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PART 1  
DESTINIES  
IN  
DARKNESS



Kaldor  
Saga 3

Scarlet Hyacinth

### Kaldor Saga 3

## Destinies in Darkness, Part 1

Eric is a young human psychic, struggling to make ends meet and achieve his dream of becoming a famous painter. His life changes completely when he meets Keenan, a 500 year old vampire.

Before they know it, the two fall in love. But Eric has to overcome the trauma of his past, and Keenan needs to learn how to love. To complicate things even further, a mysterious traitor attacks Keenan's city, threatening to tear their fragile relationship apart. Keenan and Eric have to resort to stolen moments of passion, while an enemy masquerading as a friend watches from the shadows, waiting to strike.

Thrown into a world he doesn't understand, Eric becomes an unwilling participant in a crazy game of cat and mouse. Will Keenan succeed in finding the traitor before it is too late, or will Eric pay the ultimate price for loving a vampire?

**Genre:** Alternative (M/M or F/F), Paranormal,  
Vampires/Werewolves

**Length:** 111,859 words

# **DESTINIES IN DARKNESS, Part 1**

*Kaldor Saga 3*

**Scarlet Hyacinth**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.  
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## **Letter from Scarlet Hyacinth**

### ***Regarding E-book Piracy***

Dear Readers,

Your support and opinion always mean a lot to me. I was a reader before I was writer, and as such, knowing that people enjoy my stories gives me tremendous happiness and satisfaction. Some of you may know that I originally started writing on FictionPress and AdultFanFiction. It was because of the many friends I made there and through their constant support that I persevered in writing.

However, I have to point out that, unlike stories on FictionPress and AdultFanFiction, my published books are intellectual property and are not free. The amount of time and effort authors, editors, and cover artists put into each and every one of these books is astonishing. I spent one month polishing *Enraptured* for my readers to offer them the best experience when reading my work. It hurts me, emotionally and financially, that before I could earn anything from my book, it was pirated and distributed illegally.

I sometimes can't help but wonder if all the effort is worth it. Writing is my passion, but writing for publishing is very different than posting free stories online. As much as I hate to admit it, taking into account all the work I put into these books and the poor financial profit, it somehow seems I'm wasting my time.

Maybe many of you think that being a writer instantly translates into thousands of dollars. Well, it doesn't. Many authors cannot support themselves with their writing, especially in the e-publishing industry. They have to hold day jobs while they write in the evenings and on weekends. For my part, I started writing as a student, sneaking in writing between studying for exams and trips to the library. It wasn't easy then, and it isn't easy now.

Please do not pirate my books. If you have downloaded this copy illegally, know that every reader is important and your support would mean the world to me.

I hope you enjoy the story. Please e-mail me your thoughts and comments at [scarlet.hyacinth@gmail.com](mailto:scarlet.hyacinth@gmail.com).

With love,  
Scarlet Hyacinth

## DEDICATION

Thank you, everyone, for all the kind words regarding *Over the Edge*. I'm very flattered and happy that you all enjoyed the second installment of the Kaldor Saga. I hope you will like this one, too.

With special thanks to my readers on AFF and FP, who followed each update of this story when it was still in its infancy. I love you all.



# DESTINIES IN DARKNESS,

## Part 1

*Kaldor Saga 3*

SCARLET HYACINTH  
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### Chapter One

A flash of lightning illuminated the New York City sky, and the rumble of thunder pounded threateningly in the distance. *Great. That's all I need, rain!* Eric made a face as big drops of rain started falling from the stormy sky. His day had gone from bad to worse. With exams just beginning at the university, he'd stayed up all night to study. In general, he got good grades, and most of the professors seemed to like him, but he knew he couldn't slack off if he wanted to have a chance at reaching his dream. In the end, it had been more than a little useless. On the way to the university, a car splashed him, successfully destroying any chance of passing the class. The art history professor refused to even receive him in the exam, pointing out his less than adequate attire. He'd decided to go home and change, fearing repercussions at work should he go inadequately dressed. To top things off, he'd missed several buses and subways and gotten to work late. The manager hadn't believed one word from his story, and he'd been laid off, just like that, for being unreliable and undisciplined.

Unreliable and undisciplined. Right, like that was the real problem. The man never liked him. Ever since he'd accidentally hinted to someone at work he might be gay, the manager had been on his case for every little thing he did. In truth, Eric felt surprised he lasted as long as he did. With the

recession, many businesses reduced their numbers of employees, and Eric would be just the first one out of many to be fired. If only school went better. He didn't know what he would do about the Art History exam. Things were bad enough already, and he couldn't afford starting to fail classes now.

Eric sighed in distress. It would seem that fulfilling his dream would be so much harder than he first expected. But he couldn't allow himself the luxury of self-pity right now.

The chill of the early evening already started to permeate through the threadbare jacket he wore. It was getting late and with each passing second, darker and colder. Frowning at the clouded sky, Eric decided he couldn't wait for the rain to stop. It simply wasn't safe for a young man such as himself. Just in the five minutes he'd waited in front of this coffee shop, in relative shelter, several shady characters propositioned him, their lust flowing off them like a wave. Enough was enough. He'd take his chance in the rain.

Eric covered his head with his jacket, secured his bag under his arm, and made a run for it. Several cars screeched to a halt as he crossed the street, but he ignored the insults from the angry drivers and continued running across the street.

New York surrounded him with all the hustle and bustle typical to the huge metropolis. The Big Apple, as they called it, caught the very essence of nightlife at its best and worst. The city that never sleeps. Still, one would think that the rain would chase most people off the streets. For the most part, it was true. Many of the passersby went into the nonstop bars, coffee shops, or clubs for shelter and warmth and a nice drink. Maybe some of them would even find pleasant company, someone to join them and warm their bed for the night.

Even so, generally, the streets were as busy as ever, throngs of people hindering Eric's progress as he made his way from the café to the subway. Having grown up on a ranch in the South, where everybody knew everybody and life was warm and serene, Eric hated Manhattan. But he hated the memory of his childhood even more, and he refused to be defeated. There were so many people, and they all had umbrellas. What were the odds?

Eric realized that the odds were, in fact, quite high. They must have announced the coming rain on the weather report. Eric could barely afford rent, let alone a TV set, so he'd missed the forecast.

Angry and frustrated, he ran through the rain, making an effort to keep his sketchbook dry and to not bump into anyone. Of course, his efforts were useless. Since he found it difficult to orientate himself in the increasingly heavy downpour, he bumped into a man dressed in an elegant suit and fell in a puddle as a result.

"Are you all right, young man?" the gentleman asked in a cultured voice. Eric shivered. The man seemed nice but was seriously considering fucking him into the mattress. Eric could see it in his mind. Why did he attract all the weirdos?

"Yes, sir," he replied. "Thank you very much." Avoiding the older man's extended hand and not even waiting for the man's proposal, Eric got up and decided to run through Central Park instead. It was bound to be empty. Who would go for a walk in the park on a rainy day?

On normal circumstances, he could keep his head clear and avoid all the thoughts people transmitted, even block out their energies to some extent. However, the exhaustion of the day had worn him out, and he found himself unable to do so. In consequence, the thoughts of random strangers on the street slithered into his mind, driving him crazy. The older man checking out how his wet jeans clung to his ass, a businessman musing over how many people to fire the next day, a young woman mentally debating what shade of lipstick would best fit that of her nail polish, a middle-aged mom wondering how to cure her son of his apparent homosexuality.

Eric almost laughed out loud at the woman's thoughts. He felt more than a little tempted to tell her there was no such thing as a cure for homosexuality. He should know. He was a gay twenty-year-old man with apparent psychic problems and no future. He kept his mouth shut, though, knowing he at least needed to keep up the appearance of normality. He'd long ago given up hope of it as an actual reality. Hell, he'd given up on sex even, since the touch of another made him physically ill.

The rain fell with even more violence now. Geez, if he didn't get home soon he'd contract pneumonia and die. Nobody would care, but still, he hadn't gone through so much to end up dying after stupidly being caught in the rain. He tried to run faster across the deserted park and cursed himself

for being forced to take this route. If not for the invading thoughts of the crowd, he could have managed to make a decent time to the subway, even considering the busyness of the streets. As it was, the park was huge, and even after getting through the humongous thing, he still had a long way to go, to the subway and then to his meager place in Brooklyn.

Tears mixed with the raindrops on Eric's face. His life sucked. Everything had turned a mess. He could barely make a living, yet he insisted on going to classes. And to the School of Visual Arts, too. He'd been lucky on receiving the financial aid, but that didn't help much. He didn't have a clue on how he would be able to make ends meet without a job. Maybe he should have waited for the older man's unspoken offer. He might end up selling his ass anyway.

Just when he thought things couldn't get any worse, Eric tripped and fell in yet another puddle. He dropped the bag, and it landed with a plop on the wet concrete. No! Not his sketchbook, anything but his precious sketchbook. He hurried to collect the bag, to protect it from further damage, but found himself intercepted by someone else. The rain stopped falling as a black umbrella covered him.

A man stood above him, retrieving the bag with the sketchbook. Eric gasped at the sight. He looked gorgeous, with dark, flowing hair falling on his shoulders, which matched the black clothes. As the man looked at him, Eric felt two things stir—his long neglected libido and his need to draw something so beautiful.

"You dropped this." The man's voice was pure sex. Lord, could this be a dream? In a haze, he took the man's extended hand.

Bad idea. Flashes of the dark man's past flew through Eric's mind, and Eric gasped. Blood and gore and death. Lord almighty! The man oozed death just like he oozed sex. Figures. The height of his day, he had to meet a serial killer.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan looked down at the dripping wet figure of his prey. Yes, the young man was delicious. Very pretty, too. High cheekbones, big green eyes, and blond hair that currently covered a perfect face. The rain flattened

the T-shirt the human wore, providing Keenan a tantalizing view of little, pretty nipples and a slender, yet muscled body. Yes, he'd have fun tonight.

His beautiful prey gasped as he accepted Keenan's offer and took his hand. The human started trembling violently, and Keenan suppressed the urge to lick his lips. It must be just the cold. After all, his prey had been in the rain for a long time. The vulnerability in the young man almost made Keenan lose control and devour him right then and there.

"Here, take my coat." Keenan took off his long black coat and put it over the blond's shoulders.

"T-thank you, sir." The young man closed his eyes and took a deep breath. At first, he hesitated, but then he closed the buttons of the cloak. "You're very kind."

Keenan arched a brow. The young man's tone and behavior seemed peculiar. Certainly, some precaution was to be expected when meeting strangers in the park, but humans didn't react as they normally should when dealing with Keenan.

What could be wrong with this boy? He sent a mental probe and arched a brow. The young man had shields, weak, but they were there. Keenan inwardly shrugged. It wouldn't be the first time he'd met a human with mind shields, and after all, they could be easily broken later.

"Come on, young one. You look like you need a warm drink," he coaxed, his voice dripping with seduction.

The human nodded but wouldn't meet his eyes. Strange. They walked through the park in silence for a few seconds. Keenan opened his mouth to say something, just to break the heavy atmosphere, when the blond asked, "Sir? Can I ask you for a favor?"

Keenan smirked, now on familiar ground. They always asked him for favors. He wondered what this one would ask. He ruthlessly squashed the strange feeling of disappointment in his chest. For some reason, when he saw the youth's mad dash through the park and when he first gripped that pale, elegant hand, he thought this new human could be different. There was no real rational reason why he would think this, but a creature as old as himself knew to trust his instincts. Unfortunately, on this particular occasion, it seemed that his instincts had been wrong. "Sure thing," Keenan agreed, careful to keep his voice warm and friendly. "What is it that you wish?" What would the boy ask? Money, a ride, sex? He wouldn't complain

if it was the latter. Sooner or later, they'd end up in bed anyway, but Keenan preferred it to be sooner. For an immortal, he didn't have a lot of patience.

The young human's answer turned out to be very different from what he'd expected. "When you kill me, can you make it painless?" he asked, stopping Keenan dead in his tracks. That phrase, that single phrase, squashed his thoughts of a leisurely fuck with this young human, of slowly devouring and driving the blond crazy with lust. It changed everything. Somehow, the boy knew what he was. How could he possibly know?

"Excuse me?" he inquired, fighting to keep the steel from his voice.

"Please, when you kill me, make it painless," the human repeated in a trembling voice.

For all the tremor in his voice, the slender blond seemed certain that he would find his death at Keenan's hands. In truth, Keenan didn't have any intentions of killing the human. Bleeding him, yes. Fucking him, most definitely. Not killing him, though. Nevertheless, the human's suspicion hit too close for comfort. Losing control, Keenan set loose his power over the young man, shattering his pathetic mental shields. The human screamed at the sudden assault, the pain of having his mind invaded so brutally too excruciating to bear. Ignoring his prey's cries, Keenan probed relentlessly into his mind and memories. Who was he? How did he know? What did he know? It stopped being just about him finding a pretty toy for the night. This needed to be done for the safety of his people, and Keenan had a responsibility he could not forsake, not even for someone as beautiful as this young human.

Flashes from the past spun through Keenan's mind's eye as he analytically registered the information. Eric McAllister. Age twenty. Student at the School of Visual Arts. Psychic. The human was psychic. He'd seen images of Keenan's past when they'd touched. Just erratic flashes, nothing clear or coherent. Keenan felt strangely relieved at the thought that he would not be forced to hurt this young man further. He slipped out of the human's mind, deciding against further investigating into his past, at least for the moment. It could wait. After all, Keenan had long ago stopped being entertained by hurting people just for the sake of seeing their pain. He needed to allow the human to recover from the brutal assault before he delved deeper into his memories.

Falling onto the wet concrete, Eric sobbed, clutching at his temples in pain. "Please, sir. Please. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

Keenan arched a brow, considering his next course of action. Yes, indeed, Eric didn't mean to do anything. There should be no reason why Keenan should abandon his initial plan. Eric may be psychic, but he was still so very delicious. Keenan looked forward to having him in his bed.

"Don't worry, little Eric. It will be fine. It will be just fine." Dropping the umbrella, he grabbed the blond in his arms and whispered, "Sleep."

Instantly, the tense body of the human went limp as Eric's mind succumbed to the supernatural command. Unseen by anyone, Keenan took off, abandoning the park, his prey in arms.

\* \* \* \*

Eric woke up with a terrible headache. What in the world happened? He remembered the heavy rain, running through the park, then...Oh, shit! The man, the killer! He gasped as he got off the bed, sudden dizziness threatening to overwhelm him.

As Eric's head stopped spinning, he noticed he currently found himself in an elegant room, and a very foreign-looking one at that. Satiny black sheets covered him, the silky material a sensual caress on his naked skin. Shit! He couldn't remember anything, and his head ached when he tried to grasp elusive details of the scene in the park. What had the man done?

"Don't push your mind, pet." A husky voice came from a corner, startling Eric. "It's quite easy, actually. I forced you to sleep then brought you here, to my home."

Eric gasped as the stranger stepped from the shadows, looking even more stunning than back in the park. His open black shirt allowed for a tantalizing view of his sculpted chest. Much to Eric's dismay, he realized that his mind had absolutely no control over his body. His stupid dick didn't realize Eric was in a serial killer's lair, probably about to be hacked up. Instead, the idiot thing decided by itself that, for all his murderous intent, the stranger was sex on legs, and immediately responded.

Eric forced himself to breathe evenly. He could do this. His libido wouldn't control him.

“You forced me to sleep? Like hypnotized me or what?” he asked, somehow managing to muster enough courage to portray his righteous indignation.

His little show of anger made the man laugh. “Yes, something like that,” he said, chuckling.

Eric directed a glare at the laughing stranger, feeling his apprehension and fear melt under his anger. He rubbed at his temples, the headache he’d woken up with sending a jolt of pain through his skull.

The man’s expression shifted to a pronounced frown. “I have to apologize for my rough treatment, though. I admit I was startled by your somewhat sudden declaration.”

Eric struggled to keep calm at the observation. He remembered it now, the flashes of memory, the gore and death overwhelming his senses. “Are you going to allow me the favor then?” He barely suppressed his tremors as he recalled the metallic taste in his mouth, the memory he’d stolen from this stranger who now approached him. So many things, so many sensations, everything so savage and cruel. Out of all the things he’d seen in the other man’s past, one stood out. Blood.

“No, little Eric,” the stranger answered, coming closer to him. “I am planning no such thing.”

Eric’s eyes widened as he processed the reply. Lord, he was going to be tortured before being killed. He felt so scared he almost missed the man’s final remark. “That’s because I don’t plan on killing you.”

Eric gaped. How could he not? This man, this killer, claimed to have innocent intentions regarding his person. Eric couldn’t possibly believe such a thing. He wanted to, but he’d never been mistaken in his psychic impressions.

“You think I’m lying.” The man sighed. “Well, you’re entirely justified in your opinion. And your impressions are correct. I have killed, and I have led a bloody life.”

The handsome stranger paused as if to contemplate his next words. “It is necessary for a creature like me.”

“C-creature?” Eric repeated, feeling dread encompassing his body.

Eric’s kidnapper gave him a small, mysterious smile. “Yes, pet,” he replied with a nod. “I’m afraid it’s like in those B-category movies. You’ve fallen right into the arms of a vampire.”



Vampire? No, that couldn't be right. Eric shook his head in denial. Vampires didn't exist. For some reason, the man wanted to fool him.

"You don't believe me," the stranger noted, voice dripping with reproach. "Yet I broke your shields so easily in the park."

"I was exhausted," Eric shot back. "And besides, even taking that into consideration, having psychic abilities doesn't make you a vampire."

The man smirked at Eric's reply. "True. But these do." Eric yelped in surprise as the dark stranger moved at supernatural speed. In the blink of an eye, Eric found himself pinned down on the bed, feeling the unmistakable touch of sharp fangs at his throat. "Do you still think I'm a liar?" the man murmured in Eric's ear. His voice was husky as he started tracing Eric's neck with his fangs, drawing blood, then licked the wound.

"Mmmm...You taste so good, my pet," the man whispered, and Eric suddenly felt the overwhelming urge to ask the vampire to bite him, to touch him, to fuck him. Oh, God! What was happening to him?

Alas, Eric's innermost thoughts were intercepted by the other man. "I will, I will soon enough." He laughed. "And don't worry about wanting me. It's just your body's natural response."

Eric's face flamed in embarrassment. The damn creature saw his thoughts, the things he desired. *No way*. Eric's tormentor just smirked at Eric's modesty and whispered, "Yes, way."

A flash of anger passed through Eric at the confirmation of the fact that the vampire had indeed read his mind. "Hey, stay out of my head!"

The sexy stranger lifted his head to meet Eric's gaze and mock pouted, in a manner that was entirely unsuitable for his overall dark persona. "But why? It's so fun." His expression turned predatory as he started licking Eric's neck again. "And so very enlightening. I know what to do to make you feel good. Wouldn't you like that, little Eric?"

Eric struggled to push the vampire away, feeling that not only his life, but his identity and what little dignity he had left were at stake. He shook his head, struggling against the strange man's hypnotizing presence. "No, no, you're doing something to me. I'm not like this. I don't want such things."

The vampire smirked at Eric's feeble attempts to escape. "You are, and you do. I am not playing with your mind, just stimulating your body." His eyes sparkled mischievously as he added, "And I must say, the response is most wonderful, and I will enjoy playing with you a lot, my pet."

Eric glared at the vampire, panting hard from the futile effort of releasing himself. "I am not your pet, nor am I your plaything," he furiously snarled. "If you want to kill me, kill me now. It's not like I have anything to live for." Eric snapped his mouth shut. He'd said too much. The other man had already seen his most shameful thoughts. He didn't need to know the secrets of his past as well.

He looked away from the vampire's all too knowing eyes, unable to meet that dark gaze. "Is that so, pet?" Eric's kidnapper inquired. "Do you want to die? Then why haven't you done it yourself by now?"

Eric's eyes filled with tears. "Shut up!" he snapped. "If you were in my head, you know why. I couldn't let them win. I couldn't give up. I just couldn't!"

\* \* \* \*

Keenan felt something stir inside as he watched the slender human cry on his bed. His Eric had fire, but he seemed crushed inside. Too much power in that little body and it overwhelmed him. He didn't know who Eric referred to in his desperate reply, but it didn't take a genius to realize Eric had been hurt by someone. Once Keenan found out their identities, they would regret it.

Before he knew it, he was cradling the young man's head in his lap. *How strange.* He'd never done something like that in all his years. Old age seemed to be catching up on him. He mentally berated himself for his sudden sentimentality, knowing he should be going before he did anything stupid. Eric needed rest, and Keenan needed to be away from Eric and the confusing emotions he stirred. Keenan forgot all his previous intentions when Eric raised his eyes and gave him a teary look. His pet was just so pretty, too pretty.

"Thank you, sir," Eric whispered. "I-I apologize if I have offended you in any way."

Keenan licked his lips as he took in the subconsciously seductive aspect of his human. He felt the sudden urge to taste Eric again, sink his fangs into his throat and feast on his blood. Just a little drop of that sweet nectar. It would be delicious, heavenly, Keenan just knew it. But no, he couldn't do that. He needed to have some self-restraint. Eric was tired and sick. Taking

his blood now would be irresponsible and cruel. Keenan would have to indulge himself later. “Don’t call me sir, pet,” he answered. “My name is Keenan. Now sleep.”

Eric’s eyes grew heavy again, and he fell into a deep sleep. As he watched the young human slumber, Keenan’s smile turned into a predatory smirk. Yes, he would most definitely indulge himself later.

## Chapter Two

Darkness still shrouded the room when Eric opened his eyes. His head pounded ferociously, and he whimpered at the blinding pain. He made an attempt to get up, only to be overcome by dizziness. He gasped as he collapsed back on the satin-sheathed pillows. Shit, he needed his medicine. Normally, he never missed taking them, since they were so essential to his well-being and survival. How long had he slept? Why? Where was he, anyway?

A pale hand holding the much-needed pill appeared in his line of sight.

“You slept the entire day away.” The vampire! Right, he remembered now. Keenan...Eric struggled to focus his gaze, but his head ached so terribly he wanted to scream. It always turned out like this when psychic impressions overcame him. The fact that he’d skipped taking his meds for an entire day didn’t help.

With a trembling hand, he reached for the medicine the vampire provided. Keenan helped him take it and held a glass of water to his lips, helping him swallow the pill. He collapsed again on the pillows and gave Keenan a confused look.

“How?” he barely managed to stutter, exhausted from the effort and the pain. He’d been tired, true enough, but his body followed the pattern of a certain routine. His well-established metabolism should have worked as efficiently as an alarm clock. How had he missed taking his pills?

“I’m afraid the fault lies with me.” Keenan’s voice sounded low, the normal husky tone Eric attributed to it having miraculously disappeared. “I induced you into falling asleep, and I retreated into my own slumber.” The vampire sighed, a clear indication of his regret. “I’m sorry, pet.”

Eric wanted to say that sorry wasn’t good enough, but Keenan seemed genuinely repentant. He nodded and winced when the small movement increased the intensity of his headache.

"It's fine," he somehow managed to answer. Rubbing at his temples, he sighed and added, "It's not your fault I'm a drug addict."

Eric choked on his own words, acutely aware of his own inferiority. He felt ashamed of this fact, of his addiction, but he could not deny it. He needed the pills to survive. There was no way around that fact of life.

At this, Keenan grabbed his hands earnestly and squeezed them. "Eric, look at me." When Eric wouldn't listen, Keenan forced his head up and met his gaze. "You are not a drug addict. You have nothing to be ashamed of. You do what you need to in order to survive."

Eric shook his head, struggling to keep his tears at bay. "Yeah, right."

"Why don't *you* look at me? I'm so pathetic. I've missed them one day, and the headaches are killing me. I need the drugs like I need air."

Keenan laughed, a bitter sound that somehow seemed sad. "Don't talk about drug addiction to a vampire, pet. I, my little Eric, am addicted to life's blood. How is that for a shame?"

The sudden display of emotion took Eric by surprise. He hadn't realized it, but he could now easily see how hard it would be for a person to live with such a terrible curse. He knew better than anyone how difficult an addiction could be. Poor Keenan!

Eric wanted to reach out to the vampire but refrained from it. Touching Keenan would just increase his headache, a thing he did not need. He felt pleased for taking this decision when Keenan gave him a dark look. "Pet! Don't pity me!" Keenan said with a scowl.

Eric grimaced at the knowledge that Keenan had slipped into his head again.

"I am not human," Keenan continued, ignoring Eric's discomfort. "And I've learned to deal with it in my long years. I am a vampire, and I will always crave blood. But the key is to never allow your addiction or your power to control you. Don't worry, my young Eric, I will teach you to let go of those pills. I will teach you everything you need to know."

Eric was startled at the sudden proposition. He frowned, suddenly aware of the fact that Keenan wouldn't make such an offer just out of generosity. What did he want in return for his help? It wouldn't be out of the kindness of Keenan's heart, that much was certain.

“Of course not, pet.” Keenan chuckled again, answering Eric’s unspoken question. “I am taking care of my possession, and I assure you, I intend to get a good recompense of my efforts.”

Eric glared at Keenan in frustration. Obviously, he’d have to get used to the man, or, better said, the vampire, reading his mind and calling him *pet*. Eric didn’t think he appreciated that very much.

It occurred to Eric that maybe the mind reading thing could have its uses. He could teach Keenan a lesson, show him he should not mess with an angry psychic.

Decision made, Eric created an image in his mind’s eye. Himself in the shower on his knees, Keenan’s naked form in front of him, his illusionary self sucking a huge penis in his mouth. What would Keenan taste like? Sweet? Salty? How would his cock feel like when he—?

The thought was abruptly interrupted when Eric found himself pounced and pushed on the bed by a very horny vampire.

“You want to feel my cock, pet? You know, I was actually planning to wait, but since you’re so eager...”

Eric gasped at the feel of Keenan’s body pressing him down on the bed. Good news. His plan worked. In fact, he totally manipulated Keenan. Bad news. It worked. Why did he do this in the first place?

“Too late for regrets now, Eric.” Keenan pressed their mouths together, muffling Eric’s protests. An insistent tongue probed Eric’s lips, urging them open with an almost brutal desperation. Keenan just ravished his mouth, taking his breath away, sucking on Eric’s tongue and drawing blood with his fangs.

Eric moaned, half in protest, half in insane arousal as he felt the sheets being removed from his nude body. Keenan turned him on so much, but he feared that if he wasn’t careful, he would lose himself to this mysterious creature. He wanted to push the sexy vampire away, but he couldn’t move. Tentacle-like tendrils of darkness wrapped around his wrists, pinning his hands to the head post.

Eric’s body became paralyzed with fright. He didn’t know Keenan. Hell, he didn’t know if all this was real. By rights, he’d finally lost his mind because of an overdose, and he’d been secluded and forgotten in some hospital room. And maybe the man above him wasn’t even a sexy vampire but some fat orderly abusing him. The vampire fangs could easily be

syringes, and he couldn't move because he was in a straitjacket. It made perfect sense.

Lord, he'd lost his mind. The pills finally destroyed what little reason he had left. Eric started crying as he wished the orderly would be done with him soon. Dimly, he wondered if he would ever regain his reason. Maybe tomorrow they would give him the shock treatment. That could help, right? Eric certainly hoped so. He didn't like being insane.

"Pet, snap out of it!" A powerful slap hit Eric's cheek, making him gasp in pain. It felt genuine, and it removed the edge of hysteria in Eric's mind. "This is real. I'm real," Keenan said.

Eric suddenly found himself released from the strange magic that immobilized him. Keenan took his hand, entwining their fingers and urging Eric to touch his face.

"See, I'm real," he said. "You can feel me. Don't be afraid. You're not crazy."

Eric whimpered as he buried his head in Keenan's neck. He wanted to believe it was real, but everything seemed so strange, and he felt so overwhelmed. "Please, help me."

\* \* \* \*

Keenan looked down at the little human in his arms in concern. He needed to be more careful in the future. His pet was so fragile, both mentally and emotionally. Keenan didn't expect such a powerful reaction of denial on Eric's part.

Of course, disbelief could be anticipated, sometimes horror, but once the prey had been coaxed and seduced into obedience, they were compliant and so much fun. But Eric...Eric wasn't like his other playthings.

Keenan shook himself, wondering at the peculiarity of these new emotions. What was wrong with him? Eric didn't mean more than any other toy, right? So why couldn't Keenan bring himself to fuck him already? Why did he want to be more careful? After all, if this toy broke, he'd just get another.

And yet, as he took in the slender body trembling in his arms and looked into those big, green eyes, Keenan couldn't bring himself to do anything that would hurt the young human. By rights, the smartest and easiest thing to do

would be to simply erase his memory and abandon him in the park. They could both go back to their previous existences like their fortuitous meeting never occurred. But Keenan knew he couldn't do that either. He couldn't just forget about his meeting with Eric. Shit, he was in trouble.

Earlier, when his pet projected giving him a blow job, Keenan had almost come right then and there, just because of the image in his head. Yes, Eric was truly special. Keenan would have to think about what that meant for him later. For now, he needed to take care of the outcome of Eric's seizure.

