him, shielding him from the king. Kalin looked just as anxious, even if his voice sounded polite and diplomatic when he finally spoke. “Your Majesty, if I may be so bold? What is it that you wish to speak to us about?”

The demon king smiled at them, but his smile chilled Gabriel to the bone. It reminded him too much of a different person, someone he wanted so desperately to forget. Unconsciously, Gabriel took a step back. This couldn’t be happening. Not now, when things finally seemed to be going so well.

“Of course. It is quite easy actually. We are not entirely pleased with the outcome of your staying here. The whole purpose of my sons’ coming to Alaria was to cement an alliance which has no hope of staying in place now.” Gabriel trembled as he saw his dreams of a family crumble before his eyes. The king continued to speak. “Furthermore, we feel that you are not exactly adequate as mates for my sons.”

Gabriel suddenly wished the ground would swallow him right then and there. How did Seyran find out about his time at Kirgen, about the things he’d done? He always felt tainted, ruined beyond

repair, but Lucien's love had made him feel pure again. But he wasn't pure and he wasn't good enough for Luce. And because of it, Kalin would suffer as well.

Before Gabriel could say anything, Kalin spoke, his powerful voice not betraying a hint of fear. "I am not surprised. In fact, I expected as much."

Seyran arched a brow in obvious disbelief. "Oh? Is that so?"

Kalin nodded, a smile fluttering on his lips. "Quite so. You might have fooled my baby brother with your front of unconditional welcome. But unlike Gabriel, I see the bad things in people." Kalin waved a hand in a royal and indifferent gesture. "Besides, it was only logical. You don't want royal blood tainted with that of a different race."

Orin continued Kalin's phrasing. "And furthermore, if Cade and Lucien maintained their matings with my brothers, their offspring, and therefore, your heirs, would probably be half-breeds."

The king clapped. "Very smart. And yet so very stupid. I'm surprised you came here in the first place since you know so little about us."

Orin shrugged. "What we know and what we don't is of no consequence."

"At any rate, it doesn't matter." Kalin arched a brow, a cold expression on his face. "What do you plan to do to us now?"

The king sat back down on the throne, meeting Kalin's gaze. "Do? I will do nothing. You are the ones who will act. You will leave Yazix at once. I do not care where you will go."

"And if we refuse?"

"Refusal is not an option. You will be escorted from Xeetha, back to your home country."

No! No! This couldn't be. Gabriel registered the words but couldn't accept them. He couldn't accept such a cruel sentence. He couldn't accept being separated from Luce.

“Please, Your Majesty! Please let us stay.” He fell to his knees, pleading, hoping against all hope that it would somehow move the demon king.

“Get up, Gabriel!” Orin lifted him to his feet. “Don’t humiliate yourself. There’s no point.”

“Besides we don’t need to plead for anything. We have rights here,” Kalin said in a determined voice.

“Excuse me? Rights?”

Orin smirked. “Well, I do not imagine you exiling the bearers of the children of your sons.”

Lyan gaped. “They didn’t! They couldn’t have. We would have known.”

Gabriel suppressed his shock at Orin’s proclamation. He wasn’t with child, not that he knew of at least. In fact, he didn’t even know how he could possibly be in such a situation. He wasn’t a demon, after all. Kalin and Orin seemed to know something he didn’t, however, so Gabriel decided that, if this helped them stay, he would play along.

“Orin.” he said in a low voice. “We weren’t supposed to say anything until they came here.”

Orin’s eyes flashed with surprise. But luckily there was no way Seyran could have seen that. Orin was always good at masking his feelings. He smiled lazily. “True, baby brother, but these are special circumstances.”

Gabriel prayed for strength to be able to continue the game. He’d lied before. He could do so now. He closed his eyes for a second, imagining he did bear another life within him, a child, Luce’s son. It wasn’t that hard, since he did want a family with Lucien. After a brief moment, Gabriel said in a convinced voice, “I don’t want my child to be some sort of tool of blackmail.”

“How very noble.” Seyran glared venomously at him. “And yet here you are, using them to secure your position at court. I don’t

believe a word you are saying, either of you. But just to be on the safe side, you will all receive a visit from the palace medic.”

Zeli interrupted the king. “I’m afraid you can’t do that, Your Majesty. You know touching the mate of a demon in his absence is against the law.”

Seyran’s eyes flared red. Obviously, the king didn’t like his plans being dismantled. “Seyran?” Lyan’s voice sounded pleading. “Let’s just wait a while longer. That way we’ll talk to them as well. It’s better.”

The king glared at his consort and took a deep breath in an attempt to calm himself. The doors to the throne room flew open. “Very well. You win, for now.” Seyran stormed out of the room, dragging Lyan with him.

Gabriel couldn’t help but sigh in relief. The kings granted them a brief respite. However, they still weren’t safe. As if knowing Gabriel’s thoughts, Zeli started to speak. “Okay, everybody. From now on, we stay together. You’ll move into my rooms. It’s safer. Let’s hope Cade and Lucien move their asses.”

Or else they would all be fucked. The king would realize they were bluffing and then all would be lost.

Chapter 12

Gabriel brushed his hair out of his eyes as he flipped the page of the book he was reading. In the past few days, it had been quiet at the castle. True enough, he mostly stayed inside Zeli's chambers. However, when he did see other demons, they didn't seem to be particularly hostile. Gabriel suspected Zeli might have something to do with it. The red-headed demon had very conveniently suggested the fact that Kalin and Gabriel bore the heirs to the Xeetahn throne.

Gabriel was confused. He expected to receive more grief from the demon king, but Seyran was strangely quiet. He hadn't seen either of the Xeetahn monarchs since the day of the notice. Well, they avoided the throne room and all possible areas of the castle where the kings might be, but still, it was weird.

The nightmares stopped once he received notice of Luce's arrival, but the entire situation weighed heavily on his mind.

The room he now shared with Kalin was located in a different section of the palace than their previous quarters. Apparently, Zeli was held in high esteem at the court because he had several rooms allocated to his exclusive use. Unfortunately, this implied that Gabriel and Kalin now lived in the royal wing of the palace, which made dodging the kings a really difficult endeavor.

Therefore, in spite of having avoided other conflicts with Luce's sires, Gabriel felt that he couldn't trust this relative peace. In fact, he had a very bad feeling about this silence. Even if the guards at the palace seemed civil and some even nice, he knew that soon enough things would change.

With an irritated sigh, Gabriel snapped the book shut. It had been interesting, a book on Xeetahn flora written in the common tongue that Gabriel could understand. Even so, he couldn't seem to focus on the pages anyway. Sometimes reading distracted him, but today it didn't seem the case. He couldn't focus on anything actually. The walls of the chamber seemed to crush him. He felt so strange, like his skin itched, but not quite. He was tired, so very tired. Maybe if he rested awhile, he'd feel better.

Gabriel flopped back on the bed, closing his eyes. Instinctively, his hand went to the piece of leather he smuggled from Luce's quarters. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately. Before he knew it, he fell asleep.

"My baby, I missed you so much."

A passionate kiss ravaged Gabriel's mouth and he surrendered to the onslaught, moaning in the mouth of the other man. His eyes became unfocused as Lucien's hands started roaming his body, sharp teeth nipping at his throat.

Gabriel moaned, arching his back in the touch of his demon prince. Instinctively, he spread his legs, meeting Lucien's gaze as he begged for his lover's touch. Lucien's eyes turned crimson red, fiery with passion.

"You're so beautiful. So, very beautiful. I love you so much." And Gabriel wanted to answer, to say I love you too, but the thoughts flew out of his head as Lucien supported Gabriel's body with his white wings. He saw stars as he felt a finger pushed inside him, then two, stretching him and filling him, while Lucien's other hand massaged his hardness.

Suddenly, Lucien's fingers disappeared and Gabriel nearly whimpered at the loss. Sustaining Gabriel's legs on his shoulder, Lucien brought their faces together and whispered, "Ready?"

In that moment, Gabriel would have done anything to have Luce inside of him. "Please. Yes, please!"

Lucien smiled comfortingly at him, his eyes conveying all the love he felt for Gabriel. Lucien's lips brushed over Gabriel's in the ghost of a kiss. Gabriel felt Lucien's cock nudge at his hole, and ever so slowly, Lucien pushed inside Gabriel, whispering words of endearment in his ear. "So perfect. My mate. My beautiful Gabriel."

Gabriel surrendered himself to the onslaught of sensation, reveling in the feel of Lucien inside his body. When Luce thrust into him, each time unerringly hitting his special spot, Gabriel thought he would go insane from the pleasure.

They'd only been together once, when the shadow of Gabriel's death still loomed over them. Now, everything felt so incredibly different, just as beautiful, only freer, happier.

His eyes filled with tears as he clung to Luce's shoulders, wanting to ensure himself that Luce had indeed returned to his side. Too many sensations, too many feelings. Gabriel screamed as his pleasure peaked and...

Gabriel woke up, his hand still clutching the piece of leather, feeling the effects of the dream in his sticky clothes and in the sensations still overwhelming his body. He wanted to go back to the dream, to Lucien, but no matter how much he tried, he couldn't do it. Making a face, Gabriel got up from the bed. He needed to clean himself up.

As he washed, Gabriel couldn't help but think about the dream. Suddenly, he realized something. This was the second time he'd dreamed about his mate. The first time he hadn't even known Luce. And the dream came true. Could this be some kind of premonition?

Gabriel absently bit his lip, considering the idea. True enough, he had many dreams lately, but most of them were nightmares, memories of his past at Kirgen. He knew that his dream couldn't be a memory, especially since Lucien's wings had been white. Still, the thought of him having premonitions seemed a bit farfetched. Perhaps he could talk to Kalin about it. Either way, he would have to wait and see if it

came true. Something inside him whispered that it would indeed happen, and very soon. It felt too real for it to be only a dream.

Smiling at that thought, Gabriel opened the door to the terrace and stepped outside. He loved the terraces of the demon castle. They were nothing like the balconies back in Alaria. The terraces actually had a practical purpose, since many times the demons used them as exits instead of the actual doors, which was quite logical, taking into account their physiology.

Wings. Demons had wings. Leaning on the banister, Gabriel closed his eyes as he remembered the soft leather of Lucien's wings, their protectiveness. Luce's touch, his warmth, his kisses. A smile fluttered on his lips as he remembered the way they met. Just like this, he'd been staying in a balcony and then...

Gabriel jumped as he felt a hand on his shoulder, nearly falling over the railing in the process, coming a little too close to recreating the majestic fall from Alaria. "Hey!" Kalin pulled Gabriel to his chest, his voice chastising. "How many times have I told you not to go out here? You know the demon kings might come out any time and see you. You might fall over. It's even higher than in Alaria and..." Kalin's words froze on his lips, but Gabriel knew what he intended to say.

"Lucien's not here to catch me. I know. But, Kalin, I had this dream."

Kalin's repentant expression shifted. "Dream?" He grinned. "Was it a nice dream?"

Gabriel blushed, looking down. He wasn't entirely comfortable discussing sexual aspects with Kalin. Still, perhaps Kalin would be able to tell him if his dream could have been a premonition. "It was... umm... yes, nice." He glared at his brother as Kalin chuckled. "But that's not the point. I think it could be some sort of premonition." Kalin's laughter stopped. "I know what you're going to say, that it's not possible, it was just a dream. But it has happened before and I really think—"

Kalin put a hand over his mouth, effectively stopping his blabbering. “Don’t put words in my mouth, baby brother. Hey, Orin did you hear that?”

Orin’s head appeared from the room, his lavender eyes sparkling in excitement. “Indeed, I did.” Orin grinned. “How very interesting.”

Kalin nodded. “It could indeed be a premonition. Some Alarians find they have new gifts upon their coming of age. And on that note, we actually came here to congratulate you for this special event.” Orin’s voice turned sheepish. “It was your nineteenth birthday a while ago, and with all these things happening, we sort of missed it.”

Gabriel blinked in surprise. Orin continued, “Anyway, we wanted to make it up so we made you this.” Orin triumphantly showed him a cake, with dark chocolate glazing. Its shape wasn’t perfect and the letters on the cake looked a little shaky, but it didn’t matter. Gabriel’s eyes filled with tears at the beautiful gesture.

“Hey, none of that!” Orin tsked. “Besides, we can’t eat it yet. We have to wait for the rest of the guys to show up.” He winked. “It’s a special occasion, and we can’t celebrate it without one of the main actors.”

Kalin ruffled Gabriel’s hair. “If what baby brother says is right, and I suspect it might be, then we won’t have a lot of waiting to do.” Kalin kissed Gabriel’s temple. “I’m so proud of you. I always knew you were special.”

“Would you stop it?” Orin teased. “You’re giving me a tooth ache.”

Kalin laughed, but turned towards Orin. “You’re such a hypocrite, little brother.”

Orin harrumphed. “Anyway, Gabriel, let’s put the cake in storage, so that it won’t spoil. Or be eaten ahead of time.”

Apparently, the last phrase was directed at Zeli, who at some point entered the room. The redhead smiled innocently. “What? Me? You’re not serious, pretty.”

“Right. You eat so many sweets I’m surprised you’re not as huge as this palace.”

Zeli stalked Orin, and Gabriel couldn’t help but feel happy for his brother at the loving banter. “Mmm, that’s why I like you, pretty, because you’re so sweet and delicious.”

Gabriel pulled Kalin’s sleeve. He whispered, “Private moment?” Kalin just nodded and they stealthily exited the room. As they closed the door, they heard Orin protest “*I am not sweet!* Hey, be careful with that. Hey, don’t—” Then Orin’s voice was muffled. Gabriel smiled again. He was happy for Orin and suddenly was optimistic about his own future. Yes, soon Lucien would be here. He could feel it.

* * * *

Lucien felt exhausted. He’d never done something so incredibly stupid in his entire existence. However, after having flown all through Alaria, and halfway through its neighboring country Thralnia, he had been convinced that this was taking too damn long.

Taking this into account, he and his brother made the decision to try the spell again. It had been risky and it could have fucked up things more than they already were. Fortunately, in the end, they managed to gather the necessary items and perform the ritual. And they now stood in the middle of the main road to Yazix. Well, he missed a little, but it was close enough. They’d been desperate and lucky, but that didn’t matter anymore. Now they’d be home in a matter of hours.

Guards rushed them in matter of seconds as the portal closed behind them.

“My lords? Prince Cade? Prince Lucien? Is that you?” The voice of the Xeetahn soldier sounded uncertain. Lucien couldn’t blame him. He imagined how he must look. Exhausted, with little nourishment in the past days, dirty and most of all with white wings.

Cade snapped at them. “Yes, you bastards! It’s us! Who else could it be?”

Surprised, the soldier took a step back. Cade had always been notoriously mild-tempered, a total opposite of Zeli who would generally be the one most likely to lash out of the three friends. But the tension of these past days accumulated so much, not even Cade could contain it.

“Yes, of course, it’s just that you don’t look the same. You’re—”

Lucien straightened himself, making an extra effort to stand upright, despite the fact that everything in his body screamed for rest. He violently interrupted the guard. “Stop talking about useless things. We have somewhere urgent to be.”

Without another word, Lucien made his way through the guards. The assembly of demons parted, allowing him to pass and following behind him.

Cade rushed at his side and whispered in Lucien’s ear, low enough so that only he would hear. “You ok, little bro? I can carry you if you like.”

Yes, he would like that very much, but he couldn’t do it. Showing weakness in front of the ranks would not do. He wanted to get to Yazix already, to be with his mate, but making his father angry through such an action wouldn’t help his case.

Lucien shook his head. He took a deep breath and stretched. Reveling in the feel of his home country, he spread his white wings, ignoring both the pain of his limbs and the stares of the demon guards. He knew Cade felt concerned about him, but there was no helping it. They already walked too much. They had to fly into Yazix.

He launched himself to the Xeetahn sky, followed by Cade and the rest of the demon group. Despite his exhaustion, flying came as second nature to him. And he was a soldier. He fought in worse conditions and withstood stronger damage.

They flew in silence, rapidly passing through the miles which separated them from the capital of Xeetha. Yazix shone in the distance, its black magical walls beckoning him home like a beacon.

Lucien hastened his approach. He couldn't wait any longer. Gabriel was beyond those walls. Lucien could practically feel his mate's presence. He landed with a thud in front citadel walls. Luckily, his brother was right behind him, and at Cade's urging, the walls magically parted for them.

Yazix. His home. The place he always loved more than anything in the world. Lucien never thought he'd actually come one day prepared for a fight, prepared to face his family like they were his enemies, but he knew it had to be done. For the good of his mate, he had to face his father and make things clear, as soon as possible.

Without a word, the two demon princes entered the citadel. Silence fell over the bustling center of Yazix as they passed. Heads turned and demons whispered behind their backs.

Yazix had always been a prosperous city, the center of the country in all its activities. Normally it would be full of frantic trading, as demons and non-demons moved their merchandise through the busy streets, making deliveries, taking orders and supplying shops. But all activity seemed to have stopped as Lucien and Cade walked through. The merchants and the buyers alike, the soldiers enforcing orders, even the children who probably ran away from their lessons all stared at Lucien and Cade, frozen in their spots.

Lucien ignored them. He had one goal in mind: to reach to royal castle and see Gabriel. Cade wore same silent determination on his face. The crowds parted for them as they slowly, but surely, passed through Yazix.

Lucien breathed a sigh of relief when they finally got in front of the castle gates. Obviously, rumor of their arrival reached the royal residence, because the gates had been opened. This suspicion was confirmed as he saw who was waiting in the front line. His sires. Seyran glared at him openly, and Lyan just seemed astonished.

Clearly, Zeli didn't tell them about the "minor" modification to Lucien's aspect.

Lucien opened his mouth to greet his fathers when suddenly a slender figure appeared from behind the royal couple, jumping him. All thoughts flew from Lucien's head as he inhaled the comforting perfume of his baby. Cynathole fruit. Gabriel.

Ignoring everything else, Lucien took Gabriel's mouth, needing to make sure his sweet lover was fine, that he was safe and there with him. Gabriel's arms surrounded his neck, as he opened his mouth for Lucien's kiss.

Gabriel tasted so good and so fresh. Lucien's exhaustion disappeared, replaced by lust and the desire to possess. He pulled the slender body closer to him, nearly molding them together. Gabriel melted in his arms as Lucien ravaged his mouth, nipping at his lips and swirling his tongue expertly.

Lucien wanted to kiss Gabriel forever. He wanted to make Gabriel his mate right there, to make their bond complete without wasting another second. But alas, they needed to breathe. As they finally interrupted the kiss, Lucien registered his father's glare turned positively venomous. He inwardly smirked as he noticed Cade left his side, now making out with Kalin against a wall.

Gabriel seemed completely oblivious to the king's anger. With a trembling voice, he whispered, "Luce, Luce, I missed you so much, I was so worried. But I knew you'd come back, I just knew it."

Lucien held his mate as Gabriel spoke between tears. "Of course, baby. I would never leave you. Besides, I did promise taking you on an extended tour of Xeetha."

Gabriel smiled at him, burying his head in his chest. Lucien surrounded him with his wings, protectively enveloping them in a leathery shield. Lucien met his father's angry gaze. In that moment, standing in front of the royal palace, Lucien knew there was nothing he wouldn't do for his mate. Nothing could stand between them. Not

even Seyran and Lyan, not traditions, not his country. He found his other half and he wouldn't let him go, no matter what.

Chapter 13

Gabriel buried his face in Lucien's chest, inhaling the comforting masculine scent of his demon lover. He lavished in the feeling of Lucien's white wings, protectively sheltering him from anyone who might try to hurt him. Luce, his Luce. Gabriel wrapped his arms around his demon prince, clinging to him desperately. He'd been so sure of Lucien's arrival, but nevertheless, he couldn't help feel tremendously relieved now that they were actually together.

At the same time, Gabriel felt incredibly sad because Luce just looked so tired when Gabriel first saw him at the castle entrance. He was doing his best to maintain his façade of strength and composure, but Gabriel could easily see the exhaustion hidden behind that mask. Just as he could tell that his presence helped his lover somehow. However, Lucien needed to rest and eat. He obviously overstrained himself, and that just wouldn't do.

Decision made, Gabriel looked up at Lucien. He caught a sight that surprised him. Despite the fact that his arms and wings still enveloped Gabriel in a tight hold, Lucien's eyes focused on something else. He remembered that they were still in front of the palace, still in sight of Seyran and Lyan. In his happiness, he totally disregarded the presence of the royal couple.

Gabriel tensed at the realization. Apparently feeling the change in Gabriel, Lucien met his eyes again. For a brief moment, Gabriel noticed his mate's eyes glinting with something he couldn't quite explain. Gabriel had seen it before, back in the labyrinth. It was a look of predator, radiating danger, and yet somehow, it also held affection,

love and warmth towards him. He smiled as he whispered to Gabriel. “Don’t worry. I’m here now. I’ll protect you.”

Luce removed his wings from around Gabriel, and with another encouraging smile, he took Gabriel’s hand. Together they stepped forward to where the royal couple awaited. Now that he could focus, Gabriel could see the hardly contained anger radiating from Seyran. Lucien squeezed his hand reassuringly. He made a bow in front of the royal couple, and Gabriel thought it best to imitate him. He kept silent as Lucien saluted his parents.

“Greetings, my sires! It’s a pleasure to see you all so well.” The wording sounded so formal that Lyan scowled. The king’s consort took a step forward and grabbed Lucien’s face between his hands.

“You, on the other hand, look quite awful. You haven’t been taking care of yourself. You look so tired.”

Gabriel felt startled for a second. Then again, he had no reason to be. Even from the brief amount of time he spent with the king consort, he easily realized the love Lyan had for his sons, more so than in Seyran’s case. Gabriel thought that it may have something to do with Lyan being the child bearing part of the couple, but even thinking about it gave him a headache. Instead, he focused on the present. Maybe he should exploit this and get Lucien to rest. He nodded at the king consort and said in a low voice, “With your permission, Your Majesties. I was thinking maybe they could rest a little now? I mean, having traveled from so far—”

Lyan arched a brow at him, and his eyes narrowed in suspicion. . This wasn’t very encouraging. It was Seyran who answered Gabriel’s request. “They’ll rest later. We have a discussion pending now.”

“Yes, indeed, we do,” Lucien said, glaring daggers at Seyran. Turning to Gabriel, Lucien smiled. “Don’t worry, baby, I’ll be fine. Besides, we have things pending as well.” Lucien winked, mischief and lust obvious in his eyes.

Gabriel couldn’t help but blush. They hadn’t been together since that night in the labyrinth, because his condition took a turn for the

worse shortly after, and even the slightest activity could be taxing on his strength. Despite those circumstances, he remembered so well the sensations, the perfection of their bodies entwined and the feeling of Lucien inside of him. He smiled shyly at Lucien and nodded. With luck, the dream would be a premonition after all.

Blushing even redder at his own thoughts, he nearly missed the following part of the conversation. Cade grinned lazily as he replied to his brother's statement in Gabriel's stead. When did Cade get behind Seyran? Kalin looked flushed, his lips swollen and his eyes sparkling. "Well said, little bro. Let's deal with this now." The older demon prince practically purred. "We have Alarians to ravage."

"Indeed," Lucien agreed. Gabriel barely suppressed his squeak of surprise when he felt Lucien's hand squeezing his backside. What were the two demons up to? Seyran looked positively fuming now, and Lyan moved to his side, placing his hand on the king's arm in a calming gesture.

Whatever the king thought of his sons' behavior, it didn't show. "We should go inside. The throne room is perhaps best suited for this discussion."

Lucien and Cade assented, and the royal couple made their way back into the palace. Gabriel couldn't help but think that the reception of the two wasn't very welcoming. They were the princes of Xeetha and the only sons of Seyran and Lyan. One would expect at least some sort of welcoming party, even in these awkward circumstances. This didn't seem to be the case.

He couldn't help but feel guilty about the situation. Lucien's problems with his fathers were Gabriel's fault. And in his selfishness, he hadn't even considered Luce's feelings regarding the issue so far. He just assumed that once Luce would be with him, he would make it all better for Gabriel. Light above, he'd been so selfish.

As if sensing his distress, Lucien squeezed his hand again, wrapping his arm around his shoulders. "Don't worry about a thing,

baby. We'll be just fine. Destyan seems a little fierce now, but he'll come around. You'll see."

Gabriel nodded and made a feeble attempt for a smile. He certainly hoped so. If he separated Luce from the royal couple, he'd never be able to forgive himself.

* * * *

As they walked inside the palace, Lucien observed his mate carefully. He realized Gabriel felt guilty for causing strife in the family. And the worst thing was that he couldn't explain right now that it wasn't his fault. That the stupid prejudice ingrained in Xeetahn traditions was to blame.

Lucien hoped he could convince his sires of the fact that he wouldn't be deterred in his mating with Gabriel. However, there was always the possibility of it not happening, in which case they had to be prepared to leave Xeetha at once. He discussed it with Cade on their way back, and they agreed on several possible destinations. He hoped such drastic measures could be avoided, but if he didn't have a choice...

Before he met Gabriel, his whole life meant the service for Xeetha. He felt so unprepared for the feelings that suddenly emerged with Gabriel's appearance in his life, which nearly caused a disaster due to his bad choices. He wouldn't make such a choice ever again. Duty had been his life so far, but from now on, the priority was Gabriel.

He didn't think Seyran would be above using his duty towards the country as a form of blackmail, to pressure him into leaving Gabriel. He'd seen the anger in his father's eyes. Cade had seen it as well, and they said explicit things on purpose. It was partially to make his father fume, but partially because he hoped it would help show his and Cade's determination regarding their matings.

It didn't work, though. As Lucien walked with Gabriel at his side, he couldn't help but realize the difference from when he was last to Xeetha. He supposed he should feel at least a bit self-conscious about the white wings, but he had no regrets. It might not be very Xeetah-like, but he didn't care, not anymore. He inwardly smiled at the realization. He'd been irritated at the fact himself, but he now understood that they represented a symbol of his love for Gabriel.