As he cradled Eric's body to his chest, Keenan realized that in order to make the human snap out of his frightened trance, he needed to be shown real things, things to anchor him in reality. It would be risky because it meant giving away more than he usually did, but Keenan felt willing to take the chance.

"Come, pet," he urged gently. "Let me show you where we are. Would you like that?"

Eric paused, but then the pitiful sobbing stopped, and he nodded. *Shit, just a look in those big teary eyes. So green. Focus, focus.* Keenan grabbed the slender body in his arms, holding the young human in bridal pose.

Mentally, he opened the glass door that led to the terrace. It paid to be rich. The building he owned was one of the tallest skyscrapers in Manhattan. Hell, he could probably have been able to buy the Chrysler Building. Given that such a purchase would have been too eye-catching, he'd settled for this one instead.

In the eyes of the world, he appeared as the perfect example of a successful, albeit eccentric, millionaire and businessman. Truthfully, it had become much harder to preserve such facades in contemporary days than in days of old, but humans were no longer the fools they had been. Their leaders accepted and welcomed the patronage of the insanely wealthy paranormals, providing them with the secrecy they needed in exchange for the financial support. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement, for which Keenan felt thankful. Even if he did rule his businesses from the shadows, some things could not be hidden from the eyes of the authorities.

He wondered what Eric would think when he realized the powerful firm Von Klein, Inc. belonged to him. Of course, it wasn't an uncommon thing. Many companies were owned, or at least sponsored, by paranormals. Eric



need not know that, not yet at least. All this information could shake his already fragile world. Keenan would have to break everything to his human gently. If he kept Eric around, that is. He hadn't yet decided anything on that.

"Wow." Eric's voice sounded full of wonder as he stared at the New York landscape. Keenan wasn't surprised. Even with Eric's poorer human eyesight and from the significant height of the Von Klein Tower penthouse, the beautiful Times Square would be a sight to see. Keenan couldn't help a small smile as he watched the entranced expression on Eric's face. He would have to give Eric a real tour of New York one day. They could fly over the city, unseen and unheard, and sneak in to see the Statue of Liberty at night. They could watch over the restless ocean and visit the Theatre District. He suspected Eric had never taken the time to enjoy the pleasures that New York could provide. He'd have liked to give Eric a nighttime tour of the Twin Towers, but alas, it would no longer be possible.

Keenan didn't have time to be startled by his romantic contemplations. Suddenly, the human started to struggle in his arms, protesting, "Put me down, put me down!"

Keenan felt tempted to see what thoughts passed through his little psychic's mind, more so when Eric ran back to the dormitory. Maybe he'd accidentally done something wrong. Keenan followed in his human's tracks as he made his way back to his chambers and saw Eric frantically going through a bunch of clothes and books.

Keenan almost gaped as he brushed Eric's mind. Eric was truly one of a kind.

"Stop your fretting, pet," he said with a smile. "I'll get it for you."

Eric stopped messing up the pillows and furniture, but agitation rolled off him in waves. "Really? Please, can you give it to me now?"

Keenan nodded, his smile widening as he took in Eric's childish impatience. Eric seemed to be in his own world and didn't even care about Keenan's mind reading. It was so cute Keenan felt tempted to give Eric something else to think about. Nevertheless, he ordered the hidden wardrobe to open, and Eric's bag obediently flew toward him. Eric's eyes widened, and he avidly drank in the sight of his bag floating just out of reach. Keenan hid a smirk, realizing the potential of the situation.

He couldn't wait to see how Eric liked his little trick.

\* \* \* \*

Eric was getting impatient as the backpack floated from the wardrobe to Keenan. It moved so slowly. He bit his lip in a nervous gesture. He needed it and *now*. Damn that vampire, keeping him away from what he needed. Eric cursed as the much desired bag flew right past him. He made a desperate grab for the flying object, only to crash onto the floor empty-handed. He gave Keenan a disgruntled look, but it just made the evil vampire laugh.

“Looking for this?” Keenan held his precious sketchbook in his pale hand. “Hmm, I wonder what I should ask you for it.”

Eric glared at the vampire, knowing Keenan had the upper hand. He needed the sketchbook desperately. He just had to capture the magnificent sight he’d just witnessed. It was almost a physical compulsion. Making a face, Eric inquired, “What do you want? My b–blood?”

Keenan’s eyes flashed a dangerous red, but he chuckled. “Actually, yes. I was thinking in terms of a kiss.”

A kiss? What a strange thing to ask for. Keenan could steal kisses if he wanted to. He’d done so just a little earlier, and he didn’t need Eric’s permission. But Keenan had said “yes” to his question. Maybe vampire kisses involved blood as well.

“You’re smart, Eric. It’s true. Everything we vampires do, sexually, is entwined with blood. I haven’t bitten you, just scratched you a bit, and I want to do it right.”

“But I thought you said you want a kiss,” Eric protested, feeling more than a little confused.

Keenan nodded, his smile having turned positively predatory. “That’s how we call it, the kiss of death.” The strange sensation from before returned, and Eric felt hot again, hot and needy. He wanted those lips on his neck, those fangs piercing his skin.

He shook himself and glared at the obviously aroused vampire. “Promise you’re not messing with my head?”

“I swear, pet,” Keenan answered. “Now come here.”

\* \* \* \*

Eric had forgotten about the sketchbook. What a strange development. Keenan only intended to play a prank on his human, not to ask him for something. And now this. Why had he said the kiss of death?

Even as he asked himself this question, Keenan knew the answer to it. Eric was so cute, so perfect, as he glared at Keenan to demand his sketchbook, his green eyes sparkling with indignation, still gloriously naked and oblivious of the fact. Unlike all those other easily discarded toys, Eric brought a unique light to Keenan's life. For this reason, Keenan needed his human to give his consent for the first bite. He needed Eric to come to him. The value of blood freely given made all the difference in the world for vampires. Keenan wanted it. He wanted the connection that only consent could bring.

Hesitantly, Eric came forward until they were face to face. Green eyes met midnight black, and Keenan caressed the human's smooth cheek as he whispered, "Don't worry. I won't hurt you." *Not a lot, anyway. And you'll enjoy it.*

Eric nodded his assent, swallowing nervously. Keenan brushed across his human's mind, checking on Eric's thoughts. Eric wanted to be bitten, but he was also afraid, afraid of the power he gave Keenan in doing so. At the same time, Eric knew that if Keenan wanted to, he could have crushed his fragile body with one hand or made him a mindless drone.

Keenan suppressed a chuckle. So beautiful and so naïve. One should never underestimate the value of free will like that.

Keenan mentally *tsked*. He'd have to teach his pet a few lessons. But that would happen later, much later. Now, he was too distracted by a beautiful pale throat being exposed to him and offered willingly. Nothing in the world aroused him more than seeing his prey come to him.

Keenan closed his eyes, breathing in Eric's natural scent. He hesitated for a minute, probing his human's mind more carefully. He wanted to make sure Eric didn't feel constrained in any way. No, there was no constraint there, just natural impulse. Eric felt afraid and doubtful, but remained so very willing.

Keenan smiled. Most certainly, this would be perfect. He'd deal with the fear in time. And Keenan would make sure his pet would have a lot of time to spend at his side. Sinking his teeth in that beautiful throat, for the first time in decades, Keenan felt pleased about something in his life.

\* \* \* \*

Eric winced at the thought of sharp fangs penetrating the delicate skin of his neck. What was he thinking? Had he lost his mind? Why did he become so willing to be vampire dinner?

All doubt disappeared from his mind as the vampire in question sunk said fangs deep into his neck. A gasp escaped his lips at the unexpected sensation. Fuck him, it felt so good! It seemed as if the vampire feasting on his blood was touching him all over. Every swallow of blood made Eric moan and pant louder. His body felt on fire with sensation, burning from the inside out, and yet, he needed more, so much more.

The deep ecstasy felt more intense than anything he'd experienced in his entire life. His powers kept him from having any type of contact with anyone. Therefore, his knowledge of the sexual department was limited, at best. This man's, this creature's touch enflamed him, made him need something Eric didn't understand. Eric dug his fingers into Keenan's black hair, finding peculiar comfort in the feel of the silky strands beneath his fingers. He heard his own voice beg breathily, "Please, please," but Keenan's presence cast aside the doubt and the shame.

"What, pet? What do you need?" Keenan's voice emerged like a shadow inside of his mind. The repeated intrusion of his private thoughts should have bothered Eric, but right now, he couldn't find it in him to protest. In fact, he felt rather thankful for it, since it meant he did not need to understand or vocalize the whirlpool of feelings that overwhelmed him. As Keenan took another mouthful of blood, Eric whimpered. He didn't know how to answer the whispered question. Eric started grinding his aching member against the vampire's body, using his hand to press Keenan's mouth to his neck. He wanted Keenan to suck his blood, to touch him, to take him, to fuck him hard and fast.

Keenan growled. It was an almost feral sound that should have scared Eric but instead enflamed his blood even further. He started to protest as the strong suction at his neck stopped and a talented tongue licked his neck, but his disapproval instantly vanished as he found himself flipped over and pushed on all fours on the floor.

“You want me to fuck you, pet?” Keenan purred in Eric’s ear, greedily caressing his skin.

Eric couldn’t say anything. Lust took over every fiber of his being. He wanted to beg, to plead to be taken, but just a pathetic little whimper came out.

Keenan laughed, a sound that should have seemed mocking and yet wasn’t. “I’ll take that as a yes. Don’t worry! It won’t hurt...much.”

Eric couldn’t find it in him to care about any possible pain. He was a virgin, of course, since any kind of touch would be a problem for a psychic like himself. A long time ago, he’d buried that part of him that craved human contact, his sexuality included, simply because he knew his “gift” prevented him from ever getting close. The only sexual release he got was by his own hand, and that made him feel empty inside and so very abandoned.

But now it seemed that his lonely heart and neglected body no longer accepted being denied. Every part of him ached in need, and he panted, begging to be touched, to feel the pleasure this vampire could give him. Nothing else mattered. Just the two of them, two bodies and two souls coming together as one.

\* \* \* \*

Astonishment and awe filled Keenan at Eric’s reaction. He’d expected Eric to feel pleasure at his bite, but somehow, the human’s psychic powers magnified everything, making him feel Keenan’s experience as well.

Perhaps he shouldn’t be that surprised. After all, his giving Eric the kiss of death played a major part in it. They were bonded now. Even normal humans, without Eric’s psychic gift, were said to be affected by their vampire’s pleasure in drinking blood. The bond made sure of that.

Even so, what amazed Keenan was the overflow of emotion from his human. Eric had been so alone, and it had hurt him so much. Keenan understood. He’d passed through centuries cold and unfeeling, discarding his bedmates like broken toys once he got bored. It seemed strange how he never actually realized it, how he never acknowledged his own loneliness until now.

His little human affected him more than he'd originally thought possible. Keenan didn't like losing control. Right now, though, with Eric naked, on all fours, his entire body trembling and begging for Keenan's touch, he couldn't care less. So what if the human made him feel things he hadn't felt in hundreds of years? He'd deal with it later, once he'd finished ravishing his beautiful pet.

Eric's little ass was oh so very tempting, the beautiful round globes fitting perfectly into Keenan's hands. Keenan spread Eric's cheeks, admiring the way the little virgin hole seemed to beckon him further, winking at him.

The exquisite sight made Keenan ache to abandon all caution and simply thrust inside the tight body of the human. But, no, Keenan would prolong this. He loved the way his human lost himself in pleasure, and he wanted to hear Eric scream his name, to make him beg out loud. He hadn't lived to be this old for nothing. He knew many things, and he'd teach Eric each and every one of them. He'd make Eric *his* completely.

Keenan smirked as he started feasting on Eric's anus. A leisurely lick across his human's crease, then little thrusts at his anus. Lick, thrust, thrust, lick. His pet tasted delicious. He could no longer deny himself the pleasure of again sampling the sweetness of Eric's blood. Abandoning the human's hole, he dug his fangs in Eric's inner thigh, feasting on his blood. Fuck! He was sweet, so sweet and perfect. Eric tasted addicting, like lavender honey and rich wine. The rush of endorphins in Eric's blood caused by his arousal made him taste even better than before. His entire body seemed flooded with life and light, and his flavor created an explosion of ecstasy that blew Keenan's senses away.

Eric screamed, and Keenan's own erection swelled to impossible proportions as he came without even entering Eric. Luckily, one of the many advantages of being a vampire was superhuman stamina. Keenan's cock remained as hard as a rock, prepared and eager for a fuck-fest with Eric.

Hastily, Keenan tore off his clothes, needing more than ever to possess his beautiful find. It would be Eric's first time, and due to Keenan's dick size, Eric might be hurt. Even knowing this, Keenan couldn't wait any longer. The rimming would have to do as preparation.

He coated his cock with spit and blood and placed it at the entrance of Eric's channel.

Just as he prepared himself to enter his human for the first time, a shrill sound sounded from the nightstand. The phone was ringing. Keenan cursed out loud, wondering who in the world could be calling him at the penthouse. It must be the Council.

Eric whimpered. "Please just let it ring."

Keenan struggled to breathe and considered his options. If he ignored the damn phone, he could fuck his pet into the ground until neither of them could walk. If he took the call, he would be thrust into whatever issue the Council had come up with to annoy him and be left with a hard-on. There seemed to be no reason to hesitate. The machine picked up the call as Keenan leaned over Eric again. "Hello, you've reached the private number of Keenan von Klein. I am not available right now. Please leave a message, and I will get back to you."

An angered voice followed the beep, taking Keenan by surprise. "Keenan, *fils de pute*, pick up!" Keenan frowned, recognizing the voice at the other side of the receiver. Why was that idiot calling him?

"*Bastarde, inutile sangsue*, pick up! I know you're there!" the angry caller continued to rant. Keenan would have let it ring, if not for the jerk's complete fall into French. The accent of the Sidhe tended to grow thicker when he felt nervous. Great, just great! What the hell could be wrong now?

With an irritated sigh, he moved from where he'd been sitting entwined with his human. He could hear Eric's protest in his head as he moved away. Eric wanted to be fucked, touched, licked. He wanted everything Keenan had to offer. Unfortunately for them both, that would have to wait.

\* \* \* \*

Eric couldn't believe it. The bastard vampire abandoned him to go pick up the phone after Eric begged and moaned like a slut for him. Eric gritted his teeth as annoyance threatened to overcome him.

"*Guten morgen, Zauberin!*" Keenan greeted cheerfully as he picked up the phone.

Eric felt his annoyance and sexual frustration twist into full-blown anger. Who was the other person? Eric initially assumed it could be some sort of work associate, but Keenan's tone of voice sounded flirty. "Oh? Don't tell me you were worried? I never knew you cared!"

No, this was no work conversation. Refusing to be toyed with, Eric got up from the floor, making his way as elegantly as possible to where Keenan talked on the phone. Might as well have some fun. Eric smirked as he started rubbing his naked body against Keenan's.

Keenan gasped, interrupting his conversation with the man on the other side of the receiver. He gave Eric a distinctly disgruntled look and growled, "Pet..."

Eric didn't answer Keenan's reprimand out loud, but he made himself heard through their peculiar connection. *"Nope. Sorry, but I won't have you leave me like that while you talk to another lover."*

"Pet, he's not my lover." Keenan protested brokenly. "Please, stop!"

*Right, like I believe you!* Eric continued his rubbing, ignoring Keenan's protests. He decided on attacking Keenan's neck, licking and nipping the pale skin. After all, Keenan had bitten him there, too. It seemed only fair.

The intruder on the phone shouted angrily now, and Eric rejoiced in knowing he caused that fury.

"Please, Eric." Keenan tried again. "This is important." As Eric continued to lick and touch Keenan, the vampire sighed. "You're not giving me any choice."

Eric's eyes widened as Keenan pressed a thumb on his forehead and murmured, "Sleep." In an instant, Eric started to feel tired, his eyelids growing heavy with artificially induced exhaustion. The last thought that passed through his mind was *"Bastard!"*, and then he fell into unconsciousness.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan cursed as he intercepted Eric's swooning form. His human would be furious with him when he woke up. It was his own fault for teasing the Sidhe with Eric in the room. Shit, he could be so stupid sometimes.

At the other end of the receiver, Jean Luc still vented his anger, spouting French insults. Supporting Eric's limp body against his own, Keenan concentrated on his caller. "Has anybody told you, Jean Luc, you have a really dirty mouth?"



Jean Luc cursed again, his anger and frustration palpable even through the telephone connection. “Fuck you, *sangsue*! If I didn’t need you—” Jean Luc paused, took a deep breath, and said in a barely audible whisper, “*Les chasseurs*, Keenan. *Les chasseurs sont venus*.”

Keenan froze, forgetting all about being called a leech and a bloodsucker. It couldn’t be. The hunters hadn’t been a problem for years now. “Tell me you’re joking, Jean Luc! Please tell me you’re joking!”

“*C’est pas un blague*,” Jean Luc answered. “We have several bodies already to prove it.”

Keenan felt like he’d been hit by a truck as he listened to the Sidhe’s strangled voice. “*Merde! Je peux pas—*”

Keenan couldn’t blame Jean Luc for being so affected by the reappearance of the hunters. The Sidhe prince had a more-than-unpleasant experience with them a few years back. Jean Luc nearly lost his life in an encounter with them in France, and Keenan could still remember the aftermath of the event. Nevertheless, he needed Jean Luc to focus and give him a few answers.

“Jean Luc. Breathe, damn it! Who died?” Keenan asked.

“*Merde*. Basil *et* James *et* Ulrike *et—*”

Jean Luc seemed to be almost hyperventilating. If the name of the second vampire elder living in New York hadn’t already alerted Keenan as to the seriousness of the situation, Jean Luc’s attitude would have been a clear sign that something was very wrong. A very skilled fighter, the Sidhe had killed his own share of hunters. “Jean Luc!” Keenan shouted into the phone. “Get a hold of yourself!”

Keenan’s rough reprimand seemed to snap the Sidhe from his trance. The voice that answered him turned into Jean Luc’s normal cool and sarcastic tone. “I apologize, *monsieur vampire*. We can’t be all unfeeling bitches like you.”

As peculiar as it would seem, Keenan found himself relieved to hear Jean Luc’s irritating sarcasm. In fact, he knew how to deal with a cold, sarcastic, annoying Sidhe, but he did not feel prepared to handle a hysterical one. Besides, if the hunters indeed attacked them again, he needed Jean Luc normal and cool-headed to help him organize the retaliation.

“As I was saying,” Jean Luc said, “we have several dead. Three werewolves, five Sidhe, and one vampire. We need to speak urgently. We are calling a meeting of the highest-ranking paranormals in the city.”

Keenan nodded, despite the fact that the Sidhe obviously couldn’t see him. “Right. At your club?”

“*Oui*,” Jean Luc replied. “I’ll see you there, if you can keep Keenan Jr. away from whatever *jouet* you have around there.”

Jean Luc’s sarcastic laughter rang out as he hung up the phone, but it didn’t fool Keenan. The attacks had shaken Jean Luc up. The Sidhe rarely lost his calm. His ruthlessness rivaled that of a vampire.

Keenan let out a heartfelt sigh. Just when things seemed to be going well for him, too, the hunters showed up. The attack was obviously one of great magnitude if they’d managed to slay Ulrike.

Keenan picked up the slender body of his pet, dutifully ignoring Eric’s perfect nudity. Sating his lusts would have to wait. Walking back to the bedroom, he tucked Eric in bed, covering him with the black sheets.

Keenan moved to a wardrobe and extracted a black leather outfit. As he dressed, he couldn’t help but think how much this entire situation sucked, and not in a good way. He wanted so much to be with his beautiful Eric, but first, he needed to deal with the hunter issue.

From a special hidden closet, Keenan took his blades and pistols and strapped them on. On a normal day, his powers would be sufficient to subdue anyone, but having a small arsenal to aid him couldn’t hurt. With one last longing look to the sleeping form on the bed, Keenan closed the room to the bedroom and exited the penthouse.

## Chapter Three

Ten minutes later, Keenan entered the so-called meeting room in Jean Luc D'Argent's club *Extase*. It was actually Jean Luc's office, since the paranormals of New York tended to keep in contact through electronic means. They all agreed that meeting too often would lead to blood being shed in the council. After all, even if they shared the same goals for their community as a whole, they could hardly stand the sight of each other.

Today, the Council of Paranormals once more reunited under the same roof, and Keenan would have been amused if not for the issue they needed to deal with. The werepanther Elis, leader of the New York Felines, sat, as usual, next to Jacob, Alpha of the New York Werewolf Pack. Cassandra, the third vampire living in New York waited on one of Jean Luc's expensive couches, next to the incubus Giovanni, who seemed to be attempting to placate her. Jean Luc had his hands full with listening to whatever his brother Pierre was trying to tell him. With such an explosive combination and the knowledge of the hunter attacks, Keenan knew tempers would be even shorter than usual.

"Finally!" Jean Luc said in an exasperated tone as soon as Keenan stepped inside the room. "*Monsieur vampire*, you certainly took your time to show up, *oui*?"

Keenan was not in the mood for the Sidhe's antics. He felt angry, worried, and sexually frustrated.

"Jean Luc, please don't make me go against my decision not to kill you," he said.

He wanted to be mature about the whole thing and not make things worse, but he couldn't help but think about Eric and what he'd been forced to do to his pet. The issue with Ulrike and the hunters weighed heavily on his mind. A fight with Jean Luc would at least help him release some of all that nervous energy.

Jean Luc flipped his long silver hair and threw him an obviously disdainful look. “You flatter yourself if you think you can do that,” Jean Luc said.

Keenan smirked as he walked further in the room. The Sidhe was powerful, true enough. They might even be equal in strength. However, Keenan would die before he’d ever admit that. “I could beat your fairy ass any day.”

Instead of jumping at the insult, Jean Luc just laughed. “It would seem that the only thing on your mind today is fairy ass. Oh, Keenan, if you could keep your focus more on the territory and less on fucking anything that walks...”

Keenan arched a brow as he seated himself on a vacant leather armchair. “Oh? You should be thankful that I showed up. You sounded so affected on the phone.”

Jean Luc got up from his seat in a flash. Several ornamental daggers hanging on the wall pointed threateningly toward Keenan. The Sidhe’s violet eyes sparkled, and his white leather outfit made his fair skin ethereal, but his beauty was a disguise. Behind the mask, a killer hid, waiting to strike.

“Now, now, children, don’t fight,” Giovanni said. The incubus wore a red leather outfit, his flamboyant purple hair loose on his shoulders. Strangely enough, despite his demon nature, Giovanni always acted friendly and intervened to settle disputes. Over time, he’d become someone Keenan could trust. He was also one of the few people who dared to get between Jean Luc and Keenan when they fought.

Keenan nodded, abandoning his goal of further irritating the Sidhe. “Yes, we have more important things to discuss.”

Jean Luc shrugged as the menacing-looking daggers took their places again on the wall, until the next fight at least. “This was getting boring anyway.”

“Right. Now that we have that out of the way,” Pierre said, “we should get down to business.”

To this day, Keenan failed to decipher one of the greatest mysteries of his life—the difference between Pierre and his older brother. Pierre was the kind of person who liked pink bunnies, little children, and saving stray kittens. His blond hair and blue eyes reminded Keenan of an angel. As an

added bonus, he had a nice ass as well. Keenan knew this from experience since he'd slept with Pierre once back in Paris. He remembered it as a good, satisfying fuck, but he didn't want a repeat performance. Not now that he had Eric.

Keenan sighed and rubbed his eyes. Eric would be so angry with him. This was so fucked up. What could the hunters want with them now? With their alliance with the humans, he'd thought he'd reduced the threat in New York to the minimum. Giovanni looked at him with obvious curiosity but didn't ask. The incubus knew him well enough as to be aware that he wouldn't answer any questions about his personal life.

"So? What's the deal with the hunters?" Keenan asked.

Cassandra shifted on the couch and cleared her throat. "We have received reports of sightings of unidentified hunter groups all over the city," she said in her aristocratic, cultured voice. "They seem to be targeting random groups of paranormals."

A low growl interrupted Cassandra's report. "What the hell do they want now?" asked Jacob. "We've kept everything low-key. We even have a treaty."

Jacob's tone emanated anger, and Keenan didn't blame him. Jacob lost three of his men, err...wolves, and it must have hit the pack hard.

Keenan felt furious as well. He couldn't say he'd liked Ulrike all that much, but she hadn't been half bad either. Vampires weren't a close-knit community like werewolves, but they didn't withstand the persecution of centuries by ignoring the deaths of their own kind.

"Procedure?" Keenan inquired, knowing that the Council would have information on what had killed Ulrike, Basil, and the rest of them.

"Customized to each type of paranormal," Jean Luc said. "Silver bullets and blades for werewolves, iron for the Sidhe. Ulrike was found decapitated and with a stake in the heart. There were also burn marks on all the bodies. Probably some of the guns had exploding bullets. Particularly on Ulrike, the burn mark was evident. We expect a UV ray weapon. From the scene, we gathered they have crossbows, traditional swords, and a wide range of firepower. I expect they used snipers, maybe modified M40s and also Glocks, although I can't be certain."

“Is someone on patrol?” Keenan felt both satisfied with and concerned with the detailed report. The hunters seemed well prepared, and they needed to be swiftly and efficiently dealt with.

“My pack is scouring Brooklyn,” Jacob replied.

“My cats are in the Bronx,” Elis offered.

“Most of the Sidhe are staying put,” Pierre said in a slightly apologetic tone.

“With one exception,” Jean Luc amended. “The Imperials are in Staten Island.”

Keenan nodded, pleased at the organization. With the exception of the Imperials, the Sidhe were generally mild-mannered, gentle individuals. Even if their powers could have been used for violence, the Sidhe couldn’t make themselves hurt others. The best thing for them to do in such a dangerous situation would be to find someplace safe. “What about the demons?” Keenan asked, turning toward Giovanni. “Any word?”

The incubus sighed, a clear sign that he did not expect a lot of help from his kind.

“You know there isn’t much solidarity and unity among us,” Giovanni replied. “I did send Lucca to the demon lord, though. I just hope he comes back in one piece.”

Keenan made a face but didn’t comment, knowing it wasn’t Giovanni’s fault his people were so fucked up. Even vampires had a hierarchy and organization. Not so with demons. Covens didn’t keep contact with each other, let alone with other paranormals.

“So that’s it for reinforcements,” Keenan said with a sigh. “We still have Queens and Manhattan. So how are we going to do this thing?”

\* \* \* \*

Eric woke up feeling dizzy and nauseous. For a moment, he didn’t remember where he was, but then everything came back in a flash. Keenan, his fangs, the bite, his tongue. Then the phone call and after that...Eric growled in anger as he realized the bastard vampire had done the hypnotizing thing again. He couldn’t believe it. Over and over, he’d been treated like some stupid child or plaything to be thrown away, disregarded with ease when his owner found something more interesting to do.

What did he expect? He was just some human, and a crazy one at that. Just because someone had given him some attention, he'd latched on to him like a possessive wife. What the hell was wrong with him? He meant nothing to Keenan, just dinner and a pretty slut to fuck. Keenan would probably just get rid of him once he got bored. Why would Eric even believe anything different?

Eric struggled against the tears that started flowing on his cheeks. He didn't need the idiot freak. Having lived most of his life alone, he'd never needed anyone before. So what if some vampire freak rejected him? Who cared? He was still Eric, and he would go on as before.

He made an attempt to get up, feeling the urge to draw. He always drew when he felt depressed. It soothed his erratic emotions and helped him get over his pain. But as he got up from the bed, the dizziness came back with a vengeance, and he collapsed, hitting the floor hard.

With a pained sound, Eric struggled to recover and open his eyes. The patterns on the ceiling spun, as if dancing in some sort of weird ritual. It actually looked kind of interesting. Of course, if his head didn't ache so much and he didn't feel like he wanted to die, he might have enjoyed it.

"Pet!" Eric blinked in surprise at the realization that he was now hearing voices as well. Had he lost all remnants of sanity? He made an effort to ignore the irritating noise.

"Pet! Eric!" The insistent voice sounded eerily familiar. It sounded like Keenan. Great! He'd ended up crazy *and* obsessed.

"Fuck! Eric! Are you okay? Talk to me."

Sighing, Eric decided to reply. He didn't have anything better to do, and anyway, the voice didn't seem to want to go away.

"What do you want, crazy voice in my head?" Eric mentally answered.

"Are you okay? I felt pain."

Eric scoffed at the stupidity of that remark. "*Of course you felt pain, voice inside my head. Your very location is the source of my pain. Hmm. Are you the cause of my headache? Well, it may be because I fell, but anyway, hearing voices—*" Eric almost chuckled at his own strange situation. He was rambling to a peculiar alternate personality that sounded like Keenan. How pathetic.

"Pet, listen carefully! I am not a voice inside your head." The voice paused, and Eric thought for a moment that it had disappeared. "Well, I

am,” it finished, and Eric laughed, noting that even his alternate Keenan personality felt confused.

*“Shut up. It’s me, Keenan. I’m talking to you in your mind.”*

As he took in that statement, all the annoyance came rushing back, in spite of the pain he still felt. *“Fuck you, bastard!”* Eric mentally snapped. *“What the hell are you doing in my head?”*

A mental sigh of relief echoed through the connection. *“If you’re yelling at me, you can’t feel all that bad.”* Eric wanted to hit Keenan, just for that remark. *“I’m really sorry, Eric. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”*

*“Right, whatever,”* Eric replied, feeling lightheaded.

*“Pet, listen to me! I’m coming home! I...”*

It was the last coherent phrase Eric caught. Keenan’s voice suddenly seemed distanced. Eric could still hear it to a certain extent, as if through static or through a thick glass wall. It felt odd, and something Eric didn’t entirely like. He tried to reach back for Keenan, but with that attempt, his mind seemed to explode in a million pieces. The voice dulled out completely, and everything else was gone, too, as he blacked out yet again.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan froze as Eric’s mental voice disappeared. All the paranormals stared at him strangely.

“Is something wrong, Keenan?” Giovanni asked, giving him a concerned look.

Keenan didn’t feel capable of replying. Yes, something was wrong. He’d lost contact with Eric. But how could he explain that to the gathering?

Everybody looked at him expectantly, waiting for an answer. Jean Luc arched a perfect silver brow at his sudden silence. “I think *monsieur vampire* has a problem,” he calmly said. “Don’t you, Keenan?”

Jean Luc was right. He did indeed have a problem. Eric’s silence concerned him, more so when he realized he could even find an explanation for that. He’d taken too much blood, and with the drug dependency, the loss would have an adverse effect on his human. Fuck!

“Keenan?” Jean Luc repeated.



Keenan just ignored everybody as he got up and stomped toward the exit. Before he could open the door, Cassandra got in his way, her eyes flashing with anger. “What the hell? You can’t just leave.”

How could he explain this? Keenan gritted his teeth, wanting to push the redhead out of the way. “I have somewhere to be,” he barked at her.

“Somewhere more important than this?” Jacob’s claws started to show in his fury.

“Keenan,” Elis growled, the threat in that one word sufficient to convey his message.

The atmosphere thickened with tension, but Keenan didn’t care. He’d go see Eric, whether these guys liked it or not. If he needed to fight, he would. He’d go through the entire Council if they got in his way.

“Look, guys. Obviously, Keenan has something very important to do. Otherwise he wouldn’t leave us. You all know this.” Jean Luc’s voice rang out with authority.

The Alpha wouldn’t be silenced just like that. “We are low on people as it is, Jean Luc!” Jacob protested.

“We are among the most powerful paranormals in the world,” the Sidhe snapped back. “Between the four of us, we can easily take Manhattan.”

“And what about Queens?” Pierre asked.

Jean Luc just shrugged at his brother’s question. “We’ll scour it afterwards. Jacob, Elis, maybe your people can go there once they’re done in their own areas.”

Nobody said anything. Keenan couldn’t be more surprised if the sun suddenly stopped shining. On a good day, Keenan and Jean Luc managed to try not to kill each other. The fact that Jean Luc stood up for him was more than he could hope for. Seemingly oblivious to Keenan’s confusion, Jean Luc addressed him once again. “Come, I’ll see you to the door.” Apparently, just like that, the decision had been made.

As they got out of the crowded room, Keenan felt he needed to say something. “Jean Luc, I really do appreciate it.”

The Sidhe smiled, and the sight of that smile made him look even more beautiful. “Go to him, *mon ami*. Go to him.”

Keenan’s jaw dropped. How could Jean Luc know?

Jean Luc laughed softly at Keenan’s shock. “I have known you for many centuries, Keenan. And never once have I seen that expression on

your face,” he gently replied. “Whoever this person is, he must be important.”

“He is,” Keenan managed to croak out. He didn’t understand his own desire to supply some sort of answer or Jean Luc’s helpful attitude. It would seem that even after living for so long, Keenan could still be surprised.

Jean Luc nodded his approval, and Keenan took that as his cue to leave. As Keenan turned toward the door, Jean Luc’s hand on his shoulder stopped him.

“Keenan, this is a very hard time for all of us,” Jean Luc said. “You must take care of your loved ones. The hunters do not discriminate.”

Terror slipped into Keenan’s heart as he realized the truth of Jean Luc’s words. He’d just known Eric for a little while and hadn’t realized that his involvement with his human would be quite so obvious to others. But if Jean Luc was right, Keenan’s peculiar attachment to Eric would draw attention to him. With his hand on the doorknob, Keenan threw another glance toward Jean Luc. “Thank you,” he said.

As he ran through the club and rushed to his Lexus, Keenan could only think of one thing—Eric. Eric was sick, and now, he’d become a target for the hunters. And all because of Keenan. He’d never forgive himself if something happened to his pet!

\* \* \* \*

The black Lexus sped at an alarming velocity down the New York streets. Keenan should have probably been worried about drawing the attention of the human police force or running someone over, but right now, he didn’t give a damn. He just wanted to be with his Eric.

Keenan cursed out loud when he saw the traffic jam looming ahead. Apparently, there’d been an accident of sorts. Fuck, at times like these, he hated New York. The cars were stuck, and drivers honked angrily. At this rate, he’d never get back to the penthouse to see Eric.

Keenan moved out of the line of cars, making a risky maneuver that almost made him crash into two of the neighboring vehicles. He went back a street and hastily abandoned the Lexus in the first free space he could find. Rushing to a dark alley, he cloaked himself and took to the skies.

Flying rated high on the list of advantages that came with being an eight-century-old vampire. Keenan kept the Lexus just to maintain appearances of normality. Taking into account his wealth, he was expected to have a fancy car. In situations such as this, though, said car was useless, and flying would get him to his destination much faster.

*Extase*, the club owned by Jean Luc, wasn't actually all that far from the von Klein building. After five minutes of high speed flight, he could see the penthouse. He landed off the terrace and rushed through the French doors. He spared a thought to check the magical wards, feeling satisfied at the realization that they were in place. At least he knew that the hunters hadn't been here in his absence.

Keenan made a mad dash to the dormitory. Eric lay collapsed on the floor, surrounded by black sheets. The vision made Keenan feel sick to his stomach. The black of the satin on Eric's pale skin looked like an omen, a sign of the fact that Eric was no longer among the living. Keenan refused to believe it. Eric couldn't be dead. Keenan wouldn't allow it.

Rushing to his pet's side, he breathed a sigh of relief as his vampire senses picked up a heartbeat. Because of Keenan's overindulgence in his blood, Eric had fallen into unconsciousness, but he would be fine. He just needed a little nursing.

Two hours later, Keenan started to get desperate. Eric remained unresponsive despite Keenan's efforts to wake him. Eric's fight with the induced slumber had taken more out of him than Keenan originally thought, so much so that it endangered his life. Keenan needed help, and soon.

In all of his long years, Keenan had detested asking someone for help, but he didn't have a choice now. He couldn't be certain how Eric's fragile body would react to a process as complex as the kiss of death. He'd been so stupid and selfish to push Eric into something like that. He'd allowed the unfamiliar lure of his human to cloud his reason. Now, Eric could pay the price.

Picking up the phone, he hastily dialed a number. The phone rang a few times then a voice yelled, "D'Argent!" The Sidhe sounded irritated at having been called at such a time.

"Hello, Jean Luc," Keenan said, hoping the Sidhe's mood wouldn't prevent him from agreeing to his request.

“Keenan,” the Sidhe said. His tone changed to one of mild surprise mixed with sarcasm. “To what do I owe this pleasure, *monsieur vampire*?”

Any other day, Keenan would have answered by flirting or teasing the other man, but this was not an ordinary day. Swallowing his pride, Keenan hesitantly said, “Jean Luc, I need your help.”

At the other end of the receiver, Jean Luc paused. “Keenan? What is wrong?” he asked, his tone now tinged with just a trace of concern. “Is it him, this person?”

Keenan nodded by instinct, even if Jean Luc was unable to see him.

“Yeah, it’s Eric. I can’t wake him up. It’s—”

“I’m on my way now,” Jean Luc said. “I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

The Sidhe hung up, and Keenan only hoped he would keep his promise and hurry.

The minutes seemed to drag into hours as Keenan waited by Eric’s side, trying to wake Eric without success. If he’d killed Eric, he would never forgive himself. Keenan buried his head in his hands, feeling despair seep into his heart. He had done a lot of bad things in his life, killed a lot of people. In many ways, killing defined the nature of life as a vampire. They’d just recently begun to be more cautious in their dealings with the humans. The thought that Eric could become one of his victims chilled Keenan to the core.

Finally, the elevator tone rang out, announcing a visitor. Keenan had already informed his security that Jean Luc would show up. He sped through the penthouse and dragged the Sidhe warrior in.

Jean Luc looked as perfect as always, his long silver hair tied in an impeccable braid, his violet eyes serious. “Tell me how bad it is,” he instructed in a professional tone.

“Pretty bad. I drank from him, and I think I took too much.”

“*Merde*. You’re one of the oldest vampires in America! How can you lose control like that?”

Keenan gritted his teeth at the scolding. “Look, I already know I fucked up. Can you help me or not?”

Jean Luc looked at the pale form on the bed and then turned toward Keenan again. “There’s something else you’re not telling me.”

Keenan nodded, surprised that the Sidhe detected this so easily. “He also has a drug problem.”

Jean Luc's perfect features twisted into a scowl. "Since when do you hook up with junkies?"

Keenan felt anger swell inside of him at the insult.

"Fuck you!" he spat. "He's not a junkie. He needs the pills because—" He stopped himself from finishing the phrase at the realization that he could not explain Eric's drug problem without also giving away his abilities.

Jean Luc arched a brow at Keenan's hesitation. "Because?" He urged Keenan to continue.

Deciding to choose the lesser evil, Keenan sighed. "He's psychic, all right? He's a powerful psychic. He even bypassed my slumber spell."

"Are you certain?" Jean Luc asked, back into professional mode. "He managed to wake from a slumber spell?"

Keenan nodded. "I heard him in my head during the meeting. We have a connection."

Jean Luc gave Keenan a strange look but said nothing. Instead, he came closer to the bed and pressed his hands over Eric's forehead. Seconds later, he let go and took a step back with a gasp. "*Merde...*"

"What is it, what's wrong?" Keenan didn't like the sound of that.

Jean Luc rubbed his forehead, his voice sounding strained and tired to Keenan's ears. "From what I can tell, your bite must have set loose the power he'd been keeping locked inside. It's like a volcano in there. I expect the blackout happened when the mental energy became too much to handle."

Jean Luc paused, stealing another glance toward Eric.

"However, the most important problem is that you didn't tell me he has mental problems. I can wake him up, but I am not entirely certain if you'll like the condition he'll be in."

\* \* \* \*

Eric was tired. Tired of walking. He'd been walking in a dark corridor for so long his feet ached. He didn't remember how he'd gotten there, and he didn't have any clue on how he could get out.

The dark corridor twisted and shifted in a peculiar pattern, and Eric scratched his head absently as he analyzed his current location. This was definitely not Keenan's room. The tasteful furniture and king-sized bed with

black sheets had disappeared, replaced by an obscure room that looked all too similar to the one he stayed in when he lived with his parents. Yes, it was indeed his room, the room that had been his prison for so many years. He shivered as he saw the hard bed with flimsy covering. The headboard still bore the signs of chains and someone struggling against them. He looked away, unwilling to remember those days. He'd left those days behind. He'd managed to escape the two people who should have loved him, but who hurt him because of something he couldn't control.

He smiled as he saw a bunch of sketches hidden in a crack in the floor. If someone saw them, they'd be destroyed, just because they were the work of his insane mind. Most of the time, he managed to protect his art. That's how he survived through his entire childhood.

Eric looked around, feeling more confused than ever. Could this be a memory? But why would he be remembering it now? He'd stopped thinking about this many years back. True enough, he did sometimes still have nightmares, but he'd been getting better, and anyway, they were never this vivid or coherent.

"No, it's not a memory, silly rabbit," a small voice said from behind Eric. Eric turned and gasped as he saw himself at the age of ten, sitting at the simple wooden table, sketchbook in arms.

"Stop being so surprised," child Eric said. "Everybody maintains a little of their own childhood personality. It's like a conditioning," child Eric explained in an eerily serious manner. It was almost amusing, especially since after he said this, he shifted to a younger, almost playful tone. "Like an icky caterpillar turning into a pretty, pretty butterfly."

"Now, come here, and let me show you something," his young self said, pulling Eric toward him to proudly present the sketch of a butterfly. Eric scanned the sketch with a critical eye. It was good, but it needed—Wait, why in the world was he analyzing the art of his inner child?

Child Eric smiled at him, brushing his long blond hair out of his eyes. "So what do you think?" he inquired.

Instead of replying, Eric asked a question himself. "So what you're saying is that you're the caterpillar and I'm the butterfly?"

Child Eric made a face, as if displeased by the analogy. "Yup, I guess that's it. Anyway, do you like the drawing?"

Eric ignored the question again, hoping not to upset his child self in the process. "Wait. But the caterpillar and the butterfly can't both be present at the same time. How can we...? Where are we anyway?"

Child Eric laughed, not seeming the least bit upset about his older self's apparent refusal to give his opinion on his art. "Shut up, silly. Asking things you already know."

Eric buried his face in his hands as he sat on the floor. "In my screwed-up head."

His childhood self moved from the table and wrapped his small arms around Eric in a clumsy hug.

"Don't be sad. I'm glad you came. I was lonely. And you'll help."

Lonely? Help? Eric felt confused. What did the child mean? The expression on his face must have been telling because child Eric nodded sagely and explained, "Yes. You'll help. They'll be coming soon."

As if the words of the child summoned the unwanted presence, footsteps echoed outside the room. Child Eric scuttled to the hiding place and hid the sketchbook. He had time to scramble on the poor bed before the door opened. Older Eric just stared in horror as the familiar figures of his parents walked into the room. His mother's cold eyes scanned child Eric critically as his father came closer, his usual riding crop in hand.

"Any visions today, Eric?" she asked in a sickly sweet tone.

"No, Mother. I didn't—" The riding crop hit the child hard, stopping him from finishing the sentence. "I mean no, madam. No visions." His answer didn't help him, though. Tears started flowing from older Eric's eyes as the crop hit again and again and desperate pleas echoed in the room. Lord, he couldn't see this. This couldn't be happening again.

His own tears mirrored those of the child. The renewed terror immobilized his muscles, and he just stood there, frozen, as his parents unleashed their anger on his childhood self.

"I am not your mother," the woman shouted. Then the dreaded syringe appeared in her hand, and the horror in Eric's heart increased tenfold. He stopped being Eric the adult and became Eric the child, his two selves merging as he fought his father with everything he had. The syringe flew out of his mother's hand, sticking itself in the hand holding the riding crop.

"Devil child! Abomination!" his mother screamed at him with mad eyes, while his father took the syringe out of the wound.

Eric struggled to run from the room while they were distracted, but he was small and short, and his father grabbed him before he even had the chance to get to the door.

“You’re not going anywhere, little freak,” the man growled at him.

Then the unbelievable happened. Some sort of unseen weapon violently pushed his father aside. Strong arms enveloped Eric, an unfamiliar scent resembling lavender comforting his senses. The child looked up at his savior. His eyes widened at the sight of a silver haired angel, so pretty, a warrior angel coming in his aid. Eric wanted to draw him, and he wanted to draw Keenan as well.

Just like that, the old room started spinning again, the figures of his parents fading in the darkness. Dimly, he registered the angel smiling at him, a wave from child Eric, and then everything went black again.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan stared nervously at Jean Luc as he worked. He’d known Jean Luc had the ability to heal, of course. Most Sidhe did. True, some were more powerful than others, and in this case, Keenan was lucky to have found one of the strongest ones. Still, he’d always seen Jean Luc as a warrior, not as a healer. The sight of him struggling to bring Eric back, white light glowing from his fingertips, made Keenan wonder how much he didn’t know about Jean Luc.

Finally, the light vanished, and the Sidhe opened his eyes. “It is done.” Jean Luc took a deep breath, rubbed his eyes, and sighed. “Poor thing. You have your work cut out for you, *mon ami*.”

“What? Why? What did you see?” Keenan asked.

Jean Luc shook his head, giving him a regretful look. “I can’t tell you that. It’s his past. By rights, I had no business invading his head in the first place.” At Keenan’s glare, the Sidhe added, “Ask him when he wakes. He will tell you.” Jean Luc paused. “This will not be easy, *mon ami*. If you don’t—”

Knowing what Jean Luc would say, Keenan stopped him from even finishing the phrase. “He is very important to me. I think...I think I may—” He shook his head, too uncomfortable to voice feelings he wasn’t yet certain of.



Jean Luc smiled, but his expression looked strained and his eyes haunted.

“Be careful, Keenan. It’s not a good idea to get emotionally involved with humans.”

Keenan suspected Jean Luc knew this from experience. He wanted to ask, but he didn’t have time. On the bed, Eric started to stir.

“Pet, can you hear me?”

Eric blinked, as if trying to clear his vision. He gripped his forehead with a grimace and groaned. “Keenan? What? What’s going on? My head hurts.”

“It’s normal with what you just went through,” Jean Luc calmly replied.

The Sidhe’s voice drew Eric’s attention, and the young psychic’s eyes widened in obvious surprise. “You! The angel!”

Angel? What in the world? Keenan felt possessiveness flare inside of him and hugged his human tightly to his chest. Jean Luc just arched a brow and gave Eric a somewhat sad look. “Angel. It’s a long time since someone called me that.”

That was a peculiar statement to say the least. Keenan opened his mouth to inquire into Jean Luc’s peculiar behavior. As if anticipating this action, Jean Luc cut off any attempt Keenan might have had to pry into his life. “Well, anyway...We should clear up this confusion. Won’t you introduce us, Keenan?” he said.

Eric frowned at the sound of the Sidhe’s words. “Wait, I know your voice from somewhere.”

As realization struck, Eric gasped, and a large vase was propelled toward Jean Luc. “You’re the guy on the phone, the one Keenan left me for.”

Keenan sighed as objects started floating out of control in the room, smashing against the Sidhe’s protective shield. First the hunters, now this. Life seemed to be getting more and more interesting.

## Chapter Four

Eric felt his anger flare out of control as he observed the man dressed in white. No more calling him angel. Even if he did look a little like one, it was so deceiving. How did this person dare to take Keenan away and then go around messing with his head? Stupid flirt! Keenan belonged to Eric. The stupid stranger had no right to come between them.

He realized he'd said that out loud when Keenan's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Do I now?"

Eric felt himself pale at Keenan's question. Shit! Now he'd done it! What had made him say a stupid thing like that? Keenan would hate him for sure. It's not like Eric actually meant anything to Keenan. They'd only just met, after all, and even if Keenan had tasted his blood, he'd probably done the same thing with a million other humans. A thousand things started passing through his head as Eric bemoaned his stupidity. How could he even compare himself to the angel-like person? He didn't have a chance.

Eric closed his eyes, wishing he could just disappear. Flashbacks from the past came back to him as he fell to his knees and buried his face in his hands. *Abomination. Insane. Pathetic. Freak.* Yes, he was all that and so much more. How could he even consider Keenan could like him?

Strong arms enveloped Eric, startling him.

"*Shhh, pet,*" Keenan whispered in his Eric's mind. "*Don't think that. Don't ever think that!*"

Eric opened his eyes to look at the vampire holding him tightly against his chest. Keenan seemed distressed for some reason, his dark eyes clouded by worry. Was Keenan worried for him? Did he actually care?

"*Of course I care, pet!*" Keenan mentally replied. "*You have no idea how I felt when I couldn't wake you! That's why I called Jean Luc to help.*"

Eric felt something stir inside again at the name. Jean Luc, huh? He glanced at the angel-like person, no, at the evil, wicked intruder with

suspicion. Was this Jean Luc, Keenan's lover? He had the urge to rip that perfect silver braid and pluck those supernatural violet eyes with a spoon, as painfully as possible.

With a sigh, Keenan tried to explain. "Eric, we're not like that. Jean Luc and I are just..." Keenan paused, as if trying to find the right word. "...friends." He finished in a less than convincing manner.

Eric immediately detected the pause in Keenan's little discourse. Why had Keenan paused? Liar! Eric broke away from the embrace of the treacherous creature. Who did this vamp think he was? As if taking his blood didn't suffice, now he was also lying? He couldn't take it any longer, and he refused to be some freak's toy. Bastard! Eric would show him that he'd messed with the wrong human.

\* \* \* \*

*Bastard! Liar! Cheater!* All these thoughts passed through Eric's head. Jean Luc hadn't been kidding when he'd warned Keenan, but Keenan didn't expect it to be quite so bad.

It hurt him deep inside to see Eric like this, a fact that in and by itself disturbed him. Keenan had been aware of his own inability to care for someone else for quite a while. But for some reason, with Eric, it was different.

Keenan reached out for the slender blond, causing Eric to scuttle away, burying his still-nude body in the dark sheets and throwing Keenan a glare. Keenan felt thankful for once for the absurd luxuries of his tower, since without the carpet on his bedroom floor, Eric would have surely caught a cold. Physical health aside, the very important problem of Eric's mental instability needed to be dealt with. What was he going to do?

Jean Luc came to his aid.

"Keenan is not explaining properly, my dear Eric."

Eric just glared at the Sidhe.

"I'm not your dear anything, you, you, evil vampire boyfriend stealer."

Keenan almost chuckled at the reply. Evil vampire boyfriend stealer? It would have been funny if the furniture in the room wasn't beginning to shake again. Keenan wasn't worried about the penthouse, but he needed to make Eric calm down. Extreme emotions would just further his mental

instability. If they were going to make Eric well again, Keenan needed to keep his human calm.

Undeterred, Jean Luc confidently continued. "I am afraid it's all a big confusion," he said calmly. "Keenan and I aren't lovers or anything of the sort."

The shaking stopped, but Eric's eyes remained suspicious.

"Then what are you? And why did you call?"

Keenan received his own glare and suppressed a wince at the anger in those emerald orbs. "And you, why did you flirt with him?" Without even waiting for a reply, Eric shook his head and said, "I don't believe you. You're both liars!"

He repeated the phrase over and over, hugging himself and rocking on the floor, tears flowing on his cheeks. "Liars, liars, liars..."

On impulse, Keenan lunged for Eric and hugged him to his chest. He tried to restrain the uncontrolled power that struggled to get out and hurt Eric's mind in the process.

"No, pet. We're not liars."

Eric shook his head violently, trying to cover his ears. "I don't believe you. I'm not listening."

Desperate, Keenan reached for Eric mentally. "*Pet, please, hear me out! Jean Luc and I are members of the High Council of Paranormals. He called me to let me know there's been some trouble. Our people are being killed.*"

This last phrase seemed to work, as Eric snapped out of his trance.

"K-killed?" the human asked shakily.

Jean Luc arched a brow, as if questioning the wisdom of telling Eric this. It was very unusual indeed. Keenan always kept his private life separate from paranormal politics, even erasing his vampirism from the minds of the toys he discarded. Every paranormal needed to obey this rule and keep their existence a secret from humans.

In this situation, Keenan had no choice. He threw a look at Jean Luc, and the Sidhe nodded in understanding. "*Oui*, Eric. Many of our people died, which is why I needed Keenan's support."

"But, why? Why would...?"

Keenan sighed, suddenly feeling weary and old.

“We are hunted because of what we are, Eric. It is a long story. I’ll tell you more another day. For now, just know that they are people that hate us just because we’re not like them.”

Eric nodded sadly. His slender body started shaking as he accepted Keenan’s embrace.

“I understand that,” Eric said. “I’m sorry! I’m so, so sorry!”

Keenan held Eric as his human cried. Lord, was there really nothing he could do to make him smile? He had to try something.

“Hey, don’t be sorry. I’m flattered that you’re jealous,” he attempted to joke.

The miserable sobbing stopped as Eric directed a glare at him. “Aren’t you full of yourself?” The words themselves would have sounded angry, but in truth, Keenan could tell they didn’t hold any of the fury, panic, or despair Eric had experienced before. It worked.

Keenan suppressed a sigh of relief as he pushed Eric on the bed.

“Nope,” he replied with a grin. “Just realistic.” He started placing small kisses on Eric’s temple, on his eyes, his perfect little nose, and the corner of his mouth.

Eric relaxed as Keenan kissed him full on the lips. His human made a small sound, opening his mouth for Keenan’s exploration. No longer able to hold back, Keenan allowed himself to feel the relief of tasting Eric again. They collapsed together on the satiny pillows, Keenan’s larger body covering Eric’s slender frame.

\* \* \* \*

Eric’s body turned to flame as Keenan’s fangs nipped his own lips and started feasting on his mouth. He just wanted to forget about everything and lose himself in Keenan’s delicious taste. The feel of those roaming hands on his naked skin drove him wild, and Eric let out a sound of pleasure, desperate for more.

Instead of continuing his ministrations, though, Keenan got off Eric and left the bed, picking up the landline while he went. Eric blinked in confusion. *What the hell? Not again!*

“Pet, I truly am sorry, but you still haven’t recovered from when last I took your blood.” Keenan gave Eric a serious look. “You need to feed and

replace the blood you lost,” he explained as he dialed, although his voice did sound a bit strained. “Yes, I’d like some Chicken Cordon Bleu, a chicken soup, a beef steak, medium rare.”

Eric’s eyes widened as Keenan listed various meals—fish, pork, beans, and many others. Some of them he only understood a little, but Keenan seemed to be giving specific instructions, sometimes nodding and watching Eric with a smile.

“He’s ordering you things rich in iron,” the angel-like creature, Jean Luc, noted.

“Yes, well, I don’t know. It’s like he’s ordering for an army or something.” Eric felt ashamed at his earlier behavior and couldn’t even look at the other man or, rather, paranormal. What was Jean Luc anyway? It didn’t matter. Maybe Eric should apologize? He really didn’t know how.

Seeming to anticipate his thought, Jean Luc gave Eric a reassuring smile. “Maybe we should take advantage of his absence, get to know each other a little better.” Eric’s eyes widened, and he dug himself deeper into the sheets. He couldn’t possibly be referring to...

“Not like that.” Jean Luc laughed at Eric’s expression. “I just meant we haven’t been properly introduced.”

Eric nodded, blushing at misunderstanding the other man, but Jean Luc just smiled kindly. “Hello, my name is Jean Luc D’Argent. In case you’re wondering, I am a Sidhe.”

A Sidhe? As in a fairy? Well, he certainly was pretty enough. Eric blinked and, realizing he’d not offered a response, hastily said, “Nice to meet you. I’m Eric McAllister, human psychic and mental case.”

He offered the Sidhe a small smile. Jean Luc extended his hand, and Eric gladly took it. He needed as many friends as possible in this new world he’d been thrust into. Alas, that proved to be a mistake, because as they touched, flashbacks of Jean Luc’s past rushed through Eric’s mind’s eye. Children running through a grove. A blond boy with blue eyes. Then a blond teenager crying. Darkness, cell bars, blood. Oh, God, so much pain. Cold, so cold. Then love and a betrayal. A broken heart. Eric screamed, clutching his temples as he felt the terrible pain of Jean Luc’s past. So much pain, so much pain...

\* \* \* \*

Keenan dropped the phone as he heard his pet's scream. In a flash, he joined Eric on the bed and wrapped his arms around his young human's trembling body. He glared at Jean Luc, who was standing there shaken and dumbfounded.

"What the fuck? What happened?"

"*Je suis désolé, mon ami. Je...*" Jean Luc seemed astonished but swiftly snapped back to his normal self and explained, "I didn't expect his powers to be quite so well developed so as to be able to read my memories."

Keenan gave the Sidhe a skeptic look, taking in Eric's shaking form and Jean Luc's stoic face. "He read my mind as well. It wasn't this bad."

The Sidhe tensed at that reply. "You should have told me, Keenan. My memories are not easy to stomach."

Keenan gritted his teeth. Yes, he should have said something, but with Eric, he seemed to be fucking up whatever he did.

"D—don't worry," Eric murmured. "I'm fine." He took a deep breath, struggling to regain control. Directing his attention to Jean Luc, Eric said, "Jean Luc? If you ever need someone—"

Jean Luc looked away, irradiating tension from every pore. "I don't need your fucking pity."

"It's not pity," Eric hastily added. "I am just...I misjudged you." He choked and looked away, somehow managing to stammer an apology. "I'm so very sorry. I wish that maybe we could be friends."

"I don't befriend humans," Jean Luc replied coldly. He turned his back toward Keenan and Eric, making his way to the door.

"I just got impressions," Eric whispered. "Not something specific. I didn't actually see what happened."

Jean Luc turned toward them again, and his eyes analyzed Eric, judging the honesty of his words. He must have been satisfied with what he saw because his body wasn't as tense when he gave them a final nod.

"Good-bye." Jean Luc turned to leave, and without looking back again, he added, "I'll think about it."