Lucien thought there had never been a more awkward atmosphere between them and their sires. Silence reigned as they walked through the corridors of the castle. It felt disturbing to say the least. Even so, what troubled him even more was Zeli's noticeable absence. He couldn't help but feel a little worried about his friend. Neither Zeli nor Orin were around. And in spite of Zeli's well-known inexhaustible libido, he didn't think they would be spending a playful afternoon in bed on the day of their arrival.

Just as he thought this, he noticed a silhouette behind the main staircase of the castle. He thought he recognized Orin, but the Alarian prince hid himself. Huh? What was with all the secrecy?

He nudged Cade with his elbow, discreetly pointing towards the hidden silhouette. Ensuring he wouldn't be seen by the royal couple, Orin emerged a little from the shadows and mouthed at the two demons, *Play along. Mated already*. What? What the hell? Mated already?

He wanted to ask, but there wasn't any time. Despite the fact that sensing Orin would probably be more difficult for his father, especially with so many Alarians around, it wouldn't take long for it to happen. Zeli emerged from a side door, and Orin joined him discretely. The king barely threw them a glance as the two merged with the group.

Mated already? What did Orin mean? But just as the question crossed his mind, the answer easily came. He gritted his teeth as he felt a flow of anger. The Alarians had been forced to lie that they already mated with the demons, which implied a possible pregnancy.

If that was the case, the logical deduction would be that his father probably attempted something against them. The situation seemed worse than he originally thought.

Perhaps it was foolish of him, but even as he understood the urgency of their being present in Xeetha, he half hoped that his father wouldn't try something like that in their absence. They hadn't relied on that assumption, which was a lucky thing now. The lie about the mating and pregnancies could only hold so long.

Lucien took a deep breath as he struggled for composure. He hoped he wouldn't have to deal with the Council today, because he feared he would do something really rash if he saw those bureaucrats. Thankfully, he achieved a state of reasonable calm by the time they reached the throne room.

As his sires sat on the two thrones, Lucien glanced towards Cade. Cade's gaze remained veiled and unreadable, which meant he also realized the implications of Orin's hidden warning.

"As you realize, the situation is very complicated." Seyran paused for effect. "First of all, as I understand from Zeli's report—which was very brief if I may say so myself—we cannot expect that the alliance with Alaria will be maintained in the present conditions."

Lucien knew the king would want to finish reprimanding them completely before they received the right to a defense.

"I expected a more responsible behavior from my sons and my best generals. Apparently, I was mistaken."

The king took a deep breath, seemingly fighting to maintain his calm. "Second of all, the disturbing issue is your mating without consulting us. I have to say, despite the fact that as a king I cannot argue for a punishment, as a father I feel deeply offended."

Lyan chose this particular moment to make a very unfortunate intervention. "Of course, we can understand your attraction towards people of a different race. Perhaps since they have different customs, they have led you to believe that certain behaviors are adequate.

However, this does not mean that you can disregard your own traditions with such ease. Such rash actions are unlike you, my sons.”

Lucien gritted his teeth as he felt Gabriel tense at his side. He barely contained his temper at the veiled insult. Different customs, attraction for people not of their race, unlike you. Lyan seemed to be implying that the Alarians seduced them. Of course, it might be entirely possible that Lyan actually believed his words, but there was a high probability of his sire attempting to placate Seyran and throw the blame for all this mess on their mates. In any other circumstances, he’d have appreciated Lyan’s affection, but now his overwhelming protectiveness proved to be a burden.

“Most of all, I have to say that your appearance is entirely unacceptable, Lucien. And I have to ask a question: Did you or did you not use the Forbidden Fire?”

Lucien knew this was coming. Facing Seyran, he answered without hesitation. “Yes, father, I did, since the circumstances demanded it.”

Lyan paled, and Seyran’s eyes flashed with renewed anger. “Circumstances? What circumstances can possibly be as important for you to break one of our most basic laws and return to us marked in such a shameful manner?”

Lucien could hear Gabriel attempting to suppress his tears. His lover didn’t know about this, of course, and this had to be the worst way of him finding out. He wished Zeli had prepared him somewhat, but his friend must have hoped they’d have time to talk about it themselves. Or perhaps he simply didn’t know how to approach the subject. In any case, it didn’t matter. Lucien pulled Gabriel to his chest, shielding him with his wing.

“I didn’t have another choice. Gabriel was dying, and I had to save him. Before you ask, I did not kill the person I used the Forbidden Fire on.” He felt his eyes flare as he remembered Lothar. How he wished he could kill the bastard!

Noticing this, the king arched a brow and asked, “Oh? And who was this person?”

Lucien didn’t know how to answer the question. He didn’t want to embarrass and hurt his mate further. However, during his unfortunate hesitation, Gabriel spoke. “He was my future mate, a person who was forced on me by my father and did things to me.” The voice was barely audible, muffled by shame and self loathing.

Taking the advantage Gabriel unknowingly gave him, the king promptly asked, “Things?” The expression on Seyran’s face looked smug. And for the first time in his life, Lucien felt that if he didn’t get out of there that instant, he would severely hurt his father.

Lucien could only imagine what his mate felt like. Gabriel wanted to protect him somehow, to justify his actions. He was simply too pure-hearted to realize how such information might be used against him. And now, Seyran wanted to take advantage of Gabriel’s past, to make him seem unworthy of being the consort of a prince. Well, fuck that!

Ignoring his father, he turned Gabriel in his arms, brushing away the tears that flowed down the Gabriel’s cheeks. “Shh, baby, don’t cry.” With a single look at his fathers, he said, ”We’re going now. We’ll continue the discussion later.”

He took Gabriel in his arms and opened the doors to the throne room without a thought. He’d deal with his sires later. His mate was more important now.

Chapter 14

Gabriel couldn't remember ever feeling so terrible in his entire existence. Even at Kirgen he had a brief consolation, to the extent that he didn't entirely blame himself for what happened to him. Well, most of the time anyway, but now, it was a whole different story. When he heard the king's words, when he realized what Luce did to save him, he just wanted to die right then and there.

He'd been so stupid and desperate, taking the poison like that. And because of his stupidity, Luce would now suffer. He'd be estranged from his family, from his own kind.

He felt the need to somehow justify Lucien's actions, or maybe draw attention to himself, but now he thought that maybe his speaking out only made things worse. Gabriel could still remember the king's smirk and the triumph in his voice when he asked *Things?* His shame felt so great. Would he ever get rid of Lothar's stain on him?

Why did Luce love him anyway? Why was he being so kind and gentle? Gabriel felt unworthy of Luce's affection. And yet, here he was, in Lucien's arms, swiftly being carried through the palace corridors, towards the royal chambers.

They stopped briefly, and Lucien made a sign to one of the servants. "Teliz, I want a double meal delivered in my quarters at once." The servant vacillated, but the hesitation disappeared quickly, since such a thing probably wouldn't be safe for his own skin.

"Yes, my prince. As you command." The servant departed and Lucien resumed his stride, still holding Gabriel securely in his arms.

Before Gabriel knew it, they arrived in front of Luce's chambers. "We're here, baby. These are my rooms. You can rest a bit, recover."

Gabriel knew this, of course. He'd been here before, in Luce's absence. As they entered, Lucien halted briefly, examining the room. Was there something wrong? Luce placed Gabriel on the bed and smiled, his eyes glinting with something Gabriel couldn't identify. "You were here, Gabriel, weren't you?"

Gabriel absently assented. "Yes. I know I wasn't supposed to, but being around your things just made me feel better."

Lucien looked at him, a shadow in his ice blue eyes. A second later, he smiled and said, "Come on, baby. I don't know if you saw it when you were here, but there's this great bath here. What do you say, how does a little bath together sound?"

Gabriel attempted a smile, but he couldn't get himself to forget the king's words. Lucien knelt at his feet, meeting his eyes. "Hey, Gabriel, don't be sad, please! It breaks my heart. My sires will come around, you'll see. In the end, they'll understand that I love you."

The ice blue orbs made all the dilemmas and fears flow out of Gabriel's heart. Clutching Lucien's ragged clothing, Gabriel buried his head in the crook of his lover's neck. "Why? Why did you do it if you knew it would cause you trouble? It's all my fault! I'm so stupid. You should have never saved me. You should have just let me—"

He was silenced when Lucien attacked his mouth, taking his breath away with an overwhelming kiss. When their lips parted, Lucien pushed their foreheads together. "Never say that, baby. Never say that, please! Nothing's more important than you and me. Got that?" A light shone in Lucien's eyes. "And if they don't like it, too bad."

Gabriel shook his head. "But don't you see? I'm ruining your life. I'm separating you from your family."

Lucien gave him a determined look. "No, Gabriel, you're not. Before we met, my whole life was my duty. I lived simply to be a soldier and I never actually did anything for myself, well, for my private life at least. Don't get me wrong. I don't regret it. I love Xeetha and I love my parents. At the time, I thought that I'd never

love anyone more than that. I thought I was happy until I met you.” Lucien smiled warmly, placing a hand on Gabriel’s stomach. “You changed my life, baby. You made me happier than I ever knew possible. And I actually kind of hoped that maybe we’ll make a family of our own.”

Lucien winked, and Gabriel blushed, suddenly feeling very warm inside. A family of their own. Children. He never considered it before, but now, the thought of bearing Lucien’s children... Would it even be possible? “You like the idea, baby?”

Gabriel smiled a real smile this time and nodded, but a thought crossed his mind. “Umm, Luce?” How to say this?

“Yeah, Gabriel?” At his hesitation, Lucien kissed his hands and added, “Come on, tell me what’s on your mind.”

Gabriel’s blush deepened as he stuttered out, “H-how does it work?”

Lucien blinked in surprise. “How does what work?”

“T-the pregnancy, the mating and all that.”

Lucien scratched his head, embarrassment written all over his aristocratic features. “Right, sorry about that, baby. I should have told you before, but there simply wasn’t time. It’s like this. You know that we Xeetah are a race of males only, right?” Gabriel nodded. “Well, that’s because long ago all out females died of a mysterious disease.”

“The same disease that affected Alaria and most of Kaldor, as well. Yes, I know.”

Lucien nodded, continuing his explanation. “The records are very brief regarding the plague, but in any case that’s not important. What matters is that after this disaster, the bodies of the males adapted in order to perpetuate the species.”

Gabriel jumped, a sudden chill passing through his bones. “Wait, but if the bodies of the demon males changed, maybe I can’t—” Lucien smiled reassuringly. “It’s all right. In fact, I considered the issue as well. I realized that it doesn’t matter. See, it is our seed that allows us to impregnate other males, not our bodies themselves which

are modified so that we can bear children. Basically, my seed will prepare your body to bear my child through a special hormone, which would allow you to develop an artificial womb. It will also give you the temporary ability to produce eggs.” Gabriel tilted his head, attempting to understand. “The only problem with us would be that you wouldn’t be able to impregnate me.” Lucien winked, and Gabriel felt his face flush at the implication of his lover’s words.

Lucien laughed and continued. “Anyway, in order for the pregnancy to work, we have to mate first. Mating assumes me marking you as my own and—” Lucien paused as if struggling for words. “Well, basically I have to bite you and use my magic to unite us.”

Gabriel blinked and stared at Lucien. That sounded complicated and really weird. “Bite me?” he repeated in confusion.

Lucien laughed. “Yeah, baby. See these?” He opened his mouth, and Gabriel gaped upon noticing sharp fangs lowering. At Gabriel’s expression, Lucien smiled again. “Don’t worry, I assure you, you’ll like it.”

Gabriel knew that wasn’t by any means logical, but suddenly he really felt that he wanted to be marked, to be bitten. He wanted to feel those fangs piercing his throat. “Umm, Luce? This biting thing? Could we maybe... do it now?”

Lucien’s eyes flared red. Before he knew it, Gabriel found himself on his back on the bed, Lucien’s body covering his own. Gabriel gasped at the magnificent feeling of his lover’s lips and tongue tormenting his ear and neck, playful and aggressive at the same time. Luce whispered in his ear, “You drive me crazy, baby. My beautiful mate, I want you so badly.”

Gabriel whimpered in protest as Lucien’s warmth disappeared for a second. He met Luce’s crimson eyes, but Lucien just smiled wickedly. Gabriel watched in awe as he observed sharp claws splitting the material of his clothes and Lucien’s as well. In mere

seconds, they were both divested of their clothing, and Gabriel could finally see Luce's nude form, in all its perfection.

Dimly, Gabriel registered the remarkable transformation in Lucien. His white wings now shone a bright scarlet and his bulging muscles and powerful frame showed no sign of the previous exhaustion. Instead, Gabriel could only see barely contained passion, passion for him.

Luce was so gorgeous. Everything about him looked flawless, from the way his platinum blond hair framed his face, to his powerful muscles, beautiful wings and most of all, his impressive and oh-so-hard cock. Gabriel's mouth watered.

So many times, he'd been pushed into pleasuring another man. So many times, he'd been forced to swallow his bitter essence in spite of his shame and nausea. He never thought he would desire to do it again, to actually want to suck a man off. But it would be different with Luce. They loved each other. Lothar's shadow would be over him no more.

Before Luce could say anything, Gabriel was off his back and on his knees in front of his demon prince. "Gabriel?"

Gabriel didn't say anything. His mouth was too occupied to utter words, as he started to lick Luce's shaft, swirling his tongue over the head and playing with the slit. Taking his lover's cock in his mouth, Gabriel started to suck for all he was worth, wanting to feel Luce's essence in his mouth, wanting Luce's love to purge him from the shadow of the past. All thoughts flew out of his head as Lucien groaned and entwined his hands into his hair "Fuck, baby. Yeah, just like that, Fires of Kaldor, I can't..."

Gabriel nearly gagged when Lucien's barely restrained passion emerged, and Luce started thrusting his cock in and out of his mouth. Gabriel lost himself in tasting the pleasure of his demon lover. It felt so good. Lucien's arousal, Lucien's taste, sweet and spicy, like Clarion fruit with a fiery tinge.

Much to his dismay, Lucien's cock suddenly retreated from his mouth. Gabriel made a sound of protest at being denied his prize. Luce practically growled. "Don't worry, baby. You'll get my cock soon enough."

Lucien pushed Gabriel into his previous position, and Gabriel spread his legs instinctively. His body was on fire, and he felt like his brain short-circuited. "P-please. P-please, now! Take me now!"

Luce smirked, his eyes flaming as he looked down at Gabriel. "You're so pretty when you beg." Gabriel's lips were once again taken in a ravishing kiss, and Lucien's tongue thrust in and out, fucking his mouth, possessing him. "My baby, I missed you so much." Lucien whispered as their lips separated. His mouth moved down Gabriel's neck and Gabriel felt the distinct sensation of sharp teeth nipping at the sensitive skin. "You're so beautiful. So, very beautiful. I love you so much."

Luce gathered his wings and supported Gabriel on the white appendages. The feel of the strong soft wings on his naked skin made Gabriel feel both safe and incredibly aroused.

Distracted, he didn't realize Luce's hands moved until he felt a slippery finger pushing at his entrance. Gabriel moaned in Lucien's mouth as the finger moved in and out, imitating the movements of Luce's tongue, unerringly brushing that special spot inside him. *Please, please, more.*

Another finger joined the first, and then a third, playing with him, driving him crazy with lust. Luce's other hand busied itself with massaging Gabriel's own cock. And yet it wasn't enough. Gabriel needed something else. He needed to feel filled and stretched. He needed Luce's cock inside him. As if reading Gabriel's mind, Luce proceeded to lift the Gabriel's legs on his shoulders, leaning over to bring their faces so close they were nearly touching, "Ready?"

Gabriel was surprised the position would even be possible. He barely managed a nod and squeaked out, "Please. Yes, please."

Lucien beamed adoringly at him and brushed a kiss across Gabriel's lips. "So perfect. My mate. My beautiful Gabriel." Distantly it occurred to Gabriel that this sounded exactly like his dream. But as he felt the familiar burn of Luce's cock slowly pushing inside him, stretching him and filling him so completely, he forgot about dreams and premonitions, about nightmares and past shadows. There was nothing else, only Luce, their bodies and souls, connected and perfectly entwined.

* * * *

Lucien groaned at the sensations coursing through him as he took Gabriel. Gabriel felt so tight, so hot around his cock. They fit together so perfectly. They were made for each other.

He struggled for composure so he could do this right. This was it, their mating, and he would make it perfect for his lover. No pain, only pleasure. Forever.

But it was so difficult to maintain control. Gabriel was just so beautiful, his face flushed and his eyes glazed with passion. Lucien couldn't bear it. He started thrusting in and out of Gabriel, hitting his lover's special spot every time. Gabriel mewled and clawed at the sheets, begging, his words barely coherent. "Please, oh please. Oh, yes, harder! Harder!"

His mate making those pretty sounds drove Lucien to the limit. He started pounding furiously into Gabriel's tight channel. Harder and harder every time, ignoring the protests of the creaking bed now hitting the wall. It felt so incredible. He swallowed Gabriel's mewls in another mind-melting kiss. As Gabriel completely lost himself in passion, Lucien lowered his fangs again, sinking them into the delicate skin, releasing his innermost magic, the Xeetahn secrets that would bond them together for all eternity. Gabriel's blood flooded his mouth, so sweet and delicious, like Cynathole fruit. As Gabriel

screamed and instantly came, Lucien lost it with a final thrust, releasing his seed inside his mate.

Exhausted, Lucien collapsed on the bed, careful not to crush his mate under his weight. He brushed Gabriel's sweaty hair out of his eyes, and his Alarian smiled sleepily. It was done, they were mated. And with luck, Gabriel would soon give him a son. It would probably be too soon, especially with all the problems Xeetahn reproduction still had. But soon, his seed would start doing its job on Gabriel's body, and perhaps they could indeed start a family of their own.

"Luce?" Gabriel's voice sounded tired but content.

"Mmm?"

"I love you."

"I love you too, baby. Now go to sleep." Lucien placed another kiss on the temple of his beautiful mate as Gabriel sighed in contentment and cuddled at his side, resting his head on Lucien's chest. Lucien covered Gabriel with his wing, closing his eyes. Before he fell asleep as well, his last thought was *What did I do to deserve to be this happy?*

Chapter 15

All of Xeetha teemed with nervousness. Rumor reached even the lowest strata of the population that the princes had returned. But the most astonishing fact had to be the manner of their homecoming. In particular, people were unnerved by the story that their prince arrived on white wings.

Lucien knew all this. As he looked out towards the city from the terrace of his room, he could practically feel the tension brewing in the air, a tension that didn't bode well for himself or the Alarians.

Lucien sighed at the thought of his parents. Neither Seyran nor Lyan were too pleased about their mating choices. Lucien hoped they would come around, because if not, he would be forced to leave Xeetha. His mate was the most important thing in his life now. Gabriel, a son, a family.

Lucien's spirits lifted thinking about the beautiful Alarian slumbering in his bed. There was no reason to muse about such disturbing issues now. Lucien smiled, and taking a deep breath of the Xeetahn air, he headed back to his room. He had a mate to ravish.

Gabriel's sleeping form looked positively angelic. His midnight black hair fanned on the pillows, contrasting with the marble white of his flawless skin. Well, nearly flawless. Gabriel now boasted several love marks where Lucien bit him.

Lucien silently made his way to the bed. He observed the neck mark that announced that Gabriel was his mate. It would fade in time. In fact, Lucien estimated that by tomorrow, the only visible remnant would be a minor bruise. Or so he thought. Had Gabriel been a demon, it would have started fading already, but Alarians healed a

little slower than Xeetah. Even so, its effects were probably at work now.

Lucien caressed Gabriel's hair, thinking about what that entailed. Demon pregnancies were very difficult to install and even more difficult to lead to term. From what little he knew, the first pregnancy was said to be very painful for the child bearer. He couldn't help but feel a sting in his heart, thinking what Gabriel would have to endure.

True enough, he had his doubts about the possibility of Gabriel giving him a son. If he considered it thoroughly, he realized that there wasn't any reason why Alarians couldn't remain pregnant. Demon anatomy allowed it perfectly, from what he could deduce at least. However, in his selfishness he never actually considered what having a baby might mean for Gabriel.

Lucien was startled from his thoughts when a discreet knock sounded at a door. He gingerly got up from the bed, careful not to wake up his slumbering mate.

As he opened the door, he couldn't help but hope it wasn't one of the guards summoning him in front of the Council. Council meetings had always been unpleasant for Lucien, even when he didn't actually have something to be criticized. Lucien knew and feared that those damn bureaucrats would do their best, or their worst, to sabotage his mating with his lover.

Opening the door, Lucien made a face as he realized his suspicions had been correct. A guard stood in front of his room, looking distinctly uncomfortable in spite of his obvious efforts to hide it.

Lucien couldn't help but sound supremely irritated when he asked the guard, "Yes?"

He tapped his leg impatiently as the soldier continued to hesitate, feeling his annoyance grow exponentially. Obviously noticing this fact, the Xeetahn soldier finally spoke.

"My Lord, pardon my intrusion, but your presence and that of your mate have been requested by Lord Tayin."

Lucien arched a brow. The medic wanted to see them? It was definitely quick, but it wasn't surprising of course. It was customary for demon mates to be consulted regularly, in order to ensure their perfect health, especially during their first pregnancy. Lucien suspected that the medic didn't buy their story about being mated already, or at least was aware that Gabriel wasn't with child at his arrival in Xeetha. It wasn't easy to fake the pains involved with a demon pregnancy, and there was little that Zeli could have done to help. But with mating marks healing so fast, Tayin would have no way to prove it.

Lucien didn't know whether to be thankful or irritated. On the one hand, it wouldn't be unwelcome to allow Tayin to check on Gabriel. However, he felt his lover was ill-prepared for a meeting with the demon medic, especially since they had just mated.

Therefore, he answered the guard sternly, "My mate is resting. He is physically and emotionally exhausted. I'm sure Lord Tayin will understand."

The guard stared at him for a second, as if in disbelief. Apparently thinking better than to argue with his superior, the soldier nodded curtly, saluted and said, "Yes, of course, My Lord. I will convey your message."

Lucien closed the door with a decisive bang and headed towards the bed. Surely, Tayin would send another messenger soon, to bid them a little more forcefully to participate to the examination. He had little time to prepare his mate for what would be coming.

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Gabriel sighed dreamily, as he felt the caress of a familiar touch on his forehead. He cuddled closer to the warmth, relishing the scent that he recognized as so very Lucien. He smelled so good, so masculine and so safe.

Gabriel let out a sound of contentment as the hand caressing his forehead descended to cup his face and down to play with his neck. In his sleep, he felt tingling sensations from whatever area his mate touched. Half of him felt afraid to wake up, because then maybe he'd realize this was only a wonderful dream.

Gabriel whimpered in protest as the caresses suddenly vanished. He tried to find the familiar warmth again, but to no avail. A whisper sounded in his ear. "Baby, wake up."

Gabriel struggled against sleep to reach the source of the husky voice. His eyes opened, and he extended his hand to cup Lucien's cheek. Their lips met for a kiss that lasted too briefly for Gabriel's taste. Lucien separated their mouths, breathing hard and said, "I would love to play some more, Gabriel, but we don't have time, I'm afraid."

Lucien's tone sounded so serious that it managed to put a damper on Gabriel's ardor.

"What is it, Luce? What's the matter?"

Lucien sighed, lovingly caressing his hair. "We're expected to visit the medic of the royal family soon."

Gabriel tensed, knowing what this entailed. The medic would find out that he wasn't with child, and that they deliberately deceived the royal family.

Lucien must have picked up on his fear, and his hands fell to Gabriel's shoulders, massaging the tense muscles. "Don't worry, Gabriel, I won't let anyone hurt you. I promise it'll be fine. I'll take care of everything."

Gabriel nodded, but couldn't help feeling that this conversation wasn't over. Confirming his guess, Lucien sighed, looking supremely troubled.

"Baby, there's something I didn't tell you." Lucien didn't meet Gabriel's eyes as he started to speak. Gabriel struggled to get up, feeling dread gathering in his stomach. What could be so bad?

Luce swallowed in nervousness and began to speak, “You asked me about the pregnancy earlier, and I wasn’t completely straightforward with you. The truth is that demon pregnancies are a nasty business.”

Gabriel tilted his head, trying to understand Lucien’s words. “What do you mean, Luce?”

Lucien took his hand, his ice blue eyes looking like a stormy sea. “It’s a complicated process, and I don’t fully understand it myself. Although I am schooled in many issues, this aspect still eludes me, a fact which I greatly resent now. But I can explain from what little I have read. Like I said, once the seed of a demon enters the body of his mate, it causes several transformations.”

Lucien seemed to have more and more trouble speaking. The final word was barely a whisper, and Gabriel couldn’t help but wonder what these transformations entailed that could shake Luce so badly.

“You’ve already mentioned it, Luce. What’s this all about? What’s going to happen?”

Lucien said nothing, looking outside towards the open terrace. It made Gabriel incredibly nervous that Lucien couldn’t explain.

“L-luce?”

At his stammering, Lucien met his eyes and smiled a little.

“I’m sorry, Gabriel, I made you nervous. It’s just that... it’ll hurt you a lot. I can’t bear the thought.” Lucien’s eyes lit up as if coming up with an idea. “I don’t think you’re pregnant now. It’s too soon. Maybe we can skip having a child altogether.” Lucien nodded to himself, “Yes, we’ll do that.”

Gabriel blinked in surprise at the last phrase. He’d been so excited about having a son, Lucien’s son, about starting a family, and now Lucien had changed his mind. What if he didn’t want Gabriel anymore either?

The words escaped Gabriel’s mouth before he could stop them.

“Is it me? Is it my fault? Don’t you love me anymore?”

Lucien gave him a surprised look, and then hugged him to his chest tightly. “No, baby! I mean, of course I love you, it’s not that.” Lucien let out a sad sound, and Gabriel wished he could see his mate’s eyes. “I’m sorry, baby, but you don’t know...”