Keenan remained silent as he observed the exchange. He didn't know what to think. Jean Luc had always surprised him. The Sidhe were by nature a kind and gentle race, but their prince was anything but kind. Keenan always asked himself why Jean Luc seemed so different than the rest of his

people, but in the end, he'd accepted it without sticking his nose into other people's business. Now that he looked at Jean Luc's disappearing silhouette, he couldn't help but think that maybe it hadn't been the right choice.

\* \* \* \*

Silence reigned for a few seconds as Jean Luc exited the penthouse. Eric still felt shaken from what he'd felt in the Sidhe's mind and kind of regretted having proposed his friendship. Obviously, Jean Luc did not care for people intruding in his life or memories. He *had* said he would consider it in the end, though. Too many things didn't fit, and this new reality he'd been thrust in confused him.

"Pet?" Keenan's voice distracted Eric from his musings. His arms still held Eric tightly, and Eric's eyes widened as he came to a realization. He was touching Keenan, but he couldn't feel anything. No flashback, no memory. What the hell?

"Pet, it's all right." Keenan attempted to calm him down. Eric struggled to cling to the strength in that voice and the rational part of his own mind. After all, why should he get so nervous about not being able to sense other people's memories? He'd done it minutes before with Jean Luc and even with Keenan, back in the park.

Even as he thought this, Eric understood there could only be one explanation. Keenan was shielding. He must have built to be some sort of powerful shield, blocking Eric out.

Eric went from hyperventilating to furious in the blink of an eye. How dare the vamp block him like that? Was he not trustworthy? Besides, Keenan invaded Eric's mind all the time. What, did the vamp see himself as better simply because he was richer and sexier?

Eric took a deep breath, forcing himself not to fall into depression and to remain angry. His emotions were so overwhelming and confusing. More often than not, Eric himself didn't understand what he felt.

"Pet, don't be angry. I only did it for us," Keenan said. "So we can touch."

A brief kiss landed on Eric's temple. "So we can kiss." Another kiss on his nose. "So we can fuck." Keenan took his mouth, and Eric melted,



forgetting all about his anger. Eric agreed with Keenan. He'd very much enjoy touching, kissing, and anything else Keenan wanted to do.

Just when things started to get interesting, the elevator bell sounded, announcing yet another arrival. With another kiss, Keenan got up, exiting the dormitory. Eric plopped back on the bed, feeling frustrated and disappointed. Honestly, couldn't they get a moment alone? He heard voices, then a rolling sound and approaching footsteps. Keenan entered the bedroom once again and gave him a beckoning smile. "Pet, come on! Time for dinner!"

\* \* \* \*

From the doorway, Keenan smiled at Eric. His beautiful pet crossed his arms over his chest, drawing Keenan's attention to those pretty pink nipples. Keenan just wanted to eat him up, right then and there. That pout was just too precious to explain. He held back, knowing Eric had to regain his strength, for both their sakes.

Eric moaned in protest, covering his face with a black pillow. "No! I want more touching!"

Keenan wanted to touch, lick, and fuck as well, but somebody had to think clearly in this relationship. Consciously ignoring the thought that he'd just considered Eric in terms of a relationship, he gave his human a scolding look.

"Pet, you need to eat now. You are weak from when I last drank from you and from the mental exertion."

Eric shook his head. "I'm fine, I feel much better now."

Then, much to Keenan's dismay, Eric abandoned his pillow shield and gave him a seductive look.

"Come on. You know you want me," he purred, pushing away the sheets and revealing the perfect nude body underneath.

Keenan froze as he watched the slender human touch himself. Pretty, talented hands roamed a splendid body made for pleasure. Beautiful, long fingers toyed with the tiny disks of Eric's nipples, skidding over Eric's flat abdomen to his very erect cock.

Keenan's mouth watered. He needed his human, and he needed him now. He'd never felt such a burning feeling in all his years. Not even the thirst for blood could be so powerful.

"Eric," Keenan growled, "you're playing with fire."

Ignoring the obvious threat in those words, Eric let out a little, seductive laugh. "That's exactly what I want to do, play."

Wasn't the little human daring? Well, if Eric wanted to play, Keenan could grant him his wish.

Eric made a sound of surprise when Keenan's power forced his hands above his head. He stared at Keenan, eyes wide with shock. He looked beautiful, vulnerable, innocent, yet sinful. Keenan wanted to fuck him into the mattress until neither of them could move.

Instead, he gave Eric a wicked smirk. He'd show the little arrogant human a thing or two about seduction.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan *tsked*, giving Eric a reproachful look. "Naughty, naughty, my little pet."

Had he pushed the vamp too far? Eric didn't even know why he'd done that anyway. He just wanted—needed—to be touched, but he suspected he wouldn't get what he wanted now. Eric whimpered in distress at the thought.

Keenan picked up a little piece of meat from the tray and held it up to Eric's lips. "Come on, pet. Eat."

Obediently, Eric opened his mouth, hoping to placate Keenan.

"Don't worry," Keenan said with a reassuring smile. "We'll continue this once you're better."

Eric felt like he'd been struck and choked on the piece of meat, spitting it out. He made a move to get up, only to find out he couldn't do it. A strange force immobilized his hands. The magical ties seemed to block his breathing as well as his movements.

"No, no! Let me go, let me go!"

Eric struggled against the bond as a flashback of another time when he'd been tied up passed through his mind.

*They'd found his sketchbook. Little Eric struggled against his father as his mother tore the precious drawings with cruelty.*

*"No, no!"*

*The pencil he'd smuggled in flew out of its hiding place and into his mother's arm. The woman screamed and dropped the notebook, but Eric didn't have time to rejoice, having saved his drawings. He yelped in pain as he received a powerful blow in his face from his father.*

*The man dropped Eric on the ground violently and started hitting him in every spot he could reach. Grabbing Eric's battered form off the floor, his father dropped him on his stomach, tying his hands to the headboard. The riding crop hit again and again on Eric's back and bottom. Eric started crying at the pain, pleading with his father to stop the punishment he didn't deserve.*

*"Please, stop! Please..."*

*Surprisingly, his mother stopped the savage beating.*

*"Enough. If you continue, he'll have scars, and we don't want that."*

*After hitting Eric one last time, the man did indeed stop. Before leaving Eric alone and in pain, he leaned over and snarled in his ear, "Don't worry! We'll continue this once you're better! Won't we, Eric?"*

*At the last word, his father's nauseating voice began to dim, blocked by another sound. "Eric, come back. Eric!"*

Eric opened his eyes, only to find himself in the arms of the concerned-looking vampire.

"Oh, pet...Thank God!" Keenan sighed in relief, hugging him. Keenan was trembling a little.

Eric felt he needed to say something. He was so fucked in the head, and Keenan had been so nice. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm acting so strangely. It hasn't been so bad in quite a while."

Keenan looked at him, sadness evident in his eyes. With a tortured sigh, he looked away, as if unable to look at Eric.

"I'm afraid it's my fault, pet," he explained. "When I bit you, I unleashed your power, the power that blocked your fear and your past."

Eric gave Keenan a confused look. What was Keenan talking about? Unleashing his power? His power had already been unleashed when he'd been only a child. It led to his parents' subsequent panic and himself being

locked up for almost ten years in a small, lightless room. “Remember when Jean Luc woke you up?”

Eric nodded, recalling the episode when Jean Luc had saved him from his parents.

“He told me some things when he came. Things about you.”

\* \* \* \*

Keenan closed his eyes, remembering his conversation with Jean Luc. At the time, the Sidhe had been shocked by Eric’s mental structures.

*“I am fairly certain he has a serious mental problem, more severe than I even expected,” Jean Luc said.*

*Keenan felt as if he’d been stabbed in the heart.*

*“You must be joking.”*

*“Non, mon ami. As far as I can tell, he is indeed a powerful psychic. And that power has shielded him from his mental abnormality.”*

*Jean Luc sighed, rubbing his eyes.*

*“It’s complicated. As far as I can tell, he suffers from an extreme form of borderline personality disorder. At any rate, I won’t be sure of the details until I analyze him more thoroughly, until I can see his behavioral patterns. But I do know this—up until this point, your human used this power of his to shut out his past and his illness, probably in an unconscious way. Therefore, to a certain extent, they cancelled each other out. Your bite changed all that. I’m not sure if he’ll even be the same person you knew.”*

“What things?” Eric inquired, interrupting Keenan’s memory. He was trembling, and Keenan’s heart constricted a little more at the frightened look in Eric’s eyes. The instability and fragility in Eric’s mind and soul only made Keenan want to protect him. Somehow, it hurt him when Eric fell somewhere dark inside his own mind, unable to reach out. Keenan didn’t have healing skills, and he’d been afraid he’d rupture something. That was the only thing he knew. To use and break. To abandon and destroy.

“Keenan, stop! You’re not like that.”

Keenan’s eyes snapped open at Eric’s soft voice. He’d lowered his shield without even realizing it. Hastily, Keenan focused on fixing the mental screen. He didn’t want to somehow cause further damage to Eric’s fragile psyche through his own emotions.

Eric looked hurt at Keenan's action.

"Why don't you trust me?" Eric asked quietly.

Keenan sighed, wishing that he could allow them to fully bond.

"Pet, I do trust you, but there are things in my past you shouldn't see."

*Things I don't want you to see.* He finished in his mind, without allowing Eric to hear it.

Eric glared at Keenan.

"It's not fair! Do you even care about how I feel? Do you care about me at all?" he screamed, his anger emerging again. Several objects on the floor started to shake again.

Keenan knew he needed to find a way to placate his beautiful, but unstable human. What could he do? Could he really give Eric what he wanted?

Keenan sighed. He'd killed many in his long years, remorseless and ruthless in dispatching his enemies. In many ways, his sentimental life represented an echo of that method. He'd never had any regrets about using his bedmates like toys and discarding them. Now, he wished he'd been less of a bastard because he didn't think Eric could live with someone like him.

What was wrong with him anyway? Why did this human affect him so much? Why did Keenan suddenly want to change? He'd never had problems before. By rights, Eric was just a complication, a complication Keenan didn't need. Especially not now, with the hunters in town.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan thought Eric was just a complication, a complication he didn't need. Eric gasped, and he thought he could actually feel his heart break. Whimpering, he scuttled away from Keenan, causing him to fall from the bed. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. He'd thought Keenan cared. He'd been so wrong.

Why had he pushed his way through Keenan's shield? Why had he touched Keenan when the other man wasn't paying attention? Lord, he'd just wanted to know how Keenan felt about him. Well, he had his answer.

Keenan stared at him, gripping his forehead in what seemed like amazement. Eric's eyes widened as he realized he'd hurt Keenan when he'd

burst inside his mind. God, he was such a fuckup. How could he even think he deserved affection?

A shining object to his right caught Eric's attention, and just like that, he took his decision. His parents were right. There was no place for him in the world. But maybe he could still do some good, make someone happy. Hurrying to his feet, he ran to the serving table, grabbed the knife, and slit his wrist. Keenan would have his blood, and he'd be dead. Maybe he'd find some peace, at last. It was for the best, for both of them.

## **Chapter Five**

Keenan watched in frozen horror as the sharp knife passed over the smooth skin of Eric's wrist, leaving behind a bloody mark. He couldn't believe it, he couldn't believe Eric bypassed his shield and in that particular moment, when that terrible thought slipped into his mind.

The shock wore off as the scent of blood hit his nostrils. Snapping back, he rushed toward his human, ripping the knife from his hand and throwing it away.

"Eric! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

He passed his tongue over the wrist wound, sealing it dry. Eric's blood tasted so good, but he reined in his instinct. His beautiful pet needed him.

Eric's body shook with barely restrained emotion.

"Please, just drink. Drain me dry."

Eric offered his throat to Keenan, whispering in a broken voice, "I know you like my blood. It's the least I can do. Please! It's for the best."

Keenan couldn't believe his ears. His pet was actually asking to be bled dry? Keenan closed his eyes as guilt, shame, and pure agony threatened to overwhelm him. Why? Why had his little Eric caught on to that thought?

Eric trembled, his eyes in tears, but full of determination. Keenan gritted his teeth as Eric's thoughts passed to him through their connection. Eric felt sorry he'd pushed through the mental shield, and he wanted to make it up to Keenan. He also seemed convinced he had nothing to live for. Keenan had shattered his fragile heart into a million pieces.

It didn't matter anymore why this delicate human affected him so much. The only thing that mattered was fixing this, seeing those eyes light up again, hearing that voice beg, for release and not for death.

Keenan grabbed his human's chin and forced Eric to meet his eyes. "Pet, the thought you latched on to was a mistake."

Eric struggled against the hold, freeing himself. He shook his head in denial. "You don't have to lie. I know what I am to you."

Glaring at Keenan, he practically shouted, "Why won't you do it? Why won't you drain me dry? At least I'd have the comfort of giving somebody something when I die."

Eric's voice broke as he started sobbing. "Why? Why? Why?"

His poor, beautiful pet. From the very beginning, Keenan had wanted so much to protect him, to make him smile, and to make him forget his painful past. When he'd seen that slender body overcome by rain, when he'd met Eric's green eyes for the first time, he'd fallen in love. Yes, he loved Eric. It seemed impossible for someone like him to forge such a bond with a human, and so quickly. After all, they'd just met a few days ago. Even so, Keenan was done asking questions. He refused to allow any lingering doubts. He'd fucked up once because he'd been afraid to admit his emotions, but not anymore. So what if vampires weren't supposed to fall in love? So what if paranormals weren't supposed to mix with humans? Eric was special, and Keenan would make sure Eric knew that.

"Pet, please listen."

Tilting Eric's head upwards, Keenan spoke the words he'd never said to another in all his long years. "I love you."

\* \* \* \*

Keenan's confession took Eric by surprise. He took a deep breath, struggling to process the words. He wanted to believe it, but it could only be a lie. Keenan must be taking pity on his pathetic self. Keenan couldn't love him. Eric had seen it when he'd so recklessly invaded Keenan's mind.

"I know you don't believe me," Keenan continued, "and I don't blame you. I am so very sorry, my pet. It's just that..." Keenan sighed. "I've never actually felt something like this before. It's not easy for me to realize my defenses have been broken so easily by a beautiful, fragile human."

Keenan brushed Eric's hair from his eyes in a tender gesture, tucking it behind his ear, and Eric felt that maybe, just maybe, Keenan was telling the truth. Maybe things could work out between them. But why then did Keenan block him all the time? Why did he hide like that?



“My little Eric, you don’t realize this, but I have many centuries of life behind me.”

Keenan’s eyes got a distant look, all of a sudden seeming very old and tired. “And a vampire’s life is not something for you to see. It is bloody and full of death and destruction. You got a glimpse the first time we met. You know what I mean.”

Eric nodded. He remembered. He’d assumed Keenan was some sort of serial killer. The truth had been unbelievable and shocking. Beyond that, there was so much more to Keenan than what he glimpsed in the park. A connection linked them together, a peculiar bond he couldn’t explain, and through it, Eric felt like he’d known the man forever.

Keenan sighed again upon catching on to that particular thought. “I can explain that connection, Eric. See, when a vampire bites a human with the human’s permission, it creates a link between the two. By rights, you should be able to mentally communicate with me and know how I feel, as well. Even normal humans can do it, albeit to a lesser extent. With your power, you’d be able to walk inside my head freely.”

Eric started to understand. “But you’re blocking me because of your past—because you’re afraid of what I might see.”

Keenan nodded, and Eric found himself overcome by a feeling of tenderness. It seemed amazing that this strong man would be afraid of sharing his feelings. He’d been so lonely for so long, but Eric would fix that.

On impulse, Eric threw his hands around Keenan’s neck, hugging him tightly.

“Never hide from me again. I want to know you, all of you. I want us to be together.”

He felt Keenan nod and take a deep breath.

“I want to know you, too. Please forgive me.”

Eric wanted to ask what Keenan meant by that last phrase, but then a jolt of memories and feelings hit him like a sledgehammer. Keenan had dropped his shield.

Eric started to choke because of the intensity of the emotions he experienced. He couldn’t tell how long Keenan had lived. There was just so much there, so many people, so many lovers. But no, he couldn’t feel any love, never love, just coldness, emptiness, a profound sadness buried deep inside—blood and sex and so much loneliness.

Eric hugged Keenan tighter as the impressions and fleeting images flashed before his eyes. Keenan held him silently, waiting and hoping. Eric could tell Keenan felt afraid Eric would reject him. He knew now what Keenan had been trying to hide. The other man was an assassin. He could see images of people with their necks torn off or their entrails slashed open, their minds and bodies broken. He could hear screams and pleas for mercy, futile attempts to stall and convince. It never worked. There could be no mercy for the enemies of the Council.

Eric gasped. Such a heavy burden to bear for one so alone. He wanted to be Keenan's support. He wanted to share with Keenan his own past, to show his vampire his heart and surrender himself completely. No secrets, no holding back.

Eric met Keenan's eyes and gave him a small, comforting smile. Pressing his lips to his vampire's in a brief kiss, he whispered, "Keenan, I want...I want you."

\* \* \* \*

Eric wanted to be with him. Eric had seen his past, knew about all his crimes, but he wanted to be with him. Keenan couldn't believe it. What had he done to deserve such affection?

He felt arousal flame again at his human's words. Eric wanted to share everything with him. It wouldn't be so easy. Eric's psychic shield wasn't consciously erected, so he couldn't remove it just like that. Right now, his bite had caused it to become unstable. He needed to be careful, lest he hurt Eric again.

"Hey, I know I'm not entirely right in the head, but I'm not made of glass, either. I won't break." Eric slapped him on the hand with an offended harrumph.

Keenan smiled. "Of course, pet. Whatever you say." He got up, lifting the young human in his arms. "Come on. This time, you will eat, and then we'll get to the fun part," he said, winking at Eric.

Eric made a face at the food. Keenan could tell he didn't like eating much. "Now, now. Don't argue with me." Placing the slender human back on the bed, he dragged the serving table close and began to uncover the various dishes.

Ignoring the beef he'd attempted to feed Eric before, Keenan took a piece of chicken and said, "Open that pretty mouth." Eric obeyed, albeit reluctantly. As he chewed the food, his eyes grew wide. "Good?"

Eric nodded, making a sound of satisfaction. "The best thing I've tasted in my life."

"More?" Eric nodded enthusiastically, and his innocent glee brought a smile to Keenan's lips.

Keenan continued feeding pieces of the various dishes to his pet. He couldn't help but feel warm inside when Eric would let out a sound of pleasure at the delicious food. Yes, he was aroused, but he would wait. Right now, he'd take care of this fragile human that had somehow slipped into his frozen heart.

\* \* \* \*

Eric hadn't eaten so well in ages. Correction—he'd never eaten like this in his life. Feeling like he would burst, he collapsed on the bed, theatrically moaning.

"No more, no more."

He heard a rolling sound as Keenan pushed the cart away. The bed dipped as Keenan joined Eric on the mattress again. His body already quivering in anticipation, Eric opened his eyes to look at his vampire.

"Playtime, pet? Or are you too tired?" Keenan said huskily as he made his way toward Eric on all fours. He looked like a panther ready to pounce its prey.

Eric froze in front of the magnificent image Keenan made. Keenan shed his black clothing, and for the first time, Eric took in his soon-to-be-lover's nude body in all of its splendor. He looked so handsome Eric didn't know whether to feel depressed about his own scrawny ass or lucky that Keenan wanted him regardless.

In the end, Eric decided that admiring Keenan was much more important than thinking about his own flaws. He didn't know what to look at first. His greedy gaze fell on the bulging muscles, drinking in the way that gorgeous black hair fell like a dark curtain over the broad shoulders. Keenan's dark eyes filled with passion, and Eric wanted to see more, and to go beyond seeing.

Obviously catching on to the thought, Keenan let out a husky laugh.

“So you want to feel me, eh, pet?”

In a second, his vampire jumped him, pulling him upright and then on all fours. Eric found himself facing a most impressive view of Keenan’s erect cock, jutting proudly between those powerful legs.

Scuttling closer, Eric dared a glance at Keenan’s face. His vampire watched him, need burning in his gaze. Still, in spite of that lust, Eric knew Keenan wouldn’t push him into something they didn’t both want. Keenan loved him.

“Yes, I do, Eric,” his vampire said. “I love you, and I’ll take care of you.” Eric felt so happy he wanted to shout his joy to the world. That particular manifestation of happiness would have to wait until Eric satisfied this burning need that consumed him, this incredible feeling of lust. “*I love you, too*,” he thought back.

Eric licked his lips and lowered his mouth toward Keenan’s cock. It was his first blow job, and he didn’t know what to do exactly, but he followed his instincts. He licked the length of Keenan’s erection, passing his tongue up and down over Keenan’s dick like he would over a lollipop, then letting it play over the head. He must have been doing something right because Keenan hissed, entwining his hands in Eric’s hair.

“Pet,” Keenan growled, “suck me.”

Eric smiled at the impatience in Keenan’s voice. The fact that he could influence and affect such a magnificent man made him feel powerful. He wrapped his lips around Keenan’s dick, opening his mouth and taking as much of it as possible. Of course, it was easier said than done. Eric didn’t know much about pleasuring other men. He wanted to make this special, better than anything Keenan ever felt before. For all his efforts, his inexperience still showed, and Eric felt frustrated when he gagged on Keenan’s large dick.

“Don’t worry,” Keenan soothed. “You’re new at this. Don’t force yourself. You’ll be able to take it all eventually.”

Keenan was right about that. From his life as an artist, Eric had learned that with practice came perfect. For now, maybe he couldn’t take it all, but he could still suck.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan gasped as Eric sucked him for all he was worth. His human bobbed his head up and down, swirling his tongue around his shaft. True enough, he had gagged upon trying to deep throat him, but his inexperience was more than compensated for by his enthusiasm.

Keenan couldn't take it. The image of his pet on all fours, hollowing his cheeks, sucking him off, became too much, and he lost the already tenuous control he had over his body.

With a growl, he grabbed that blond hair and started fucking his human's pretty mouth. Eric let out a sound of surprise but quickly adjusted, breathing through his nose. The pleasure felt incredible, and Keenan could tell Eric experienced it as well.

Wet heat enveloped Keenan's cock, entwining with the fire in his blood and the explosive passion this wonderful, unique human aroused in him. Keenan thrust in and out of his pet's mouth, as instinct to possess took over. He needed to make Eric his in soul and body.

Keenan felt his orgasm build up powerfully deep inside. He was close, so close. And yet he needed something else, something more. Eric whimpered in protest as Keenan pulled his cock out of the human's mouth. Keenan grinned, pushing his human on the pillows. "I want to come in your tight little ass."

Gasping, Eric spread his legs and begged, "Please, please, fuck me!" The lube flew into Keenan's hand from the night table. Keenan's mouth watered at the sight of Eric's opening. He remembered its wonderful taste and considered forgoing the lube for another rimming session.

The decision was taken out of his hands. A sudden feeling of impending doom cut through his passion, and then Keenan heard a sound of glass shattering. He barely had time to cover Eric with his own body when the penthouse was showered in bullets. The scent of burning flesh started to fill the air as the bullets burned his vampiric skin. The hunters had come.

Keenan cursed. How the fuck had they managed to shoot through the bulletproof windows? And how had they known about him being a vampire?

Those questions would have to wait. He needed to eliminate the immediate threat, especially now that he had Eric to worry about. Beneath him, Eric began to tremble, but just from panic. His body was otherwise

unscathed. Keenan mentally sent Eric a message, *“Shhh, pet...Stay down, and don’t be afraid! I’m here.”*

*“Keenan?”* Eric’s voice tentatively slipped into his consciousness. *“Are you all right?”*

Keenan couldn’t help but smile. His sweet human worried about him.

*“I’m fine, pet. Don’t worry!”*

In spite of Keenan’s mental reply, Eric’s concern and distress still radiated through their connection.

*“But they hit you, I could tell!”*

Keenan grinned, incredibly thankful that his pet was uninjured. *“I’ll just have to hit back.”*

And he would, too, he’d hit back with all the ruthlessness vampires were known for. These foolish humans would beg for their lives—no, for their deaths—before he was done with them.

Keenan gave Eric a small kiss on the nose. He closed his eyes, willing the bullets out of his back. Keenan gritted his teeth at the burning feeling but put the pain out of his mind. He was an assassin, and pain meant nothing for him. He had someone to protect now.

The wounds were already closing when Keenan made a move to get off Eric. Since they’d rolled onto the floor and shielded themselves behind the king-sized bed, the position seemed to be reasonably safe.

At Keenan’s movement, Eric extended his hand to stop him. *“Don’t. Don’t go.”*

Keenan looked at Eric, drinking in those perfect green eyes and creamy skin. *“Pet, don’t worry. I’ll be fine. Just hush and keep out of sight.”*

He got up, abandoning their meager shelter behind the bed. The bullets had come through the window of the terrace. The logical conclusion would be that the next attack would come from there, but in the case of the hunters, one never knew.

An explosion suddenly shook the von Klein Tower. Sudden chaos ensued as gunshots and screams reached up to his sensitive hearing. He could tell that even Eric had heard the sound of the guns firing because his fear escalated.

*“Keenan...”*

Eric almost whimpered through their connection. Keenan hastily made his way back to Eric. His first priority was finding a safe place for Eric, and

for that, they had to get out of there. The penthouse seemed deserted for now, but the lower floors were being assaulted. It wouldn't be long before the hunters attacked it as well.

He didn't even have time to finish his thought when he acknowledged a noise coming from the direction of the terrace.

*"Come on, pet. We have to get out of here."*

\* \* \* \*

Something really bad was going on. Eric knew it had to do with the people Keenan mentioned earlier, those men who'd killed his friends. Keenan was such a powerful vampire. How had they gotten to him?

Eric took a deep breath. He needed to stay calm. Keenan would take care of him. Keenan would help him. He gave his vampire a small smile and nodded.

Keenan tried to smile back, but a strange look appeared in his dark eyes.

*"I love you, pet."*

The statement unsettled Eric. Why was he saying this now? They were going to be fine, right?

Not bothering with clothes, Keenan hoisted him up. *"Of course we are, pet,"* he replied with a small mental chuckle. *"I haven't made you mine yet."*

Eric suddenly felt warm all over as he realized they were both still naked. Keenan laughed as he moved like a shadow through the penthouse.

*"We'll manage to eventually, pet. I promise."*

The conversation distracted Eric, and he didn't even realize they had crossed the entire apartment. Before he knew it, they'd arrived in the entryway. Eric yelped as he realized that Keenan's feet weren't even touching the floor.

"Stop fretting, pet. I won't drop you," Keenan said out loud with a smile.

Eric nodded but couldn't stop a retort. "A warning would have been nice."

Keenan chuckled again as he hovered above the floor, pressing what seemed to be a hidden button. The wall opened, revealing a secret doorway. Where they getting out through there? Why weren't they just flying out?

He got his answer when he heard a noise coming from outside. Eric's eyes widened, realizing it was a helicopter. A helicopter seemed to be coming closer. Keenan's expression turned glum.

*"Shhh...Stay here, pet. It should be safe."*

He pushed Eric inside the secret room and pushed the door back in its original position.

Terror gripped Eric as he was suddenly stuck in the dark place. It brought back flashes of images he wanted so much to forget. He pushed back the memories, knowing he couldn't afford the luxury of fear now. He had to be strong for Keenan. His vampire had enough concerns with the attack on his tower. He didn't need to worry about Eric as well. Curling into a ball, he closed his eyes, making an effort to ignore his surroundings.

*"Where are you, Keenan?"*

\* \* \* \*

Sliding back the door to the secret room, Keenan slipped into the main apartment. The room had been built from special material, and it would hide Eric from the heat vision goggles, from bullets and whatever else the hunters might throw at them. He would also keep in touch with Eric mentally, just to make sure.

Keenan groaned as he felt the fear of his pet, realizing the darkness reminded Eric of his past. Keenan wished he could have done things differently, but he didn't have any choice. His brave, beautiful pet was trying so hard to overcome his fear. Keenan ached to hold him.

Taking a deep breath, he reached out to Eric. *"I'm here, pet. We'll be in touch. Listen to me. Go to your right."*

Eric's reply held a lot of relief and a touch of confusion. *"Okay. But why?"*

*"The safe room has an internal generator. Unfortunately, it slipped my mind when I was with you. Can you manage to make your way to the panel?"*

Keenan knew Eric was looking around for the indicated panel, as he felt new determination in the voice of his human. *"Yes, yes. I can manage,"* Eric mentally replied. *"Please be careful. Don't worry about me. Just be careful."*



Keenan couldn't help but feel warm inside at Eric's concern. Shaking his head, he hastily shut down his feelings. First thing, his men. The staff of the von Klein Tower was human, and although they were loyal, they would be no match for the hunters. They'd been instructed that, in case of such an attack, they needed to fall back to the upper floors and shut down the entire complex.

Keenan had warned them before going to *Extase* about this new development. His staff had been informed about the deaths and the appearance of the hunters in town. Even if they were human, they'd been with Keenan all their lives and knew what needed to be done. Everyone here had been handpicked from families with a long history in serving vampires. Keenan would hate to lose them.