Gabriel pushed away from Lucien’s arms. For the first time, he felt the urge to slap his lover. He might have looked frail, but he wasn’t. He’d taken thousands of lashes in his life for no reason but Lothar’s pleasure. Now Lucien was saying that they couldn’t have a child, a child he’d thought they both wanted?

But the urge vanished as he felt a heat wave suddenly grow inside him, engulfing his entire being. Gabriel leaned against the pillows as his breathing labored.

Noticing his state, his mate rushed to his side in an alarmed frenzy. “Gabriel? Are you all right?”

Gabriel whimpered and shook his head. His body felt like it was on fire, and his heart beat so fast he thought it would burst. Somewhere in his belly he felt a pressure accumulating, and he bit his lip against the combined discomfort.

Lucien pressed a hand to Gabriel’s forehead and cursed violently.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck! Shit, fuck! No, this isn’t happening, this isn’t happening.”

Apparently making a decision, Lucien abandoned the bed. Alarmed, Gabriel grabbed his mate’s arm. He didn’t know what was going on, but he felt afraid, so very afraid. He didn’t like the heat or the pressure in his stomach. He feared that if Lucien left him it would only get worse.

Struggling against his growing discomfort, Gabriel managed to choke out, “No, don’t leave me.” With a strength he didn’t know he had, he struggled to pull Lucien down. “I need you.”

His lover seemed conflicted, his ice blue gaze clouded in torment. “Baby, we need to get you some help. This isn’t normal.”

Gabriel shook his head again and opened his mouth to protest. But he forgot what he wanted to say and all that escaped his lips was a gasp as another heat wave pooled straight to his groin.

The pressure and the heat became too much to handle. Clenching his fingers in his mate's arm, Gabriel surrendered a battle he didn't know he'd been fighting and allowed the heat to take him.

Lucien cursed again, as he struggled with the decision of abandoning his mate to get help or staying by his side. But suddenly Gabriel didn't have the same problem. He knew exactly what they needed to do and he definitely knew that the only one that could help him was Lucien. Smiling, he opened his eyes and wrapped his legs around his demon's waist, demonstrating his conviction of the fact.

Lucien's eyes widened and flared red at his Alarian's sudden shift. Surprising himself, Gabriel purred in seductive voice. "I only need you."

Lucien took a deep breath, but Gabriel could see his control started to fail. Gabriel watched as understanding dawned in his mate's mind and he nearly giggled as he imagined little wheels turning in Luce's head. His giggle was swallowed by a moan as Lucien smirked and descended upon him.

* * * *

His mate was in heat. Lucien didn't know to be thankful or to curse his luck, but his seed had done its job and Gabriel's body was preparing for a child.

Well, he couldn't do anything now. He silently swore at the stupid ways of his people, who limited medical education to the things necessary on the field of battle. For some obscure reason, the needs of one's mate would only be explained on the eve of the mating, which is why the tradition of the parent council had been maintained for so long in the first place. Therefore, he felt entirely unprepared for what was happening.

Even so, as he kissed Gabriel, all thoughts flew from his head. His body seemed to be very happy about Gabriel's state and was in fact very eager to begin copulation. Lucien allowed his instincts to take over as he took Gabriel's mouth in a nearly desperate kiss. He pushed his mate on the pillows with the weight of his own body.

Gabriel surrendered to the kiss as Lucien thrust his tongue inside his mouth. Lucien felt his own body flame, as if answering his mate's feverish state. Even in his passion, Gabriel tasted so sweet and so pure, so intoxicating.

Separating their mouths, Lucien started placing tender kisses on his beautiful mate's jaw, down to his neck and collarbone. Gabriel made little distressed sounds and rubbed his arousal against Lucien, nearly insane with lust. Smiling to himself, Lucien closed his mouth over a nipple and sucked on the tender bud, rejoicing as the whimpering sounds increased in volume. With his hands, he held his mate down, restricting his movements.

He tormented Gabriel's nipple, nearly drawing blood when he expertly passed his fangs over it. When he finished with one, he passed over the next, as it seemed to be demanding attention.

As he sucked on his mate's nipple, Lucien fought for a little composure, in despair that he couldn't seem to remember the spell that provided lubrication. He made a conscious effort to separate their bodies, since touching Gabriel distracted him so much that he had no chance to think even about the simplest spell. Gabriel seemed to not care, as he made a sound of protest and practically jumped Lucien where he was.

"Luce, please! Take me, now! Now! I need you now!"

Lucien growled as he flipped Gabriel over. Mindless of the fact that his hands sprouted claws, he separated the perfect globes of his mate's ass, admiring the tight opening that seemed to beckon him closer.

With a savage sound, Lucien leaned between Gabriel's legs and with no warning, he started feasting on his lover's ass. Gabriel screamed his name, and his body shook as he came all over the sheets.

Lucien stopped for a second, as the last rational part of him wondered if it would be wiser to stop, in order to prevent a possible pregnancy. There was still a chance that Gabriel wasn't with child, and if Lucien exercised some control, he might be able to avoid it.

But Gabriel turned, his eyes still clouded with passion. "Luce, please!" he begged in a frantic voice.

Lucien could tell easily that Gabriel was still very much aroused. Of course, the heat couldn't be stopped with just one orgasm. Oh well. They'd just have to deal with the issues involved when the time came. He couldn't think properly right now anyway.

Therefore, Lucien resumed thrusting his tongue in and out of Gabriel, causing him to claw at the sheets desperately, beautifully begging to be fucked. Satisfied that his mate's channel was prepared, Lucien turned to lubricate his shaft when a vigorous knock sounded at the door. Lucien made an effort to ignore the insistent knocking, but the door nearly shook with the strength of the hits. Growling, he got off the bed, not bothering to put anything on.

He practically tore the door open, nearly ripping it of his hinges and roared at the interloper. "What?"

Tayin blinked in obvious surprise at his appearance. His voice was nevertheless as composed as ever when he said, "Excuse me, my lord, but there are several aspects that must be dealt with. Now that you're back, we need to analyze your mate, establish his pregnancy. Furthermore, I'd like to take a look at your wings."

Lucien glared at the medic and managed to growl in a nearly animalistic voice. "Yes, well, as you can see, we're a little busy right now."

On cue, a moan sounded from the direction of the bed. "Luce...."

Tayin sighed in annoyance, obviously not surprised. "Not again! You younglings will be the death of me."

Waving a hand, Lucien interrupted the elder demon. “We will see you, umm...” Lucien looked at the bed and was momentarily enraptured by the image of his mate touching himself. Gabriel’s eyes were closed, his cheeks flushed, and he gasped as he inserted a finger into himself.

Lucien finished the previous phrase, his attention still at the scene in the bed.

“...when we’ll see you.” Lucien dimly registered Tayin nodding and saying something. The medic had apparently expected this, but he still felt the need to lecture Lucien. It didn’t matter anyway.

Disregarding whatever the medic was saying now, Lucien closed the door in Tayin’s face. He’d deal with the elder later. He had more important issues to attend to, namely his very horny mate and his own unsatisfied cock.

Lucien turned away from the door, eager to return to his previous activities. His cock readily agreed, as it pointed nearly accusingly in the direction of the bed to Gabriel’s writhing form. Lucien felt his eyes go to full flame as he observed the beauty that was his mate with his own fingers up his ass.

Lucien followed the lead of the organ proudly jutting between his legs and sauntered to the bed. He was getting ready to pounce his lover when he changed his mind. Gabriel was just too beautiful like that, pleasuring himself. He could enjoy the image while his control lasted.

Lucien stopped dead in his tracks and chose to sit on a chair instead, turning it so that it would face the bed. It was a little uncomfortable sitting down in his state. His erection screamed at him to go ravage his mate. Nevertheless, Lucien knew he had time. He’d make the best of Gabriel’s heat.

Lucien smirked to himself, feeling particularly wicked. It’d be a night Gabriel would never forget.

* * * *

Gabriel moaned as he noticed his demon mate sitting down at the other side of the room. Even in his lust-filled haze, Gabriel could tell Lucien watched him with a distinctive predatory look. Being observed by Luce as he touched himself aroused Gabriel to no end. If he had been able to think clearly, he'd probably have been ashamed of the whole situation. He never played with himself in the past, and having someone watching him as he did it now would normally have been shameful. Somehow, it didn't matter. The only things that mattered were the heat and the pleasure.

Nevertheless, all too soon, his own touch became insufficient and unsatisfying, and Gabriel knew he needed his mate to provide him relief. He whimpered in distress, wanting to reach out, but reluctant to stop touching himself.

"Luce, please!" he begged.

"Please what, baby?" Luce purred, still watching him with crimson-colored eyes.

Gabriel threw his head back, wishing with all his might he could make himself understood.

"P-please!" he stammered. "I need..."

Lucien got up from the chair, his nude form sleek like a panther as he silently moved across the room. He crouched at the end of the bed, gently stroking Gabriel's leg, a teasing caress which sent tingling sensations through the Gabriel's spine and made his toes curl.

"What, baby? What do you need? Tell me." Luce said huskily.

Incredibly, Gabriel managed to choke out, "You. You. I need you!" He pinched his own nipple and gasped as he continued riding his own fingers attempting in vain to sate his arousal.

Lucien just tsked and continued to watch him with that lust-filled expression. "But you seem to be doing so fine by yourself. I think I'll just stay around here and watch."

Gabriel shook his head violently, meeting his mate's gaze intently. "No, no, please. I can't, I need!"

“Prove it to me. Stop what you’re doing, stop touching yourself and I’ll give you what you want!”

Luce smirked, and Gabriel felt his arousal grow. He hadn’t seen this side of Lucien before. As it was, Lucien’s game drove Gabriel crazy. The way Lucien took control of him made him feel incredibly hot. Was something wrong with him for being excited like this? Gabriel didn’t find it in himself to care.

Obediently, he removed his fingers from his own body and placed his hands on the bed. He clenched his fists into the sheets, struggling against the urge to touch himself and release at least some of the sensual pressure torturing him. Gabriel moaned as Lucien gave him a smoldering look. “Mmm. What a brave, obedient mate I have.”

The next thing Gabriel knew his lover was on him and crushing their lips together in a devastating kiss. Lucien’s hands roamed his body at will, caressing and teasing his sides. Gabriel wanted to beg, to plead to be taken, but his mouth was busy being ravaged by his mate. So, instead he rubbed his body wantonly against Lucien’s as they kissed. His action had the desired effect. His lover growled, a sound that was nearly animalistic and inflamed Gabriel even more. Lucien lifted Gabriel’s legs on his shoulder, and without further warning, thrust into the channel of his mate.

Gabriel screamed at the sudden feeling of his lover’s cock filling him. Lucien was huge, but somehow the burn caused by his thrusting sated the fire in his veins, at the same time fueling it. Gabriel felt his brain go into overload, and all he knew was that he needed more, more.

Pathetic little mewls escaped his mouth as he tried to urge Lucien to go deeper, to fuck him harder. Obviously, his demon needed no further convincing. He thrust inside Gabriel with such strength the bed hit the wall, groaning and grunting, cursing, whispering dirty words.

“Fuck, you’re so tight. Your ass is gripping me like a fist. So good!”

Gabriel moaned as a particularly hard thrust hit his special spot and he clenched his fingers on Lucien's arms, mindless of the possibility of drawing blood. Lucien seemed in a similar state of sexual frenzy, because Gabriel could see his wings turned completely crimson and could feel his claws as he held onto Gabriel's hips. Strangely enough, the trickle of his own blood drawn by Lucien's claws didn't faze him. It was like the slight pain represented a part of their love play, and it blended so completely with the pleasure that it was too overwhelming for Gabriel to even think.

His entire world was Lucien, Lucien thrusting inside him, Lucien's husky voice growling, Lucien's magnificence as his demon fully extended his wings in ecstasy. And when Luce sank his teeth in the Gabriel's neck, Gabriel's pleasure peaked and he came shouting his mate's name so hard that he fell into unconsciousness.

* * * *

With a final powerful thrust, Lucien came inside his beautiful mate as he drank the sweet nectar of his blood. Moving away a little, he was careful not to withdraw himself from his mate's sweet channel. He felt reluctant to leave Gabriel's body. Even though he'd come, he was still hard and he wasn't done with his gorgeous mate, not done by far.

His lust-clouded mind cleared as if by magic when he realized Gabriel had fallen into unconsciousness. His beautiful black eyes were closed and his previously flawless body covered savage welts where Lucien's claws touched the delicate skin. Crimson blood trickled down Gabriel's neck and hips, and Lucien felt a cold chill pass inside him at the realization of what he'd done.

For a moment, he couldn't quite believe that he'd allowed his instincts to take over to the extent of becoming nearly mindless. However, the proof was right there, before his very eyes, in the ivory

white skin now marred by his claws. Lucien looked at his hands and true enough, they were stained by his mate's blood.

Lucien wanted to scream, to die, to tear his claws off so that they'd never hurt Gabriel again. He took a deep breath and fought to control his emotions. Any torture he'd inflict upon himself would have to wait. He had to ensure Gabriel was all right for the moment.

Separating their bodies, Lucien fought panic as he checked Gabriel's pulse. He couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief realizing it was stable. Carefully, he inspected his lover's body to make sure Gabriel had no serious injuries. He wasn't a healer, but he had enough medical knowledge to check surface wounds.

He hated himself for being aroused at every touch of silken skin. Ignoring the urges of his body, he carefully analyzed Gabriel from head to toe. Lucien realized that the wounds looked rather shallow and there seemed to be no internal damage but his heart clenched as he observed the swollen state of his lover's abused passage. He'd done that to his beautiful mate.

Lucien took the slender form of his mate in his arms and carried him to the bathing chamber. He let out a vicious curse as he realized his arousal was definitely not connected to his brain, and the scent of Gabriel's blood enflamed his instincts again.

Lucien shook his head, hoping to clear his mind a little. He stepped in the bathing chamber where a pool of clear water waited for him. Carefully, he slipped inside the lukewarm water, and supporting Gabriel with his wings, he procured cleaning supplies.

Lucien passed a sponge over Gabriel's body, feeling tears in his eyes for the second time in his life. Even when he thought Gabriel would die, he didn't cry, because he simply refused to accept it. But now, as he washed Gabriel's wounds, wounds Lucien himself had inflicted, it was too difficult not to see reality.

Now that he was mated, it was his duty as a demon to provide comfort for his consort. From the moment he'd seen the young prince back in Alaria, he wanted to protect Gabriel, shelter him from any

danger. He provided comfort for his lover all right. For all his good intentions, he took advantage of his mate in the worst way. He rutted with him like an animal.

Demons learned from a very young age the importance of control. It was perhaps the most vital of the lessons they were taught as younglings. If demons surrendered completely to their passions, to their lusts or hatred, they risked going over what was known as The Edge. If a demon went over The Edge, he became a perversion of his former self, losing his mind entirely.

That's why one of their most important laws banned the use of the Forbidden Fire. Stealing another person's energy sent a demon into a frenzy of power that was practically impossible to control. It was the easiest way to go over The Edge.

Lucien understood that and accepted it. He had no qualms with what he did in Alaria, because in the end, Cade helped him stop in time. Still, he couldn't accept losing control with his mate today. How could he have done that? How could he have abused his mate's body so? He felt like the lowest creature in existence.

While Lucien lost himself in his self-berating thoughts, beneath his careful ministrations, Gabriel stirred, opened his eyes and gave him a lazy smile. "Hello, Luce. I'm sorry I blacked out like that."

Lucien didn't meet Gabriel's eyes. He couldn't bear seeing those beautiful black orbs, knowing what he'd done, knowing that tomorrow they might look at him with disdain or fear. He said nothing and continued to wash Gabriel's body.

The silence seemed to go on forever until a gentle hand touched Lucien's shoulder. "Luce?" Gabriel's voice sounded genuinely worried. "Did something happen? Is anything wrong?"

Gabriel's warm hand forced Lucien to look up. Their gazes met, and Lucien wanted to crawl into a hole as he saw the concern that he could read in Gabriel's midnight black eyes. "Luce?"

What could he say to make up for what he'd done? Hugging Gabriel to his chest, he managed to croak out, "I'm sorry, baby, I'm so, very, very sorry. I'll make it up to you, I promise."

Gabriel pushed him away, and Lucien's heart fell. Surely, his lover was angry at him and with good reason. He only hoped he didn't spoil their chance for a life together. If he did, Lucien didn't know what he would do.

However, when Gabriel looked into his eyes, his face showed only genuine confusion. "Sorry? Make it up to me? Whatever for?"

Lucien blinked at the innocent question and he swallowed hard. Of course, Gabriel would be so gentle as to forgive him just like that, allow him to forget what he'd done. For a second, he felt tempted to do just that, take advantage of the chance Gabriel gave him and just go on, but he couldn't do it. He knew something inside of him broke when he saw what he did to his beautiful lover. There was no way he could forget something like that.

So instead, he answered his mate. "I hurt you. I hurt you badly. I spilled your blood."

Gabriel tilted his head in an endearing gesture, still not understanding. "Of course you spilled my blood. You were drinking it. Is that the reason of all this? The biting business?"

Lucien shook his head and lifted Gabriel out of the water. He pointed to the claw marks still very visible on Gabriel's skin. "And don't tell me you're not sore, because I won't believe you."

To his astonishment, Gabriel blushed. "Well, yes, I'm a little sore, but it's a good sore. And the scratch marks, well, they do hurt a little, but—" Gabriel gulped as if trying to find words. Finally, he blurted out, "I enjoyed it."

Lucien grimaced at his mate's words. He appreciated that Gabriel was trying to give him a way out, but he didn't appreciate deception. "Gabriel, I see what you're trying to do, but please, don't lie to me! I know what I did."

Gabriel's eyes widened at his reply, and he pushed Lucien away. "I would never lie. I would never lie to you. Why are you being so mean?"

Gabriel wiped at his eyes, seemingly on the brink of bursting into tears. Under Lucien's dismayed eyes, he strode out of the water, obviously upset. Lucien knew he royally fucked up yet another conversation with his mate.

* * * *

Gabriel walked out of the water decisively, mindless of his own nudity. He didn't know whether he was more angry or hurt. How could Luce say something like that? How could he think that he was deceitful? Did their love mean so little for his demon?

Lost in his thoughts, he didn't pay attention to where he was going and he slipped on the tiles of the bathing chamber. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he was intercepted before he hit the floor. "Be careful, baby, you'll fall and hurt yourself."

Gabriel didn't say anything to his mate. Just looking at Lucien made him want to cry. Lucien said he loved Gabriel, but still he kept taking decisions without his accord and didn't trust him. How could their relationship survive like that?

Pushing out of Lucien's arms, he hastened out of the bathing chamber and into the bedroom. The room smelled like sex, and it irked Gabriel to no end that he was aroused against his own will. Ignoring the urges of his stupid body, he moved to the bed, pushing the dirty sheets on the floor and sat on the bed, curling into a ball. He wanted to cry and sleep, then cry again. Or maybe just cry. He didn't know.

He ignored the scent of Clarion and ash as Lucien approached and the gentle caress of his hair. Lucien moved his wet locks aside and pressed a kiss on the nape of his neck.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m really, really sorry. I’m not very good at this mate business, am I?”

Lucien sounded so miserable, Gabriel couldn’t stay silent. He got up and gathered his knees to his chest, observing his mate. He had to say something to make Lucien realize his mistake. “Why are you sorry, Luce?”

His lover gave him a genuinely surprised look, and Gabriel resisted the urge to tap impatiently. Lucien answered in a small voice, “Umm, because I made you cry. And I hurt you.”

Gabriel nodded, expecting his demon to say that. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He had to be logical about this. Gabriel thought back to what his mate said in the labyrinth. Lucien told him that he’d never loved before and that demons were creatures of passions, and when they lost control, it was a bad thing for everyone. Luce lost control with him, and he felt guilty. That’s why he couldn’t accept Gabriel’s explanation.

Biting his lip, he opened his eyes and met Lucien’s ice-blue gaze. He nearly jumped into his mate’s arms at the hurt he could see in them. But he couldn’t do that. Well, not yet at least. He had to make Lucien understand first.

Gabriel took his mate’s hand and kissed it. “I know it’s hard for you to lose control.”

Lucien opened his mouth to say something, but Gabriel covered his mouth. “No, let me finish. I can understand how you must feel, because you lost it with me today. Nevertheless, I am convinced that you’d have stopped if only I asked.”

Lucien shook his head at the Gabriel’s words. “I wouldn’t have stopped. I was too far gone.”

Gabriel just smiled. “I don’t believe that. Look, I’ll ask you something instead. When we were making love, did you feel what I felt? Did you realize how much I enjoyed it?”

Lucien nodded, and a shadow of red flashed through his eyes. “Every time, I know that you enjoy my touch. It turned me on so much.”

Satisfied by the answer, Gabriel continued his explanation. “Well, then, the opposite works, don’t you think? If I was unhappy...” Gabriel bit his lip in thought. He wasn’t good at this, and neither was Lucien. How should he say this? “Imagine me for a second begging you to stop. Would you have not stopped?”

Lucien looked at him for a second, and closed his eyes, complying with Gabriel’s request. After a few moments, he opened them again. “I would have stopped,” he said decisively.

Gabriel beamed and briefly pecked his mate. “Now, for my crying.” He pointed an accusing finger at Lucien. “Don’t ever call me a liar again. True, I haven’t been completely honest every time in my life, but I’ve never lied to you.”

Lucien nodded, giving him a distinctly apologetic look.

Gabriel bit his lip and continued in a softer voice. “Also, about the baby. I want to have a son. Not one. More than one, a family.” His tone turned nearly pleading. “Please, Luce.”

Lucien sighed and rubbed his eyes. “At this point, there is probably a reasonable chance that you’re already carrying.”

Gabriel’s smile lit up his whole face. A high-pitched squeal escaped his throat. “Really?” He jumped Luce and kissed him soundly then started jumping up and down on the bed. “Yay!”

Lucien stared at him, a helpless smile on his face, “Oh, yes, definitely.”

Chapter 16

Lucien watched his mate jump up and down on the bed, and his heart grew lighter. Gabriel was right, of course. A baby was always a reason for joy. They would go through the troubles of the pregnancy together as a couple. He felt like an idiot for panicking.

Nevertheless, it was too soon to be sure that Gabriel was pregnant. Furthermore, demon pregnancies weren't easy to deal with. Even if their bodies adapted to the difficult circumstances, this didn't come without a price. Since men weren't supposed to be able to carry children, miscarriages became quite common and the rate of child mortality was tragically high.

Lucien rubbed his chin in thought. He didn't want Gabriel to believe in an illusionary pregnancy only to be disappointed when it turned out false. For one, they were only just recently mated.

"Baby?"

Gabriel landed on the bed with a final thud and, breathing hard, collapsed on Lucien, "Yes, Luce?"

Lucien couldn't help but smile at his mate's antics. He hated what he had to say to Gabriel and he hated himself for speaking impulsively minutes before.

"I just wanted to tell you that... umm... Well, it sometimes takes time for a mate's body to stabilize and a pregnancy to appear. I don't want you to, you know—"

Gabriel's smile fell a little. Biting his lower lip, he said, "Of course, I understand that. I mean, anyway, it would be too soon to be able to tell, even if I was."

Lucien felt relieved and so damn lucky to have such an understanding mate. His feelings shifted as Gabriel smiled at him, a charming blush spreading over his perfectly sculpted features. “Luce?”

“Yes, Gabriel?”

“I was thinking. Maybe we should make sure I’m pregnant, you know, improve the chances. I mean, my soreness is almost gone altogether and, and...”

Lucien tilted his head, amused at his mate’s bashfulness. “What am I now? A means to an end?”

Gabriel’s eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to argue, but then he obviously saw the teasing smirk on Lucien’s lips. He frowned. “You, you... You’re being so mean.” A light appeared in Gabriel’s eyes. “You need to be punished.”

Lucien made an effort to ignore his erection and spoke nonchalantly. “Oh? And how are you going to punish me, baby?”

At the taunting remark, Gabriel launched himself at his mate, but Lucien caught him and pushed him down, immobilizing him with a single hand. Gabriel directed a glare at him, but there was no genuine upset behind the glower, only passion.

Lucien tsked. “Now, Gabriel. Is that any way to treat your mate?”

He passed a teasing finger over Gabriel’s side and his lover whimpered. “Luce...”

Lucien shook his head. “Tsk ts, baby, you’re so very impatient. I have to see for myself in what state you’re in. I simply can’t trust your word on not being sore. You’re so hungry for my cock you would take it either way. Isn’t that right?”

Gabriel whimpered, nodding vigorously. “Yes, oh, yes... Luce...”

Lucien grinned and flipped his mate over. He could tell from the beginning that Gabriel was telling the truth, since the swelling subsided entirely. Nevertheless, he took his time *analyzing* his mate’s channel, effectively driving his lover crazy as he moved his fingers inside of him.

No longer able to withstand the torture he was himself inflicting on the both of them, Lucien flipped Gabriel around so that his mate faced him yet again. He loved to see the way Gabriel's eyes glazed over in passion as he took his mate. He reveled in the feel of Gabriel's legs wrapping around him in wanton despair and the taste of his lips when Gabriel pulled him closer for a kiss. Everything about Gabriel was intoxicating, more addictive than any drug.

Lucien pressed their bodies even closer, so close he could feel the thump of Gabriel's heartbeat in his own chest. No matter what he did, he couldn't seem to get enough. He wanted to taste every inch of his mate's skin, to suck on Gabriel's cock, kiss him and fuck him simultaneously. Alas, given that he had to choose between the three options, he abandoned Gabriel's mouth, silently vowing to kiss his mate again as soon as possible. Gabriel whimpered in distress. "Luce. Please!"

Gabriel looked incredibly beautiful like that, pleading, begging to be ravished. Alas, Lucien didn't have the patience to keep his mate hanging anymore. With a smooth movement, he took Gabriel's cock into his mouth and started sucking.

Gabriel let out a choked sound that seemed like a cross between a moan and a gasp. Feeling satisfied, Lucien continued torturing Gabriel with his mouth, alternating leisurely licking and deep throating, sometimes lowering his mouth to Gabriel's testicles.

He kept Gabriel on the edge until he felt that he could no longer withstand the sexual compulsion to fuck Gabriel. His own neglected cock ached and Lucien needed to be inside his mate. He proceeded to suck on Gabriel's cock for all he was worth. As expected, his beautiful mate came with a cry only a few moments later.

Licking his lips, Lucien pressed a kiss to Gabriel's mouth. Gabriel smiled into the kiss, lifting his legs to offer himself to Lucien.

Lucien didn't delay in taking his mate's invitation and thrust into Gabriel's prepared passage, groaning at the sensation of being enfolded in his mate's tight heat. Gabriel arched his back, reaching for

Lucien and digging his fingers into Lucien's arms. "Fires of Kaldor, baby. You feel so perfect around me."

Gabriel moaned Lucien's name in reply. "Please, Luce, fuck me."

Half of Lucien snapped at him to be careful, to keep control so as not to hurt Gabriel again. But the other half, the one that needed Gabriel so bad it hurt pushed the thought back, clinging to Gabriel's passion and his mate's own need to couple. If Gabriel was in any pain, he would say so. Lucien could let loose, he could find the freedom he never had in Gabriel's body, in Gabriel's heart and his love.

Yet, he still found himself reluctant to completely lose control. An idea occurred to him and he inwardly smirked. He shifted their position so that Lucien lay on the bed, wings spread and Gabriel ended up on top, their bodies still united. Smiling wickedly at his mate, he purred, "Fuck yourself on my cock, baby."

All thoughts flew out of his mind as Gabriel gave him an intense look and started riding him. Lucien met his mate's movements thrust for thrust, harder and harder, losing himself in the passion, in the perfection of their bond.

It was too much, and all too soon, Lucien felt his climax approaching. He gritted his teeth, wanting to make his mate come again before he surrendered to his own pleasure. Growling, he thrust once more with such strength that Gabriel's eyes rolled in his head. "Luce!" With a shout, he came. His ass tightened around Lucien's cock and Lucien found himself unable to hold back any longer. Burying himself with a final thrust inside Gabriel's channel, he released his seed inside his beautiful mate.

Gabriel collapsed on top of Lucien, panting in exhaustion. Lucien lovingly kissed Gabriel's forehead and flipped them over once again. "Wow. That was amazing." Gabriel finally said after they'd managed to recover a bit.

Lucien chuckled and rolled on top of his mate. "You think that was amazing? I'm not done with you yet."

As he once again descended upon his mate, Lucien knew that this night would be a night to remember, for both of them.

* * * *

Lucien woke up to the sound of banging at his door. He covered his head with his hand, but unfortunately, it wasn't enough to drown the obnoxious noise.

At his side, Gabriel stirred, sighing in his sleep. "Luce." As Gabriel cuddled closer to him, Lucien smirked, feeling smug. Obviously, the noise wasn't enough to awaken his exhausted lover. But his exhaustion was entirely justified, taking into account the night they just spent.

Unfortunately, the irritating noise at the door wouldn't disappear. So much for rest. Well, it didn't matter. He could sleep another time. In fact, he was very thankful for the wake-up call, since there were more interesting things he could be doing, all involving a certain dark-haired Alarian.

The view of his mate's nude form had a very rousing effect, in more than one way. Lucien grinned. Whoever it was at the door, he would dispatch them quickly, then he'd wake his lover up with a kiss or maybe with—

"Little bro, come on already!"

Cade's voice boomed from the hallway, and at the same time, the knocking turned into door abuse. The noise became so loud Gabriel's eyes flew open and he catapulted himself from the bed, hitting the floor hard.

Lucien didn't know whether to laugh or be concerned at his mate's confused expression. Gabriel blinked, rubbing his eyes and looked towards the bed, sleep still clouding his expression. "Luce? Wha—?"

Lucien couldn't help it. He collapsed on the pillows, laughing heartily. It was either that or ravaging his mate again. Gabriel was just

too cute for his own good. However with Cade's banging at the door, the latter wasn't really an option.

"Hey, now." Gabriel got up from the floor, rubbing his rump. "Don't laugh at me." He pouted a little, and Lucien's laughter died. He wanted to replace Gabriel's hand with his own and kiss that pout away.

Lucien pulled a surprised Gabriel in his arms. "Come here and say good morning to me properly, baby."

He then proceeded to ravish his Alarian's mouth in a devouring kiss. Gabriel moaned and seated himself in Lucien's lap. They were a step away from continuing their sexual marathon when the loud banging sounded again.

"Come on, Lucien! Will you move it already?"

Lucien sighed in irritation. "I have to get that, baby."

Gabriel nodded. "I suppose I need to put something on, huh?"

Lucien's nostrils flared as his mate turned and started rummaging through his drawers, searching for an appropriate garment. The sight of Gabriel's round little bottom nearly made him change his mind regarding his talk with Cade. But his brother wouldn't bother him if it wasn't important.

"You do that, Gabriel." he croaked out in a raspy voice.

Come to think of it, why would Cade come see him? Why wasn't he with his own mate, in his own fuck fest? Had something happened?

The thought that maybe the tension in Xeetha erupted faster than he expected, and they could be all in danger right now urged Lucien to move swiftly to the door. After all, he left the throne room without actually explaining anything to his sires. Cade and Zeli were left to clean up his mess. Perhaps they even had to see the council now or worse.

Lucien opened the door still naked. In the doorway, Cade arched a brow. "Huh, I see you were busy. Sorry to have interrupted."

His brother didn't seem very sorry, and Lucien felt irritation grow inside him. Judging by Cade's demeanor, the castle wasn't under siege or anything of the sort. Even so, something was obviously going on, because the entire gang gathered at his door.

Lucien reclined against the door, giving his brother a skeptical look. "I take it that this interruption was necessary, because—?"

Orin cleared his throat and said in an annoyed voice, "Can we not speak of this here? I am not of a mind to stand in the hallway chatting." Without another word, the Alarian prince pushed into Lucien's room. He sat on the couch, throwing over his shoulder with a slightly disdainful voice, "And put something on, would you? I'm not interested in seeing the goods of my brother-in-law, thank you very much."

Lucien gaped at Orin. Someone was being a bitch today. He turned and looked at Zeli. He barely contained his laughter when he noticed his friend boasted an already healing black eye. "Anything you would like to share with the group, my friend?" he asked in an amused voice.

Lucien barely had time to dodge an object flying at his head. "You think this is funny?" Orin practically screamed.

"I assure you it is *not* funny. I am *not* a woman and I do *not* produce eggs or bear children" Zeli winced and hastened to his mate's side. "Sweet, come on..."

His only answer from the Alarian prince was a venomous glare and a harrumph. With that, Orin flipped his lavender-colored braid and ignored Zeli, deciding a spot on the wall suddenly became very interesting.

Lucien scratched his head, not knowing what to do. Cade and Kalin swiftly moved to the room as well. "Shut the door will you, little bro? We have issues to discuss."

Lucien nodded absently, wondering if he was going to survive his new family life.

* * * *

From the bathing chamber, Gabriel silently observed the conversation between Lucien and Orin, if screaming and throwing objects made for a conversation in the first place. He would have been irritated with Orin, if not for the obvious reason of the tense situation. Even if Zeli, who was now crouched at the foot of the couch at which Orin collapsed, seemed apologetic, the man practically radiated happiness. And Orin looked positively glowing.

Gabriel let out an enthusiastic squeak and hurried in the room. “You’re going to have a baby. Orin, that’s so great. Congratulations!”

Orin’s lavender gaze turned to him, having apparently forgotten about his presence. Well, he sort of hid on purpose in the bathing chamber, just in case Cade wanted to come inside. Cade had seen him nude before, but that didn’t make him feel comfortable with it. Most of the Lucien’s garments consisted of leather and his own were lost somewhere in the room. He barely managed to find a cloth shirt which efficiently covered his derriere.

Even so, his near-nudity was of no consequence when faced with the excitement of Orin’s pregnancy. Gabriel did a little happy dance and jumped on the couch, where Orin sat, hugging his brother. “Wow, that’s so wow! Have you thought of what you’re going to name him? It’s going to be a him, right?”

Gabriel’s enthusiasm died a little when he felt Orin tense in his arms. “Yes, I’m pregnant, Gabriel.” Orin broke away a little and tried for a smile, but Gabriel could see it was only for his sake. He frowned, realizing that, apparently, Orin’s outburst couldn’t be disregarded as something temporary.

Gabriel glanced towards his brother’s mate. “Zeli? Everyone? Give us a moment, will you?” He needed to talk to Orin alone.

Zeli gave him a thankful look and ushered everybody to the bathing chamber and closed the door. Given the circumstances, it

wouldn't be safe for their conversations to take place in public locations, where anyone could overhear.

Gabriel took Orin's hand and searched his brother's eyes. "Want to tell me about it, Orin?"

His brother shook his head, but after a pause, he nevertheless answered. "This is all so, I don't know, strange. All of a sudden, it's expected of me to give birth, to abandon my way of life altogether. I mean, ok, I'm mated now, but I'm still me, you know?"

Gabriel nodded and waited, knowing that his brother wasn't finished. "It's not like didn't expect changes. I did, but not like this. I mean, I'm not a fucking woman!" The last phrase was said louder, in the direction of the bathing chamber, doubtlessly for Zeli's benefit.

Gabriel inwardly sighed. Orin obviously didn't feel ready to be a parent, and Zeli's glee at his pregnancy didn't help.

"Are you sorry for coming here, Orin? For mating with Zeli?"

Orin gave Gabriel a surprised look. "No, of course not. I mean, I love the big jerk."

Gabriel smiled at his brother's immediate answer. "That's good then. But you're angry with him."

Orin immediately assented, his lavender eyes fiery as he spoke. "Yes, I'm so very angry! Because I don't know a thing about all this. And he's like 'oh, sweet, you're pregnant, how great,' but it's not like it's him who'll pop the kid out."

Gabriel winced, realizing he'd told Orin exactly the same thing. His brother squeezed his hand. "It's not the same with you, little brother. I mean, I don't know how you're dealing with this so well. You're practically in the same situation."

Gabriel's eyes widened. "You think? I mean, already? I can tell for you, but not for me."

Orin laughed awkwardly. "I can't be certain, but there's a high probability, yes. Or if not, you will be soon, anyway."

Gabriel smiled dreamily, caressing his stomach. "Wow, just wow. A baby, a son."

Orin looked down at his hands. “I wish I could be like you, Gabriel. You’re so kind, and I’m so—” Orin averted his gaze as tears started dripping on his cheeks. “I’m so selfish. I’m causing so much trouble for Zeli. I knew he wanted a family, because his parents died when he was little. But still, I can’t help it.”

Gabriel hugged Orin’s head, caressing the lavender locks. “Shh, there now. It’s just the shock. I mean, not everybody takes news such like this the same. Luce has been so freaked for me these days I can’t even explain.” He laughed a little, trying to dissipate the tension. “Anyway, I don’t know all that much about babies. But when I was at Kirgen, I used to like growing plants. It was the one thing I really, really liked doing there, because it made me feel so great, helping grow another being. I can only imagine how much better it would be to have a little person of your own, a replica of you and your loved one. Depending on you like that, to raise him, help him and love him.”

Gabriel cleared his throat, blinking back tears. “Anyway, I think I guess I’m a little selfish too, because I want this baby for myself, more than anything. And it’s a little weird comparing a child with a plant.” Orin laughed, nodding against Gabriel’s chest. “But I think that in the end, the most important thing is that this baby you bear inside is the fruit of the love between you and Zeli. When you’ll see your tummy grow, you’ll remember every day of how great the bond between you two is. And when he grows up—”

Orin burst into tears, interrupting Gabriel’s phrase and Gabriel thought that maybe he pushed his brother a little too hard. As Orin cried, Gabriel waited patiently, hoping for the best. Fortunately, his suspicions proved incorrect, because after a few moments, Orin hugged him tightly. “You’re so right, Gabriel.” He sniffled a little. “How didn’t I see it before?”

The door of the bathing chamber opened, and Orin broke away from the embrace, hiding his face in Gabriel’s shoulder. Orin wiped his eyes, looking distinctly embarrassed for being caught crying. It

made Gabriel feel special that Orin didn't censor himself in front of him.

It was actually sort of weird. Although he and his brothers never spent time together as children, Gabriel felt connected with Kalin and Orin. If it was because of their blood link, he felt thankful to his father that at least he'd given Gabriel that link through siblings.

As it turned out, the person now entering the room was Kalin, looking slightly flushed. He snapped the door shut and directed a glare at it. Gabriel tilted his head curiously, examining his older brother. "Kalin? What's wrong?"

At the mentioning of Kalin, Orin raised his head and scrutinized Kalin as well. Kalin must have known Orin was crying, because his eyes observed the face of the younger prince critically. Tactfully, he answered Gabriel with a fierce scowl marring his handsome features. "Demons. They were talking about... things."

Gabriel blinked in confusion as Kalin's vagueness. Orin didn't have the same problem, because he burst into laughter. "Oh, for the Light! I can't freaking believe it. You, you..."

Kalin glared at his younger brother, but Orin just laughed harder. "You're acting like a shy virgin. They ran you off with sex talk."

Kalin made a face at his brother and sat down near Gabriel. "Shut up, you! It made me feel uncomfortable, all right? Shit, I sound like such a woman."

Kalin leaned back against the couch and groaned. "How do these people do it? I mean, they're warriors. How do they bear children? How can they...?"

Gabriel suppressed a smile at Kalin's words. He had his work cut out for him with his brothers. First Orin, now Kalin. Even, he didn't actually mind. In fact, being here, talking to his brothers, he felt happier than ever. He had a mate, possibly a child and brothers, a loving family, just like he always wanted. What more could he wish for?

Chapter 17

Lucien watched in amusement as his brother winced when Kalin made his exit from the bathing chamber, slamming the door in the process. He arched a brow at Cade. He may be a little lost when dealing with his own mate, but this he knew for sure, it wasn't wise to fuck with the masculinity of a soldier. Lucien didn't know Kalin too well yet, but from what he'd gathered back in Alaria, he could tell that Kalin was a brilliant commander and tactician, not too different from him or Zeli in that respect.

"Well, now, Cade, that was smooth. Talking about Kalin and eggs in the same sentence."

Cade shrugged. "Yeah, well, it was necessary. I needed to talk to you alone."

Lucien blinked, his amusement disappearing entirely. He didn't like Cade's tone. It sounded positively glum. Whatever was on Cade's mind wasn't a good thing.

"Cade? What's going on? Something the matter?"

Cade looked down, seemingly analyzing the tiles of the bathing chamber. "First of all, I want to ask you something." He hesitantly began. "I've already talked to Zeli about it and I hope you won't mind."

Lucien barely managed to hide his grimace at the way his brother was going round and round. It was so unlike Cade that it was starting to freak him out. Deciding to see what this thing affecting Cade so much was, he said, "Sure thing, bro. Shoot."

Cade nodded, his eyes still stuck in the direction of the floor. "It's a little embarrassing." He cleared his throat and paused, looking for

words. Lucien met Zeli's eyes, and his friend made a face. Lucien scowled, the peculiarity of the situation starting to bother him. Zeli knew something about Cade's weird disposition.

"I'll just spit it out then. I wanted to ask you. When you mated with Gabriel, how did he react?"

Lucien blinked in surprise. It was most definitely an unusual question. Despite the fact that they shared lots of intimate talks in the past and practically had no secrets from one another, he felt uncomfortable discussing his mate with Cade. Demons were by nature very jealous with their mates and discussions regarding sex lives were taboo because of this. If Cade asked about Lucien's reaction, it'd have been all right, but since he asked about Gabriel, Lucien couldn't help feel his possessiveness flare. Fighting the surge of irritation, he asked his brother, "I assume there's a good reason for this line of questioning?"

Cade finally met his eyes and nodded. Lucien didn't like the look of his eyes. Cade seemed uncertain and... sad?

Swallowing hard, Lucien decided to answer his brother. "Well, after I first bit him and we first made love..." Lucien found himself unable to speak, and swore softly. This was so fucking awkward!

His brother looked at him expectantly, so Lucien continued. "After we mated, we rested just a bit. Then when we woke up, had a talk regarding baby issues, but anyway... It got cut short because all of the sudden Gabriel went in heat."

Cade's face fell. "So, basically, you mated with him, then the transformations necessary for conception started."

Lucien nodded. He was startled at the expression of abject misery on his brother's face. "What's this all about, anyway?"

When Cade didn't answer, Lucien looked at Zeli. Zeli raised his arms in a confused gesture. "I'm not sure, Lucien. This morning when we met, he was fine."

"Don't give me that, Zeli! You know something."

Lucien just glared at his friend, ignoring Cade, who said in a low voice, “I’m still here, you know.”

Zeli glanced at Lucien with an unreadable expression. “Look, I’ll tell you exactly what happened so you can judge. This morning, we met in the main hall. Cade asked me if I heard anything from your sires, and I said I hadn’t. By the way, we have to discuss that too. Anyway, we talked about that a little, then Cade said that after our mates wake up we should come here and talk to you, to see how we’ll deal with that. And after that, Cade started asking me stuff.”

Lucien arched a blond brow. “Stuff? What stuff?”

Cade got up on his feet, booming, “Mating stuff, all right? Mating stuff. I assumed that since he mated before us, he knew more about all this shit with the conception.”

Lucien stared at his brother, feeling more confused than ever and thankful that all the rooms in the palace were soundproof. So Cade asked about some mating details. Big deal. He would have asked too, because he was also unsure regarding his mate’s possible pregnancy.

“Ok, that’s entirely understandable, bro. Don’t freak out on me.”

Cade gritted his teeth, but his wings started to turn scarlet. “I’m not embarrassed, fires be damned! I’m fucking furious! And you know why?”

Lucien wondered what could be so bad as to make Cade lose his control like that. “I think I’m fucking sterile!”

Zeli and Lucien gaped at him. For a second, Lucien thought that surely Cade must be joking, but when Cade collapsed on the bench of the bathing chamber and buried his face in his hands, all doubt flew from his head. Cade was most definitely serious.

“Cade? What the hell is up with that?” Lucien asked. “You know there’s never been a sterile Xeetah in history.”

Cade glanced at him and gave a bitter laugh. “Yeah, well, there’s never been a Xeetah with white wings in history either.”

Lucien’s eyes flared at the veiled insult. He took a deep breath, but he could feel his wings turn crimson.

Obviously realizing the situation was about to turn to violence, Zeli got between them. “Hey now, Come on. Talk, ok? We’re talking here.”

Cade shook his head, looking away from Lucien and Zeli. Lucien struggled for composure as he observed his brother. Eventually, after a pause that seemed to extend for ages, Cade finally spoke. “Ok, talk. Here goes nothing. So, basically, me and Kalin, we did what you guys did. The mating, with the biting and all that. But...” Cade paused, as if attempting to gather his courage. “After that, there was no heat, no nothing. I mean, isn’t Kalin’s body supposed to be adapting to bearing my son? Well, none of that for me. Sure, we had great sex, and the biting was a rush for both of us, but in the end, it didn’t have any actual effects.”

Lucien scratched his chin. It did sound bad when said like that. Lucien didn’t know a lot about the technicalities involving demon pregnancies, but he did know that mates were supposed to answer to their demon’s seed at once. Even so, there had to be a possibility of delay, right? “Maybe the effects are just delayed for you?” he asked, hoping not to cause another outburst.

Zeli nodded. “I mean, what reason could there possibly be for you to be sterile?”

Cade met their eyes and said one word. It chilled the blood in Lucien’s veins. “Cain.”

* * * *

Gabriel observed the reclining form of his older brother, considering how best to placate him. Kalin was a soldier, and even if on the surface he seemed to be taking this better than Orin, Gabriel knew that Kalin was pretty shaken up. After all, he had to abandon his army, people that he cared for, and a life he built around defending Alaria.

“Kalin?”

“Mmm?”

“Are you feeling guilty for leaving Alaria?” Gabriel asked, and immediately wanted to kick himself at the shocked expression on his brother’s face. Kalin did *not* need more on his mind.

He raised his hand, and started to speak again. “I don’t mean... What I want to say...”

Kalin just smiled. “I think maybe a little, yeah.”

Encouraged, Gabriel continued. “I think that you should leave that behind, Kalin. I know it’s hard and all, because you had people who depended on you, but I’m sure that those same people understood your choice.”

Kalin nodded, suddenly thoughtful. He sighed. “Some of them even followed me here.”

Gabriel felt ashamed to admit that he completely forgot about the Alarian soldiers who chose to come with them. He was so wrapped up in his own thoughts about Luce he hadn’t realized all of Kalin’s concerns, nor had he realized that Orin was different in any way. He suddenly felt like a terrible brother.

Sensing the shift in Gabriel’s mood, Kalin hugged his brother. “Hey now! None of that. I know what you’re thinking, but it’s none. Of..Your. Fault.” Each of the last words was punctuated by a playful touch of Gabriel’s nose.

Gabriel beamed at his brother. “You’re going to make a great daddy, Kalin.”

Kalin laughed and ruffled Gabriel’s dark hair. “When did you get so mature, baby brother?” Gabriel blushed at the undeserved praise. Orin joined the hug, nodding against Gabriel’s shoulder. “Here you are, encouraging us, when surely you must feel just as confused as we are.”

Gabriel was just about to say that, actually, he felt happier than he’d ever been when a knock sounded at the door. The door to the bathing room remained closed, and he looked at his two brothers inquiringly. “Should I go answer that?”

Orin smirked. “In normal occasions I’d say yes, but you’re not dressed for visitors right now. You’ll cause the poor demon knocking the worse case of blue balls in—”

Kalin clamped a hand over his brother’s mouth. “Shut up, you. I’ll get it. Gabriel, you get in the bed and cover yourself. Orin, you see what those mates of ours are doing in there that’s so important.”

Gabriel complied, feeling his face flush at his brothers’ words. Was the black shirt really that revealing? He’d put on a really shameless display for his brothers-in-law. Gabriel buried himself in the sheets, hoping that whoever was at the door would stay there.

He watched Orin gracefully move across the room and knock at the door of the bathing chamber.

“Excuse me for disturbing whatever interesting conversation you’re having, but there’s someone at the door.”

The door opened to reveal Lucien, who studied Orin silently. He moved to the door swiftly, just as Kalin prepared to answer the door. “I’ll take that, Kalin, thank you.”

Gabriel observed his mate and frowned. He could tell from the tense posture of Luce’s body that something was wrong. He looked towards Orin only to find his brother studying his own mate critically. Yes, definitely, something was very wrong.

* * * *

Lucien abruptly opened the door to find the same guard as the day before. The guard fidgeted, and Lucien gave him a dark glare. “Come on already! Spit out whatever you want to say!” he barked.

He took a deep breath, struggling to control his nerves. Talking about what happened years ago always had this effect on him, especially now, since Cade seemingly incurred long-lasting effects which he had kept a secret.

He'd thought that Cade recovered completely from the injuries from the explosion that killed their younger brother. Apparently, he'd been mistaken.

Lucien didn't realize that his wings started to glow scarlet, until he saw the guard pale. "My Lord, I... I... His Highnesses wanted you to be notified that you should go see them at once."

Lucien nodded, feeling the sudden urge to destroy something. He was so not in the mood to see his sires. If Seyran was half as annoying as he'd been when they'd arrived, he'd most likely do something stupid like hitting the king.

Lucien felt a comforting hand on his wing, and then a soft voice spoke at his side. "Thank you very much. We'll be there."

Seemingly grateful for the dismissal, the guard saluted. "By your leave, Your Highnesses." Just before leaving, though, the guard stole a glance towards Gabriel and Lucien growled as he caught the appraising look the Xeetahn soldier gave his mate.

Luckily for the guard, Gabriel pulled Lucien inside and shut the door. Lucien grabbed Gabriel's shoulder and squeezed his arm. "What are you doing, Gabriel, coming out like that?" he angrily snapped.

Gabriel winced, struggling to free himself out of Lucien's hold. "Luce, you're hurting me."

Lucien looked at his hand where it clutched Gabriel's pale arm. He knew that he left a mark. Cursing, he released his mate and sank to the floor, burying his head in his hands.

He felt Gabriel kneel at his side, leaning towards him until the strands of Gabriel's hair tickled at Lucien's arms. "Luce?" Gabriel's gentle hands caressed Lucien's hair, and Lucien felt comforted by the feel of his mate's touch. On impulse, he looked up at Gabriel's concerned eyes, the sorrow in his heart soothed by his lover's presence. He hugged Gabriel to his chest and whispered in his ear. "I'm sorry, baby. Let me just... hold you for a bit, 'kay?"

Gabriel placed his head on his demon's shoulder and nodded. Obviously, his mate could feel that he needed comfort. And right

now, Lucien couldn't feel more grateful for Gabriel's silent care and acceptance.

Lucien buried his head in his mate's hair, inhaling the comforting scent of cynathole fruit. Closing his eyes, he remembered...

* * * *

Chernobyl, Ukraine, 26th of April, 1986

Lucien exited the dimensional portal to face a huge building in the distance. In front of him, his brothers observed a huge complex of buildings in the distance. Lucien scowled. It rivaled the size of the palace of the Xeetah, but unlike his home, this place had something about it that wasn't quite right.

"Are you sure this is where we're supposed to go?"

Cain assented, flipping his platinum blond hair. "Stop worrying. Isn't this what we've always wanted? Peace with the humans again and all that?"

Lucien silently observed the looming building. "Yes, but this place... I don't know."

Cade continued Lucien's thought. "It has a bad feeling about it, like too much power in the same place."

Cain sighed. "I hate to agree with you guys, but yeah. You know what? Let's just do this thing and go back home. Destyan and Kazyan are waiting. And besides, I want to prove to Zeli that peace with humans is possible."

Cade shrugged at the mentioning of their friend. "You know what Zeli's like. I don't think he'll ever like humans. It's understandable."