The attack on his own turf took him by surprise, though. The hunters had obviously become more resourceful than Keenan had thought. Eric would be safe in the hidden room, just in case they managed to somehow get in.

In a flash, Keenan rushed to the hidden panel in the living room, not bothering with anything else. The helicopter was close now, and he needed to activate the shut-down mode. Luckily, the first round of bullets just hit the bedroom, and the electronic equipment remained unharmed.

As he typed the password, Keenan knew that didn't bode well that his underlings hadn't succeeded to do this already. The computer cracked, and an error message appeared on the screen. *Access denied. What the fuck?*

Keenan accessed the view of security cameras of the tower and cursed at the images that appeared. His men had managed to retreat, just barely, but there seemed to be a lot of casualties already. A brown-haired human waved at him from the computer room, just before the electricity keeping the Tower computers online shut down.

Keenan felt anger flare within him. Who did these bastards think they were messing with? He grinned as he heard the helicopter closing by. *You want to dance? Let's dance.*

Keenan made his way to the terrace, where he could see two choppers closing in fast. He scowled. How could they have gotten so close? This entire sector of New York was restricted to paranormals. The airspace should be strictly monitored from a safe distance. Why hadn't he been notified?

There were two possible answers to this question. The most obvious one was that he had a glitch in security of the size of the Grand Canyon. The second could be summarized in one very disturbing idea—a traitor in their midst. And these two options weren't mutually exclusive. Keenan shook his head, deciding to think about the cause of this disaster later. For now, he had a more pressing issue to deal with.

Hovering in the air, Keenan landed on the roof, faced the incoming helicopters, his senses wide open just in case more bullets came his way. As he'd expected, the aircraft targeted him, and two missiles headed toward him.

Keenan focused his mental abilities on the missiles and deflected their trajectory back into the very helicopter that had fired them. The aircraft blew up in flames, crashing into the adjoining skyscraper. The humans didn't have a chance. He turned his attention to remaining aircraft. While he'd been dealing with the first chopper, the second one had also fired two missiles. He managed to deflect the first one in the same way, hitting the tail of the aircraft that fired it, but he didn't have time the second missile. He sent Eric a brief, *"I love you,"* and then his world turned to pain and flame.

\* \* \* \*

Eric screamed as he felt his vampire's pain. No! They'd hit him, they'd hit him, with a rocket. Eric had seen it. He'd seen the missile coming through his connection with Keenan. A rocket! Who shoots at people with rockets? Bastards, monsters! They'd better hope Eric would never find them, because if he did, they'd regret the moment they messed with his vampire.

Desperate, Eric started pounding on the door, screaming and sobbing. He wanted Keenan. Keenan, Keenan.

The door wouldn't open. Eric collapsed on the floor, sustaining himself against the cold metal of the secret door. Tears flowed freely across his cheeks. How could someone do such a terrible thing? So much pain. There was so much pain.

Eric's eyes widened as he came to a realization. He could still feel the pain. Their connection remained in place, which meant his vampire wasn't dead. He didn't know how Keenan could survive such a thing, but the

certainty of the mind bond couldn't be denied. Eric resumed his furious pounding on the door. He had to see his vampire. He needed to get out.

He didn't know how long he continued his desperate assault on the metal door of the secret room. Then all of a sudden, he heard a noise, as if some sort of mechanism was set into motion. Had he accidentally done something? It couldn't be. He'd been trying to get out for quite a while now, and nothing had happened.

The metal screeched, as if attacked from the outside. Someone was trying to get in. Eric could have whooped for joy. It didn't matter who would get him out. He'd be able to go to Keenan's side.

The person on the other side of the room obviously didn't have a key because he or she was forcing his way in. Eric guessed it would not be safe to stay near the door and bit his lip, not knowing what to do. Well, if he got hurt when the door crashed open, he wouldn't be able to see Keenan. Hastily, Eric moved to the other side of the small room, to the bed, covering himself with the blanket.

The door to the safe room burst open, and Eric readied himself for the worst. He didn't care what happened to him. He just wanted to see Keenan. The sight of Jean Luc in the doorway both surprised him and made him feel overwhelmingly relieved.

The Sidhe observed him from the doorway, apparently irritated with something. He brushed his normally white clothes and arranged his hair. "How unpleasant! There just had to be some sort of booby trap."

Eric assumed the mechanical sound he'd heard came from the trap Jean Luc mentioned. Anyway, it didn't matter much, since the Sidhe seemed unharmed. Eric needed to go now, and Jean Luc was in the way. Discarding the blanket, he snapped at Jean Luc. "Where's Keenan?"

The Sidhe harrumphed. "A thank you would be nice, you know. Also, you're naked." Eric blushed, but put it out of his mind. He had other priorities.

Jean Luc smiled, taking off his long white leather coat, placing it across Eric's shoulders and closing it with its belt across Eric's waist. "Come on, I'll take you to him." The Sidhe lifted him up and carried him out. Eric would have felt irritated, but Jean Luc moved much faster than humanly possible. Besides, at his point, Eric was beyond irritation. The only things he

could feel were anguish, a fear so intense it almost choked the life out of him, and determination to get to Keenan's side.

In seconds, they arrived next to a couch in the living room. There were a few obvious signs of the attack, broken glass, displaced furniture, nothing major. Eric detected several other people in the room, probably more paranormals. A redheaded woman sat on the couch, and next to her, Eric saw something that almost made his heart stop.

Eric screamed and fought out of Jean Luc's hold. He violently pushed the unknown woman away and collapsed next to the charred body of his vampire.

## Chapter Six

Keenan's aristocratic features were unrecognizable, burns covering every viewable segment of the previously flawless skin. Keenan's face had taken the most damage. The only thing that identified him as Eric's beloved vampire was his long black hair, which, although scorched, had mostly been spared.

Eric felt his heart break as he stood by the burnt body on the couch. Hugging Keenan's head, he sobbed. The touch of a gentle hand on his shoulder pulled him out of his misery.

"Eric..." Eric jumped at the intrusive voice and turned to look at Jean Luc. Even with his brusque manner, the Sidhe helped them out before. Perhaps he'd be able to aid them this time.

"Eric, he's not dead." Jean Luc attempted to soothe him.

Eric glared at the Sidhe, feeling frustrated. "Of course he's not dead. Don't you think I know that?" Looking around at the assembly in the living room, he shouted, "Why are you all standing around like a bunch of morons? Do something!"

Jean Luc rubbed his eyes and sighed, shaking his head. Eric gaped. Why did Jean Luc refuse to help? He'd been quite open to it earlier, when he'd drawn Eric out of his nightmares.

Eric glanced around, trying to figure out who looked more approachable or, better said, less hostile. All of a sudden, the woman he'd pushed away sauntered to him. "Well, isn't this interesting. And who do you think you are, human, to order us around?" She grinned, and sharp fangs glinted menacingly at Eric.

Ignoring the threat, Eric sighed in relief as he identified the woman as another vampire. He got up, grabbing the redhead's hand and pushing her back toward the couch. "Oh, good, you're a vampire. You must know how to fix him."

After a second, she slapped his hand away. “Filthy human! How dare you touch me?” Her fangs lowered, the woman pushed Eric on the floor with amazing strength for someone her size. Then again, she was a vampire. “Now, you’ll learn your place.”

Much to Eric’s surprise and glee, the she-vamp didn’t have the chance to bite Eric. “Cassandra, control yourself,” Jean Luc snapped, throwing Cassandra off Eric. “Eric, listen to me. All of us here can do nothing. I can do nothing.”

Eric whimpered as the Sidhe’s words slipped into his consciousness. He scuttled back to the couch, clutching Keenan’s unmoving hand. Between tears, he managed to croak out, “But why?” “There has to be something. Please.”

Cassandra scoffed. “Even if I could help him, which I can’t, I wouldn’t. He’s a freaking jerk and a self-righteous bastard and a—”

The she-vamp’s insults were interrupted as an invisible force hurled her to the other side of the room. “Don’t you talk about him like that, bitch,” Eric practically growled. He felt so angry he couldn’t see straight. The bitch-vamp hit the wall hard over and over. She had to suffer. She needed to pay. It was her fault.

Eric barely registered Jean Luc closing in and shaking him. “Eric! Eric!” Jean Luc staggered as Eric’s fury turned against him. The Sidhe cursed under his breath. “Listen, Eric, what you’re doing isn’t helping Keenan. But you can help him. You can save him.”

The glass shards that hovered dangerously close to the bitch-vamp dropped to the floor. Jean Luc sighed in relief. Eric grabbed the Sidhe’s arms, practically begging. “How, how, tell me. Please, please tell me! I’ll do anything.”

“It’s actually quite easy,” another voice with an Italian accent said. Eric turned his head toward the new speaker, a strange purple-haired paranormal dressed in red leathers. “You have to give him your blood.”

That was it? He’d done it before and liked it.

Jean Luc sighed. “We can’t do it because... Well, let’s just say our blood isn’t compatible.”

Eric nodded, not really listening. “Right, right, whatever. Doesn’t matter. I’ll do it.”

Ignoring Eric's words, the Sidhe continued to speak. "Eric, you have to know it won't be like before. He'll be feral. He'll hurt you."

Eric narrowed his eyes and shook his head. No, Keenan wouldn't hurt him. Keenan loved him. He'd kept Eric safe. And even if Jean Luc was right, Eric didn't care. He'd do it regardless. He'd save his vampire.

"I don't care. All I want is to do this already. I want Keenan back."

"You have a choice to wait until we round up the human staff of the von Klein Tower."

"No. No waiting! Now!" This was taking too long. A glass shard flew into Eric's hand. He caught it and, proving his point, cut his wrist, for the second time in the day. Disregarding everyone else, he pressed the wound to the burned lips of his vampire. *Please let this work! Please, Keenan. Please, be all right!*

\* \* \* \*

Keenan was lost in a world of fire, pain, and darkness. He tried to find a way to get out, but he felt weak. The thread binding him to reality unraveled, too fragile to support him. But then, out of the blue, life flowed into his veins, and his body immediately responded. The burn of his wounds turned into the familiar flame of bloodlust.

Keenan growled as he grabbed his feeding source, sinking his fangs into the warm skin deeper, tearing the sensitive tissue. Blood invaded his mouth, sweet, delicious, rich, and pure. He needed more.

Keenan grinned, feeling the life-giving liquid building his body anew. Raising his head, he laughed. It wasn't a painless process, but the pain meant nothing in front of the pleasure of feeding. In fact, they complemented each other perfectly.

His prey's blood tasted so enticing. He wanted more, and his impromptu donor didn't seem too upset about it. It didn't even struggle as Keenan drank. In this case, it was better, since he didn't have to waste any effort in subduing it. He sunk his teeth again, this time in the delicate skin of the neck of his victim. He registered a gasp, but still the prey didn't move away.

Keenan felt something tug at his consciousness. Through the red haze of bloodlust, he heard a call he knew. *Keenan*. A voice whispered in his head.

That one word sufficed to snap him out of his madness. He recognized that sweet taste and that warm voice. Eric. It was Eric.

Keenan immediately withdrew his fangs from Eric's neck and sealed the hemorrhage with his tongue. He felt sick at the picture he saw. Eric's eyes looked glazed, and his wrist and neck showed ugly wounds where he'd been bitten. Keenan's saliva had healing properties, but only to a certain extent. Eric's neck was destroyed. What had he done?

Eric smiled weakly and made an attempt to reach out to him, but his hand dropped at his side. Then Keenan again heard the voice in his head. "*Keenan, you're all right. I'm so glad. I...love...you...*" It was barely audible, as if passing through static. And then it stopped altogether, as Eric gave him one more smile and his green eyes closed.

No. This could not be happening. He couldn't have killed the only man he'd ever loved. Keenan shook his head in disbelief, but he could not hide from the truth. He still tasted Eric's essence in his mouth, still felt his human's life feeding his body. He was a monster.

A bolt of Sidhe magic pushed Keenan away and immobilized him against the wall. Keenan gritted his teeth as the magic trapped him in an iron-like grip.

"*Je suis désolé, mon ami.* It is the only way," Jean Luc said as he knelt next to Eric, touching his forehead lightly.

Keenan roared as the bloodlust returned, mixed with murderous intent. Fucking traitorous Sidhe. He'd tear the little fairy into small pieces. They'd all learn not to touch the property of others.

Keenan fought against the magical shield trapping him. The Sidhe had taken him by surprise, but next time, Keenan would be ready. He'd left the little bitch alive too long.

"Get the fuck away, you little shit," he growled at Jean Luc.

Jean Luc just ignored him. He closed his eyes and focused on the wounded human. Then his silver hair suddenly seemed to shine like mercury, and white light encircled him, like an angelic aura.

Keenan's anger disappeared as he realized what Jean Luc intended. It was even more beautiful than before, when he'd entered Eric's mind to bring him back to reality. With a touch of the Sidhe's finger, the ugly wound at the neck disappeared. Another one at the wrist and there was no sign of fangs on Eric's body.



Jean Luc made a face as he got up. Keenan realized in panic that Eric wasn't waking up. Furthermore, Keenan could hear his heart rhythm slowing down. "He's dying. Do something."

"He's not dying," the Sidhe snapped back. "He's just weak."

Jean Luc sighed, weariness obvious in his voice. A shock passed through Eric, and his body convulsed for a few seconds, and at the sight, Keenan let out a sorrow-filled howl. The Sidhe rubbed his temples as he abandoned Eric's side. "He'll be fine. He should wake up right about now."

As if on Jean Luc's cue, Eric opened his eyes, and Keenan could have wept in relief and joy. Smiling, the Sidhe released the spell holding him captive. Keenan rushed to his human's side, pressing his mouth to Eric's. "Oh, pet," he said as he broke the kiss. "I'm so, so, very sorry."

Eric looked at him, his face flushed but his green eyes teary. Drawing his breath, Eric spat out, "You should be, you bastard! How can you go flying into a rocket like that? What were you thinking?" An unidentifiable object flew at Keenan's head, and Keenan barely had time to duck. "Do you think you're Superman or what?"

Keenan couldn't contain his smile of satisfaction. His pet was back.

\* \* \* \*

Eric made a face at the stupid vampire. He wanted to continue to kiss him and hug him and make sure he was all right. Hell, that one kiss left him in an uncomfortable situation, but he'd deal with that after he taught the idiot a lesson. How dare he go and get himself burnt like that? He didn't have the right to get burned. He needed to ask for permission.

"Yes, pet. You're completely right." Keenan's voice held amusement, and Eric scowled at him. "I apologize for my transgression."

Eric harrumphed. The vamp didn't seem very sorry. In fact, he looked quite pleased with himself.

Keenan's expression changed as that thought passed through Eric's mind. "*I'm not pleased with myself, pet. I'm just happy you're fine,*" he said glumly. Eric blinked, surprised by the sudden shift. Keenan's emotions reached out to him, swirling in his head. His vampire felt guilty for biting him, for drinking his blood like an animal. Eric wanted to comfort Keenan, to tell him everything would be all right, but he suddenly felt dizzy. Leaning

against the cushions, he sent a mental message to his vampire. “*Keenan, don’t blame yourself. I wanted to help, and besides, I’m fine. You didn’t hurt me.*”

Keenan sighed and mentally replied, “*I might believe that, pet, if you weren’t so weak now.*”

Eric didn’t know what to say. He did indeed feel weak. Luckily, Jean Luc broke the awkward moment. “Don’t worry, *mon ami*. He’ll be just fine once he rests a bit and gets a healthy meal. You stopped in time.”

Eric almost jumped when Keenan snarled at Jean Luc. “Fuck that! You should never have allowed it. You should have stopped me, Jean Luc.”

Keenan seemed terribly angry, but Eric could feel the undertone of hurt and guilt in his voice. Eric didn’t want that. He didn’t want Keenan to feel bad. He’d just wanted to help. He’d ended up hurting Keenan and causing a fight between Keenan and Jean Luc.

Eric cradled his knees to his chest, curling into a ball and covering his eyes. He hated it when people fought. He hated raised voices. It made him feel so afraid and so very inadequate.

“Shhh, pet. Don’t cry!” Eric suddenly found himself in Keenan’s warm and comforting embrace. “I promise we won’t fight anymore.”

Eric raised his eyes to meet Keenan’s. “Really? We’ll just forget about this whole thing?”

Keenan nodded in assent. “Whatever you want, pet.”

He smirked as he leaned over and licked the traces of the tears on Eric’s cheeks. Eric gasped, feeling the warmth in the room increase tenfold as the arousal from before returned with a vengeance. He whimpered, his body calling out to Keenan, desperate for his touch. His vampire didn’t disappoint. He covered Eric’s lips with his own, devouring Eric’s mouth in a devastating kiss.

Eric dove his hands into Keenan’s dark locks as he spread his legs to accommodate Keenan’s form. As his vampire moved over him, they never once broke the kiss. Keenan feasted on his mouth, and Eric could feel the emotions overwhelming the other man—lust, guilt, fear, and most of all, love. Eric moaned as his vampire started moving his hand under the leather overcoat, massaging his ass.

Alas, the sound of a cleared throat interrupted them. Eric blushed, and Keenan cursed under his breath. They'd both completely forgotten about the other people, creatures, whatever they were.

"Excuse me." It was the man with the purple hair again. "I enjoy a little voyeurism as much as your average incubus, but this isn't entirely the right moment."

While Eric tried to take in this new species of paranormal, Keenan just gave an irritated sigh. Nevertheless, Keenan got up from his position, and Eric pouted. Keenan smiled down at him. "*Don't worry, pet, we will resume this when we're safe and alone.*"

Keenan turned to the incubus. "Right, Giovanni. Do we have a safe place for Eric?"

"We can take him to *Extase* for now," Jean Luc said.

Eric frowned. He disliked it when people talked about him like he wasn't even there. Everything seemed to be happening so fast, and these people made decisions for him without even asking him what he thought. Even if Eric couldn't give valuable input, they could at least explain what was happening.

"You're coming, too, right, Keenan?" he asked, feeling a bit shamed that his voice came out small and confused.

Keenan briefly hesitated. "I have to deal with certain issues here," he answered between gritted teeth. "Jean Luc will take care of you. Don't worry."

Something was wrong. Eric could tell. He tried to read Keenan, and he gasped when he realized his vampire blocked him again. Why? Had he done something wrong?

Jean Luc lifted Eric in his arms, and his kind voice snapped Eric out of his dark thoughts. "Don't worry. Give it time."

Eric didn't oppose the Sidhe. He looked toward Keenan again. When his vampire avoided his gaze, Eric felt a dagger pass through his chest. The sound of the closing door seemed to have a sort of finality to it. Why? Had he been so wrong? Had Keenan's love been a lie? Eric dropped his head onto Jean Luc's shoulder. He wanted to tell Keenan. He needed to know.

Eric searched for the connection that he knew was between them. Making an effort, he sent his vampire a message. "*Please, please, don't leave me!*" He received no answer. "*Keenan... Oh, Keenan... Why?*"

\* \* \* \*

*Eric ran as fast as he could through the dark corridor. He knew they were chasing him. He could feel them right behind him, laughing and calling after him.*

*“Oh, Eric. Eric, come back here!”*

*They were close, so close, already catching up to him. They were going to get him.*

*Suddenly, Eric saw a light in front of him. His heart almost skipped a beat when he realized it was an open door. Panting, he tried to run faster. If only he could get to the door, he would be saved. He just knew it.*

*The laughter and voices seemed to be coming even closer.*

*“Eric, there’s no use for hiding, boy. We’ll find wherever you go.” Eric struggled not to think about those words and focused on the door straight ahead. Yes, he would make it. He would make it.*

*A dark silhouette came out of the light. Eric stopped running, startled. For a moment, he felt frightened that he wouldn’t be able to reach his target. Then he recognized the dark silhouette, and his fear vanished. It was Keenan. Keenan would help him get away from his pursuers.*

*However, when he met Keenan’s eyes, his vampire’s gaze looked cold and unfeeling. Keenan threw him a disdainful look. His voice dripped with scorn as he said, “Crazy freak!”*

*Turning his back on Eric, Keenan disappeared back into the light, and the door closed. Eric collapsed against the blocked exit as laughter and distorted voices came closer.*

*“No!”*

*Eric’s eyes flew wide open, his arms flailing around him, fighting off an invisible enemy.*

*“No!”*

*“Eric, calm down. It was just a dream.” The gentle voice soothed him, and Eric managed to take a look around. The voice came from a silver-haired man with lavender eyes and perfect marble-white skin. Jean Luc. Recent memories flooded Eric’s mind—the hunters, Keenan’s injury, all the weird people, then Keenan drinking from him and the vampire’s rejection.*

Eric felt tears flood his eyes. How could Keenan do something like that to him?

“Hey, hey, don’t cry,” Jean Luc said. “I know you’re sad. I know how you feel.”

The sadness shifted into angry frustration. “Shut up, stupid fairy. How the hell can you know how I feel?”

A flash of something unidentifiable passed through the Sidhe’s eyes. Then the shadow disappeared, and Jean Luc’s eyes became unreadable. Eric covered his mouth, realizing what he’d said. He’d seen bits and pieces of Jean Luc’s past. How could he be so idiotic?

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean...Oh, God, I didn’t mean...”

Jean Luc smiled. “It’s all right, Eric. I know you didn’t mean anything by it.” He grabbed Eric’s hands and looked straight into his eyes. That eerie lavender gaze seemed so intimidating Eric wanted to look away. He felt proud that he managed not to follow his cowardly urge. “Now, Eric, listen to me,” Jean Luc began. “I know you’re hurt with what Keenan did, but I also know for a fact that he loves you.” Eric opened his mouth to argue, but the Sidhe shushed him with a finger. “Hush and listen. He’s hurting, too, because of what he did to you.”

Eric blinked in confusion. “What he did to me?”

Jean Luc nodded sagely. “You don’t realize it, but he got very close to draining you dry—to killing you. He blames himself for it.”

Eric gasped at the realization. Of course! Keenan would do that! Keenan would totally feel guilty for something stupid like that. Eric couldn’t let his vampire feel like that. He just couldn’t. Interrupting the Sidhe, he got up from the bed he’d been lounging on. “I have to go talk to him. I have to clear things up.”

As he took a few steps, Eric realized that he didn’t have a clue as to where Jean Luc had taken him. “Where am I?”

Jean Luc chuckled. “You are in the private quarters of my club, *Extase*. It is a place mostly visited by paranormals, so it’s safe here.”

Right. A club for paranormals. Well, that was completely logical. Eric decided he would think about the weirdness of the situation later. “What about Keenan? Is he here?” Eric asked.

Jean Luc shook his head. “He still has some issues to attend to. He needs to find out how the hunters managed to get through the security of the von Klein Tower like that.”

Eric’s face fell at the news. He couldn’t see Keenan, and he couldn’t demand his vampire’s attention like some spoilt child. Keenan had responsibilities, a lot of issues to deal with, and other people he cared about.

“Eric, listen up! Don’t worry about it, *oui?*” Jean Luc left the bed and took Eric in his arms, placing him back on the bed. “Now, you need to rest and eat. You blacked out when we were in the car on our way here.”

Eric felt irritation surge but fought against it. What was the point anyway? Where could he go? He had no chance of fighting the Sidhe, and if Keenan didn’t care about him, nothing he did could make a difference.

Jean Luc interrupted Eric in his depressing train of thought. “Plus, I expect that you might want to gain your strength for when Keenan comes for you.”

Eric felt a spark of hope flare. “You really think he’ll come? You’re not just saying that?”

Jean Luc nodded his assent. “I know he’ll come. He loves you, *mon petit*. Yes, he loves you.”

Jean Luc’s voice turned into a whisper as he said the last phrase. Eric realized that the Sidhe’s mind was somewhere else.

“Umm, Jean Luc? Do you want to talk about it? I mean, it’s okay if you don’t. But you’ve been really nice, and if I can help in any way...”

Jean Luc smiled sadly and shook his head. “*Non*, Eric. It’s in the past. I thank you, though. You’re a good person, and Keenan is very lucky to have met you.”

A knock sounded at the door, and Eric observed the paranormal he’d come to think of as Purple Hair enter the room.

“Ah, he is awake, then?” Purple Hair laughed, obviously pleased. Eric frowned, trying to remember the previous conversation. What did Purple Hair say he was? An incubus?

“*Benvenuto, piccolo*. I am Giovanni.”

Giovanni. Yes, Keenan had called him that back at the tower.

“Umm, hello. I’m...”

The incubus nodded, interrupting him. “Eric McAllister. Yes, I know. *Allora, piccolo*, you should eat something, *sì?*”

Eric sighed, but nodded, remembering Jean Luc's previous words. Eating was a good idea, but Eric didn't know if he could do it. These people seemed nice enough, but he felt uncomfortable around them for some reason. Why did all of them feel the need to call him *little one*? It would be all right if Keenan called him that, but both Jean Luc and Giovanni?

At any rate, he didn't have a choice but to wait—wait and hope Keenan would come for him. His annoyance with the paranormals meant nothing in front of his feelings for Keenan. Eric really hoped Jean Luc was right. He didn't want to think about what he would do if Keenan left him.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan gritted his teeth as he listened to the report of the Imperial Sidhe.

"We found out about the imminent attack on your location after we captured one of the hunters on Staten Island. Unfortunately, he did not survive the interrogation, and he was only an underling. However, we do know that there is someone inside the paranormal community who arranged this."

Keenan nodded. He'd suspected as much when the security systems had fallen. "Any word from the others?"

Michel Valois, the leader of Jean Luc's Imperials, shook his head.

"Not yet. But we do expect reports from Elis and Jacob soon enough. Also—"

Cassandra's screech interrupted Michel. "I have something to discuss with you, Keenan. To be more specific, your little human plaything. He attacked me."

Keenan fought for composure as he answered the other vampire. "Cassandra, I have no time for such foolishness. Michel, please continue."

Before Michel could comply, Cassandra snapped at Keenan again. "You will *not* ignore me. I will have the head of that little, crazy slut if it's the last thing—"

Cassandra gasped as Keenan grabbed her, squeezing her windpipe.

"Call Eric that again and it may just be the last thing you do," Keenan growled.

Cassandra clawed uselessly at Keenan's arm, but he couldn't care less about her efforts.

"Funny thing how vampires can still choke. We're supposed to be the undead. Talk about unfounded rumors, right, Michel?"

The Imperial nodded, continuing his report and disregarding Cassandra entirely. "As I was saying, we are expecting reports any moment now. Giovanni has received word from Lucca that he is in the middle of negotiations with the demons. The remaining staff of the von Klein Tower is being debriefed. Unfortunately, we were not able to capture any live hunters. Furthermore—"

Keenan took a deep breath, struggling for calm. Things were chaotic in the paranormal community, and all he could think about was his pet. Eric's beautiful eyes, Eric's naked body, Eric's blood in his mouth. The life he'd nearly taken.

A shift in Michel's tone made Keenan direct his attention to the Imperial.

"Keenan? I do not wish to pry into your thoughts, but Cassandra just blacked out."

Instantly, Keenan dropped the redhead's unconscious form onto the floor. He rubbed his eyes, ignoring Cassandra's already healing scratch marks on his arms. God, what was he going to do? He could still remember Eric's voice inside his head, whispering, "*I love you. Don't leave me...*" For the first time in his long years, he felt lost. He didn't know what to do.

Michel arched a brow. "Keenan?"

Keenan stared at the Imperial Sidhe, puzzled for a moment. He realized then that, while lost in his thoughts, he'd completely missed half of Michel's report.

"If I may be so bold, could I suggest a visit to *Extase*?" Keenan blanched at Michel's words. Why would the damn Sidhe meddle in his affairs?

Undeterred, Michel continued. "I know His Highness, Prince Jean Luc, would be delighted to see you there."

Keenan just stared. Jean Luc, of course!

"Would he now? Is that why he left you guys behind, to hammer this in my head?"

The Imperial shook his head, and his voice turned almost robotic.



“No, Mr. von Klein. This is only a secondary objective. The primary objective is to protect you from any potential traitor.”

Jean Luc worried for his safety. That was good to know, although Keenan would have to keep an eye on the Imperials. He didn't think Jean Luc would double-cross him, but he didn't trust people easily. It would be for the best to finish with business as quickly as possible and retrieve Eric from *Extase*.

“Since His Highness was unable to accompany you due to the problem with the young human, we were instructed to guard and aid you at all costs.”

Keenan arched a brow. Michel's machinelike tone gave Keenan the creeps. Well, come to think of it, the Imperials always seemed kind of eerie. “Thanks, I think.”

Michel nodded, obviously acknowledging Keenan's words as a form of agreement to the arrangement. “We can deal with things here if you wish to solve your personal issues first.” Michel paused, as if waiting.

Keenan gaped as realization struck. He'd just been dismissed from his own tower by a Sidhe underling. He'd be furious if he wasn't so pleased. He did indeed have some very important personal issues to attend to. He needed to see his pet and make sure Eric was all right.

Sparing another nod for Michel, Keenan left the von Klein Tower, flying toward *Extase*. Perhaps it would be best if he just made sure his pet was fine and then erased Eric's memory of him. Keenan was a monster. He proved it tonight. He had no place in the life of someone like Eric. Yes, it would be for the best. They couldn't be together. Their worlds didn't mix. For Eric's safety, he needed to forget he'd ever met Keenan.

## Chapter Seven

The club was bustling with activity. Writhing bodies surrounded Keenan on the dance floor, demons of different types, Sidhe, shape-shifters, were-creatures, all on the prowl for their next fuck or their next victim. It seemed to be a night like any other in a popular club, but Keenan knew better. The tension was so thick you could practically taste it, feel it in the air. News of the hunters must have reached every layer of the paranormal society. A property of the Sidhe prince and unofficial base of the New York Council, *Extase* boasted the latest in security equipment. As a result, it had become one of the safest places for a paranormal to retreat to in case of a hunter attack.

Making his way through the crowd, Keenan headed toward the bar, where he spotted Jean Luc and Giovanni. The Sidhe seemed to be listening intently to the incubus's words, answering from time to time. Keenan couldn't help but frown. If Giovanni and Jean Luc were here, who was looking after Eric?

As Keenan hastened toward the bar, Jean Luc turned and greeted him with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. "Ah, *mon ami*, so glad you could make it."

Keenan scowled. He'd trusted Eric was safe here, but maybe he'd been mistaken.

"Jean Luc, where's Eric?"

The Sidhe gave him a mysterious smile. "He's resting in the private chambers, of course."

Something flared inside Keenan at the words "resting in the private chambers". They conjured a totally unwanted image, Eric and Jean Luc together, locked in a passionate embrace. No, the Sidhe wouldn't dare touch his pet.

Keenan took a deep breath, struggling against the flare of annoyance. He wasn't thinking clearly. He could find Eric without even asking Jean

Luc, through their mind bond. Although he'd blocked his human from his mind, Keenan could still access that connection. During his flight toward *Extase*, he'd actually done so, and he knew Eric felt restless, but otherwise fine. Nevertheless, Jean Luc's smirk irritated him, especially since he couldn't be sure nothing had happened.

Jean Luc chuckled, obviously guessing his thoughts.

"Don't worry. It's just exhaustion from all the recent events. We managed to make him eat a little, with great effort, I might add."

Giovanni nodded. "He kept asking about you, Keenan."

Keenan blinked in surprise at Giovanni's remark, and he felt the irritation and jealousy being swept away by a familiar warmth. He shook himself, struggling to find the resolve to do the right thing. He'd come here to erase Eric's memory of him. It was better for his pet. A human had no business in a relationship with a paranormal—a vampire, no less. Besides, Keenan knew nothing about love.

Nodding to Giovanni and Jean Luc, Keenan left the bar and passed into the private sector of the club. He'd been here many times before, sating his appetites, always with one-night stands. It seemed peculiar that he would now find Eric here, in one of these rooms. Keenan followed their mind bond, feeling his pet closer and closer. Suddenly, the connection blurred for a second and then shifted. The restlessness turned into outright terror, and Keenan could feel Eric felt afraid, so very afraid.

Keenan sped through *Extase*, ice flowing through his veins. What if someone sneaked into the room? Or what if Eric hurt himself? Eric was still mentally unstable, and all the past events could have pushed him to do something horrible. Keenan made an effort to push through their connection, but something blocked him. Cursing both Jean Luc and himself for their incredible stupidity, Keenan moved with supernatural speed through the club, bypassing several paranormals before they even had a chance to blink.

He reached Eric's room in record time. To Jean Luc's credit, it was quite hidden from the main private quarters and away from the rooms used for common sexual practices. Even with those precautions, though, Eric had somehow been attacked. What could have possibly gone wrong?

Keenan burst into the room and froze in his tracks at the sight of his pet deep in sleep, thrashing on the bed. Eric whimpered, clutching the bedsheets, his blond hair sweaty and his slender form contorting painfully.

“No, don’t, Keenan, don’t!”

Keenan’s heart leaped as he heard his name on Eric’s lips. His pet was having a nightmare about Keenan. Eric had realized the truth about Keenan.

Keenan struggled to shut out the sudden agony. It didn’t matter. In fact, it just made his decision easier. He could make Eric forget with a clear conscience. No regrets. In the end, they couldn’t have been together anyway. It would be best if he did it now, while his human slept. That way, Eric would wake up the next day in his own apartment, thinking he had an extended nightmare and would remember whatever Keenan planted in his mind. A flu, perhaps. Fever would be a perfectly reasonable explanation for hallucinating about vampires, hunters, incubi, and Sidhe.

Keenan’s decision crumbled at Eric’s next words.

“No, Keenan, don’t! Don’t leave me. Don’t go.”

Keenan wanted to make the right decision, to choose the best thing for Eric. His pet had no place in the darkness of Keenan’s life. And yet, something deep inside Keenan rebelled against the idea. How could he let go? How could he give up something so precious?

Keenan moved toward his human’s restless form. Eric was so beautiful, and Keenan wanted to make that body writhe with passion, not fear. With everything that had happened, he’d never managed to possess his precious human. Well, he would remedy that soon enough.

Without giving himself time to change his mind, Keenan pressed his lips to Eric’s. He gently embraced Eric and caressed the nape of his human’s neck. Eric’s restlessness disappeared, and even in his sleep, his pet unconsciously responded to Keenan’s touch. Eric’s mouth opened, yielding to Keenan’s exploration, and Keenan felt everything else fly out of his mind as he tasted Eric’s sweet passion.

\* \* \* \*

*A sudden warm presence appeared around him, enveloping him, and Eric’s dream shifted. The door reopened, and Keenan reemerged. He pulled Eric up, smiling seductively, no trace of the previous cruelty in his dark eyes.*

*“Come here, pet,” Keenan purred, pressing their mouths together. Eric melted against his vampire, letting the sensations course through him. The*

*kiss grew in intensity until the dream blurred completely. Eric didn't want to wake up. He wanted to continue kissing Keenan.*

Nevertheless, much to his dismay, the dream ended, and Eric started to wake up. Eric tensed for a dazed second, feeling the weight of somebody on him and lips on his own. Then his body recognized the feel of Keenan. Oh, thank God! It wasn't just a dream.

Keenan's mouth tasted heavenly, and Eric couldn't get enough. As Keenan separated their mouths to breathe, Eric felt joy overwhelm him. Jean Luc had been right. Keenan had come for him.

Showering his vampire with kisses and blurting out random words, Eric forgot everything else but his own need.

"You came! I was so worried, so scared. I thought you'd leave me, I thought you didn't want me. But you came."

He wanted to protest when Keenan pushed him back on the bed, restricting his movements. As Keenan spoke, all such thought flew from his mind.

"No, pet, I haven't. I haven't come yet, but I plan to."

Eric let out a pathetic, little whimper at the implication of Keenan's words, nodding enthusiastically. He wanted to speak, to say how much he wanted his vampire, but as Keenan's lips assaulted his neck, words escaped him. They'd been interrupted so many times, but he could still remember very clearly the magnificence of Keenan's body, the fire of his touch.

Eric clung to Keenan, hoping to communicate his overwhelming need through his touches. He must have managed to successfully transmit his message because he didn't even realize when Keenan removed both of their clothes.

Keenan assaulted his mouth once again. As they kissed, his vampire tweaked Eric's nipples. The little nubs peaked and reddened at Keenan's ministrations. Keenan's mouth swallowed Eric's moans, and Eric lost himself in the passion, overcome by sensation. Keenan's voice ghosted into his mind. *"So perfect, so passionate, my beautiful Eric."*

Eric realized that Keenan had opened their connection once again, and all traces of his previous fear vanished. He could feel his vampire's love and his passion. Why had he ever doubted Keenan?

*"Don't worry, pet. Don't fret. I'll take care of you."*

Keenan's clever mouth moved down to his neck, and Eric waited impatiently for the bite. Keenan just nibbled gently and then advanced to his chest, licking his collarbone and playing with his erect nipples. Eric had never realized that his nipples were an erogenous zone. Well, he'd never explored the opportunity either, but now, as Keenan's fangs passed over the tiny nubs, he could certainly appreciate it. With every touch, he felt hotter and hotter, pleasure coursing through his veins.

Keenan's hands roamed Eric's body, caressing his sides. Eric could feel his vampire's lust as well, and he could tell Keenan tried to control it, attempting to be gentle, to take it slow. Eric didn't want slow. He wanted hard and fast and, most definitely, now.

"P-please! Now. Keenan, p-please."

Keenan took a deep breath, apparently struggling against himself. After a second that seemed like a lifetime to Eric, Keenan let out an inhuman growl, and in a flash, he shifted his position. He flipped Eric over on all fours, holding him down with a powerful hand.

Eric clutched the bedsheets as he felt his ass cheeks being separated. Finally, they were going to become one. He gasped in surprise when he felt Keenan's tongue passing over his opening, feasting on his ass.

*"Mmmm, pet, you taste so good, so good."*

The words slipped into his mind again, and Eric thought his mind would overload with lust. Keenan expertly swirled his tongue around his entrance then thrust it in and out of his body.

*"You're so beautiful, so fucking perfect. I need you so much."* Eric almost missed the words, barely registering himself moaning and gasping like a slut. Oh, God! It felt so magnificent. He could come just from Keenan's tongue teasing his hole, but he wanted Keenan inside him. He ached to be possessed fully, to feel Keenan's cock taking him, fucking him, marking him as forever belonging to him.

Keenan must have caught on to the thought. With another snarl, Keenan flipped Eric yet again on his back, positioning Eric's legs on his powerful shoulders. Eric screamed as Keenan's cock thrust into him without a warning. Unwillingly, he felt his eyes tear. It hurt! Was it supposed to hurt so much?

"Sorry, pet," Keenan murmured into his hair. "Wait a second. It gets better."

Eric opened his eyes, smiling at his vampire. If Keenan said it would get better, then it would. He trusted Keenan. Keenan wouldn't hurt him. Taking a deep breath, he willed his body to relax.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan cursed himself as he felt his pet's pain. In his lust, he discarded the fact that Eric was a virgin. Even with the preparation, his human hadn't been ready for such an abrupt penetration of his large member. Keenan should have used more adequate lubrication. He should have gone slow.

Looking into those wide, teary, green eyes, Keenan knew he could never let Eric go. He wasn't so noble as to allow his pet to live far away from him. He wanted Eric too much.

Keenan forced himself to stay still, to wait until Eric's body adjusted. Eric was so tight, and his channel gripped his cock like a fist. It took all his willpower not to start thrusting into Eric as his instinct demanded.

Closing his eyes, Keenan tried to think something boring and nasty, something to take his mind from the exquisite sensations. Gritting his teeth, Keenan reviewed in his mind the statistics of the von Klein corporation, budgets, profits, equipment, losses, gains, marketing strategies.

Through their connection, Keenan could tell when Eric's body relaxed and the pain diminished. Thank God! Keenan didn't think he could stand it much longer. Eric nodded and urged him to continue. "Okay. It's okay now."

Keenan didn't waste a single moment. He thrust in and out of Eric's passage, angling carefully so that every time he hit his human's prostate. Eric mewled, and desperate screams started sounding in the room. "Oh, God! Oh, my God! Harder, oh, please, harder! Oh, Keenan! God!"

Keenan would have felt smug if pleasure didn't overcome all his senses. Harder and harder, he took his pet, his thrusts gaining an intensity and speed impossible for a human. Eric howled and moaned helplessly, lost in ecstasy and passion. Through their connection, Keenan could feel how close Eric was to coming.

Seizing the moment, he bared his fangs, sinking them into the creamy skin of Eric's neck. With another scream, Eric came, and Keenan's mouth flooded with sweet, intoxicating blood, overflowing with endorphins.

Another powerful thrust and Keenan released his seed in the channel of his human lover.

Sealing the wound at Eric's neck, Keenan slipped out of his lover's body. He was momentarily startled when he noticed that Eric blacked out. It sometimes happened that humans were overwhelmed when they had sex with vampires, but Keenan mentally checked Eric just to make sure. His human was fine, just exhausted. Cradling Eric to his chest, Keenan smiled to himself. So much for his noble intentions.

\* \* \* \*

In the silent room, Keenan watched his slumbering human. Eric was still out of it, exhausted from their lovemaking, but Keenan didn't mind. Eric looked so peaceful in his sleep, like an angel stranded on earth, his blond hair haloing his face as he rested on Keenan's chest.

Keenan didn't know what he'd done to be so lucky. All his life, he'd just used people like toys. He'd never once gotten attached to any of his bed partners, not even to fellow paranormals. His life had been just fucking, feeding, and killing.

Amazingly, before Eric showed up, he didn't even realize that something was missing. He'd never believed in love until he fell for an angel with sad green eyes.

Keenan realized, too well, how stupid of him it was to keep his lover by his side, considering his feelings for Eric. The paranormal world could be very dangerous for a human, even in common conditions, but even more so with the recent hunter problem. Nevertheless, when he looked at his beautiful pet, slumbering and looking so utterly gorgeous, he knew his previous plan had no hope of being achieved. He couldn't possibly protect Eric from afar and, at the same time, manage to restrain his passion. He'd never allow another to touch Eric. Even the thought made something dark stir inside him—a murderous instinct to protect what was his.

But if he thought about it, giving up on Eric wouldn't make that much sense, would it? Eric hadn't been happy before, and his powers didn't allow him to lead a normal human life. Although he didn't know all the details, he realized with ease that Eric suffered a lot because of his gift. Eric said so himself, and his instability was a proof of that. Keenan nodded to himself.



Yes, Eric would be safest at Keenan's side. He'd make sure his human stayed happy and unharmed. There was no one else he could trust with the task.

Keenan's little session of planning for the future came to an abrupt halt when his vampire senses detected a presence closing in. His teeth elongated, prepared for any attack, but then he identified the approaching individual as Jean Luc. The Sidhe didn't even bother to cloak himself, obviously wanting to be detected. A discreet knock sounded at the door, announcing Jean Luc's intention to come in. Keenan gently pushed Eric's head off his chest, placed a chaste kiss on his temple, and covered him with the bedsheets.

Keenan made a face when he realized he'd torn his clothes in his frenzy. He shrugged, not really caring about the issue. It wasn't as if Jean Luc hadn't seen him naked before. Even if they'd never been lovers, Keenan wasn't shy about his nudity. Without sparing another thought, he headed toward the door. As he opened it, Jean Luc didn't even blink at his nakedness. However, a glint of satisfaction sparkled in his eyes.

"I'm glad everything turned out well, *mon ami*. I knew you'd make the right decision."

Keenan arched a brow. How had the Sidhe known about his plans? Keenan felt half-irritated and half-relieved. Even if it unnerved Keenan to know he'd been so transparent, he couldn't help but be satisfied at the knowledge that Jean Luc preserved his qualities as a tactician. In spite of Jean Luc's peculiar behavior, some things did stay the same.

"I know better than to ask how you knew about that. I suppose you wanted to talk to me about something."

The Sidhe nodded. "Elis and Jacob are here. As soon as Cassandra arrives, we're conferring a council meeting. I have already sent for my brother. We haven't heard from Lucca yet, but we'll just have to do without him this time, as well."

Keenan sighed. The hunters situation would get worse before it got better. It irked him severely that they managed to assault his own tower, and the fact that this attack suggested a traitor in their own ranks. A meeting of the Council was in order indeed, but he didn't look forward to seeing Cassandra at all.

"I don't suppose we could do without Cassandra as well," he muttered.

Jean Luc chuckled. “No, we can’t. Also, you can’t go out wearing nothing.”

Keenan blinked, realizing he’d totally forgotten about the absence of his clothes. *Oh, great! What now?*

As if guessing his thoughts, Jean Luc smirked. “Don’t worry, *mon ami*! I’ll bring something of mine for young Eric and something of Lucca’s for you.”

Keenan rubbed his eyes and groaned. Lucca.

The Sidhe smiled innocently. “What? He’s the only one your size and living in the premises of the club.”

Keenan glared at Jean Luc, knowing he couldn’t disagree. He needed the clothes and didn’t have the time to go back to the von Klein Tower.

“That is fine. Thank you.”

Jean Luc chuckled again at his expression. “*Adieu, mon ami*. I’ll be back soon with your clothes.”

Keenan shut the door behind the departing Sidhe. Looking toward the bed, he noticed Eric still slumbered. Well, he’d leave his pet to rest. It would be better that way. He had a feeling that when he was back from the meeting, he would need a great deal of distraction.

Ten minutes later, Keenan sauntered inside the meeting room, feeling irritated that he had to wear such a ridiculous garment, but not showing it in the least. Everybody was there, Pierre, Cassandra, Jean Luc, Jacob, Elis. Well, with the exception of Ulrike, of course, and Lucca.

Ignoring Cassandra’s furious glare, he greeted the gathering with a nod. “Hello, everyone. It’s good to see you all here.”

Jacob grunted, obviously still angry from before. Cassandra didn’t answer. Pierre smiled and said, “Please, sit, Keenan. We were just discussing the recent events.”

“Like he fucking cares. I’m surprised he even came, considering he was too busy fucking around to inspect the city,” Jacob muttered under his breath.

“Please, restrain yourself from making such comments,” Jean Luc coldly snapped at the werewolf.

Giovanni nodded, brushing his purple hair out of his eyes. “Besides, we have more important matters to attend to. This issue does not concern you. We are not here to discuss the private lives of any of us.”

Elis' cat-like eyes narrowed. "Yes, we have important matters to attend, and if his private life intrudes with them, we will discuss it."

"Enough," Keenan growled. "Do not presume you can judge me. My business is my own, and if you don't like it, I could have a few words to say about you, as well."

Just as he said this, he felt a presence stir in his mind.

*"Keenan? Is everything all right?"* Eric inquired.

*"Of course, pet. Everything is fine,"* Keenan replied, through their connection.

Things were far from being fine. The cat-shifter hissed, and his eyes started glowing eerily. "You freaking bastard." At the same time, Jacob growled, and their forms shimmered almost instantaneously. A black panther and a huge wolf appeared in the center of the room, where the two weres had been standing. They charged at Keenan, only to be immobilized by Jean Luc's mental abilities.

*"Keenan, that's not true. What are those things attacking you?"*

*"Eric, stay in the room. I'll deal with this."*

A mental curse followed his order, and then Eric disappeared from his mind. *"Eric, Eric!"* Keenan inwardly swore. This wasn't good.

Oblivious to Keenan's distress, Jean Luc rubbed his eyes tiredly. Between gritted teeth, he repeated, "Please, restrain yourselves. This is not the time for such displays."

The were-shifters ignored Jean Luc as they growled. Hoping to manage to deal with the two weres before Eric arrived, Keenan said, "Let them be, Jean Luc. I can defend myself. Maybe after I give them a lesson, they'll shut their mouths."

Unrestrained by magic, the panther and the wolf attacked Keenan again. They charged viciously, their sharp teeth snapping at him with fury. Keenan ducked and grabbed the panther, hurling its body into the wolf. The two weres quickly recovered and got back on their feet, attacking again. They circled Keenan, the wolf pacing in the front, while the panther charged at him from the back. Oh, so they wanted to play nasty. He could do that.

Keenan summoned his mental powers, and the panther crashed into an antique armoire. He was distracted for a second, and the black wolf had time to jump him and snap at his neck.

Before the wolf could tear Keenan's jugular, a powerful bolt of energy hurled him back. A shout sounded from the now-open door. "No!"

\* \* \* \*

Anger flowed through Eric's every pore. How dare these creatures attack his Keenan? He'd show them. They wouldn't touch his vampire.

Keenan sighed and turned toward him.

"I thought I told you to wait in the room, pet."

Eric fidgeted nervously at Keenan's reprimand.

"Right. Well, I felt lonely, and I didn't want to—"

God, how could he say this? He was suddenly very aware of all the eyes on him and felt incredibly thankful for having the time to put on the clothes left for him.

Keenan saved him from further embarrassment. "Everybody, this is Eric McAllister. He is staying here at the club."

Keenan moved strategically to Eric's side. "I believe you remember Cassandra." He gestured to the bitch-vamp, and the redhead just scoffed. "You know Jean Luc and Giovanni. The blond in the corner is Pierre D'Argent."

The blue-eyed blond smiled but didn't come closer.

"*Bonsoir*, Eric. It's nice to meet you."

Pierre D'Argent? That sounded familiar. He must be related to Jean Luc.

"*He's Jean Luc's brother, pet*," Keenan explained mentally, before continuing with the introductions. "The unfortunate little weres on the floor are Elis and Jacob."

Eric gasped in surprise as the panther and the wolf shifted and two beautiful naked men appeared in front of him. Oh, God! The former wolf was actually a gorgeous brunet. His gray eyes sparkled with fury, and his muscled body tensed, radiating hostility. He looked like he wanted to kill both Eric and Keenan. The black panther turned into another brunet, his slender body complementing the werewolf's looks. He gave Eric a cool look, and Eric suppressed the urge to squirm at the sight of those eerie cat eyes.

Eric shook himself as he remembered the attack of the were-shifters on Keenan. What was wrong with these people? Why were they being so hostile? Well, he refused to be intimidated. Ignoring their nakedness, he said, "I'm Eric, Keenan's lover."

Cassandra scoffed again. "Yeah, right, lover. Slut is more like it."

Keenan growled, and in an instant, the bitch-vamp hit the wall, gasping as Keenan unleashed his fury over her. The former panther—Elis? Jacob? Eric didn't know which was which—growled. "What the fuck, Keenan?" he asked menacingly. "This is why you abandoned us? For a little human whore?"

Eric expected another violent response from Keenan. Instead, Jean Luc practically roared, "Assez! This behavior is unacceptable for any of you!"

Silence fell over the room as objects shook in their places. Eric could tell the Sidhe had been pushed beyond his limit. He made his way to Jean Luc's side, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder, but careful not to touch skin. "Umm, Jean Luc? It's fine."

Jean Luc took a deep breath, shaking his head. "It's not fine, Eric. I *really* don't need this right now."

"Well, for once, I can agree with you, Jean Luc." Cassandra directed a glare at Eric. "We don't need this complication. A human in our midst at this time? Who knows if it wasn't him who let the hunters inside the tower?"

Eric jumped at the accusation. As he looked over the people in the room, he realized something. Fearing the answer, he mentally asked Keenan, "*Is it because of me that they were attacking you?*"

Keenan's sigh echoed in Eric's mind. *Pet, it's not because of you. It's because they don't understand how I feel about you and the situation is very complicated at the moment.*

Eric felt his heart fall into his stomach. Tears accumulated in his eyes. Hate everywhere, everywhere he went. No matter what Keenan said, he knew it was his fault. He was a freak, and now, he'd caused problems for his vampire.

This was a disaster. He'd thought he could be loved and be happy. But how could he stay here when his presence caused such strife? He could never do that, just as he could never be loved. He was such an idiot. Tears

sprung into his eyes at the realization that, as much as he loved Keenan, he could not stay.

“Pet, pet. Come now, don’t cry!” Keenan’s warm presence appeared at his side, and Eric desperately wanted to sink into his embrace. But he couldn’t, he wouldn’t. Avoiding his vampire’s gaze, he brushed Keenan away and struggled to stop his tears. He turned toward the Sidhe. “Jean Luc?”

Jean Luc seemed lost for words for a second. “*Oui?*”

“Do you think I could take a taxi or something from here?”

Jean Luc hesitated and glanced toward Keenan. Eric suppressed a sigh. The Sidhe wasn’t going to answer.

“Anybody? Can I take a taxi or something from here?”

Keenan turned Eric around, forcing their eyes to meet and holding Eric’s wrists captive. “What the hell, Eric? What kind of question is that?”

Eric struggled uselessly to escape Keenan’s iron grip. “It’s obvious, Keenan. Look at them. They hate me, and they’ll hate you because of me. I can’t stay here.”

Cassandra laughed. “Well, at least the slut isn’t completely stupid.”

“Shut up, bitch,” Keenan snapped at her. Taking Eric’s head in his hands, he pressed their foreheads together.

“Now listen to me, pet. Nobody hates you. They just don’t know you, and they’re confused. I’m sure they’ll come to like you once you talk a little.”

Eric glanced to the shifters, who now looked distinctly confused and embarrassed. The former wolf nodded. “Yeah, yeah, that’s right.”

The panther attempted to smile. “Don’t worry about this. It’s just the way we are, a little violent, you know, animals and all.”

Eric stared at the two shifters, analyzing them for any sign of deceit. They seemed to be honest. Could they really make it work?

“I hate you,” Cassandra gritted out.

Eric looked toward the bitch-vamp. Waving a hand, he disregarded the redhead disdainfully.

“I don’t care about that, bitch-vamp. You’re ugly and evil, and I hate you, too.”

The tension in the room vanished as everybody, with the exception of Cassandra, burst into laughter. Eric blinked in surprise at the sudden reaction.

“What? What’s so funny? It’s true.”

The shifters started rolling on the floor, howling with laughter. “Oh, God,” the wolf said. “Oh, fuck! So funny.”

The only one who maintained a modicum of composure, Jean Luc explained, “Just ignore them, *mon petit*. It’s funny because of her expression and the way you said it.”

Eric looked at Cassandra, and true enough, the bitch-vamp was fuming. He smirked. “Well, it is true. She’s evil and hideous, and she dresses badly, too.”

“Please, pet, please stop.” Keenan brushed a tear out of the corner of his eye. “You’re killing me here.”

Eric chose a seat on the couch, pouting. “Damn. Do I have to?”

“Shut the fuck up, little bitch!” Cassandra snarled, and a vase shot toward Eric.

Giovanni caught it before it actually became a danger. Even so, the bitch-vamp’s intervention snapped everybody out of their laughing fits.

“Anyway, now that we’re fine, who wants a drink?”

As Giovanni placated the situation with strategically placed alcohol, Eric couldn’t help but feel an impending sense of doom. What had he gotten himself into?

## Chapter Eight

As the drinks were distributed around the room, Elis looked at Keenan and burst into laughter again. Keenan arched a brow. “What? What now?”

Elis shook his head, holding his sides as he laughed hysterically. “Pink! You’re wearing fucking pink, and you’re all fluttery and shit. I just now realized it. God, how did I miss—”

Jacob looked from the were-panther to Keenan. Because of his werewolf eyes, he couldn’t see colors, but the cut of the material was all he needed to know. Keenan wore pink silk pants, almost transparent and flowing over his powerful thighs like water, artistically boasting an intricate embroidery of oriental flowers. The material remained just as transparent in the area of his crotch, a most unfortunate choice, since it revealed the fact that he wasn’t wearing any underwear. The matching shirt made a poor attempt of covering his chest, its sleeves following the same flowing pattern up to Keenan’s wrists and leaving his abdomen nude. A pair of sandals of the same color completed the attire. He looked pink, like a pretty harem boy.

Keenan mentally cursed as Jean Luc smiled smugly. Fucking Sidhe! He enjoyed Keenan’s humiliation. Keenan didn’t mind showing off his body. Hell, he’d slept with lots of paranormals, and he knew he looked stunning. But this suit of Lucca’s annoyed him to no end. He’d have been better off wandering out naked.

“*Ignore them.*” Eric’s voice ghosted into his mind. “*You look gorgeous.*”

Just like that, Lucca’s pink suit no longer seemed so awful. Keenan turned to look at Eric and smiled softly. “*Thank you, pet.*”

Placing a brief peck on Eric’s forehead, he smirked at the shifters. Yeah, he was pink, but he had the sexiest mate. *Eat dust, kitty!*

Keenan mentally discarded that part of his brain screaming at him. “*Mate? What the fuck is wrong with you? Since when do vampires have*



*mates?*” It was quite easy to do so. One look at Eric and said brain part quieted down completely.

Shaking his head, Keenan tried to focus on something else rather than the human in his arms. He quietly observed the gathering of paranormals. Pierre swirled an amber-colored liquid in his glass, seemingly finding the patterns of the drink fascinating. Cassandra openly glared at Keenan. Giovanni just smiled, and Jean Luc looked pleased. Then again, you never knew with the Sidhe prince. Elis and Jacob shifted in their seats, occasionally brushing against each other. Keenan silently chuckled, deciding that a little sexual frustration would be the perfect punishment for the were-panther and wolf.

Berating himself for his own poor ability to focus, he introduced the issue at hand. “Okay, then, now that we’ve had a few laughs, should we pass to the matter of interest?” he said impatiently.

Jean Luc nodded, putting down his wine glass. “As you all know, during the past few days, there has been an extensive hunter activity. The casualty report so far is five Sidhe, three werewolves, one vampire, as well as a great number of human staff.”

Jean Luc paused. “To a certain extent, we have been lucky tonight, as no further killings have occurred. However, the report from the Imperials doesn’t allow for optimism.”

Keenan pressed Eric to his chest, as his human’s body tensed. His poor pet, thrust in the middle of a chaotic paranormal conflict. He knew that Eric wasn’t afraid for his own life, but for Keenan. He registered the memory as it passed through Eric’s mind, Keenan burnt beyond recognition, Eric’s pain echoing his own, Eric’s fear that Keenan would not wake.