Lucien made a face at the thought of the red-headed demon. "Yes, well, let's not think about it now. Cain's right. Let's meet whoever we're supposed to meet and go home."

The demons cloaked their wings and walked towards the building. As they approached the meeting spot, their uneasiness grew.

Whatever this place was, it teemed with energy, and not in a good way.

Maintaining a close relationship between the Xeetah and the demons that left Kaldor long ago had always been very important, especially since the earthling demons seemed to have trouble with their new home. Sacrifices were made to maintain this relationship, sacrifices like Zeli's parents, who'd been diplomats here on Earth. They were mourned by everyone and yet, it was decided that Earth could not be abandoned. Lucien knew all this very well.

As the building grew closer, Lucien felt coming here by themselves was a severely bad idea. They decided on this formula to ensure both the humans and the native demons of their good intentions. However, Lucien started to think that perhaps that plan wasn't so great.

"I don't know about this, guys." He stopped walking.

"I have a really bad feeling too," Cade said. "But what can we do? Go home?"

Lucien shared a knowing look with his two brothers. They couldn't go home. They were warriors. They were Xeetah. They didn't run away.

Ignoring their instincts, the three demon princes continued to walk towards the gate. They didn't bother to hide their presence since the humans here were supposed to have been alerted of their arrival. Lucien, Cade and Cain would first meet a native demon delegation and then see the head of the humans dealing with demon activity in the area.

In front of the gate, he saw that indeed they were expected. Several demons waited for them, dressed in their finest regalia.

A red-headed demon walked forward and said, "Welcome, friends mine. We happy to see you here safe."

Lucien winced at the demon's poor knowledge of the Kaldor common tongue. He shifted to Earth speech and hoped he was better

at it than the redhead was at Kaldorian. "Greetings. I am Lucien, and these are my brothers, Cade and Cain."

Cade took a step forward, scrutinizing the earthling. "I am sure you are aware of our rank, so we will not dwell on it."

"Now, I understand that we are supposed to meet a human representative to make the arrangements?" Cain inquired.

"Yes." The earthling assented with a nod. "Right this way, if you may."

The native demon walked towards the gate of the complex. Lucien frowned. "If I may be so bold, why is the meeting scheduled here?"

"Is it a landmark of some sort?" Cain asked.

A green-haired demon piped in. "Yes, it is an important landmark of earthling magic." The demon grinned, and Lucien disliked him immediately.

Cain must have had the same idea because he grabbed the green-haired demon by the throat and squeezed. "Do not presume to mock me! We are showing a great degree of tolerance to your demands, but that does not mean that we won't turn around and leave if we so desire."

He dropped the green-haired demon on the ground. Lucien felt more and more reluctant to deal with these demons. They were unlike the Xeetah, and he didn't trust them. For one, they hadn't even introduced themselves, a fact which didn't bode well. He met Cade's eyes and could tell that his brother acknowledged the fact as well. This was a dangerous place to be, but in spite of Cain's words, going back wasn't an option.

Putting on his most regal face, he looked at the redhead who seemed to be the leader. "Now, if your people are done with lousy attempts at being comedians, shall we go?"

It wasn't lost to Lucien that the demon hadn't actually answered his question.

* * * *

Lucien hugged Gabriel tighter as the memories became too painful to bear. It was the last night he saw his youngest brother. Cain died in the horrible fire that engulfed the entire complex. He died saving him and Cade. To this day, neither he nor Cade could forgive themselves. And he was certain Zeli blamed himself for not being there to help.

He thought that with time the pain for the loss of his youngest sibling would wane, but it hadn't. He remembered everything so vividly, as if it happened just the day before. And now Cade was suffering, most likely unable to have offspring because of the humans' poison.

As he hugged his mate, Lucien wished all the humans on Earth and the demons who helped them died a terrible death, just like his little brother did.

Chapter 18

Gabriel didn't know what could be wrong with Lucien. From the way his demon mate hung on to him, it almost seemed that Lucien was trying to anchor himself somehow, or make sure Gabriel was there. Gabriel felt very concerned, especially when he noticed the other demons in the room displayed a similar state.

Zeli's head lay in Orin's lap on the couch, and he petted Zeli's hair lovingly. Cade collapsed on the bed in Kalin's arms, and Kalin whispered something Gabriel could not hear in Cade's ear.

Gabriel knew that whatever shook the three demons so badly had to be something awful. Otherwise, Luce would have never grabbed his arm like that or yelled at him. Lucien's emotions were all over the place, and Gabriel felt worried and afraid for his lover.

All he could do right now was provide comfort and hope Luce would tell him in his own time. He could not let his concern guide him into pushing Luce to an unnecessary confession. Right now, the urgency was to stop Luce's pain.

The silence grew heavy as the three demons sat in the embraces of their mates. Gabriel wasn't the impatient sort, but the attitudes of the three Xeetah were getting to him, and his concern grew by the minute. What was going on? Had something happened with the kings? Had somebody fallen ill? He wanted to shout, "Please, tell us already!"

Fortunately such extreme measurements weren't required because Cade suddenly broke away from Kalin and sighed. "I suppose you're all wondering what this demon emotional breakdown is all about."

Lucien also broke away from Gabriel's embrace. Gabriel studied his mate carefully, settling for nodding at Cade. "Yes, we are very concerned. Is something the matter? Can we do anything to help?"

Lucien squeezed his hand and gave him a small smile. "Just you being here is helping, baby."

Cade cleared his throat. "Anyway, I might as well tell you now. The gist of it is that some twenty years ago, we, that is me, Lucien and Cain, our little brother, were involved in an explosion involving dangerous substances. Cain died, and I incurred severe injuries. I do not remember everything after the injury, but I was told I ended up a step away from death, which is a lot for a demon. Originally, I thought that, since I managed to elude death, my body's regenerative abilities dealt with it efficiently. In time, I realized that it was not the case, since I experienced vomiting, bouts of nausea, and sometimes even a general feeling of illness. True enough, in time, it lessened, but the effects never fully vanished."

Kalin paled and clutched his mate's hand harder, panic visibly settling in. "You are telling me this now? Is it serious? Are you going to—?"

Cade smiled a little, caressing Kalin's cheek. "No, love, I'm not going to die. I'm quite certain that since I survived the original injury it is most likely impossible for me to die now." The smile vanished. "The reason why I'm saying this now is that, additionally to the effects I mentioned, there seems to be another one, an effect I hadn't anticipated. I seem to be sterile, Kalin."

Cade choked a little and broke down. Gabriel gaped at his brother-in-law, watching in disbelief as the normally carefree demon wept like a child. "I'm so sorry, love. If only I'd known, I would have never dragged you away like I did. I wouldn't have—"

Cade's phrase was interrupted by a powerful punch from the direction of his mate. Kalin threw an angry glare at Cade. "Shut the fuck up! If you say that again, I don't know what I'll do."

Kalin passed a hand through his purple locks, noticeably distressed. Gabriel could tell that for all Kalin's moaning about bearing a child, Cade's being sterile terribly pained him. Kalin wanted a baby with Cade, and he'd only just now realized it.

Kalin looked at his mate, who seemed frozen in his spot, looking heartbroken. He took Cade's hands in his own and said in a soft tone, "Are you certain, Cade?"

Cade glanced towards his Alarian lover with a miserable expression. "Not one hundred percent. But there is no another explanation as to why my seed doesn't cause your body to modify to bear my child."

Kalin bit his lip, distress obvious in his demeanor. "Maybe it's not you, it's me. I mean, since we're a different race..."

Cade shook his head at his mate's words. "It worked fine for Zeli and Lucien. And technically speaking, there is no reason why the problem would be out of discrepancies between our two peoples. In fact, despite our racial difference, you well know that our genitals are exactly the same, love. With the exception that demon seed has a little extra kick."

Kalin ignored Cade's lame attempt for a joke. "At any rate, shouldn't you consult a medic?"

Cade looked horrified at the prospect. "Love, no! I mean, there's nothing the medic can tell me that I can't find out for myself. And honestly, I'd rather not subject myself to Tayin's ridicule."

"But surely there has to be something, some sort of cure—"

Interrupting Kalin, Lucien answered in place of his brother. "Unfortunately, there is nothing. We Xeetah have always prided ourselves on our bodies' regenerative capacities. Since we heal by ourselves, we mostly have healing accelerators or pain removers."

Orin let out a sound of amazement and exasperation. "How is that possible? You are a race of warriors. How can you fight efficiently if you don't have adequate medicine?"

At Orin's exclamation of dismay, Zeli spoke for the first time. "You misunderstand, sweet. By our standards, our medicine suits us just fine, because we focus on what problems we *do* have. There is no need for us to have a medicine for a cut, if in our case a cut heals in seconds. Even for normal poisons, our immune systems will flush them out eventually."

"Well then, if your medicine can't do anything about it, maybe we can help. I mean, we're all healers, so we might be able to cure you."

Kalin seemed optimistic about this alternative, but Cade just shook his head. "The cause of my injury was a very powerful poison, more powerful than your Linas even. I remember what you said about the poisons and Alarian energy, love. There's nothing you can do."

Kalin gritted his teeth, and Gabriel could feel the pain of helplessness radiating from his brother. "You are actually sure of this then?" Cade nodded, looking down as if unable to meet his mate's eyes. After a brief silent moment, Kalin hugged Cade tightly to his chest. "We'll be fine. Don't worry, we'll be fine. Even if it is like you say, we'll have each other."

Gabriel felt frozen in his spot. It was heart-breaking, seeing Cade in his brother's arms, tears flowing down his face. Obviously, Lucien felt the same, because he averted his eyes and buried his face in Gabriel's hair again.

Gabriel could only guess what Lucien felt like right now, remembering the death of his youngest sibling and now seeing his eldest suffer. If something like that happened to Orin or Kalin, Gabriel couldn't even bear thinking about it.

He didn't know how long they stayed like that when Cade finally spoke, his voice raspy. "We should go. Our sires are waiting."

* * * *

Lucien's feelings were jumbled as they walked the corridors of the royal palace. He observed Cade's silhouette in front of him and wondered what thoughts passed through his brother's mind.

Despite his carefree attitude, Cade had always been overwhelmingly protective of his younger brothers. Cain's death affected him severely, and although Lucien wanted to resent the fact that Cade had been secretive about his problems, he couldn't. He understood because he'd probably have done the same thing.

In truth, it was probably better that Cade didn't remember the details of his convalescence. Lucien did, and he berated himself for believing that such an extensive injury wouldn't cause long-lasting damage. He took a deep breath, fighting the surge of guilt that came whenever he thought about that day.

* * * *

Cain tapped his leg impatiently, looking at the red-headed leader of the Earth demons.

"How much longer is this going to take?"

The redhead shrugged, a seemingly indifferent expression on his face. "I'm not entirely certain. The representative who is to meet with you is a busy man."

Lucien directed a dark glare at the native demon, barely containing his anger. "I know we contacted you, but do not overestimate our good intentions. Know this, earthling. Good intentions or no, we will not be mocked. The representative may be a busy man, but we are royalty. I do not expect he out-ranks us in any way."

Seemingly realizing that he crossed the line, the redhead laughed nervously. "Of course, Your Highnesses. I didn't mean any offense. I only wanted to say that a certain delay is to be expected."

Lucien's inner alarm rang danger. The situation was getting fishier by the minute. He didn't like this place, and he didn't like these people.

Cade apparently shared his assessment, because he shrugged and said, "Well, your man has exactly ten seconds to show up or else we'll be leaving. We did not come here to be made fun of."

"Yes, of course, I understand entirely." The redhead turned a little, as if looking towards the gate. But then, swifter than humanly possible, the earth demon pulled out some sort of device and pointed it at Cade and Cain. Without sparing another thought, Lucien jumped between his brothers and the other demons, shielding them with his large black wings. He felt the burn of projectiles hitting his wings and thighs, embedding in his flesh.

Even so, the adrenaline of the fight was stronger than the strange weapons of the earth demon. Gritting his teeth, Lucien forced the foreign objects out of his body to allow the natural healing process to begin. Ignoring the pain, he proceeded to eliminate his opponents without sparing a second to rest.

"Make no use of magic. It's too dangerous here!" Cade shouted in old Xeetahn.

Lucien cursed, realizing that indeed they couldn't unleash their fire inside the premises of the complex. But he didn't need his fire to deal with these traitorous vermin. His whole body was a killing machine.

Lucien manifested his claws, and in a flash of an eye, he was on the redhead demon. He tore out the jugular of the double-crossing maggot with gusto, ignoring the gurgles of agony coming from his victim. In mere seconds he jumped off the redhead, slashing the neck of another demon with his claws and ripping the heart from a third one at the same time.

In his peripheral vision, he could see his brothers also causing considerable damage among the ranks of the earthling demons. Nevertheless, Lucien couldn't help a foreboding feeling.

He shouted at his brothers. "Fall back, now!"

Two seconds later, after killing another of his enemies, Lucien saw an earthling aim a strange weapon at him. He tried to dodge, but he was only partially successful. The next thing he knew an undeniable feeling of terrible pain flared in his side as he was catapulted by a powerful projectile into the wall. The pain became agony, and Lucien looked down to see a pipe coming out of his chest.

The last thing he registered before he blacked out was Cain's horrified scream. "Lucien!"

* * * *

Lucien didn't realize he'd been clutching his mate's hand so hard until Gabriel snapped him out of his memory. "Luce?"

Lucien gave his mate a weary smile, but it wasn't enough to fool Gabriel. The concern in those dark eyes made him feel both guilty and comforted.

In the end, it wasn't him that should be the focus of concern, but Cade. He studied his brother's stoic figure and stifled a sigh. He knew that Cade would take this as a punishment for not being able to save Cain twenty years ago. All three of them, Lucien, Cade and Zeli, felt overwhelming guilt at the demise of the youngest of their group. The only reason they hid their grief was because of the need to comfort their Kazyan. Lyan fell into a terrible depression after Cain's death, and for a while, the family even feared for his sanity. They worried Lyan would go over The Edge because of the pain.

In truth, only Lucien knew how close Lyan, and even Seyran, had been to losing their minds. He'd seen his two sires randomly attack and destroy inanimate objects, clawing at their own faces, shredding their wings and burning everything around them. Seyran recovered faster, and he'd been the one who anchored Lyan back into reality.

Lucien remembered even now waking up to a dead brother and one struggling between life and death while suffering extensive burns.

He still fought with the sight of Cade's burnt body and the pain he felt when he was told that they weren't even able to recover Cain's remains. In anger, he went with Zeli to the demons who created the trap that killed Cain and destroyed them all, slowly and painfully.

After Cade recuperated, they wanted to go on another rampage, to eliminate all the demons on Earth and enslave the humans. He'd been so furious and lost in his pain, that he nearly organized a war to avenge his little brother. In the end, Lyan's pleas thwarted them. Their Kazyan begged them not to make him go through the pain of losing a child again. For Lyan's sanity, they agreed to forsake Earth altogether.

He never forgot Cain of course. Every time he saw the mausoleum that his sires erected in Cain's honor his heart clenched. He knew only marble rested there, and Cain's ashes were still lost on Earth. That was perhaps the worst thing of all. His youngest sibling didn't have a decent burial. Perhaps his soul still roamed the ruins of that place of death. As if sensing his pain, Gabriel released his hand and hugged his waist. The contact of his mate's body was a balm to the old wound that never really sealed and that now felt rawer than ever.

Before Lucien knew it, they arrived in front of the throne room. The black doors opened magically, and Lucien hoped he could go through it without having a breakdown. He didn't want to fight with his sires, not now. In fact, he'd been hoping to find a way of avoiding this conversation altogether. He didn't really want to see Seyran and Lyan's reaction to the news.

The party entered the room in silence. They all bowed in front of the kings. "Greetings, my sires." Cade murmured.

Lucien echoed his brother and met the eyes of his parents. He observed Lyan studying them closely and getting off the throne. "Cade? Lucien? Zeli? What is wrong, my sons?"

Cade averted his gaze. "I'd rather not speak about it, Kaze."

Lucien could see Seyran's eyes widen. They stopped using that nickname when they were children. For it to slip out meant that

something was definitely wrong with Cade. Lucien knew this, and so did his sires.

“You wanted to talk to us?”

He struggled against the urge to fall into the similar habit as Cade. But if he did that as well, his sires would truly realize the extent of the situation.

His effort didn’t go unnoticed though, because Lyan’s scrutiny turned to him. “Lucien? Talk to me!”

Seyran got off the throne, looking concerned as well. “The other issues can wait. What is the matter, my sons?”

It seemed quite peculiar to see his father showing concern after all the problems he caused for his mate and the other Alarians. Still, Lucien knew that in spite of Seyran’s apparent ruthlessness, the king loved his sons and wanted the best for them. Lucien couldn’t forget his rejection of Gabriel very easily. Even so, he didn’t have the heart to bring forth the memory that still plagued them all.

Silence reigned in the throne room. Seyran wouldn’t want them to answer his question, not if he knew what the answer would be. Not with Lyan there to hear. Lucien feared that if Lyan heard this, he would lose himself again and perhaps, this time, he would be unable to find his way back.

The king watched his sons as they stubbornly refused to answer his question. He turned to his sons’ mates. “Gabriel? Orin? Kalin?”

Kalin shook his head, even as he met the king’s gaze. “It is not our question to answer.”

Lucien mentally started counting. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

As predicted, Seyran exploded and Lucien could practically see the flame in his normally violet eyes. “What is the meaning of this? What game are you playing? You are worrying both your Kazyan and me.”

Lucien suppressed his wince. He knew this would happen, of course, but they couldn’t answer Seyran. Not right now, at least.

Zeli came closer to the king, and whispered something in his ear so low that not even Lucien could hear it. He guessed that Zeli actually meant to secret whatever he said from Lyan, but he underestimated Lyan's acute hearing. His strategy didn't work, as Lyan suddenly paled.

"What is the meaning of this, Zeli? What is so important that you feel the need to hide from me?"

Cade cursed under his breath, and Zeli gave him an apologetic look. Then Cade took a deep breath and said, "Kazyran, please, you don't want to hear this."

It was the wrong thing to say, and everybody knew it the second it escaped Cade's mouth. Lyan's eyes became even more alarmed, but his face turned to stone. "As your king, I order you to tell me what on Kaldor is going on, High General Cade, First Born of the Royal Couple of the Xeetah!"

Cade grimaced, and Lucien couldn't suppress a groan. They didn't have a choice now. They never had a choice, not really, and stalling only made it worse.

"I'm sterile." Cade blurted out. Lucien thought he could see a glint of desperate hope in his brother's eyes. Hope that no explanation would be demanded but of course, that was too much to ask.

"Say again?" Seyran growled.

Lyan collapsed back on the throne, looking astonished. "That can't be. There's never been a sterile Xeetah in history."

Seyran glared at Kalin, overwhelming anger and hate marring his features. "This must be your fault, prince Kalin," he spat. "For some reason, your body isn't compatible with my son, and now he thinks he's sterile."

The tension escalated in the room to a nearly physical level. Lucien could feel Gabriel trembling at his side, and he cuddled his mate under his arm protectively. "That can't be. For me and Zeli, the mating worked fine." He fought to keep level with a cool voice,

although inside he was steaming. “There’s no reason why Kalin would be faulted.”

Lyan raised his hands in the air in a gesture of exasperation. “There’s no reason why Cade would have such a problem either.”

Lucien waited for Cade to drop the bomb. He wondered how his brother could manage to keep his calm. True enough, he broke down back in his chambers, but Cade more than one reason for his pain, his sorrow two times more acute than Lucien’s. Lucien felt selfish and weak at this knowledge. “Actually, there is, Kaze.” Cade replied softly.

Both kings directed their looks towards Cade. “I did not wish to speak of this, but you leave me no choice. The incident twenty years ago has left some traces in me.”

Seyran paled visibly, and Lyan suddenly looked like he was going to be sick. His voice trembled when he repeated, “T-traces?”

Cade nodded, averting his eyes. “I have been experiencing some discomfort across the years, but I did not expect something quite like this. It was foolish of me, since such severe poisoning...”

Seyran raised a hand. “Stop, just stop, Cade!”

The king rushed to the side of his consort. He took Lyan’s face in his hands. “Beloved? Look at me!”

Lucien felt a sense of strange and all-too-sorrowful déjà-vu as he noticed the vacant look in his Kazyan’s eyes. He pulled Gabriel to his chest. The picture of Seyran trying to make Lyan come back from wherever he’d gone was much too painful to bear alone.

Seyran placed little kisses on Lyan’s face, caressing the platinum blond locks of his mate.

Crystal tears poured from the ice-blue eyes of the king consort. “My sons... My sons are gone. My sons are dead. My poor sons. Where are they?” Lyan whimpered softly.

Seyran hugged his mate tightly. “Shh, shh, beloved, it’s all right, I’m here.”

Turning his gaze to his sons and their mates, Seyran took a deep breath. Glancing towards his son, then towards his mate, he hesitated, as if uncertain. But Lucien knew what choice Seyran had to make. His mate had priority, and no one but Seyran could now help Lyan. “We take our leave now.” Cade said softly. “We will come see you later.”

They bowed shortly and scuttled out of the room silently. Lucien’s heart ached as he took a last look towards the royal couple. Lyan wept softly in Seyran’s arms, and the king caressed him gently, trying to comfort him. Then the door to the throne room closed with a bang, shutting out the view of the royal couple.

Lucien hated the fact that the thud of the door closing scared him. It sounded so final, as if placing a brand of misfortune on him and his family. He shook his head, trying to dissipate the thoughts. There was nothing he could do about his Kazyan’s tears, but he had to be there for his brother, his best friend. He had to be strong for his mate and his unborn son. Lucien sighed silently. Was it really so much to ask to be allowed a little happiness?

Chapter 19

Gabriel thought that Lyan's breakdown in the throne room had to be the most heartbreaking moment he ever witnessed in his life. He hoped the royal consort would recover soon, if not for his own sake, then for the sake of his sons who needed him.

The three demons looked lost in their thoughts, lost somewhere in the past. Even as they walked through the corridors, Gabriel could tell by the stormy look of Luce's eyes that his mind was someplace else. He didn't know what to say or what to do to make it better.

Fortunately, Luce intercepted his concern, turning his head towards Gabriel and smiling a little. It was somewhat reassuring, despite the fact that it was forced. Gabriel smiled back and squeezed his mate's arm, suddenly selfishly wishing that they could be alone.

As if in answer to his thoughts, the party halted when they got to the main staircase of the palace. They stayed in awkward silence for a moment, and then Cade turned and took off up the stairs without a word, Kalin following closely behind.

There seemed to be a silent agreement that it would be best if each of the couples went their own separate ways. After Zeli gestured a goodbye and Orin hugged Gabriel, they also took the stairs, heading towards Zeli's chambers. Gabriel wanted to cry at the sorrow of his family. He knew that they all needed time alone with their mates. The brutal remembrance of Cain's death and the accident's effect on Cade hurt them all deeply. For now, there was nothing Gabriel could do.

Lucien turned towards him, the same weary smile on his face. "Well, it's just the two of us now, baby." Luce sat on the staircase,

removing his jacket and placing it on the marble, patting on it in invitation. “Gabriel, come sit by my side.”

Gabriel followed Lucien’s request, unsure of what he should say. He leaned his head against his demon’s shoulder and sighed. He hated this awkwardness so much. He never knew Cain, but it stood to reason the demons loved him a lot. True enough, he’d known of the fact that Lucien had another brother who died, but he never realized that there something like this could happen. Gabriel was suddenly acutely aware of the superficiality of his knowledge regarding Lucien.

He bit his lip, feeling more selfish than usual. Here he was, worrying about such trivialities, when his mate needed comfort. But he couldn’t help it. He felt uncomfortable realizing that if someone asked him, he wouldn’t know how to answer simple questions. When was Lucien’s birthday? How old was he? Did he have a favorite color? What did he like to do in his free time? Simple things like that.

“Gabriel, what are you thinking about?”

Gabriel lifted his head and met his mate’s quizzical eyes. He debated telling Lucien about this, but he decided against it. It was stupid, and they’d have time to discuss it later. After all, they didn’t have much time to actually know each other so all that would gradually come. “Nothing important. Don’t worry about it.”

Lucien kissed his nose, a tender gesture that made Gabriel’s heart clench. “Anything that’s on your mind is important. Tell me, baby!”

Gabriel made a face, but complied. “I was just thinking that there are so many things I don’t know about you. I know you told me about Cain back in Alaria, but somehow I didn’t realize back then. See, I told you it’s stupid.” He looked at his hands, feeling selfish and idiotic.

Gabriel was surprised at Lucien’s laugh. It was a beautiful, husky sound that somehow lifted Gabriel’s heart. He looked at his mate and noticed genuine merriment sparkling in those ice-blue eyes.

Lucien chuckled. “Honestly, Gabriel, I don’t know what I’d do without you.” He kissed Gabriel’s forehead and got up, extending his hand.

“Come on, Gabriel! I promised you a tour of my homeland, didn’t I?”

The rest of the day passed in a blur for Gabriel. They visited the center of Yazix, flew over the forests nearby and made love on the bank of a nearby river. And as they stood in each other’s arms, nude and sheltered by the trees, Gabriel said, “When we have a son, could we name him Cain?”

Lucien hugged Gabriel and said in a choked voice, “I’d like that, baby. I’d like that a lot.”

* * * *

Lucien awoke to the feel of someone moving in his bed and opened his eyes drowsily. That could only mean his mate was awake, which was definitely a good thing. Lucien’s cock apparently forgot the fact that it should have been exhausted after the night before, because it perked up instantly.

The day he spent with Gabriel soothed his wounded heart. Lucien supposed that he would have felt guilty for finding comfort in Gabriel’s arms to such an extent, but he couldn’t find it in himself to regret it. He still hurt for his brothers, of course, and he would most likely never be able to think about Cain without sorrow in his heart. Even so, he had Gabriel now. Gabriel’s love made him stronger, more able to deal with the pains of the past and whatever challenges the future presented. With Gabriel by his side, he would be able to help Cade with his own problem.

Lucien turned towards his mate, eager to catch another round of lovemaking before the world caught up on them. But the view Lucien encountered was very different from what he expected. Gabriel was

whimpering in his sleep, seeming to struggle, clutching the sheets desperately. “No, no! Please, no! Luce, come back!”

The words were incoherent, but Gabriel looked very distressed. Tears were flowing down his pale cheeks and his beautiful dark locks were drenched with sweat.

Lucien frowned in concern. Gabriel seemed to be having a nightmare. He wasn’t entirely surprised. After all, Gabriel had nightmares back in Alaria. All because of that monster Lothar.

Lucien felt his eyes flash red as the desire to kill Lothar resurfaced. He couldn’t focus on it now. Gabriel needed him. Lucien shook his mate gently. “Wake up, baby!”

Gabriel was too engulfed in the dream to feel the light touch. Lucien’s concern grew, and he started shaking his lover’s body harder. He called out to Gabriel, much as he did back in Cade’s bedroom in the Alarian palace. He even slapped his mate, even if lifting a hand on Gabriel deeply hurt him. To his dismay, there was no response from Gabriel. In despair, he took the writhing form of his lover in his arms and hastened to the bathing chamber, dropping him unceremoniously in the water.

The eyes of his mate flew open, and he gasped at being woken in such a brutal manner. Lucien stared helplessly as he observed his mate huddling himself in the corner of the bathing pool, looking every bit like a frightened rabbit, his dark eyes seemingly searching for exits in the room.

Lucien glided gently through the water, so as not to frighten Gabriel further. Gabriel jumped and tried to move away when Lucien touched him, staring at him with unseeing eyes. Lucien began to panic—hell, he was already terribly panicked—but he was afraid to go and look for help. What if something happened to his mate in his absence?

He gently brushed Gabriel’s wet locks out of his eyes, wincing as his lover shivered. The water was cold, but Lucien wasn’t entirely sure that the low temperature caused the shiver. This guess was

confirmed when Gabriel pushed him away violently, covering his face and body. “No, no, leave me alone! Luce, where are you? Help me!”

Gabriel was still lost in his nightmare, and Lucien didn’t know what to do. He grabbed Gabriel and put him back on the bed. Summoning his fire, he sent a flare out on the terrace. He hoped Cade or Zeli saw his signal, because if not, he didn’t know what he would do.

Lucien remembered too well the terrible fear he’d experienced when he thought Gabriel was dying. He didn’t want to think about the fact that maybe the healing process hadn’t worked as well as he thought. That maybe Gabriel experienced the same issues as his brother or even worse, as Lyan. Gabriel’s eyes reminded him of his Kazyan’s absent gaze just the day before. He wondered how Seyran managed to get over the incredible pain of seeing his mate’s mind lost.

Hastily moving back to the bed, he continued to try to wake Gabriel. “Baby, please! It’s me, I’m here.”

Desperate, Lucien kissed Gabriel on the mouth, hoping that somehow his love would help snap his mate out of whatever nightmare plagued him. Gabriel fought him for a brief second, but then his sweet mouth opened to Lucien’s tongue, and Gabriel’s arms surrounded his neck.

Lucien separated their mouths and looked into his mate’s eyes. He breathed a sigh of relief, noticing that Gabriel came back to his senses, and his black eyes were fully alert.

He pushed their foreheads together, sighing in relief. “Oh, thank the fires, you’re all right!”

“Luce? What happened?” Gabriel asked in a confused voice.

Just as Lucien was about to answer, Cade burst into the room, closely followed by Kalin. He was in lethal mode, prepared to diffuse any situation that could have caused his little brother to summon him to his aid.

Cade tilted his head in confusion when he noticed that there seemed to be no signs of enemies or even of a struggle in the room. “Umm... Little bro?”

Kalin arched a brow, reclining against the wall. “I understand that you activated some sort of distress signal, but I see no reason for distress.”

Lucien got off his mate, discretely covering Gabriel’s nude body with the sheets. “Actually, there is. Or there was. Gabriel had a nightmare, and I couldn’t wake him up.”

When the phrase exited his mouth, he realized how stupid that sounded. Cade’s eyes flashed in irritation. “You called us because Gabriel had a nightmare?”

Before he could answer, Zeli and Orin flew inside the room through the terrace. Lucien groaned. How could he explain this?

Zeli landed with a thud on the floor. “Sooo... What’s the big emergency?”

Cade glanced at his friend and pointed out, ironically drawling out the words. “Gabriel was having a nightmare.”

“A nightmare. You called us because your mate had a bad dream?” Zeli asked incredulously.

Lucien felt frustrated with his brother and his friend. Surely they remembered the problems Gabriel had in Alaria. How could they not understand Lucien’s panic? Then again, with all the issues Cade had now, the last thing on his mind would be Gabriel’s nightmares.

Luckily, Lucien didn’t have to vocalize any of these things. Orin frowned in distaste and turned his lavender gaze towards Lucien. “Shut up, you! This nightmare, what was it like?”

Lucien directed a thankful look for his mate’s brother. “I woke up to him writhing and whimpering in his sleep. Whatever I did, I couldn’t wake him up. I dropped him in the bath, and he seemed to wake up, but when he looked at me, it seemed as if he was someplace else, as if he couldn’t see me at all.”

Cade and Zeli remained silent, having apparently recalled the episode in Alaria, remembering Lyan's face the day before and imagining what they'd have done if something like that happened to them.

"Did he say anything?" Kalin inquired.

Lucien nodded, proceeding to detail the earlier events. "My name, over and over. Lots on "no," "please," "don't." I finally managed to wake him up a second before you got in. But I'm concerned. It looked worse than back in Alaria."

Kalin turned his attention to his brother. "Gabriel, do you remember anything?"

* * * *

Gabriel bit his lip nervously, considering for the first time lying to his family. He didn't want to tell them about his dream, because that was all it was, a dream and nothing more. Just another nightmare.

"Gabriel?"

Gabriel shook his head. "I don't want to talk about it. It's not worth it."

Kalin frowned at his brother, "If this nightmare of yours manifested like Lucien described, it might be important to tell us, baby brother. It might be a vision."

"No." Gabriel jumped up from the pillows, ignoring the fact that in the process he exposed his nude body almost entirely, and that this was probably the first time he shouted at his brother. "It's not a vision, it's not." He buried his head in his hands, rocking himself gently. That couldn't be his future. It wasn't possible.

Lucien gathered him to his chest, holding him close. "It's ok, baby. I'm here. You're fine."

Gabriel looked up at his mate, finding comfort in Lucien's warmth, scent and presence. "Luce, it's not a vision. It's not," he whispered.

Lucien placed a gentle kiss of his forehead, lovingly caressing his hair. "Of course not, Gabriel."

Having apparently realized that their help was no longer required, Cade cleared his throat. "Well then, we'll be leaving now."

Gabriel watched sadly as Cade pulled a reluctant Kalin out of his room. Orin gave him a look of concern. "If you ever want to talk about it..."

Gabriel wearily smiled at his brother, giving a grateful look. "Thanks, Orin. I know. But you don't have to worry about it. Just a stupid nightmare, nothing else."

Orin didn't look convinced. Gabriel bit his lip, wondering what his brother saw in his aura. But it didn't matter. He had a lot of nightmares in the past. The sadness of Cade's situation must have brought the bad memories forth.

He watched Orin and Zeli leave, hating the fact that amongst all the sorrow that plagued the family now, he had to make things worse.

Gabriel sighed, a deep heartfelt sound that drew the attention of his mate. Lucien kissed him gently and pushed him back down on the bed, tucking him in. "There now, Gabriel. Just rest a bit. So much excitement these days has got you troubled." Lucien smiled. "Don't worry about a thing. I'll take care of you."

Gabriel felt comforted by his mate's strong presence at his side. He closed his eyes, thinking that Lucien was probably right. The images of the dream flashed back into his mind instantly, and he gasped, desperately hugging Lucien to make sure he was there.

Lucien hugged him tightly, soothing him with soft whispers. "Shh, shh, baby. It's fine. I'm here with you. Nothing is going to happen."

Lucien cursed under his breath, sounding frustrated. "He did this to you. That bastard Lothar. I swear, Gabriel, I'm going to kill him."

Lucien's words chilled Gabriel's to the bone. "What are you talking about?"

“He wasn’t dead when we left.” Lucien explained. “But I’m going to go back and fix that.”

Gabriel jumped up, pushing away from Lucien, his dream still very much present at the back of his mind. “You will not! I forbid you to do such a thing.”

Lucien’s eyes widened in surprise. “But Gabriel, you can’t possibly—?”

“Listen to me, Lucien.” Gabriel began. He hadn’t addressed Lucien by his full name in a long time, and his demon looked taken aback at the change. “You will not go anywhere. Your brother and your father need you. I need you. Lothar is in the past. If you go back now, who knows what could happen?”

Lucien gave Gabriel a distinctly upset look. “Baby, we can’t just let him get away with it.”

Gabriel looked away, the memories of his time at Kirgen starting to come back. Shaking his head, he faced his mate dead on. “I’m sorry, Luce, for being so selfish, but I refuse to lose you to the past. I want to forget. Is that really so much to ask?”

Lucien sighed, but didn’t argue. “It will be as you wish it. You’re right. Cade needs our help. We will deal with the rest in time.”

Gabriel understood the undertone of his mate’s words. Lucien would not give up and eventually, he would want to go after Lothar again. For now, Gabriel felt thankful for even this small victory.

Gabriel cuddled into Lucien’s embrace, making a conscious effort not to think about the dream, or anything else unpleasant for that matter. If he didn’t think about it, he’d forget soon enough. Nightmares belonged in the past. He refused to let them burden his present or cast a shadow over his future. And after all, Gabriel had more important things to think about. Like how to help Cade.

He mentally reviewed everything that happened in the past few days. Surely there had to be a way to cure his brother-in-law. Cade said that the poison that caused his sterility was stronger than the Linas. He couldn’t fight against that.

Gabriel's eyes opened wide as he realized something.

"Luce?"

"Yes, baby?" Lucien still sounded a bit upset, but Gabriel thought that his idea might take his mate's mind off Lothar and the nightmare.

"When was that explosion again, the one in which...?"

He didn't finish the phrase, reluctant to mention the death of Lucien's brother. It would be obvious what explosion he was talking about anyway.

Lucien said nothing for a second. Just when Gabriel thought he wouldn't receive a reply, his demon swallowed and choked out, "If you want the exact number, twenty-three years ago."

Gabriel swallowed, feeling hope swell inside him. Why didn't he consider this before? Gabriel forced himself to cool down. He didn't know for sure that it would work, therefore, he couldn't tell Lucien, not yet. And he could most definitely not tell Cade. Bringing a spark of hope when he was unsure would be cruel. He had to talk to Kalin and Orin.

Getting off the bed, he began frantically looking for clothes. Luckily, his wardrobe had been moved in Lucien's chambers so he didn't have trouble finding an adequate garment. Quickly, he dressed, ignoring Lucien's stare.

"Gabriel? What's the matter?"

Gabriel met Lucien's eyes, a determined look on his face. "I need to talk to my brothers now, without Cade knowing. Can you help me?"

"Ok, baby. But you'll tell me what this is all about, won't you?"

Gabriel nodded, tapping his foot impatiently. On cue, Lucien grabbed a random leather outfit and swiftly put it on.

"Come on. I have a pretty good idea where they might be."

* * * *

As he'd expected, Lucien saw his brother, Zeli and their mates in the training area. Cade had always been a training freak, and he loved to spar when something disturbed him. Currently, his opponent was his own mate, and Lucien stopped to admire the way Kalin managed to retaliate to Cade's attacks.

Even if they were only recently mated, Kalin seemed to know that Cade didn't need a hug or a kiss right now, but he needed some sort of discharge, something to take his mind off his problems. He smiled, thinking that it was truly amazing for someone other than a Xeetah to present a challenge for his brother. Kalin seemed to be the exception to this rule. If Lucien didn't know better, he could have sworn his brother-in-law had Xeetahn blood in his veins.

The blades of the two mates clashed so hard Lucien could swear the iron was bending. Cade twisted his body in an expert move, releasing the blade and kicking Kalin's own out of his hand. Kalin seemed surprised by this, but made no move to retrieve his weapon. Instead he attacked his mate, directing a roundhouse kick at Cade's face.

Cade staggered, but quickly recovered, smirking even as he spat blood. By this time, the sparring session gathered a large numbers of spectators. Lucien thought that maybe it was time to interfere, or his mate wouldn't have his talk with Kalin anytime soon. In spite of Kalin's undeniable skill as a fighter, Cade was clearly not using his full strength.

As if echoing Lucien's thoughts, the blow of a wing made Kalin practically fly across the training field. Kalin grunted at the impact with the floor, and Lucien caught the expression of concern on Cade's face. He sparred on numerous occasions with Cade, and he understood that the adrenaline of battle burned in his brother's blood. It was the way of the Xeetah, the fire that burned so bright that Cade temporarily forgot Kalin wasn't a demon, and therefore did not heal as efficiently as them.

Thankfully, Kalin seemed resilient, for he got up and smiled at his mate. “That was cheating, Cade.”

Lucien could see the relief in Cade’s eyes and caught his moment to intervene. “Cade has always been a cheater. He never could win fairly.”

He cast a furtive glance at Gabriel, nudging him discretely. Then he turned his full attention on his brother, who was analyzing him with open surprise. “Well, I most definitely didn’t expect to see you here today, little bro.”

Lucien shrugged, stepping into the ring. “I’ve been neglecting training lately. What’s say you and me have a little one-on-one, Xeetah style? Or has your mate exhausted you already?”

If Cade recognized the taunt for what it was, he showed no sign of it. “You’re on, little brother.” Cade grinned, and Lucien noticed a spark of gratitude in his violet eyes. Lucien guessed that Cade wanted to give his mate a break, but hadn’t found a way to do so without offending Kalin. “You don’t mind, love, do you? We can continue our match later.”

Kalin arched a brow, obviously seeing through the ploy. Nevertheless, he nodded. “Most definitely, Cade. We will continue later for sure.”

* * * *

Gabriel was entranced at his mate’s body as Lucien extended his wings, preparing to spar with his brother. Gabriel had never seen Lucien fight and he was suddenly hit by a wave of arousal he could barely quench. The way Lucien’s muscles worked as he charged his brother, those beautiful white wings.

Gabriel closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and forcing himself to focus. He hadn’t come here to lust over his mate. When his mind started working again, Gabriel forced himself to look away from the mouth-watering sight of his mate and direct his attention towards

Kalin and Orin instead. Kalin busied himself with cleaning himself of sweat and dust, at the same time engaged in a conversation with Orin. Zeli stood close by and Gabriel briefly debated whether it would be safe to discuss what he had in mind with Zeli present. He decided that he had no choice, especially since he didn't know when another opportunity to talk to Kalin alone would present itself. Besides, Cade was the one who had to be unaware of his idea, not Zeli.

Gabriel hastened towards his brothers, easily making his way through the crowd of demons. The way the Xeetahn soldiers parted for him somewhat made him uncomfortable. He put it out of his mind and focused on what he would have to say.

Panting, he finally got to his brothers' sides. Kalin saw him first, and his eyes glinted with annoyance. Kalin glared at Gabriel, practically growling at him. "What are you doing here, Gabriel? You should be resting after that dream, not running around at Lucien's whim."

Gabriel blinked, realizing that Kalin was actually angry for what Lucien said. He shook his head, determined to speak with his brother about his idea. "I asked him to come find you. I need to talk to you. Now."

Orin arched a brow, giving Gabriel a cold look. "Oh? Have you decided that we are worthy of your trust then?"

Gabriel unwillingly took a step back. He didn't consider the fact that he may have offended his brothers by not trusting them. He bit his lip nervously, considering sharing the dream.

But as the images flowed back into his head, he knew he couldn't do it. "I'm sorry. It's not that I don't trust you, I do. But—" Gabriel swallowed a lump in his throat and looked away, unable to finish.

Kalin grabbed Gabriel's arm. "Look, if it's a vision and it's a bad one, we should know about it so that we can protect you." His brother sighed as Gabriel maintained his silence. "Fine then, take your time but please, consider it."

Gabriel hastily assented, wanting the topic to be behind them. “So what did you want to speak about that was so important?” Orin asked, absently toying with his dagger.

Hoping that Orin would get over his anger, Gabriel took a deep breath and began to speak. “From what I understand, Cade’s injury was sustained a little over twenty years ago.”

Kalin gave Gabriel a warning look and said in a low voice, “Yes, that is correct, Gabriel.”

Gabriel nodded and continued, undeterred by his brother’s gaze. “If that is so, it is most likely that Cade is not suffering from the actual poison right now, but from its underlying effects.”

Kalin tilted his head. “I’m not sure I understand your point.”

“My point is that the poison was eliminated from Cade’s system, but it left a trace behind.”

Orin perked up, a light appearing in his eyes as he understood where Gabriel was heading. “But since we don’t have to fight the actual poison...”

“We might be able to help.” Kalin finished, and his violet eyes positively glowed with hope. “Of course! Why didn’t I think of it before? Little bro, I could kiss you right now.”

Gabriel blushed at his brother’s praise. In truth, it couldn’t be expected of Cade or Orin to think of something like that simply because they weren’t trained healers. Even if their Alarian magic was stronger, Gabriel always had more powerful healing abilities, and he often used them at Kirgen. His education there wasn’t too significant, but it taught him to use his healing talents and it helped him learn more about the resources of Alaria. He healed a lot of people before, and managed to help people with serious issues. Still, he didn’t kid himself. He realized that Cade’s problem was more complicated than any healings he ever dealt with, but that didn’t mean that there wasn’t a chance that he could help. In fact, he remembered reading that it could be indeed possible. Alarian healing powers could cure sterility. Gabriel only needed to find out if the poison that affected Cade had

indeed left the demon's body, the extent of the damage and the nature of the poison itself. It would be tricky, but Gabriel thought he could do it.

As Gabriel considered this, Kalin rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "It will be difficult though. Cade's refusing even me analyzing him. He says that there's no point, that he knows he's sterile, and I can't do anything to help."

At this, Zeli finally decided to intervene. "It's our way, Kalin. You must understand it is difficult for him to cope with the fact that he can't give you a family."

Gabriel made a face at Zeli's words. "Well, maybe he can. Maybe we can help. I mean, I haven't dealt with such problems before, but I've been taught that it's achievable, and I've healed extensive injuries before. And with Kalin and Orin's help..."

Orin lifted a hand, requesting attention. "So it has to be the three of us to make it work?"

Gabriel thought a little. "Well, it's like this. The fact that it's been so long is both an advantage and a disadvantage. An advantage because the poison is no longer in the system, and a disadvantage because so much time has passed that it will be very difficult to make Cade fertile again. From what I've been taught, sterility is not like a normal wound and the long time that Cade has suffered from it makes it more difficult to treat. By myself, I don't think I have the energy to do it. However, if we combined our powers together, there is a good chance that it would work. Of course, I can't know for sure since I haven't even analyzed Cade or know full details of his anatomy."

Kalin grimaced at Gabriel's words. "There is little chance that you will anytime soon. He's so stubborn sometimes."

"You can always blackmail him with sex." Zeli grinned, a sparkle of mischief in his bronze eyes.

Kalin gave Zeli a dirty look, but in the end he said, "If all else fails, I might just do that. Congratulations, Zeli, you've just sabotaged the sex life of your best friend."

Zeli groaned, apparently considering the implications of Kalin's words. "Just don't tell him it was my idea, okay?"

Orin laughed and leaned on Zeli, rubbing his bottom flirtatiously against his mate's groin. "Demons. They're sex fiends."

Kalin snorted at Orin's shameless display. "Like you're any better."

Gabriel blushed and stole a look at his own mate, suddenly feeling the need to touch Lucien like Orin touched Zeli. Lucien's body was drenched in sweat, and Gabriel licked his lips, wishing he could pass his tongue over those strong muscles, over Luce's spine, over.

Orin's voice shook him out of his lust-induced trance. "Hey, Lucien, I think you should finish with Kalin's mate already and deal with your own."

* * * *

At Orin's voice, Lucien looked up and at Gabriel. His body already buzzed with fire and the view of his lover staring at him with such open lust. He lost his focus, dropping his guard. As a result, he received a hard blow in his side, compliments of Cade's wing and dropped to the floor unceremoniously.

His brother laughed, even as he helped him up. "My bad, little bro. You should go to your mate." Cade's voice lowered as he stole a look at Kalin. "I think I might just do that myself."

Lucien nodded absently, struggling to put a damper on his arousal at least to the extent that he wouldn't ravish his mate in front of the whole Xeetahn army. Unfortunately, Cade's blow apparently roused Gabriel's protective instincts, because the next thing he knew he was engulfed in a cynathole-scented hug.

"Are you all right, Luce?" Gabriel whispered softly in his ear.

Lucien vaguely registered Cade's amusement, but it was so distant it didn't matter one bit. Suddenly, his world was Gabriel and the

warmth his body radiated. Lucien couldn't see straight, and everything else vanished but his mate.

He growled and swiftly turned, grabbing Gabriel into his arms and kissing him hard. His mate tasted sweet, like ripe cynathole fruit, and Lucien barely had the strength to separate their mouths. He wasn't sure how he had enough presence of mind not to ravish his mate right then and there, but years of discipline gave him enough presence of mind to take Gabriel into his arms and leave the training yard. Once they arrived in their chamber, he fully intended to compensate for the brief delay.

Gabriel wrapped his legs around Lucien's waist and moaned. Lucien wouldn't have thought it possible, but his arousal increased even more as the wanton sound escaped his mate's lips. "In a moment, baby." He whispered in Gabriel's ear. "In a moment, I'll give you what you need."

If Gabriel registered those words, he didn't show it. Instead, he started rubbing against Lucien, panting softly. At this point, Lucien gave up on attempting to hold onto his control, stopped walking and pushed Gabriel against the wall of the hallway. He took his mate's lips, ravaging his beautiful lover and fucking his mouth as he intended to fuck his ass as soon as they reached their chambers. His body urged him to just choose the first room available, but his mind and his heart knew he couldn't do that. He needed to respect his mate.

"Baby, you drive me crazy." Lucien said against Gabriel's lips. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

Gabriel gave him an innocent look, but Lucien could see the way his eyes sparkled in amused wickedness. Oh, yes, his mate knew exactly what he did to Lucien. Growling, Lucien took his lover into his arms again, feeling more than ever the need to claim his beautiful and perfect Gabriel.

Lucien groaned in relief when they finally reached his chambers. Bursting into the room, he headed directly towards the bed and deposited Gabriel on the comfortable pillows. Without wasting

another second, he tore at Gabriel's clothing desperately, placing kisses on each inch of skin he uncovered.

Each touch from Lucien drew another beautifully passionate sound from Gabriel. "Luce...Oh, Luce." Gabriel moaned, and Lucien took it as a cue to tear his own clothes off.

Taking a deep breath, Lucien murmured the lubrication spell, and smiled in satisfaction as his hand flamed. The warmth faded to leave behind the smooth liquid demons used for easing their way into their mates' bodies. Normally, Lucien enjoyed preparing his mate's passage with his own tongue, but the urgency he felt now wouldn't allow for a prolonged foreplay.

As much as Lucien wanted to be inside his mate, he would never hurt Gabriel by taking him without previous preparation. Luckily, Gabriel's body adapted to their active sex life. Gabriel arched his back as Lucien inserted a finger into his passage and showed no sign of pain when another finger followed. "Please, Luce! Fuck me!" Gabriel pleaded.

Unable to hold back any longer, Lucien lifted Gabriel's legs, sustaining his mate's body with his wings to reduce the strain. He pushed inside, groaning at the incredible sensation of his mate's channel gripping his cock. Even with Lucien's preparation, even if they'd fucked all night, Gabriel still felt amazingly tight.

Lucien angled his thrusts to hit Gabriel's special spot every time. His efforts were rewarded by the escalating volume of Gabriel's moans and pleas. Harder and harder, faster and faster, until nothing else remained but Gabriel, their bodies united, their souls entwined.

Lucien reached between them, to Gabriel's hard cock. A few strokes of Lucien's hand would have sufficed to push Gabriel into coming. At the last moment, Lucien changed his mind. He thrust inside his mate one more time, burying his fangs into Gabriel's throat at the same time.

With a cry, Gabriel climaxed, and Lucien immediately followed. For all his demon stamina, he could not withstand the avalanche of

sensation that coupling with Gabriel always brought. His mate's blood tasted like nectar and their bodies fit together perfectly. They'd been made for each other.

Collapsing at Gabriel's side, Lucien gathered his mate into his arms. "I love you, baby." He whispered softly.

"I love you too, Luce."

His mate closed his eyes and fell into exhausted slumber. Lucien smiled down at Gabriel's sleeping face, hugging his lover tightly. He couldn't help but wonder why his mate wanted to talk to Orin and Kalin with such urgency. Whatever the reason, though, it would have to wait. For now, Lucien would enjoy his time alone with his mate. He would find out soon enough.

Chapter 20

An annoying sound broke Lucien out of his exhaustion-induced sleep. He rolled in his bed, muttering a curse, but after a brief second, his mind started working, and his eyes flew open. Lucien breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that his mate rested peacefully and cuddled closer at his side at his movement. So the sound had not come from Gabriel.

The dilemma was solved when a knock sounded at the door. Lucien quietly cursed, but resolved answering nevertheless. Perhaps it was Cade and he needed to talk to someone? If he thought about it, Lucien had to admit that he still felt worried about his big brother. Despite his carefree appearance, Cade had never been one to easily display weakness. This problem with sterility sure hit him hard. Lucien hoped Cade didn't have problems with Kalin. It would be entirely possible that out of a surge of nobility, Cade would be pushed into breaking the mating with Kalin.