*“Don’t worry, pet. Never again, I promise, never again.”*

As Eric gave him a small smile, Keenan asked out loud, “What exactly did the Imperials find? How did you guys know to come to the Tower in the first place?”

“They found a random bunch of hunters in Staten Island, minions, more or less. They didn’t know much, but they were aware of the attack planned on the von Klein Corporation.”

Keenan felt a surge of irritation swell his insides.

“I don’t understand how they could have bypassed the security systems. I’ve always kept them top notch.”

Cassandra scoffed. “Well, obviously, they weren’t so perfect. Or maybe it was an inside job.”

The redhead glanced meaningfully at Eric.

Eric noticed the look. Scowling at the female vampire, he said, in a disdainful voice, “That’s the second time in the last hour you’ve suggested I was a freaking traitor. What the fuck is wrong with you? I mean, from what I gather, this is a serious matter, and all you can think about is badgering me? You’ve got issues, lady!”

Keenan felt his heart swell at Eric’s words. In spite of his fear and confusion, Eric held his own against the most powerful paranormals in New York. Keenan felt humbled by his lover’s courage.

Keenan cleared his throat as he attempted to fight his arousal. It wasn’t easy, though. In his outburst of temper, Eric somehow moved and now sat in Keenan’s lap, his cute little ass right above Keenan’s crotch. Keenan suppressed a groan as his human wriggled a little, apparently attempting to find a more comfortable spot.

*“Pet, please, have mercy! We’re in public.”*

For a brief second, Eric paused, as if he didn’t quite register the words. “Sorry.” He sheepishly apologized. He stopped moving and leaned on Keenan. Struggling to control his libido, Keenan gathered his thoughts and focused on Cassandra.

“I will let this slide one last time, Cassandra. However, I do agree with you on one thing. This was indeed an inside job.”

Jacob broke the uncomfortable silence that followed Keenan’s words.

“You think it was a paranormal who cooperated with the hunters.”

Keenan met the werewolf’s eyes and nodded. Before Jacob could argue, Jean Luc stepped up. “I agree. There is no other way they could have bypassed von Klein security like that.”

“It would be interesting to know where the bullets came from. All the buildings in the area belong to paranormals,” Keenan added, carefully analyzing the reactions of his fellow Council members. He wondered which one of them could be behind the attack on the Tower.

The silence turned deafening as the council seemed to contemplate that. “All right, so who owns those buildings?” Elis eventually asked.

“There are several buildings in the area that are owned by the Sidhe, one that is...was owned by Ulrike, and several establishments belonging to demons,” Pierre replied.

“The most logical connection would be that the shots would have come from Ulrike’s place. It would be in chaos now,” Giovanni mused. It made sense, of course. If someone had killed Ulrike, he or she would know that, without her leadership, her corporation and businesses would crumble under their own weight.

Keenan nodded, rubbing his chin. Even if the shots had indeed come from Ulrike’s building, there were still facts that irked him terribly.

“What about the helicopter?” Eric spoke for the first time. “I mean, since there were so many of you guys in the area, someone should have seen it, I dunno, detected it, before it came so close.”

Jacob glanced at Eric. “Point. So what does that imply?”

“That, in the end, even if it was from Ulrike’s tower, there is, nevertheless, a traitor,” Pierre said with a sigh.

Silence fell again over the gathering of paranormals. None of them knew what to say.

“Well, if that is so, all we can do is strengthen the security of all our individual establishments,” Jean Luc concluded. Keenan suddenly felt thankful for having the Sidhe here. Even if Jean Luc was far from being his friend, Keenan could at least count on the Sidhe to help him with the organization of the Council. With the new issues Eric’s presence brought into his life, dealing with the traitor in their midst would be next to impossible on his own.

“Less experienced paranormals should be warned to stay off the streets and in safe locations,” Jacob suggested, having seemingly accepted both the idea of a traitor and Jean Luc’s conclusion.

Pierre made a face at the werewolf’s idea. “I’m not sure exactly how to announce this, *mes amis*. I mean, of course there have been rumors, but the certainty of an attack may cause chaos.”

“True,” Cassandra said, “but we cannot risk further damage to innocents. I suppose that each individual leader of paranormals could summon a gathering, without actually telling them the matter to be discussed. Still, in a place as big as New York, it would be next to useless. Like Pierre said, rumors are already flying around.”

Cassandra scowled as if in fierce concentration. She shook her head. “An official statement for all paranormals is very difficult to accomplish.”

“Ummm...Keenan?” Eric’s little voice appeared in Keenan’s head. “Why don’t you guys do something here at the club?”

Keenan smiled adoringly at Eric, nodding. “*It could work, pet.*” He cleared his throat to draw attention and said, “Everyone, Eric has an idea.”

His human blushed ten shades of red, glaring accusingly at him. As the paranormals looked at him expectantly, he managed to stutter.

“I...I...I was just wondering why you couldn’t...umm...make a statement here, at the club. I mean, Jean Luc said there are a lot of paranormals here and on short notice—”

The Sidhe nodded, giving Eric an approving look. “I have been thinking about that as well, *mon petit*. The downside is that we don’t know how the rumors will grow if alimented like this. Some segments of the paranormal community tend to be particularly alarmist.”

“Well, it’s the best thing we *can* do at the moment,” Giovanni pointed out with a shrug. “It’s not like we have a Paranormal Gazette or whatever.”

Cassandra glared at the incubus, obviously not enjoying Giovanni’s attempt at humor. Before she could say anything, Elis jumped in. “Right, so you guys will make the announcement. What else do we need to decide? Redistribution of forces?”

Giovanni shook his head sadly. “I haven’t received word from Lucca yet.” Keenan suppressed a sigh. He could tell Giovanni felt incredibly worried about the fate of his stepbrother.

Obviously picking up something, Eric sniffed a little, burying his head in Keenan’s shoulder.

“Pet? Are you okay?” Keenan inquired.

“I’m fine. It’s just that I just realized that your people are in danger, dying.”

“Oh, pet, hush now! Such is our world, full of danger.” Keenan felt a familiar doubt creep into his heart. Maybe he should have erased Eric’s memories after all.

\* \* \* \*

Eric's eyes widened as he caught on to Keenan's last thought. Erase his memories? In shock, he scuttled from Keenan's arms, landing with a thud on the hard floor. He barely registered the discomfort caused by his less-than-graceful movement, too busy staring in disbelief at his vampire.

"What the fuck, Keenan?"

His lover winced, realizing his thought had been heard. "Pet, I can explain."

"The hell you can!" Eric felt so angry, angry at being deceived, angry and hurt. "Erase my memories? What the fuck?"

Dimly, he registered objects starting to move in the room. He could practically sense the confusion coming from the rest of the paranormals, but he couldn't care less. An antique vase flew at his lover as Eric fumed.

How dare Keenan think that? How dare he say that he loved Eric then decide to discard him? He had a heart, God damn it! He wasn't a freaking toy.

Another decorative object flew at Keenan. Keenan deftly dodged it, just like he'd done with the first one. Keenan raised his hands in a sign of peace.

"Eric, please, listen. Don't do this."

Eric wanted to obey but found that he could not. He took a deep breath as bits and pieces of stolen thoughts slipped back into his head. Unwanted. A complication. A complication Keenan didn't need.

Eric whimpered pathetically, burying his head in his hands. Somewhere in the background, he could hear distinctive sounds of crashing and curses in various languages. He couldn't bring himself to care. How could he have thought that he had Keenan's love?

He was just a human, and a freak human at that. Perhaps he seemed amusing for Keenan now, but in the end, Keenan would leave him. Eric would be all alone again. He didn't want to be alone again, not after having felt the comfort of a warm hug, the taste of a sweet kiss, the passion of a lover. He didn't want to lose the most beautiful memories he had. It would be kinder to just kill him.

"Shhh, pet, don't cry! I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Keenan enveloped him in a hug and rocked him like a child. "I promise you, there'll be none of that. It's just my stupidity at work."

Eric shook his head, sobbing miserably. "You said...You thought...I heard you!"

Keenan raised Eric's head, forcing their eyes to meet. His gaze burned into Eric's heart. "I know, and I admit I did consider it. I was afraid for you, afraid because you are so delicate and the paranormal world so dangerous. I still am. But, my beautiful, brave Eric, I couldn't bring myself to leave you. I want you too much."

Eric heard the words, wanted to believe them, but it was so hard. He shook his head, covering his ears with his hands. "No, you're lying, you're lying!"

Keenan's voice ghosted in his mind. "*Pet, you know I'm not. You can feel what I feel. Please, Eric! I love you, please, don't cry!*"

At the heartfelt words, Eric faced Keenan. "Do you really?"

Keenan nodded, smiling widely. "You know I do."

Eric bit his lower lip. "And you won't do that? You won't leave me?"

"I swear, pet. I won't ever leave you."

Eric beamed, reveling in the genuine affection and honesty he now felt coming from Keenan. He collapsed in Keenan's embrace as exhaustion overwhelmed his senses. Keenan kissed his hair and whispered, "Hush, now, rest for a minute while I finish up here."

Nodding, Eric closed his eyes and dozed off in the warm, pink silk embrace of his vampire.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan gently placed Eric on a nearby armchair and faced the audience of paranormals who stared at them with expressions of disbelief and confusion. He made a face at the destruction of the room. Eric's outburst had wrecked all the decorations and done significant damage to the antique furniture.

Elis brushed shards of glass out of his hair and turned toward Jean Luc, giving him an angry look. "What the fuck, Jean Luc? What was that all about?"

Jean Luc blinked and met Keenan's eyes, silently asking whether they should keep Eric's power a secret. Keenan sighed and shook his head. He appreciated the offer, but it would best for things to be out in the open. Eric wasn't going anywhere, and in the long run, the paranormals would find out about his abilities anyway.

“Jean Luc didn’t do anything, Elis. It was Eric.”

Eric had shown his abilities before, but Elis couldn’t have expected such a thing from a human. The power that swiped through and destroyed the room had been too great.

The shifter’s eyes widened, “Say again?”

Cassandra let out a bitter laugh. “Don’t tell me you didn’t realize that it was him who blasted Mr. Doggy here. We had a similar episode back at the Tower.”

Keenan scowled. He must have missed something when he’d been unconscious because of the rocket. “You were asking for it, Cassandra,” Giovanni replied bitingly.

Jacob lifted his hands in a sign of peace. “Excuse me, but isn’t he supposed to be human? What’s this all about?”

“And what’s wrong with him?” Elis scowled fiercely at Keenan. “What’s with all the sudden flying objects?”

Keenan felt thankful Eric had passed out of mental exhaustion. His lover wouldn’t have reacted well to this interrogatory. He opened his mouth to speak, but Pierre answered in his stead, “He’s mentally disabled, isn’t he?”

The question made Keenan’s blood boil with fury. The way Pierre said those words, he sounded like he was cataloguing Eric as a medical specimen. What the fuck?

Jean Luc grabbed his brother’s shoulder. “Pierre...” Jean Luc’s tone was a warning in itself, but Pierre ignored it.

“What, Jean Luc? You know it’s true.”

Keenan took a deep breath and struggled for control. “Eric has a fragile psyche, it’s true,” he said quietly. “However, Jean Luc and I are handling it quite well. It’s none of your business, Pierre.”

“Eric just needs affection and care,” Jean Luc explained. “His personality disorder is more common than you might think. If necessary, I will supply medicine, although I hope it will not be the case.”

“What’s wrong with you people?” Cassandra shot back at the Sidhe. “The little bitch is out of control. He’s a danger to all of us, especially now. Can’t you see that?”

Elis seemed to agree with Cassandra.

“Besides, Keenan, how long have you known this human anyway? I mean, last time I checked you were single, and now, you’re smitten with this human or whatever he is?”

True enough, Keenan had met Eric just a few days back. It seemed unbelievable, as so much had happened since then. He couldn’t explain the connection between him and his human. It was private and sacred, and they wouldn’t understand.

The Council’s hostility toward Eric started to wear out Keenan’s control. As he took in the assembly of paranormals who looked at him for an answer, Keenan knew he somehow needed to hide his true feelings regarding Eric. He glared at Elis and scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous. Eric is only a temporary issue. Don’t intrude where you’re not needed.”

“Are you saying he’s only a plaything?” Pierre arched an inquisitive brow at him.

“Since when are you all so concerned about who I fuck? Eric ended up here because of circumstances. I’ll deal with him once the more important problems are solved.”

The only acknowledgement Keenan received for the last statement was a nod from Pierre. Keenan didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but he decided he’d discussed Eric long enough.

“Now that we have that out of the way, let’s continue with our business. This city is ours. We won’t let anyone take it from us.”

The fire in Keenan’s voice impassioned everybody in the room. Even the Alpha of the New York pack appeared to have agreed to his dominance. He gestured toward Jean Luc, and on cue, the Sidhe rummaged through the destroyed furniture, cursing in French when a shelf almost fell on him. Despite the small impediment, Jean Luc swiftly retrieved the items they needed for the following stage of their meeting.

Jacob and Elis straightened the table which had fortunately received no significant damage, and Jean Luc placed the maps of New York in the center.

“Right. So where have the attacks been?” Keenan inquired.

“My brethren were attacked somewhere in this area,” Jacob said, pointing to a park in Queens. “They were in human form at the time, but somehow, they were still detected.”



Pierre arched an inquiring brow toward the werewolf. “How do you know that?”

Jacob directed a dark glare toward the Sidhe. “The pack is very united,” he explained, the strain of losing his fellow wolves obvious in his voice. “They managed to speak to me before they—”

Jean Luc sighed as the voice of the werewolf broke. “I apologize, *mon ami*. We meant no offense.”

Keenan suppressed a frustrated sigh. Jacob seemed very affected by the demise of the members of his pack. However, any information the now-dead werewolves had provided before they were killed would be of extreme utility.

Thankfully, the werewolf knew this, and Keenan gave a mental thanks that he wouldn’t have to push Jacob into delving into the painful memory. “They were taken by surprise. The hunters must’ve brought some sort of equipment or device that blocked our senses.” Jacob’s eyes turned stormy as he spoke. “They shifted and barely had the time to send us a warning. We heard their call, but by the time we got there, they were already dead.”

“From what we can tell, it was the same during the attacks against the Sidhe.” Pierre continued to report after a brief moment of silence. “The Sidhe were also ambushed, cornered, and their powers neutralized. Five dead, from wounds made from crossbow arrows and special bullets. From what we can tell, they didn’t go for the kill immediately, because there are a number of nonlethal injuries which appear to have been inflicted before the actual death. In other words, they were toyed with and then murdered.”

“The most worrying is Ulrike’s death, though,” Cassandra added. “Ulrike was a very experienced vampire, and for them to have managed to slay her...”

Keenan rubbed his chin in thought. For once, he agreed with Cassandra. “Any clue on how the attacks were timed? Which was first?”

“The preliminary analysis of the bodies pointed out that the Sidhe were first, around nine in the evening,” Jean Luc answered, his voice nearly clinical in tone. “After that, the werewolves at eleven, eleven thirty and Ulrike around midnight. The attack on the von Klein Tower happened around two in the morning.”

Keenan felt cold dread seep into his veins as the Sidhe's words confirmed his guess. It seemed clear to him now, and not accepting it would be stupid.

"I can only draw a conclusion from what you all have said. It may be rash, but I urge you to take it into consideration. I think that the Sidhe and the werewolves were just a test of sorts, to check the efficiency of the weapons and the level of security there is in the paranormal community. I expect that they either didn't trust their supplier or they weren't sure about their information. In any case, I believe that the true targets of the attacks are the upper level elites, most specifically, us."

The room fell into heavy silence for a few seconds. Jean Luc cleared his throat and said, "I believe Keenan is correct, *mes amis*. Ulrike's death and the attack on Keenan cannot be a coincidence. There is someone who wants us out of the way, and that someone has inside information. That's the only explanation for Ulrike's assassination and for the security system problems at the von Klein Tower."

Jean Luc stopped speaking, probably intending to allow the idea to sink in the minds of the other people in the room. The members of the Council kept their emotions in check, and it didn't take long for Elis to snap back into his usual self. "Okay, so if there is a traitor, what do you think we should do?"

"We take this as an attack to ourselves," Giovanni replied. "So, we enhance the security on ourselves, as well as on our loved ones. You never know what methods might be used against us."

Keenan clenched his jaw, suppressing the sudden urge to look toward his pet. If anyone tried anything against Eric, they would be sorry. They would beg for death before he finished them off. Keenan took a deep breath, struggling to think reasonably. Could he be at Eric's side 24-7? Clenching his jaw, Keenan made his decision. He only hoped Eric would understand.

\* \* \* \*

Eric woke up feeling a little lost. As he opened his eyes, he realized Keenan's warmth wasn't beside him. Stretching a little, he looked in the room, and he noticed that all the people from before were bent over a table and scrutinizing some unknown document.

*"Hello, pet! I'm glad you're up. You certainly took your time."*  
Keenan's voice fled in his mind.

Eric observed his vampire without making a sound. Keenan still wore the "harem boy" suit, and Eric allowed himself a moment to admire his lover's body. In his pink attire that revealed more than it covered, he looked like a fallen angel, exotic, gorgeous, and yet, still dangerous.

*"Silk really suits you, Keenan. You should wear it more often. You look sexy, even if it's pink."*

If his vampire was startled by the completely random remark, he showed no outside sign of it. His laughter rumbled in Eric's head as he spoke to his incubus friend.

*"So you're saying we shouldn't resort to the underground right now."*

Giovanni nodded. *"They're unstable and would do more harm than good right now. Even the demons are a gamble, but they're a better option."*

Eric kept silent. He knew all the paranormals in the room must have felt him waking up, but he couldn't make himself speak out. As the last remnants of sleep disappeared, he remembered what had happened earlier. He chewed on his lip thoughtfully. He wasn't pleased with himself, with his irrational display earlier. Keenan didn't seem angry with him, but what about the other paranormals? Eric winced as he observed the pieces of broken pottery on the floor. He'd surely caused problems for Keenan.

A tear trickled down Eric's smooth cheek, but he fought against the sobs threatening to overwhelm him. He hated being so weak. He needed to stop, to overcome this flow of confusing emotions. Keenan had responsibilities now, important issues Eric couldn't compete with.

Keenan turned and frowned, giving him a displeased look. *"You're awake, then,"* he said in an arctic voice.

Eric blinked, and his tears froze as cold dread slipped into his veins.

*"Don't worry, pet. It's just an act. I don't trust them. There's a traitor in our midst, and you're not safe here."*

Eric fought to keep the dismay off his face. Did that mean he would get his memories erased after all?

*"You promised,"* he weakly choked out.

*"Yes, I did. But in light of your unimpressive little show, I changed my mind,"* Keenan said out loud. In his mind, Keenan whispered, *"Play along, pet...It'll be fine, I swear."*

The difference in the tone in his mind and the tone in his ears was astounding. Even so, Eric somehow knew that Keenan's heart was true. He would play along, if Keenan said so.

Eric gathered his knees to his chest, covering his head and curling into a ball. "No, no, you promised." He didn't have to fake the shake of his voice. Whatever the reason of Keenan's act, these people didn't like him. How did he always manage to fuck things up so badly?

He felt a presence at his side, just before a gentle hand caressed his hair. "Eric, it's for the best, really." Jean Luc's voice had a comforting undertone, but it didn't help that even the Sidhe that he considered a friend wanted him out.

*"Don't cry, pet, please. It'll be okay, you'll see."*

Keenan pushed Jean Luc away. Eric raised his eyes, meeting Keenan's gaze. "Keenan, please..."

Keenan didn't smile or give any sign of acknowledging Eric's plea. As he sat next to Eric, his voice sounded gently in Eric's head. *"I know, pet. Don't worry, I won't leave you."*

Keenan touched his forehead, and Eric barely had time to register Keenan's final comforting caress before he was again plunged into darkness.

## Chapter Nine

Keenan felt his heart clench as he once again rendered his pet unconscious. Eric wouldn't take it well, he just knew it, but for the moment, he didn't have a choice. He wasn't willing to risk Eric's safety with the members of the Council in the present circumstances.

It wouldn't be easy to make them all believe he intended to erase Eric's memories indefinitely. Cassandra was a vampire herself, and she would be a problem in particular because she understood how his mind worked, at least to a certain extent. Vampires weren't inclined to giving up their prey, and neither did they have problems of ethics. Out of all the races of paranormals that roamed the Earth, vampires were perhaps the most immoral ones. Cassandra knew all this because, despite their differences, in the end, they were both the same breed.

The shifters would also be a problem. They had a knack for detecting lies a mile away. Normally, Keenan wouldn't worry about that, just like he didn't worry about the empathy of the Sidhe. He had powerful mental shields that could easily deal with it. Even so, both Jacob and Elis were predators. If they realized how his mind worked, it'd be all over.

Jean Luc would be the most difficult one to fool. The Sidhe was simply too devious for his own good. They'd known each other for longer than Keenan would have liked, despite the fact that they'd just recently started to inhabit the same city. In fact, Keenan thought he had very little chances of making Jean Luc believe he would give up on Eric just like that. After all, the Sidhe helped him when Eric fell into unconsciousness and knew more about their relationship than any other member of the Council. Keenan could only hope Jean Luc would keep his mouth shut.

Pierre could also be a complication. He was a gentle soul, but Keenan knew that he didn't like humans. Keenan didn't know all the details regarding this particular attitude, but it had a connection with the reason of

the relocation of the Sidhe from Paris to New York. At the time, Jean Luc had been severely injured and he'd arrived in New York in a coma. Pierre still begrudged humans terribly.

At the same time, the fact that they'd been lovers in the past didn't help. Keenan was normally guarded with his emotions, but with Pierre being a Sidhe and an empath, he might have caught on more than enough at the time. Keenan felt thankful that Pierre had at least a nice personality because the last thing he could deal with right now was a jealous Sidhe.

He wouldn't even try to fool Giovanni. They knew each other far too well, and the incubus would just feel offended at the attempt. But Giovanni wasn't a danger, and he'd play along.

Keenan mentally groaned at his inventory of Council members. He never realized how dangerous they could all be. Technically speaking, he'd never had a reason to fear them. With the possible exception of Giovanni and Lucca, he didn't actually feel attached to anyone. Nevertheless, it'd be hell convincing them that his act was genuine.

Keenan put Eric back on the couch, facing his audience with a stony expression. Cassandra gave him a look of disbelief, while Elis and Jacob seemed just amazed. They must have suspected Keenan would wait to erase Eric's memory. Perhaps it would reassure them that Keenan truly had no deep feelings for Eric.

Jean Luc's face remained as expressionless as ever, and Keenan knew by one look at the Sidhe that his act was a bust there. Pierre seemed to have bought it. For a brief moment, his eyes glinted with barely hidden satisfaction.

Before anybody could say anything, Keenan asked, "Right, where were we before we were interrupted?"

Cassandra arched a perfect red brow, irradiating skepticism. Even so, Keenan could tell that she wasn't certain. Keenan could exploit that underlying doubt. Good.

"We were discussing the possibility of involving the underground in this conflict," Cassandra began, resuming their previous conversation.

Pierre shook his head. "There's no way the elves and sprites will come. You know how they are very—" Pierre paused as if looking for a word.

"Irritating?" Elis supplied.

Pierre threw the panther a glare. "I was thinking more in the terms that they like their privacy."

Keenan nodded, silently thankful for the digression. "I agree. The most we can do is notify them, just in case they are also targeted."

Jean Luc cleared his throat. "I've already done that. We are, after all, very distantly related."

Keenan couldn't help a smile. Sometimes, he completely forgot about that. "Right. With that out of the way, I have to say that I object to summoning the banshees, the leeches, or other such paranormals. They'd be more trouble than they are worth. All those who agree with me, say 'aye.'"

As expected, there was a unanimous chorus of ayes. Nobody wanted the banshees roaming around New York scaring people half to death. It would just make things worse than they already were.

"With that in mind, I suggest that talking to the human authorities is the next order of business."

Keenan made a face at the thought of handling human bureaucracy. It was probably the third worst thing the humans had invented, surpassed only by the hunters and the atomic bomb. He gave Jean Luc a meaningful look, already decided to designate the task of discussing with the humans to him. Jean Luc owed him for the pink clothes stunt anyway. "You're right, Jean Luc. We have to notify them urgently. If the hunters are around, there's bound to be consequences. It would be most unpleasant if, because of them, the public found out about our existence."

There was an awkward pause as Keenan and Jean Luc stared at each other. In the end, Jean Luc sighed, took out his cell, and dialed, directing a glare at Keenan.

"You should be doing this, you know."

Keenan crossed his arms across his chest. "Yes, well, it's you they like. I just freak them out."

"If you but made an effort," the Sidhe snapped, in a rare show of irritation.

Luckily, Keenan was spared of having to find a retort because the person at the other line picked up. Richardson barked an irritated "*what*", and Keenan felt thankful he'd asked the Sidhe to call.

As if proving Keenan's theory, Jean Luc turned his attention to the conversation, and when he spoke, his voiced sounded so honey sweet it made Keenan's fangs ache.

"*Bonsoir, Monsieur* Richardson. So nice to hear your voice again."

Keenan grimaced. Mark Richardson was the head of the human agency dealing with paranormal activity and a typical bureaucrat. His condescending attitude always caused clashes between the Agency and Keenan. Nowadays, Keenan preferred to delegate Jean Luc to deal with Richardson. The man was positively smitten with Jean Luc. Many assumed the Sidhe slept with him. Keenan didn't know, and honestly, it was none of his business. He would bet that Jean Luc wouldn't sink to the human's level. Of course, one could never know for sure with Jean Luc.

Because of their enhanced hearing, everybody in the room could hear the conversation. Richardson's tone echoed Jean Luc's, and Keenan didn't know whether to laugh or throw up. After his gruff greeting, Richardson's demeanor changed entirely upon realizing the identity of his caller.

"Ah, Jean Luc, my sweet. As always, it's such a pleasure. What can I do for you?"

The Sidhe sighed theatrically. "Alas, the reason of my call is, unfortunately, not a very pleasant one. There have been some attacks on my people, and of course, I needed to let you know."

Richardson seemed genuinely troubled. "Attacks? Is it serious? Are you hurt?"

Cassandra giggled, a gesture so unlike her it almost caused Keenan's own composure to break. Jean Luc glared at both of them, but his tone showed nothing but pure distress when he answered the human, "No, I'm fine, but several of my friends..." He sniffled a little for effect, and Elis buried his head in Jacob's shoulder to avoid bursting into laughter.

Oblivious to his impromptu role as an entertainer, Richardson hastened to show his concern to Jean Luc. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Jean Luc paused a little, and Keenan felt he needed a drink to withstand the rest of the conversation. "*Non, non*. I'm fine. I just need a period of mourning."

At the other side of the line, Richardson replied, "Yes, of course, I entirely understand."



Jean Luc's tone turned into a seductive purr, thickening his French accent. "I knew you would, Mark."

Keenan made a conscious effort to quench the hysterical laughter gathering in his chest. It wasn't all that hard. He took a look at Eric's slumbering form, wishing his pet could be awake to enjoy this as well, and his amusement vanished.

The rest of the paranormals did not manage it, however. Giovanni covered his mouth and sat down, obviously a step away from losing it. Cassandra's shoulders shook in silent laughter. Even Pierre collapsed somewhere on an armchair, not managing to hide his amusement at his brother's act.

Jean Luc ignored them and continued the conversation. "I wish I could see you, but in these circumstances..."

He added another sigh.

Richardson readily agreed. "Of course. You have to be there for your family. Don't worry, my sweet, I'll take care of things on my side."

Jean Luc smirked, satisfied, and Keenan felt the need to clap. "Thank you so much." Jean Luc sighed again into the phone. "I don't know what I would do..." He ended the phrase with a choked sob.

The difference between the voice and the expression on Jean Luc's face freaked Keenan out. If he took away the phrasing and the human's ridiculous fawning, it even scared him a little. Keenan hoped that Jean Luc wasn't the one who'd betrayed them because the Sidhe wouldn't go down easily.

"Please, you should rest," Richardson insisted. "Such a time is obviously very taxing for you, and it's very late."

Jean Luc gasped and incoherently babbled, "Yes, of course. I didn't realize...I'm so sorry. I got so wrapped up in my own problems I didn't think. You must have been sleeping." In spite of everything, Keenan couldn't help but admire the way the Sidhe dealt with Mark Richardson.

Predictably, Richardson turned flustered by Jean Luc's comment. "No, I didn't mean...You know you can call me anytime, my sweet."

Keenan began to get irritated by the human. Jean Luc was a royal Sidhe. Who did this man think he was, addressing him in such an inappropriate manner? He regretted asking Jean Luc to call him. Next time, he'd deal with the human and show him his place.

He made a gesture at Jean Luc to cut the call. The Sidhe nodded and spoke again in the cell phone. "I know, I know. But, nevertheless, you're such a busy man, and I'm being so selfish. I'll just go now and leave you rest. Perhaps we'll continue our chat tomorrow?" he added in a hopeful tone.