Lucien knew that should such a thing happen, Kalin wouldn't have a problem in finding another mate. He hadn't missed the appreciative gazes that the Xeetahn soldiers gave Kalin. He wasn't sure how Cade managed to take it without ripping some heads off. One look from them directed at Gabriel, and Lucien became rabid.

Carefully detaching himself from his mate, he went to answer the door. The knocking didn't seem as fervent as last time, and suddenly Lucien doubted that the one responsible for the noise was Cade. Ignoring the surge of irritation that came with that realization, he considered putting some clothes on, but changed his mind. He wasn't planning on having too much of a conversation with the person

knocking anyway. Maybe he'd wake up his mate, and they could work on making a son some more.

Decision made, Lucien opened the door. He found that indeed, it was not his brother, but a young Xeetahn soldier.

Lucien arched a brow, feeling silently thankful it wasn't the guard from last time. He wasn't completely over the look the demon soldier gave his mate. Probably this one was sent in his stead as precaution. Truly, that was probably a wise thing to do.

"My-my Lord." The demon stammered a little, and Lucien rubbed his eyes tiredly. Younglings.

As he struggled against the last remnants of sleep, he said, "Yes?"

The young demon looked down, and Lucien suppressed a grimace. The soldier must have been bullied into taking this task. Xeetahn society was harsh on younglings, but it was their way. Growing up, he and his brothers took even harsher tasks, since the princes needed to be the best of the best. Truly, it was ridiculous that the youngling would fear him so.

But as sleep finally drifted away, Lucien carefully analyzed the soldier, suddenly realizing that he seemed distinctly familiar. His eyes widened at the realization that the youngling wasn't so young after all, but one of his old bed warmers. He never slept around as much as Cade, but nevertheless demons were lusty creatures and he had his own fair share.

What was his name? Something with an X... Xander! Lucien felt a little guilty for forgetting the name of a person he'd slept with, but the guilt disappeared quickly as he noticed Xander's expression. Xander wore a positively predatory smile, admiring Lucien's nude state shamelessly with fire in his azure eyes.

Lucien silently cursed his stupidity. Xander surely had the wrong idea now, that maybe he wanted to continue the affair between them.

Lucien scowled at Xander. "Come on, then, say whatever you're going to say!"

Xander hesitated a little, but the seductive smile didn't disappear even as he flipped his green hair flirtatiously. He opened his mouth to say something, but another voice stopped him.

"Luce, who is it?"

Gabriel's sleepy voice and a distinctive noise of rustling of sheets sounded from the direction of the bed. Lucien inwardly cursed as his cock perked up at the sound of Gabriel's voice. Xander's smile grew and he licked his lips. Lucien froze. This most definitely did not look good. He did *not* need this. What possessed him to answer the door naked?

Xander had always been an overwhelmingly gorgeous demon, although in truth, there could be no comparing him with Gabriel. Of course, nobody was as beautiful as his mate. Regardless of this fact, if Gabriel saw him naked with a gorgeous demon guard, there would be hell to pay. He just knew it.

"No one, baby, just a guard." he shouted back.

Lucien turned his head at the louder rustling of sheets. His lover got up from the bed with a sheet wrapped around his waist providing modesty. Gabriel maintained himself out of view from the door and asked, "Oh? Something the matter?"

There was an undertone of irritation in Gabriel's voice, something Lucien heard before when they'd fought in the bathing chamber. He gulped and turned to the demon guard.

"I'm not entirely certain. What is it that you want, Xander?"

Xander smiled, his eyes glinting with lust. Lucien mentally cursed himself at falling in his old habit of calling the demon by his name. If not for his mate's waking up, he'd have shown Xander his place. But it was his own fault. Now that he had a mate, he should have shown more regard to Gabriel and not run around answering doors in nothing more than his skin.

"His Majesties, King Seyran and King Lyan are summoning you for dinner in the main hall."

Lucien barely contained his surprise. Dinner? When they left the throne room the day before, Lyan was a wreck. Why would his parents organize a formal dinner now?

Unfortunately for him, Gabriel shared his surprise and he moved from his spot and to the door, shielding his nudity with Lucien's. Lucien tensed as Gabriel observed the soldier, who studied them unabashedly, not bothering to disguise his interest.

Obviously, Gabriel noticed, because he grabbed Lucien's waist in a death grip.

The demon soldier just smiled at Gabriel's display. "Greetings, Your Highness. It's so nice to finally meet you," Xander purred.

Lucien wanted to kick out his former lover before he said anything worse, but he couldn't actually do that, now that he'd greeted Gabriel. "Greetings. And you are?"

Xander answered Gabriel with an elegant bow. "My name is Xander, Your Highness. My Lord Lucien and I know each other well."

Lucien felt Gabriel's body tense against his own and took a deep breath so as not to smash Xander's perfect nose. What the hell was wrong with this demon?

"Is that so?" Gabriel whispered. "That's very interesting." Then Gabriel did the unthinkable. He dropped the black sheets, caressing Lucien's spine with his slender fingers. "I didn't have time to meet any of Lucien's friends. It's very nice to meet you."

Lucien felt his eyes flare, and all his anger against Xander turned to lust directed at his mate. He ignored the fact that probably Xander was about to answer Gabriel and growled, "Right, thanks for transmitting the message. We'll be there."

Slamming the door shut in Xander's smirking face, he grabbed Gabriel's shoulders and pushed him against the door, placing an aggressive kiss on his mate's full lips. Gabriel answered the kiss greedily, rubbing his body against Lucien's wantonly.

Lucien had to break the kiss to breathe, and the small respite gave Gabriel enough time to push him away. Lucien groaned at the anger on his mate's face. It made him hot and frustrated at the same time.

"What the hell was up with that?" Gabriel snapped. Oh, yes, he wasn't getting any in the near future.

* * * *

Gabriel glared at his mate, putting his hands on his hips. He was so angry with Lucien. How dare he flirt with that demon like that? Lucien was his mate. *His!* Not Xander's, not anybody else's. *His!*

"Well, explain. Why on Kaldor were you nude in the hallway with that, that... demon?"

Lucien scratched his head awkwardly. "To be honest, I didn't think it would be necessary to put on clothes."

Gabriel gaped at his mate. "Excuse me? Because Xander has already seen you naked, right? Is that it?"

Lucien grabbed his hands in a panicked gesture. "No, no. It's not like that."

"Don't lie to me, Luce! Don't you dare lie!" Gabriel shouted, breaking from Lucien's grip.

Lucien sighed, passing a hand through his blond hair. "Baby, I admit, I slept with Xander. But it was before I met you. And it was different. It was just sex, I swear."

Gabriel bit his lip, trying to calm down. "Yeah, well, apparently, you're not entirely over it." He nodded towards the cock now proudly jutting, hard and leaking, between Lucien's legs.

He knew that Lucien had been with other people of course, but he hadn't expected to feel this surge of possessiveness, of insane jealousy. He never actually felt something like that. He wasn't a jealous or rancorous person, but he wanted to hurt Xander. And he wanted to hurt Lucien for being a deceitful bastard.

Gabriel looked away from his mate, not being able to look at Lucien all of the sudden. He felt torn between hurt and anger. He wanted to cry and to scream. He didn't know what to do.

Taking a deep breath, Gabriel fought for calm and thought a little. He didn't know the Xeetahn ways. He'd thought from what he caught on that they were strictly monogamous. But what if they weren't? What if Lucien wanted someone else in his life? This Xander? What if Gabriel wasn't enough for Lucien?

At that thought, Gabriel found himself helpless to stop the tears that started flowing, sinking to his knees and burying his face in his hands. He heard Lucien curse and then he was enveloped in a Clarion-scented hug. He tensed and immediately wanted to break away, but Lucien wouldn't let him.

"Baby, I swear, only for you. Only for you. Not Xander, not anybody else."

Gabriel let the words flow into his heart. He wanted to believe it truly, but Luce had so many lovers in the past. Could he really just stop? Just like that?

Biting his lip, Gabriel nodded. He hated Xander for this uncertainty but he knew that even if Lucien wasn't satisfied with him, he could never leave his demon lover.

"I'm sorry, Luce." He sniffled. "I'm being stupid."

Lucien caressed his cheek gently. "No, baby, not at all. It's my fault. I shouldn't have gone out like that. I should know better."

Gabriel forced a smile on his face. "If you ever want to, you know, with other people, I'll totally understand." He ignored the way his throat constricted when saying this, the way his heart hurt. He nodded for emphasis. "I won't mind, truly."

Lucien stared in silence at him, as if not entirely believing what he'd just said.

"What on Kaldor are you talking about, Gabriel?"

Gabriel winced at Lucien's tone. "I was just saying, if you wanted to—"

Lucien pushed him on the floor, shielding his fall with his hands and pressing an aggressive kiss to his mouth.

“Never say that again, never.”

He passed his tongue over Gabriel’s ear, whispering. “I’m a very jealous person, baby. I don’t share. And I don’t want anyone else but you.”

And then Gabriel’s world became Lucien’s hands roaming his body, Lucien’s cock thrusting inside him, Lucien’s fangs at his throat. And he forgot about everything else except the fire consuming them both.

* * * *

Lucien flew down the stairs with his mate in his arms. The clock chimed, an ominous sound that let him know how late they were for the dinner with his sires.

He moved swift as lightning through the castle, grateful for his supernatural speed and stamina. When he got in front of the dining hall, he wasn’t even breathing hard, but they were still awfully late.

When they finally finished with their impromptu match of lovemaking, he’d been freaked to realize that the time of the dinner had come and gone. They washed and dressed in record time, but it hadn’t made much difference.

As they got to the door, Lucien analyzed his mate. Gabriel seemed thoughtful and silent, and it flashed through Lucien’s mind that maybe his mate wasn’t completely over the Xander incident. Putting his lover down, he cornered Gabriel against the wall.

Gabriel’s eyes widened, “L-luce... We’re already so late.”

Lucien shrugged his mate’s words away. “Don’t worry about it. It doesn’t matter.” Surprisingly, it didn’t. Right now, what mattered most was to clarify this issue before Gabriel dug himself into it deeper. “I love you and only you and I want you and only you. I will

repeat this again and again, until you believe me and your pretty head stops being crowded with thoughts that have no business being there.”

“But Luce, I...”

Lucien grinned, interrupting whatever his mate wanted to say with a brief kiss. Then placing butterfly kisses all over Gabriel’s face, he whispered over and over, “I love only you and I want only you.”

Gabriel relaxed in his embrace, and it occurred to Lucien that maybe this wasn’t so wise. They were in the main hallway after all, and having someone walk in on him ravishing his mate would be most unpleasant.

He cleared his throat. “You believe me then, baby?”

Gabriel met his eyes and was silent for a moment. Then burying his head in Lucien’s shoulder, he nodded. “I believe you. I’m so sorry. I got so angry at you for not trusting me and here I am, doing exactly the same thing.”

Lucien placed a brief peck on Gabriel’s forehead, “It’s all right, Gabriel.” His mouth spread into a grin. “Actually, it flattered me terribly to see you jealous.”

A charming blush spread on Gabriel’s cheeks. “I couldn’t help it. It just made me so angry.”

Lucien growled a little, and Gabriel’s blush deepened. “Also made you very sexy. But then again, you’re always sexy.”

Gabriel whimpered in distinct arousal, and Lucien couldn’t help but take the mouth of his mate yet again. He would have probably forsaken all thoughts of attending his sires’ dinner if not for the distinct sounds of wings flapping closing in.

Lucien halted the kiss, whispering in his mate’s ear. “Someone’s coming.”

Gabriel’s midnight black eyes widened and Lucien thought in amusement that his mate had forgotten where they were. He laughed at Gabriel’s panicked expression, when his lover started arranging his braid and robes. He didn’t have the heart to point out that Gabriel practically seduced him in front of Xander. He knew it was jealousy

at work there, and in normal circumstances, Gabriel would have never put on such a display.

Lucien glanced surreptitiously at his mate even as he arranged his own hair. Gabriel seemed to be back to normal, but he'd make sure of it soon enough. They'd have a little chat with Xander just in case. He didn't want the shadow of doubt over his mating.

As the sound of wings came closer, Lucien heard voices. He strained his hearing and he couldn't hold back a grin.

"It's all your fault, you big oaf." Orin sounded angry, almost fierce. "We wouldn't be late if you didn't—"

"Oh, come on, sweet." Zeli's voice interrupted. "You needed to rest some anyway. What better method of relaxation?"

"Yeah, yeah. That's what you do, abuse a person when he's weak. You, you abuser!"

Gabriel snickered and the wing flapping halted abruptly, as Zeli emerged triumphantly, holding Orin to his chest. For all his complaining, Orin looked supremely satisfied, cuddled at the chest of his red-headed mate. It passed through Lucien's mind that Orin looked as comfortable as a pig in shit, and he barely managed to restrain his laughter at his own comparison.

Meanwhile, Zeli took advantage of their presence. "See, Gabriel and Lucien are just here as well. You worry for naught, sweet."

Orin waved a regal hand, and Zeli placed him down. He flipped his impeccable lavender hair and analyzed Lucien and Gabriel critically. For a brief second, it occurred to Lucien how much he looked like the Alarian queen, but the impression vanished instantly as Orin's mouth split into a grin.

"You too, huh?"

Gabriel blushed, barely meeting his brother's gaze, and Orin sighed theatrically, grabbing Gabriel's arm. "I tell you, brother dearest, it is a real toil to be mated with these demons. Sex fiends they are."

Lucien struggled to contain his mirth, since he didn't want Orin to make Gabriel uncomfortable. Luckily, Zeli intervened, grinning at his mate's antics. "Come on, sweet, stop clowning around! I thought you were worried about being late."

Orin stuck out his tongue in a childish gesture, but nevertheless, he didn't oppose Zeli when the red-headed demon took his arm and stepped away towards the door.

Zeli winked and Lucien followed his example, taking Gabriel's arm. "Well, here goes nothing."

* * * *

Gabriel's felt butterflies in his stomach as the door to the dining room opened and he walked in holding Lucien's arm. The last meeting with the demon kings didn't so well, Seyran seemed truly angry with his sons. The issue with Cade's sterility truly hurt his sires, practically propelling them to the past, reminding them of the pain they'd felt twenty-two years ago.

To his surprise, he walked to a room adorned as if for a celebration. Lyan sat on a couch with Kalin, apparently in the middle of a friendly chat with him before their entry. Seyran had taken his mate's example and engaged his oldest son in conversation, nursing a drink.

Gabriel could barely contain a sound of surprise. It seemed such a friendly gathering, to the point of being downright unusual. He couldn't believe the way Lyan was sitting by his brother's side, like they were the best of friends. The last time they spoke with the demon kings, Kalin was accused of being incompatible with Cade, and Seyran even mentioned breaking their mate bond.

There seemed to be none of that tension left now. Lyan actually seemed genuinely happy when he got up to greet them.

"Ah, greetings. I'm so glad you're finally here."

Seyran gave the newly arrived group a stern look. “You’re late. The dinner was supposed to have started an hour ago.”

Lyan waved a hand, disregarding his mate’s words. “Never mind that, beloved. I’m sure the delay is entirely justifiable.” He winked towards the party of four, and Gabriel was sure he walked into some other dimension. What was going on?

The king consort must have guessed his doubts because he laughed, and pointed to sitting spaces all over the room. “Come now. Please sit down.” He pressed a device on the table, and a servant appeared from a side door. “Prepare the table, please. My sons and their mates are finally here.”

The servant bowed respectfully. “Yes, Your Highness. At once.”

The side door closed as the demon servant efficiently disappeared to do his duty. Lyan clapped his hands together. “Well now, while the servants finish arranging the meal, I’m sure you’re wondering why you’ve been called here.”

Seyran got up from his seat next to Cade. “As we have already told Cade and Kalin here, we have decided that the hostility we’ve shown has been an entirely inadequate and unjustifiable attitude.”

Lyan smiled at them, and his eyes looked warm as he continued Seyran’s words. “We owe all of you an apology.”

Gabriel felt too stunned to speak. An apology? From the Xeetahn kings? It was unheard of for royalty to apologize. Surely, traditions could not be so different here.

He stole a look at his mate, who looked as astonished as he felt. Lucien cleared his throat and managed to answer the kings. “Truly, my sires, you need not apologize.”

Lyan huffed, silencing his son with a gesture of his hand. “Hush, now. It is an honest apology, from two sires to their sons.” His smile warmed. “We are just family now, not royalty.”

The king consort turned to Zeli and Orin. “Of course, the two of you are included, since I have considered Zeli as my own from the moment he was brought here so many years ago.”

Zeli lowered his gaze, looking distinctly touched. “I could never thank you enough, my lords, for your kindness.”

Seyran came up to Zeli and clapped him on the shoulder. “None of that, boy. I do not expect you to call us sires, since I know how much you cared about your own family. Nevertheless, you are part of this family, whether you like it or not.”

Gabriel was speechless. Seyran and Lyan had been nice before, only to make a radical turn later on. He felt unsure of the Xeetahn kings’ purpose, but he knew that he couldn’t trust this sudden change of heart.

Evidently he was an open book for the king consort, because Lyan smiled warmly at him. “I understand that you must feel confused and more than a little reluctant to trust our apology. Nevertheless, I assure you that it is honest. And I will tell you the reason as well.”

“Kaze, there’s no need, really,” Cade interjected.

Lyan ignored his oldest son, and his expression turned pained as he spoke. “As you surely realized, the death of my youngest born, Cain, hurt me a lot, and it still does to this day. When Cade mentioned him the other day, it shook me the core and it took me back to a period I’d rather not remember. Nevertheless, I must admit that I am thankful for it, because both Seyran and myself realized how we’ve acted with you.”

Seyran moved back to his mate, hugging Lyan from behind. “My beloved is right. We lost ourselves in petty issues and forgot to be parents. We will not make the same mistake again.”

“Thank you very much.” Orin said softly, surprising Gabriel. “We appreciate it a lot, Your Highnesses.”

Lyan grinned at Orin. “None of that, young one. If you can’t call us parents yet, our names will be fine. Also if I may be so bold... You are carrying, yes?”

Orin stiffened and said nothing. Gabriel realized that there was still the matter of the lie they’d said in the beginning. He opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by Seyran. “Don’t

bother, youngling. We knew from the very beginning that you were not mated with our sons.”

Gabriel’s face flushed as embarrassment overwhelmed him. He prayed for the ground to open so that he wouldn’t have to bear this conversation. He found himself forced to answer. “I... We were... We were afraid and... confused.”

Lyan walked to Gabriel’s side. “I know that, youngling. It was wrong of us to push you the way we did.”

A knock sounded, and Gabriel turned to see the same servant as before opening the side door. “Dinner is served, Your Highnesses.”

Seyran nodded. “Thank you, Zither. Shall we move to the table then?”

“I think that would be best.” Lucien answered, his posture still a little tense.

Lyan patted his son on the arm. “Stop worrying, dear heart. You always worry for everything. What’s say we start over and forget all about these unpleasant issues?”

Gabriel didn’t know if it would be wise to trust in Lyan, but he did know that his family was very important for Lucien. So he jumped at the chance the king consort offered. “We’d like that. Thank you very much.”

Lyan smiled, nodding and moved to where Seyran waited. A servant opened the door to an adjoining room, boasting a long dining table. They sat down, and a host of servants started bringing platter after platter until the table was full of several dishes of exotic foods. Gabriel didn’t have time to analyze any of the dishes on the table though, because Lyan suddenly asked, “Well, then, tell me, Orin, Gabriel, have you thought about names for your younglings?”

Orin choked on the glass of water he’d been drinking, and Gabriel suppressed a snicker. His brother still had trouble with the idea of the pregnancy, despite the fact that he limited his complaints visibly.

Zeli gently tapped his mate on the back, earning an entirely non-justified glare. Orin wiped his eyes. “Sorry about that. I seem to have choked.”

Lyan tactfully hid his smile, but his ice-blue eyes glittered with amusement. “Oh, no, nothing to be sorry about. Are you all right?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” Orin said, and Gabriel could read the beginning of irritation in his brother’s voice.

“Would you like something to drink, sweet? Or maybe some fruit. These are great and easy to swallow,” Zeli suggested.

A snicker escaped Kalin, earning a glare from his brother, but as Gabriel expected, Zeli took the brunt of Orin’s anger.

“Zeli,” Orin snapped. “I said I’m fine. I can eat, thank you very much. Stop acting like this. You’re embarrassing me.”

“Now, now, youngling,” Lyan interjected, his soft voice focusing on Orin. “Be patient with him. It is natural. This one—” he nodded towards Seyran, “—wouldn’t even let me get out of bed during my pregnancy with Cade. He was horrible. He wanted to go with me even to the privy.”

Seyran made a face, suddenly looking embarrassed. “Stop, beloved! I wasn’t so bad.”

Lyan crossed his arms, giving his mate an amused look. “You were and you know it. Now, we were discussing youngling names.”

Gabriel couldn’t help but think that this conversation was somewhat inadequate, taking into account Cade’s sterility. He noticed Orin stealing a look at Kalin and Cade, just as he was. Cade arched a brow, and Seyran shook his head. “Your concern is admirable, but you needn’t fret. It’s not like Cade isn’t going to see the babies grow in your bellies and in this house anyway.”

Gabriel studied the two demon kings and caught a flash of pain in their eyes. That’s when realization struck. They were trying to prepare their son for a life of being without offspring. He shared a look with Kalin over the table, and his brother discreetly shook his head. He hadn’t been able to speak with Cade about it.

Interrupting the sudden silence, Orin suddenly said, “We were thinking Cyan.”

Seyran smiled, seemingly pleased by the choice. “Cyan is a good name. Your Destyan would be proud, Zeli.”

Zeli beamed and whispered something Gabriel couldn’t hear in Orin’s ear.

Seyran smirked and turned, allowing the couple a moment of privacy. “And what about you, Gabriel, Lucien? Have you thought about it?”

Gabriel gulped, suddenly feeling afraid to tell the demon kings what name they’d chosen.

“Well, we’re sort of not sure if I’m with a child yet.”

Lucien squeezed his hand and finished. “But we have decided on a name. Cain. I trust you agree?”

Lyan seemed frozen for a second then tears filled his eyes, “Of course I agree. Your brother would be so happy.” He wiped his tears. “I apologize. I’m acting so embarrassingly today.”

“This whole day seems to be meant for awkwardness and embarrassment. You haven’t called Lucien *dear heart* since he was ten, Kaze,” Cade pointed out with a chuckle, causing Lucien to flush and Zeli to snicker.

But Zeli’s amusement died when Orin squeezed his arm. “Zeli... I don’t feel so well.”

Zeli paled and similar looks of concern turned towards Orin. The redhead took his mate into his arms. “Sweet? Where do you hurt?”

Orin groaned. “Bathroom, now!”

Zeli grabbed his mate in his arms and hastened to the bathroom located across the dining room. Through the open door, Gabriel could hear the sound of retching start almost instantly. Gabriel bit his lip nervously, and they waited in silence until Zeli returned with Orin in his arms.

Zeli carefully put his mate on a chair, pouring some water in a glass for Orin to drink. Orin snatched it irritably, snapping at Zeli. “I can drink by myself, thank you.”

A collective sigh of relief sounded in the room, and Orin harrumphed.

Kalin got up, ruffling his brother’s hair. “If you can be a bitch, it means you’re just fine.”

“You’ll have trouble with this one, Zeli.” Seyran grinned as he glanced at his adopted son and chosen mate. “He’s a handful.”

Zeli placed a kiss on Orin’s forehead. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Gabriel took Lucien’s hand beneath the table and smiled. A burden lifted off his heart as he watched his brother growl at Zeli and the kings chuckle at Orin’s outbursts.

“Indeed. And on this note, we have a gift for you.”

Seyran nodded solemnly, signaling for the servant to come in. On cue, they appeared, bearing a box encased in golden-embroidered satin.

Gabriel looked at box, confused and dared a glance at Lucien. His mate practically gaped in shock. Gabriel poked Lucien in the ribs. “Luce? What’s going on?”

Lucien turned towards him, intending to answer. But Lyan lifted a hand, stopping him. “Please, dear heart. Let me speak.”

Lucien nodded at his sire and remained silent. Gabriel turned to look around the table, observing the fact that his brothers bore twin expression of confusion, mirroring his own.

“I know you do not understand a lot of these things, my sons,” Lyan began. “And it is our fault, because we should have been there for the beginning of your mating.”

Seyran cleared his throat, holding on the hand of his mate. “Indeed, we should have done this a while ago, but we will try to make amends now.”

He gestured to the servant and on his command, the box was placed at the head of the table. Immediately, Seyran opened the box, and Gabriel curiously stole a look inside.

Gabriel gasped as he saw what the box contained. Three sets of bracelets, one bronze encased with crimson, one violet combined with gold, and one ice-blue combined with platinum, all artistically crafted with old Xeetahn symbols in a shape that resembled a flame. The size and pattern of the flame were each different, and Gabriel was astounded at the detailed art work.

“These were made the very day you were born, in preparation for your future mating. In your case, Zeli, it is your own sires who fashioned it and it was passed to us when you arrived here.”

Seyran pushed the box forward, and the younger demons took the hint, standing up and taking their corresponding bracelets. Lucien looked at the flame bracelets in his hand, as if in doubt.

“But, Destyan, we can’t—”

Seyran lifted a hand. “Hold on a minute, Lucien. I can see on your faces, my dear Alarian sons, that you are confused. To be brief, these bracelets have more or less a ceremonial purpose, signifying the union between you and each of your mates. The actual mating has already occurred, in a more *private* environment.”

At the demon king’s words, Gabriel felt his face flame, and Kalin shifted in his seat uncomfortably. Orin looked at them, amusement sparkling in his lavender eyes, before turning to the king. “So, how do we use them?”

“Well, the ceremony in which the mating is celebrated consists in the two mates exchanging bracelets.”

Gabriel looked at the king curiously. “Exchanging bracelets? But we don’t have anything like that.”

He blushed harder when he realized that he’d spoken out loud and now Seyran’s attention turned to him. “True and it is to be expected. Normally, Xeetahn sires deal with such aspects, and naturally, you

couldn't have been prepared. But, taking into account the circumstance, we took the liberty of arranging something else."

On cue, the door opened again and the demon servant silently placed another box on the table. It looked similar, and yet so very different than the one containing Lucien's bracelets. Gabriel couldn't help but wonder what the Xeetahn kings came up with to bridge the gap between their sons and their Alarian mates.

When the servant retreated, Lyan took the second box, opening it with a small smile.

The dining room fell into silence. Three more sets of bracelets, one purple entwined with dark blue, one lavender and one blacker than black shone magnificently from their satin casing. Gabriel felt his eyes fill with tears as Lyan spoke again. "Do you like them? They were done on short notice, but we had the metal smiths slave over them all night."

"They're lovely," Gabriel said softly as he got up and extended his hand, gently touching the bracelet he easily identified as his own. "Can I...?"

Lyan smiled at him indulgently. "Of course, youngling. They are yours."

Gabriel took his own fire bracelets, tracing the intricate patterns on the metal with his finger. He smiled up at Lucien, and his mate wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "See? I told you everything would be all right," Lucien whispered softly as he started placing the bracelet on Gabriel's hand.

"Wait, dear heart. Just a second."

Lyan opened a window, and a bolt of flame shot out of his hand and into the night sky. Seconds later, Xeetah started flying in, dressed in their finest clothes. Gabriel's eyes widened as demon after demon landed on the dining room floor and started singing a rhythmic tune in what had to be old Xeetahn.

Everybody cheered as the demons ended their song and the ceremony began. Gabriel was completely oblivious to the noise, too

lost in Lucien's ice blue eyes to care about anybody else. Tears flowed down his cheeks as the flame bracelets slipped on his wrists, and his hands trembled slightly as he echoed Lucien's gesture. The image of his mate looked slightly blurry as Gabriel looked up and beamed. A second later, Lucien's mouth took his own, and his senses were assaulted by the comforting and arousing scent of Clarion.

As Lucien finally separated their mouths, Gabriel cuddled into his demon's embrace and looked around the dining room. Orin and Kalin bore twin expressions of bliss, their own mates looking at them with fire and love in their eyes. Could it be that things were finally looking up for them?

Epilogue

“So let me get this straight. You think you can heal me of the poison that’s been in my blood for over twenty years?”

Gabriel hesitated at the barely concealed hostility in Cade’s voice. He didn’t want to give the man false hopes, but they had to try. He was almost certain it could be done, if only Cade would be willing to make the attempt. “I’ve done a lot of healing in the past. There is a chance that I can help you.”

Kalin took his mate’s hand and gave him an almost pleading look. “Come on, Cade. If there’s a chance...”

The demon sighed and Gabriel’s heart ached for his pain. He couldn’t even imagine what they were going through, especially acknowledging the fact that Zeli and Lucien didn’t have any problems in their mating. “You’ll try it then?”

In a sense, he knew that Cade would try it the moment the man stepped through the door, if not for himself, then for his mate. If Kalin managed to convince him into this discussion, the battle was already half won. Still, he couldn’t be certain until the demon gave them his answer.

“I’ll try it.” Cade replied morosely.

“Perfect.” Orin clapped his hands, satisfied. He could not help in the procedure, since the doctor forbade him from any effort that could jeopardize his baby. But Gabriel thought that for him, it would be safe, since he didn’t seem to be in Orin’s situation.

Gripping Kalin’s hand in his own, he took a deep breath and summoned his power. The healing magic obediently came forth, more tamed and potent now that he’d come of age. He felt his brother

summoning his own healing power, which, albeit limited, would help if they were to heal Cade.

Their entwined magic slipped into Cade's body. Kalin was not a skilled healer, but Gabriel managed to guide them both, carefully inspecting all the muscles and arteries that could have been a reason for Cade's problem. At first, he didn't detect any traces of the poison Cade mentioned, but he knew it had to be there, deeper, hidden somewhere and preventing Cade from being happy. Gabriel searched more and more, his magic delving deeper into Cade's body, until he finally found what he was looking for. He could now easily see the damage done to Cade's reproductive system by the incident that killed their younger brother. As he'd suspected, the poison had, indeed, disappeared. Either way, Gabriel could tell that Cade was right about one thing. The poison's effect looked like nothing he'd dealt with. He wondered what exactly could have caused this damage. It was as if some sort of peculiar blaze burned Cade's body inside out, an unnatural and evil flame.

Suppressing a shudder at the thought, Gabriel continued to inspect Cade's internal injuries. Gently analyzing, he smiled as he realized that, indeed, he could help Cade. It would take time, but Cade could be healed.

He felt Kalin's joy as this thought slipped into his brother's mind. Just as he was about to begin the first session of healing, a sudden feeling of weakness and nausea gripped him. He lost the connection with his magic and was brutally propelled back into his own body.

Gabriel heard a flurry of movement around him and then a concerned voice in his ear. "Gabriel? Baby, are you all right?"

"I don't know. Something went wrong." Gabriel tried to push back his dizziness and to focus on Lucien's figure. "Luce... I don't feel so..."

He didn't manage to say anything else. He felt himself being lifted, heard more voices around him shout and then everything turned into a blur.

The next thing Gabriel knew was the feel of a soft bed beneath his cheek. He struggled against the peculiar feeling of exhaustion and cracked his eyes open. “What happened?”

“You fainted, youngling.” Gabriel recognized the voice as belonging to Lyan.

Rubbing his eyes, he looked at the king consort. “Where’s Luce?”

“I’m afraid he was threatening to attack me if I touched you any further so we had to throw him out.” Gabriel’s eyes went to the source of the new voice. It sounded vaguely familiar, and the face of the demon who’d spoken seemed familiar as well. Straining his memory, Gabriel identified the person as being Tayin, the palace medic.

“Am I sick?” He blurted out without further thought.

“You’re not sick, youngling.” Lyan soothed.

“As far as we can tell, you’re with child.” Tayin explained. “Congratulations.”

Gabriel gaped at the medic in shock. At first, he didn’t really understand how it could be possible for a male to be pregnant. In his land, such a thing was inconceivable, and in truth, since he wasn’t a demon, he shouldn’t have been able to give Lucien an heir. But demon anatomy was nothing like the Alarian one, and it seemed that Lucien’s seed indeed allowed him to bear a child, just like Zeli’s did with Orin. Still, he couldn’t help but be surprised.

“Therefore, Prince Gabriel, you must take great care of yourself. The fact that you are not a demon may influence the outcome of the pregnancy, but then again, it may not. I must admit your situation is uncommon. You will not be able to birth naturally, that is one thing that is certain.”

“What do you mean?” Gabriel asked, the shock vanishing to leave behind a terrible fear.

Tayin looked a little embarrassed at his question. “Because of your race, birthing the child through your nether passage would endanger both of you. Therefore, you will probably have to undergo surgery.”

Gabriel felt himself pale at those words. “It’s quite a common procedure.” The medic noted. “Granted, we normally don’t use it for firstborns, but it is the adequate method for you.”

“You needn’t worry about it, Gabriel. Alarians may not heal as fast as we do, but the surgery isn’t complicated.” Lyan explained. “I myself underwent it when I birthed my third child.” A shadow of pain passed through the king consort’s eyes, and for a second, none of the occupants of the room knew what to say.

Thankfully, the medic found a way to break the awkward atmosphere and began to speak again. “At any rate, like I was telling your brother the other day, the fact remains that you need to be very careful with your diet, the magic you use. No significant efforts and especially nothing that can upset you. You can have sexual contact with your mate, but later on, you will need to take greater care – no acrobatics or roughness in the bedroom.”

“What about now?” The question slipped out before Gabriel could help it. “We can do what we want now, right?”

Tayin nodded, eyes wide and Gabriel felt extremely embarrassed at his own wantonness. It didn’t matter anymore, though. As the medic went on to explain further details on what he should eat or avoid, realization finally struck. He would have a child. Lucien’s child. A family with his mate, just like he wanted. His dream would finally come true.

* * * *

Lucien paced nervously outside his chambers, his wings rustling anxiously around him. “This isn’t right. The law states that I should be in there with him.”

“It’s your fault you got thrown out so shut up,” Kalin barked at him irritably.

Cade nodded sagely at his mate's words. "If you stopped snapping and growling every time Tayin touched Gabriel, you would still be there with him."

"Besides, Gabriel is safe," Orin pointed out. "His Highness is there with him. Stop worrying."

Lucien wanted to say that it wasn't Lyan who had to watch Gabriel while the doctor examined him, that it was his duty and his privilege as a mate. However, he remained silent. They had a point. It was his own fault for being thrown out.

The door suddenly opened, and Tayin exited the room, a serious expression on his face. "Well?" Lucien immediately asked, barely suppressing a glare. He hoped that Tayin hadn't tried anything, or wasn't secretly lusting for Gabriel, because if he did, the palace would need a new medic.

Thoughts of revenge and different methods of slaying the medic instantly disappeared from his mind upon hearing Tayin's response. "Yes, my Lord. You will definitely be a father."

A flurry of dark robes dashed from the room, and next thing he knew, Lucien found himself with an armful of excited Alarian. "Did you hear, Luce?" Gabriel squealed enthusiastically. "I am with a child."

Lucien petted Gabriel's hair, still in a daze. He was going to be a father? A son, their son.

He was snapped out of his trance by Tayin's stern admonishment. "Please, calm down, Your Highness. You need to take better care of yourself now."

Gabriel stilled instantly, his attention on the Xeetahn doctor. Tayin cleared his throat and continued to speak, his tone pretentious and academic. "As I was saying, demon pregnancies are very sensitive. And there is the additional complication of you and His Highness, Prince Orin, not being of demon blood."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lucien growled, his eyes flashing an angry red.

“Please, Prince Lucien,” Tayin said calmly. “There is no reason to be snappish. I mean no offense. It is strictly from a medical point of view. Taking into account your mate’s ancestry, it is very likely that he will not be able to birth naturally.”

Lucien’s anger drained out of him instantly as he paled. “But it is safe for him to carry the child?” he asked, almost fearfully. The very thought of choosing between his son and his mate chilled him to the bone, but if he had to, he would choose Gabriel any day.

For the first time that day, the medic smiled brightly. “Worry not, Your Highness,” he said warmly. “Your mate is a very healthy young man. With care and attention, there should be no problems.”

“See, dear heart! You worry for naught.” Lucien’s eyes turned to his father. Lyan hugged his son from behind and laughed happily. “Don’t worry. We’ll take good care of Gabriel and young Cain. Thank you, Tayin. That will be all.”

The medic bowed low in front of Lyan and took his leave. Lyan clapped his hands and grinned happily. “Well now, I think a celebration is in order. But for now...” He gave Gabriel and Orin a stern and meaningful look. “You two need to rest. There’s been a lot of excitement today, and we can’t chance anything going wrong.”

Taking his cue, Zeli scooped his mate into his arms. Orin yelped, struggling in Zeli’s hold. “Put me down, you big oaf! I can walk by myself.”

“Young one, we’re perfectly aware that you can walk.” Lyan said sternly. “But for now, leave your pride aside and allow yourself to be pampered!”

“Besides, sweet, we still have something important to finish.”

Orin flushed a deep red but stopped struggling. He prince was still very uncomfortable with the idea of birthing a child. Gabriel told Lucien in confidence that he suspected Orin actually did love the idea of having a son. However, Orin’s temper remained a problem, and something that worried both the medic and the Alarian brothers. Since

demon pregnancies were so delicate, it was highly recommended that the carrier should be calm and relaxed at all times.

“Ok, ok,” Orin muttered darkly to Zeli, looking away from the demon king’s stern look. “But you still owe me a massage.”

“Whatever you want, sweet,” Zeli answered, beaming at his mate. “I ordered a new supply of Lithidian oils and some chocolate cake.”

“I just love those oils. They smell so delicious but the cake you ordered for yourself. Stop eating so many sweets. I swear if you get fat there’s no way I’m sleeping with you.”

Everybody remained silent as the couple vanished in the direction of Zeli’s quarters. Lyan just shook his head and sighed. “Those two... They really are hopeless.”

“They’re happy,” Gabriel noted, smiling brightly.

“Yes, they are,” Kalin answered, his tone so flat it created an almost appalling contrast with Gabriel’s enthusiastic one.

Nobody had the time to comment upon this, because Cade effectively saved the situation. “Well then. If you don’t mind, we’re taking our leave as well,” Cade said, already pulling Kalin away and disappearing in the opposite direction of Zeli and Orin.

“I worry about them.” Lyan sighed, his eyes sad as they watched the disappearing silhouettes of the two.

Gabriel gave the king a sad smile, and Lucien knew exactly what thoughts passed through his mate’s mind. They’d decided to remain silent regarding Gabriel’s idea to help Cade since they weren’t entirely certain it would work. They didn’t want Lyan and Seyran to get their hopes up if the plan turned out to be a failure. Lucien felt secretly thankful for that. Now with Gabriel’s pregnancy, the plan would have to be on hold. Gabriel couldn’t risk his son and there was no way Kalin could heal his mate by himself.

Lyan shook his head, as if trying to dispel the dark thoughts that encroached upon his good mood. “Ok, then. I’m going to go as well. That mate of mine needs a break from the business of the kingdom.”

Lyan tried for a light tone, but Lucien could tell his Kazyan felt also deeply pained about Cade's situation. He pretended not to see it, since saying anything would just embarrass Lyan. In the end, there was nothing he could do for his sire. "Ok, Kaze. See you at dinner."

Lyan nodded absently. "See you then. And congratulations again, dear heart!"

With that short goodbye, the two mates were left alone. Together, they entered their chambers, the happy and enthusiastic mood from before broken by the knowledge of their family's pain.

"It'll be fine, Luce, you'll see. After Cain is born, we'll continue with the plan. It'll be fine."

"I certainly hope you're right, baby." Lucien answered morosely.

"I'm right. I just know it. I've seen it. Just before I fainted, I saw it."

Gabriel's statement seemed to be more for himself than for Lucien, because Gabriel didn't even give the demon time to answer. "You need to stop worrying now, Luce," he said, smiling gently and wrapping his slender arms around his mate's neck.

Lucien breathed in deeply, taking in his mate's unique scent, reveling in the warmth of his body. Their lips met in a gentle kiss, and it held nothing but their love and devotion for each other, their hope for the future.

The comforting kiss evolved in something entirely different. The gentle and unhurried tenderness shifted into pure passion, and they feasted on each other's mouths greedily. Much to Lucien's surprise, the kiss ended as abruptly as it began. "Wait a moment, Luce! I want to do something." Gabriel practically purred when Lucien tried to reach for him again.

With that, Gabriel planted another small kiss at the corner of Lucien's mouth. It would have been chaste if not for the promise it held, a promise of many sinful things to come. Lucien didn't know what to expect. His mate was such a complex creature. Sometimes he would be so shy and withdrawn, other times he would show an

entirely different side, one that was so scorching hot it made Lucien's blood boil. So wait he did.

Gabriel's black eyes delved into Lucien's own, and his sensual lips twisted into a wicked smile. He removed his robe, pulling it off with an excruciatingly slow rhythm. When the robe was off, discarded to the ground, and Gabriel wore only the sleeveless top and his tight pants, he started to move his body in sensual lines, swaying to the sound of an unheard melody. The soft glow of the fire flashed on the mating bracelets, making them seem like they were real flames dancing across Gabriel's skin. It looked surreally beautiful.

Lucien felt his eyes turn blood red as he watched his mate slowly strip for him. Every discarded piece of cloth exposed a new patch of creamy white skin which Lucien yearned to lick. The only thing that stopped him from pouncing was the thought that, at this point, he needed to control his sexual impulses so that the pregnancy would be safe.

"Baby, I don't know if I can restrain myself if you don't stop that," he growled, voice turned husky with lust.

Gabriel's smile held smug satisfaction as he sauntered across the room and into Lucien's embrace again. "Don't worry, Luce," he whispered seductively in Lucien's ear, rubbing his nearly naked body against Lucien's. "It's safe. We can make love. Later on, we'll have to be more careful, but for now, we're perfectly safe. I asked."

Lucien's eyes flew open at the blunt statement. He couldn't imagine his shy mate asking the medic if they could still fuck with no risk to the pregnancy. Of course, Gabriel most definitely didn't seem shy now. Hormones. It was just hormones. He needed to control himself, because Gabriel was definitely not in control. "Are you certain, baby?"

"Of course, Luce," Gabriel whispered softly, squirming in Lucien's lap. "Besides, you know I would never endanger our son."

Gabriel gave his mate a meaningful look, and Lucien simply couldn't take it any longer. He tried to be noble, damn it, but he was a

demon, and demons were sexual creatures. Besides, what kind of mate would he be if he didn't satisfy his beautiful Gabriel's demands?

Satisfied with his own reasoning, Lucien pressed his mouth to Gabriel's, desperate to feel his mate's soft lips upon his own. His mate tasted uniquely sweet and pure, like ripe cynathole fruit, and it sometimes amazed Lucien how Gabriel managed to keep his beautiful heart unmarred by the darkness that surrounded him for so long.

Images and memories came back to Lucien and he angrily pushed them back, determined not to let ghosts of the past haunt them and destroy their lives. Gabriel still felt it though and broke their kiss, giving him a concerned look. "Luce? What's the matter?"

Gabriel's innocent black eyes tore at Lucien's heart and right then and there, he wanted to go back to Alaria and rip the bastard that hurt him into little pieces. "Luce?"

"It's nothing, baby. I was just thinking..."

Gabriel smiled sadly, his eyes getting that distant look they always got when he remembered his time in Alaria. "You promised me, Luce. Remember, you promised."

"Yeah, I know. I just wish I'd killed him."

Gabriel shuddered slightly, and Lucien cursed himself for bringing up the man that almost caused his mate's death. This was a day of joy, and they shouldn't be thinking about that. Lyan was right, they should be celebrating. "Never mind that," he purred into Gabriel's ear. "Now, where were we?"

Flipping Gabriel back on the bed, Lucien proceeded to devour his mate's mouth yet again, doing his best to effectively eliminate any shadow that may linger on Gabriel's happiness. When they finally needed to take a breathing break, Lucien decided that kissing was simply not enough, not nearly enough to prove how much he loved Gabriel.

In one swift movement of his claws, he deftly removed the remainder of Gabriel's Xeetahn outfit. Alternating tender kisses with sharp nips of teeth, Lucien expertly tormented every exposed patch of

Gabriel's soft skin until he reached his target. His mate's nipples already perked up, a clear notification of Gabriel's arousal, and Lucien smiled as he took one small nub in his mouth, his hand gently tweaking its twin. He continued his ministrations on Gabriel's nipples until they were beautifully swollen and red, and his mate writhed on the bed, begging with him. "Please, Luce, please!"

Hmm... Still coherent. That would never do. Grinning to himself, Lucien abandoned his mate's nipples and traced Gabriel's chest and abdomen with his tongue. Gabriel whimpered as Lucien's mouth hovered over his erect cock. "Luce..."

"What do you want, baby?" he asked teasingly. "Tell me what you want!"

"Luce, please..."

Lucien took one look into Gabriel's black eyes and crumbled. He really would have liked hearing his mate's beautiful voice whispering in that sultry tone "Suck me, Luce. Please suck me!" But Gabriel wasn't much for talking dirty. It was only in the moments in which he really lost control, mostly when Lucien fucked him, that Gabriel could get himself to talk dirty. It was something so uniquely him that Lucien didn't have the heart to force his mate into changing, in spite of the fact that he simply loved it when Gabriel begged to be fucked. Gabriel was perfect just the way he was.

Therefore, Lucien took pity on his Alarian mate. His mouth descended upon Gabriel's erection, and he grinned a little as he held it and blew a puff of hot air over the sensitive head. Gabriel shuddered, his erection twitching in Lucien's hand. Lucien licked his lips, suddenly feeling ravenous. He couldn't wait any longer. He needed to feel Gabriel, now.

As a young demon, he had a lot of experience in a wide variety of sexual activities, and he orally pleased more than one of his fellow companions in the army. He enjoyed it at the time, almost as much as he enjoyed their mouths on his cock. But that particular experience paled when compared to the feel of Gabriel's pleasure. Everything

about him tasted delicious, from his scent and his sweat to his essence. It was a heady mixture of sensuality and purity that felt so incredibly addictive, more even than the rush of the magic of his kind. It was pure and sinful and so very perfect.

Gabriel's elegant hands buried into Lucien's hair as Lucien took his erection into his mouth. Lucien held his mate's hips, restricting his movement. He could make this swift and efficient, but their lovemaking was never about getting off. It was about satisfying a more basic need, their need to be together in the most intimate of manners. It meant lust and it meant love, but it was also so much more than that. And Lucien wanted to make this last, to cement their union until they could no longer be separated by anything. Instead of immediately proceeding to the "main event," Lucien gave Gabriel's cock a leisurely lick, lapping on the hard shaft like it was a sweet candy cone. He allowed his hands to naughtily toy with his mate's testicles, all the while alternating lazy licks and teasing nips with torturous and earnest sucking.

Gabriel moaned and gasped, harsh inarticulate sounds escaping his throat. Lucien stole a look at his mate's face. Gabriel's eyes were closed, and his face flushed and lips swollen from Lucien's kisses. He made for a sinfully delicious sight, and perhaps for the thousandth time since they met, Lucien gave thanks to all the deities of Kaldor for allowing him such a beautiful mate.

For all Lucien's efforts, it didn't take long for Gabriel to come. It seemed to strike Gabriel like lightning, because he didn't even have the time to warn his mate, and Lucien found himself with a face full of cum. Gabriel blushed deeply, his expression openly showing his embarrassment. "Sorry. Didn't mean for that to happen."

Lucien arched a brow, passing a finger through the cum that somehow landed on his cheek. "Why sorry? I would have liked to swallow you down, but in the end, there's nothing quite like knowing I offered you pleasure."

Gabriel looked down, biting his lip as if in deep thought. Abruptly Lucien found himself with Gabriel in his lap, their nude bodies still touching. “Nothing?” Gabriel whispered in his ear, reaching back to pass a finger over his mate’s spine. Lucien’s need increased tenfold, the flame of his body burning so bright it threatened to consume him. His wings twitched impatiently at the seductive sound of his mate’s voice, and he had to force himself to remain still and allow Gabriel to move at his own pace.

Luckily, Lucien didn’t have to wait long. He watched entranced as Gabriel slicked Lucien’s shaft with his own cum. Gabriel carefully positioned his body over Lucien’s and gripped his shoulders, biting his lips as slowly lowered himself on Lucien’s cock. Lucien gritted his teeth at the almost painful pleasure of his mate’s tight body engulfing him so perfectly. He needed to keep his calm, for he knew that even if it was safe to make love, that didn’t mean he could lose control with Gabriel and accidentally hurt him.

When Lucien was finally fully embedded in his body, Gabriel lowered his head on his mate’s shoulder. “Luce... You feel so incredible, so deep inside of me.”

Lucien took this statement as a cue and started to thrust. Gabriel’s body gripped him so tight. They simply fit together, like their bodies were made for each other, like their entire beings were customized to complement each other perfectly. With each thrust, Lucien felt their mating bond burn brightly inside of him, their feeling entwining and their souls reaching for each other. If he focused, he thought he could feel a third energy itching to connect with theirs.

By rights, the indisputable proof that his mate was with child should have urged Lucien to try and hold back. Instead, it only served to inflame him further. The knowledge that his beautiful Gabriel carried his son brought forth a whole new level of possessiveness, and Lucien felt now more than ever the need to claim.

Gabriel arched his back, digging his fingernails into Lucien’s shoulders desperately. “Luce... Luce! Yes, there!”

With every plea that escaped Gabriel's lips, Lucien felt his control slip just a bit more, his Xeetahn nature rising fast and urging him to take what was his. He needed Gabriel so much it was dangerous and all consuming. He picked up speed, the thrusts so powerful now that their bed creaked and hit the wall. Lucien thought that, after a certain point, cracks actually started to appear in the wall, but he couldn't bring himself to care. The only thing he cared about was his mate and this moment in time when their minds and bodies were one.

All too soon, Lucien felt his orgasm coming forth, gathering at the base of his spine. The demon held it back. He needed to bring his mate to climax first. Lucien's touch would be enough to push Gabriel over the brink, but they both needed something different. Leaning over his mate's body, he buried his fangs in his mate's shoulder, feasting on Gabriel's blood. With a shout, Gabriel came hard for the second time. Gabriel's body tightened around Lucien and the feelings that swirled out of control became too much. The ecstasy of tasting his mate's life and passion in that unique way that was strictly theirs triggered Lucien's own climax. He came shouting his mate's name, feeling everything that he was and everything that they were surround him in a heavenly embrace. Gabriel collapsed on the bed, his silky black hair spreading on the pillows in a cascade of ebony. With their bodies still connected, Lucien lowered his own larger form and pressed a kiss to his mate's lips.

"I love you so much," he whispered into the kiss.

"I love you too, Luce," Gabriel said softly, his big midnight black eyes already closing in exhaustion.

Lucien smiled and hugged his tired mate to his chest. Outside, the Kaldorian night fell, and the blue moon shone upon the two lovers. They did not know what the future held, but they could only hope that they would overcome any darkness with the light of their love.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native Romanian, Scarlet was born in 1986 and grew up an avid fan of Karl May and Jules Verne, reading fantasy stories and adventure. Later, when she was out of fantasy stories to read, she delved into her mother's collection of books and of course, stumbled onto romance.

As a writer though, Scarlet Hyacinth was born one sunny summer day, when a dear friend of hers - the same friend who introduced her to GLBT fiction - proposed they start writing a story of their own. As it turns out, the two friends never did finish that particular story, but Scarlet discovered she had a knack for writing and ended up starting to write individually. And so, between working on her dissertation, studying for exams and reading yaoi manga, she started writing the Kaldor Saga. Along the way, Scarlet met a lot of wonderful people who supported her, and in the end she found her story a home – and in the process, fulfilled a beautiful dream.



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