"Yes, of course," the Agency head answered. "Whenever you feel like it, Jean Luc. Please go and rest now. Don't worry about a thing."

Jean Luc let out an audible sigh of relief. "Thank you, Mark. I will. Good night."

"Good night, my sweet."

With that, the Sidhe ended the conversation. Keenan was torn between irritation, amusement, and amazement. The other paranormals obviously didn't have the same dilemma because as soon as the phone call ended, bouts of laughter sounded in the room.

"Oh, my God, man, you were so..." Jacob choked.

Elis mock-sighed, collapsing against the werewolf in a fit of laughter. "Ah, Mark..."

Jean Luc grimaced at his companions' reactions. "I should have taken the conversation in the private room."

"I think you shouldn't have phoned in the first place," Keenan said with a fierce scowl. "That man needs to be taught his place. I apologize for making you call."

Jean Luc gave him an obviously surprised look but then smirked. "I'm flattered by your concern, *mon ami*, but you're disastrous at diplomacy, and we both know it." He waved a hand dismissively. "Richardson wants to get in my pants, but it's nothing new. Anyway, he'll help us cover this up."

Giovanni got up from where he'd collapsed. "Now that we have that out the way, how will we go about solving this?"

Keenan wished he could come up with a true answer. He didn't have any idea on how to find out who was the traitor. He needed to test these people.

"Right. There are several answers that could explain the recent events. First of all, the one we were earlier discussing, the existence a traitor *inside* the council. Second, a traitor who has some sort of connection with the council. And the third explanation, which I personally don't believe in, there isn't a traitor and the hunters are working alone. For now, we can't be sure

which the correct option is, but I feel the wisest course of action is ensuring our own people are safe on our own accounts.”

“But that way, we’re divided,” Pierre protested. “If there’s a traitor, it will only give him or her more power over us.”

Jean Luc shook his head. “Keenan is right, *mon frère*. In this context, we can’t trust each other, so there’s no point in trying something together.”

“Wait a minute,” Jacob intervened, looking distinctly uncomfortable. “Are you talking about dissolving the Council?”

Elis frowned. “I believe that’s a little unwise, Keenan.”

Keenan met the werewolf’s eyes. “No, we’re not dissolving the Council. Its sessions will be in a hiatus, if you prefer.”

“It’s the same thing,” Cassandra scoffed.

Jean Luc threw his hands up, having apparently reached his limit. “So what do you propose, Cassandra? There is a high chance one of us here is the one behind the attacks, and any decision we might take will leak to the hunters.”

“I’m not comfortable with allowing the lot of you out of my sight,” Cassandra replied with a scowl.

Keenan smiled to himself. He’d never actually had the intention of dissolving the Council, but the answers to his proposal gave him a clue as to how to approach the problem. He needed to investigate each of the members of the Council, and Cassandra had unknowingly given him an opening.

With a thoughtful frown, he offered Cassandra a neutral reply. “Perhaps you’re right.”

Jean Luc sighed and shook his head, but Keenan knew better than to trust what the Sidhe showed to the world. In truth, they’d all seen what Jean Luc was capable of. Half the time, many of the members of the Council had been too busy laughing to realize the implications. They would eventually realize, however, since they were anything but stupid. Jean Luc would be one of the most likely targets of suspicion because he was so duplicitous. The Sidhe obviously didn’t care about this aspect. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have called when in the same room. Whatever Jean Luc was thinking, though, Keenan knew it wouldn’t hurt to keep an eye on the Sidhe. Jacob rubbed his eyes tiredly, leaning on Elis in what seemed like a subconscious gesture. “At any rate, there’s not much we can do right now. We should

meet again in, say, two days' time? We still have arrangements to make to put our fallen to rest."

Keenan felt a sting in his chest at the werewolf's words. He wasn't big on emotion, but he'd known some of the attack victims for years, or in Ulrike's case, for centuries. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Indeed. Cassandra and I have to speak with our Elders as well and deal with Ulrike's remains."

Cassandra smiled a little, obviously pleased at speaking with the Elders. Keenan could already see she intended to cause trouble, maybe even complain about his behavior or his involvement with Eric. He wanted to throttle her, but it was neither the time nor the place.

Giovanni got up, the leather of his outfit squeaking as he moved. "Well, then, if that's it..."

Rubbing at Jacob's shoulder, Elis looked at Keenan inquiringly and asked, "Actually, no. I have a question for Keenan. What about him?" The were-panther pointed to Eric's unconscious form, and Keenan felt his anger flare.

He clenched his jaw and struggled for control. "Eric is my business. By tomorrow, he won't even remember any of you."

"Are you certain, Keenan?" Pierre insisted, sounding concerned.

"Yes, I'm certain. Like I said, it's only a minor issue."

With that, he took Eric in his arms and exited the room without looking back. Holding his precious cargo safely to his chest, he took off to the apartment where his human lived.

As he flew over the city, he couldn't help but steal looks at his pet. Eric looked so beautiful and peaceful in his induced sleep. Keenan felt a strong surge of resentment to whatever deity was in charge of their fate. Why did the hunters have to appear right now? Why couldn't he have a little time with his pet?

A few days ago, if somebody had told him he'd have these kind of feelings for someone, and a human, no less, he'd have laughed in their face and kicked their ass. He was notoriously a heartless bastard, and all his life, he'd done nothing but use people for his own benefit. True enough, they'd always known what they were getting into. Eric didn't even have that.

If Keenan would've had a little decency, he'd have erased Eric's memory. Despite the fact that they shared a connection, his human didn't

quite realize the world he'd become involved in. At this point, though, after feasting on Eric's nubile body and his sweet blood, after seeing in his soul, Keenan didn't have the strength to let his human go.

It wasn't difficult to find Eric's apartment. He'd seen the location in his lover's mind, and he didn't approve. Seeing it in person made him feel even worse about what he had to do. The streets were dirty, crowded with litter. The lights illuminating the street flickered constantly with an eerie sound, notifying how dangerously close they were to leaving the road in darkness. In a side alley, he could hear a junkie desperately looking for a fix, begging for some drug dealer, offering her body in exchange. Prostitutes hung around every corner, and a gang gathered their forces to attack a rival group.

Keenan swallowed as he looked at the desolate view and at the delicate form in his arms. Eric wasn't built for something like this. He deserved better.

Keenan cursed again, knowing he couldn't do anything about this for now. Invisible to the human eye, he flew to Eric's building, opening the window with a thought. The apartment was just as badly furnished as he'd caught from Eric's mind. And yet, even if it seemed poor, it somehow exuded warmth. There were beautiful paintings, notebooks with unfinished sketches, charcoals on the tables and scattered on the floor. Keenan couldn't help but lose himself for a moment in front of the drawings. They all looked so sad and so touching. The colors blended perfectly, creating a harmony that reached Keenan's very core. Eric was in these paintings, his sadness, his loneliness, his wonderful soul, a flower blossoming in a garbage bin.

Gritting his teeth, Keenan took his eyes off the beautiful drawings. Heading toward the bed, he carefully placed his human down and set about to remove his expensive leather clothing, the clothing Jean Luc left for Eric. He couldn't leave any trace behind. Of course, he would keep in touch with Eric, but for now, it was best if it seemed that Eric's life continued as normal.

He berated himself for the arousal he felt at every patch of creamy skin he uncovered. He didn't have time for this. He had a job to do, and the sun would soon be up.

Hastily, Keenan removed the white pants and vest. He amused himself imagining Eric struggling to get into them, while desperate to come to Keenan's aid. His beautiful, brave pet. So young, so innocent, so perfect.

Keenan shook himself out of the trance. If he stayed longer, he'd ravish Eric in his sleep. He tucked his lover in and placed a kiss on Eric's sweet lips.

Forcing himself to turn away from his beautiful human, Keenan dared another glance at the paintings. He wished he could take one along, to remember Eric's art.

But what was he thinking? He'd come here again soon. Maybe he'd ask his pet to paint something for him, a self-portrait, perhaps. For now, he couldn't risk taking something.

Keenan headed toward the window, deciding to leave before he lost his nerve. He hated the thought of leaving Eric alone in this dangerous place. As he exited, he changed his mind and went back to where Eric slumbered. He allowed his claws to extend and slit a golden lock from his pet's beautiful hair. Then, without looking back, he disappeared into the night.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan buried his head in his hands, feeling his strength drained by the daylight. His duties at the von Klein Tower had extended longer than he'd expected, and he was exhausted. He'd made arrangements for his fallen human staff to be replaced and their families compensated. Finding new people he could trust would be incredibly difficult. Following that, he'd called to private firms to assign the creation of a whole new security system for the Tower and to rebuild what had been destroyed in the explosion.

In truth, the Tower wasn't in bad shape, since its protective layers took the brunt of the explosion. Still, Keenan didn't feel comfortable living in a place with an obvious security problem. At least he'd finally managed to change into his own clothes and was no longer forced to wear Lucca's silk outfit.

Of course, he'd needed to stop by *Extase* and discuss breaking the news to the populace again with Jean Luc. They'd decided they would do it the next day and keep their guards up, to see if the hunters made any more movements.

He'd also spoken with one of the remaining human members of his staff to arrange surveillance for Eric. He couldn't rely on his little acting episode.

For all he knew, his human might still be in danger, and Keenan couldn't stay at Eric's side at all times.

Like right now, for example. Right now, Keenan felt terribly tired. His age allowed him to face the sun better than most vampires. On good days, he could go out to the beach and get a perfect tan if he wanted to. However, this was not one of his good days. The explosion put him into a blood frenzy that he'd never fully sated. Despite the fact that he fed off his pet, and almost killed him in the process, that blood just took the edge off. It helped keep the hunger at bay during most of the night, but now the effect started to wear out.

The only thing that stopped Keenan from going hunting was the image of his pet with his neck torn out by his fangs. Keenan took out the lock of hair, absently twisting it around his fingers. If he went out hunting now, he'd kill someone, and he couldn't go back to Eric like that. His pet would know and would hate him.

Keenan raised his head when he heard steps closing in. Giovanni sauntered into the room, looking as gorgeous as always and as tired as Keenan felt. The incubus gave him a once-over.

"*Amico mio*," Giovanni said, "pardon me for saying this, but you look like shit."

Keenan grunted. "Well, you don't look so hot yourself, Giovanni."

Giovanni waved a hand, dismissing his retort.

"It's different. I'm worried about Lucca. You haven't fed enough."

Keenan groaned. Was he truly that transparent? "It's just been a taxing night, that's all."

The incubus nodded, tapping his lip with his index finger. He came forward to where Keenan sat and flipped his hair, exposing his neck.

Keenan felt his hunger flare inside him, expanding to turn into a fire burning his every cell. He grabbed Giovanni's neck roughly and prepared himself to sink his teeth into it. Then a flash of another offer came to mind, a gift made out of love, not friendship. Eric.

Keenan pushed Giovanni away, and the incubus would have probably broken something had he not been a paranormal. "No, Giovanni. Go, go now, while I can still rein it in."

Giovanni got up, eyes shining with concern.

“That bad, huh?” The incubus sighed and made his way to Keenan. Keenan took a step back as he felt his hunger reach its monstrous fingers toward his friend. “Giovanni...”

Giovanni just smiled.

“Come on, Keenan. We’ve done this before. Stop being such a child.”

Keenan scowled at his friend. “I’ll fucking hurt you.”

Giovanni shrugged.

“So? You won’t kill me. You’d kill a human. And there’s always a chance I might actually enjoy it. Incubus, remember?”

Keenan could no longer restrain himself. With a growl, he pounced his friend and sunk his fangs into Giovanni’s neck. Giovanni didn’t fight him and let him feed. Unsurprisingly, the paranormal’s blood didn’t taste as good as Eric’s. Paranormal blood was often not compatible to a vampire’s feeding needs, and even Giovanni’s, who kept Keenan many times from going on a killing spree, didn’t have the energy and healing properties a human’s blood offered. Perhaps it was for the best, since it gave him the ability to stop when he had enough. Giovanni looked a little dazed and had an ugly mark on his neck, but otherwise, he didn’t look that much worse for the wear.

The incubus sat down, his legs obviously incapable of holding him. Keenan scowled at his friend. “You should have told me to stop.”

Giovanni waved a hand at him. “It’s fine. I’m just a little weak. I’ll be okay in no time.”

“Now is not the time for you to be weak,” Keenan said, feeling guilty for having abused his friendship with Giovanni. “Not with a traitor running around.”

“I wasn’t planning on staying at *Extase* anyway,” the incubus replied. “I’ll go to the penthouse.”

Keenan arched a brow in surprise. He knew that Giovanni and Lucca shared a penthouse, but they never stayed there. Much like Jean Luc, most of the time, they lived at *Extase*. Giovanni must have a real problem with the recent events to change his ways to such an extent, especially when Lucca wasn’t around. He frowned. Would Giovanni even be safe in that penthouse?



“You don’t mind if I come with you, do you?” he said. If necessary, Keenan could protect his friend from danger. “I don’t have a place to sleep, with my Tower being under renovation and all.”

He regretted the question when Giovanni gave him a mischievous grin. “Is that an invitation, *amico mio*?” Giovanni practically purred.

Keenan scowled at his friend and hoisted him up. “You know it’s not.”

Giovanni laughed as he ended up on Keenan’s shoulder, carried like a potato bag. “Ah, yes, the infamous Eric. He is quite cute. You’ll have to tell me more about him soon. In detail, preferably.”

At Keenan’s silence, Giovanni hummed appreciatively. “Nice view, Keenan.” Hands roamed over Keenan’s sides and down to his leather-encased buttocks.

Keenan sighed. He didn’t like biting incubi. They got high from being bit and pretty much lost themselves to their nature. Not that Keenan didn’t appreciate a good fuck, but Giovanni was the closest thing he had to a friend, and Keenan preferred to keep it that way.

“Stop that.” He put Giovanni down, glaring at the incubus.

“But why?” Giovanni whined. “We could have some fun. Eric would never know, I promise.”

Of course he would, Keenan thought. Their connection would make sure of it. Even if that weren’t the case, Keenan would still not sleep with Giovanni. He didn’t get to voice his disagreement, though. All of a sudden, it wasn’t Giovanni on the floor, but Eric. “Come on, Keenan,” Eric purred. “Fuck me. You know you want to.”

Keenan groaned as arousal hit him like a truck. The fresh blood still burned in his veins, and blood tasted best with sex. He pushed his pet down on the floor and pressed his mouth to Eric’s. Eric moaned wantonly, arching his back and leaning into Keenan’s touch. The scene was familiar, almost like the time in the private chambers of the club, and yet, somehow, it felt different. Empty.

Keenan blinked and pushed himself away from Eric. “Shift back, Giovanni.”

Fake-Eric smirked. “Why? You want this. Why are you afraid to take it? What do you care about the feelings of a human?”

Giovanni his friend would have cared about Keenan’s connection with Eric and would have never attempted to seduce him. But Eric’s feelings

didn't make much difference for Giovanni the incubus. Keenan hated himself for it, but he knew what he needed to do. With supernatural speed, he jumped Giovanni and pressed his hand to his forehead. The incubus let out a scream and then went limp. Blond hair turned purple again, and fake Eric became Giovanni once more.

Keenan hoisted his friend in his arms again and made his way to his Lexus. Starting the car, he headed toward Giovanni's apartment. He hoped this wouldn't be a problem because he now risked losing one of his few allies.

## Chapter Ten

Eric opened his eyes to a strange buzzing in his head. His confused gaze met the familiar sight of his rundown apartment, rented with money from his meager earnings at the coffee shop.

Eric's eyes widened. He got up from his bed, looking around in confusion. Everything was just as he'd left it—the unfinished canvases, the paints and charcoals, the old furniture and curtains.

Had it all been a dream, just a fantasy? It couldn't be. He distinctly remembered Keenan—his touch, his taste.

Eric took a deep breath. He knew of one way to make sure. Closing his eyes, he focused on his connection to Keenan. He imagined his vampire in his head and called out, "*Keenan! Keenan!*"

There was no answer to his call. Tears started flowing on his cheeks as he murmured out loud, in a broken voice, "*Keenan...Keenan...*"

Of course it had been all an illusion. He knew better than to believe otherwise. Nobody could be that perfect. And even if such a person existed, why would he give attention to Eric? He'd finally lost his mind.

"*Pet?*"

A well-known voice rang out in his mind, a little raspy and distant. Eric blinked in disbelief, not daring to hope. "*Keenan?*" he asked tentatively.

"*Yes, pet, what's wrong? Did something happen?*"

Eric's desperate sobs turned into tears of relief. Keenan was real. Why had Keenan not answered to his first call, though? Did Keenan want to block him again?

Keenan laughed. "*Eric, I was just resting. Even vampires sleep, you know.*"

Wiping at his eyes, Eric blushed, just now taking in the daylight fighting its way through the curtains. Glancing at the clock, he made a face. One thirty in the afternoon. Of course Keenan would be asleep.

*"I'm sorry," he sheepishly replied. "I just panicked."*

*"Don't worry about it, pet," Keenan answered. "You can wake me up anytime."*

Keenan's voice made Eric shiver, swamping him in an incredible mental caress. Eric gulped, feeling arousal starting to heat his blood. No, he couldn't think such thoughts. Keenan needed his rest, to regain his strength. Berating himself for his wantonness, he addressed Keenan again. *"I won't wake you again, promise. Just sleep, okay? We'll talk again when you wake up."*

Keenan mentally chuckled. *"Of course, pet. As you command."* His voice turned soft and gentle. *"I'll come see you as soon as I can, all right?"*

Eric made a face. He didn't like the sound of that. Obviously, this separation would last a while.

Keenan sighed. *"I'm sorry about this, Eric. I swear, if it was safe, I would have kept you by my side. But with the hunters around, I can't risk it." And you're a distraction.*

Eric blinked as Keenan's last thought ghosted in his mind, obviously without Keenan's permission. He didn't know whether to feel offended, hurt, or flattered. After all, it meant that Keenan wanted him enough to be distracted.

*"Oh, I do, pet. I want you more than you can imagine," Keenan purred.*

Eric whimpered as the need in his body escalated to unbearable levels. *"Keenan..."*

Keenan's low growl echoed in his head. *"Pet, you drive me crazy, you know that?"*

Just like that, Eric found himself engulfed in a phantom embrace. He let out a sound of surprise when the presence pushed him down forcibly, ravishing his mouth with the undeniable passion that was Keenan's trademark. Eric let go of all his fears and doubts, surrendering himself as the invisible presence made love to his mouth.

Loving hands caressed his hair as ghostly kisses passed over his temples. An invisible tongue passed over his neck, teasing his collarbone. Phantom fingers played with his nipples, twisting them, until they obediently became erect. Eric threw his head back, collapsing on the bed at the ministrations of his invisible lover.

*"Keenan... Oh, Keenan..."*

In answer, the fingers moved from his chest to his nether regions. Eric fisted the sheets as a hand deftly massaged his erect cock, the other playing with his testicles, rolling them around. It was a lesson in torture—sweet torture—giving him what he wanted, but not quite.

He felt Keenan's husky laughter rather than hearing it.

*"Demanding, aren't you, my pet?"* his vampire whispered.

Eric gasped as fingers penetrated him from behind. Keenan's fingers unerringly found his pleasure spot, and Eric thought he was in heaven and life couldn't get any better than this.

He found that it could indeed get better. Impossibly, his invisible lover took Eric's shaft in his mouth. Keenan's phantom form sucked on Eric's cock, deep-throating him expertly. Eric screamed as the fingers fucking him stroked his prostate, the dual sensations driving him crazy.

"Keenan!"

With a hoarse shout, Eric came, his vision blurring at the incredible pleasure. As he opened his eyes, he observed that he could even see Keenan now. His vampire smiled smugly, a fire of possessiveness burning in his black eyes.

Eric extended his hand, only to have it pass through the image. He gasped, but Keenan just chuckled and gently reprimanded him. "Pet, don't do that! It's disturbing!"

Eric looked at his hand and then at Keenan's image, not understanding.

"It's called astral projection, pet. It's one of the many perks that come with being a vampire. With training, you might be able to do it as well." Keenan smiled fondly. "You're so beautiful, you know that?"

Eric blushed and looked down. He didn't know how someone like Keenan could consider him beautiful.

"Tsk, ts. Don't contradict me, Eric!" Keenan said, caressing his hair lovingly. "I have to go now, it's quite late."

Eric stared at his lover's image, realizing that Keenan overextended the use of his powers in giving him pleasure. An overwhelming feeling of guilt washed over him. How could he have been so selfish?

Keenan chuckled, his phantom form hugging Eric to his chest. It felt so much like the real Keenan that Eric was confused and almost forgot about his distress.

“Don’t worry, pet. There are certain benefits that come with age in the case of vampires.”

Eric opened his mouth to argue, but Keenan efficiently shushed him. Placing a final kiss on Eric’s mouth, his lover smiled.

“None of that now. Trust me, okay?”

Love swelled in Eric’s heart, and he nodded at Keenan. “All right,” he whispered. “But, please, be careful!”

Keenan nodded, his countenance turning solemn. “I will. If anything happens, anything at all, don’t hesitate to call me,” Keenan earnestly said. “Promise me, pet. Promise you’ll call me in case you feel anything is wrong.”

Eric blinked back tears at the care he felt behind those words. “I promise. Speak again tonight?”

Satisfied, Keenan kissed him on the forehead. “Tonight. I love you, pet.”

Eric gave Keenan a small, tremulous smile. “I love you, too.”

His vampire’s image blurred, and the connection closed, leaving Eric feeling alone and empty inside. Still, he knew Keenan would be at his side soon. He would be patient.

Eric sighed, urging himself to stop staring dumbly at the place Keenan’s image had been. He already missed his lover so much. What could he do to kill some time until tonight?

Glancing around the room, he realized the stupidity of his own question. Of course! Hastily scuttling off the bed, Eric rushed into the shower. He was late for school.

\* \* \* \*

Eric ran as quickly as he could on the stairs of the academy. He’d been lucky in catching the subway, but he was nevertheless indecently late. He couldn’t be late if he wanted to conserve his scholarship.

Eric didn’t know how much time had passed since he’d met Keenan in the park. He’d missed school a lot already, and his situation looked glum. He wished he’d taken a minute to look at a newspaper or ask for the date, but it had slipped his mind.

Ironically, he couldn't bring himself to be sorry about skipping classes either. Even if half the time he'd blacked out, even if he'd been in constant turmoil, this was the first time he felt alive.

Nevertheless, he couldn't help but feel relieved when he finally saw the door to the amphitheater where his classes were held. He took a deep breath, composing himself, knocked then pushed the door open.

Eric gulped as he was met with the stares of the whole class of students and the stern look of the professor. Mr. Nelson arched a dark brow at him. "You're late, Mr. McAllister. The class started at three o'clock."

Eric managed to sputter out, "I-I know. I-I'm sorry. I..." He swallowed around the knot in his throat. What could he say? Stuck in traffic? Didn't hear the alarm? "I was sick."

The professor gave him an unreadable look. "Very well, Mr. McAllister. But please, don't let it happen again. Take your seat now."

Eric couldn't help but sigh in relief at being forgiven. "Thank you, sir." He quickly moved to the end of the room, almost tripping in his haste.

He ignored the hushed whispers and giggles from the students. He was used to them anyway. He chose an isolated spot, sat down, and took out his notebooks. A smile ghosted across his face. Who cared about their giggling? He had his art and now Keenan. It was enough.

\* \* \* \*

The class hummed with the noise of students gathering their notebooks, backpacks, and pencils. As always, Eric took his time in putting away his things. He liked to wait for everybody to leave so he didn't touch anybody by accident.

It was the disadvantage of going to such a famous university like the School of Visual Arts. There were a lot of students around, and inadvertently, Eric sometimes felt overwhelmed by their presence. The coffee shop where he'd worked had been the same. Eric schooled himself to ignore the mental pressure. It was inevitable when you were a psychic and living in a city like New York.

Many times, he thought that his dreams and actions were pointless and stupid. Going to college like a normal person seemed impossible. However,

he'd needed a reason to live, something to look forward to. Art had always been his salvation, even when he'd been a child.

Eric shook himself. No, he wouldn't think at that. Dwelling on the past never helped anyone. He had Keenan now, and everything would be all right. Nobody would be able to hurt him ever again.

Maybe he could finish his studies, get a degree in Fine Arts, like he'd always wanted. Then he could become a painter, a famous artist. Keenan would be proud of him, and he would finally be worthy of his vampire.

"Are you all right, Mr. McAllister?"

Eric blinked as Mr. Nelson's voice startled him from his reverie. He gave a little awkward laugh. "Yes, yes, I'm just fine. I'm sorry. I was just thinking."

Mr. Nelson smiled. His gray eyes looked amused, and Eric couldn't help but smile back. He liked the modern art professor, although God only knew the man wasn't the most pleasant or likable person in the world. Mr. Nelson never treated Eric differently because he tended to keep away from others or because of his financial status. In fact, it was Matthew Nelson who helped Eric in being admitted at the prestigious school. Eric didn't have much educational background. He'd been "homeschooled" as a child and went to night classes for high school. If not for Nelson's appreciation of his art, Eric's dream of attending the SVA would never have come true.

Eric guessed that, if he didn't have this psychic power, he might have even been attracted to the professor. He'd fashioned himself an armor that allowed him to live day-to-day life, to fight for his dream and survive, even if it meant forever condemning himself to a lonely existence.

He had never managed to find out Mr. Nelson's age, but the man was handsome in a distinguished way. His entire being screamed aristocrat, and he had beautiful hands that sometimes would create masterpieces. His gray eyes could freeze a student on the spot, but Eric knew that there was more to the man than coldness. He also knew that he could never feel anything for him, except admiration for a fellow artist and overwhelming gratitude for his help.

Noticing that the other students had already vacated the amphitheater, Eric started to gather his belongings as well. Not one to be impolite, he offered a shy smile to his professor.

"I'll just go now. Thank you for your concern."



The professor gave him an absent nod. "Before you go, I have a question for you, Mr. McAllister."

Eric froze in his tracks, his mind already racing. What would Mr. Nelson ask? What if he inquired about Eric's absence? What was Eric going to say?

He turned, reluctantly meeting the eyes of the professor.

"Y-yes?"

The man arched a brow, and Eric could feel the professor's confusion at Eric's behavior.

"In fact, it was rather an advice, rather than a question. I assume you know about the Exposition organized by the Faculty next week?"

Eric nodded. Of course he knew. Everybody at SVA knew about it. They were all very excited because lots of famous artists would be there.

"Well, I can arrange for you to have a slot, if you've finished the piece you showed me last time."

Eric's eyes widened. Expositions of the SVA were quite a common occurrence. He himself participated in the previous year, even if he'd been just starting his studies. However, this particular exposition would be nominally off limits for young students such as himself. MFA students and professors presented their works because undergraduates hadn't acquired the necessary skills yet. Since many artists and famous critics were expected, it was a chance of launching their careers.

"R-really? But, but...why? I mean, I'm not good enough. I'll mess things up, I—"

Mr. Nelson raised a hand, effectively stopping his blabbering. "See, that's the sign that you're a promising artist. The fact that you know you need to do more work. However, your last piece is very good, and I believe it deserves to be displayed, if you've made the final touches I recommended."

Eric searched his memory for the painting Mr. Nelson was talking about. It was one of his best works, a depiction of sunrise in one of the poorer regions of New York. He finished it just the day before meeting Keenan.

"Y-yes, I did. I mean, I finished it."

Eric's professor chuckled at his incoherence. "That's good then. I'd like to see it tomorrow. After that, I can make the final arrangements if that's all right with you?"

Eric nodded, feeling a little numb. "That would be fine, sir."

Mr. Nelson just smiled, and Eric stared dumbly at him, waiting for the man to say anything, something.

"Well, go on then! You're late for your next class."

Eric snapped out of his trance and looked at the clock on the wall. "Shit!" He covered his mouth with his hand and gave the professor an apologetic look.

"I apologize, Mr. Nelson. I...Thank you. I'm very grateful for this chance."

The art professor acknowledged his thanks with a nod, and Eric took off down the stairs. He couldn't wait to tell Keenan about his accomplishment.

\* \* \* \*

The pencil easily flew on paper, artful strokes sketching graceful and aristocratic features. Eric sat on a bench in SVA's courtyard, doing his best to ignore the sea of students roaming around. At any rate, they weren't by far as many as earlier in the day or at lunch, and Eric learned to ignore the psychic irritation of being around so many people. Right now, he even found it easy. He was too busy thinking of his vampire to even give the students a modicum of his attention.

Throughout the day, even at the courses, he found that he couldn't manage to fully concentrate. His attention span drastically dwindled, and in a minute, he found himself daydreaming about midnight black eyes and flowing dark hair, about a husky voice whispering in his ear and sharp fangs nipping at his throat. He felt thankful for the cold weather because he still bore the marks of said fangs and he had been able to cover it up with a turtleneck. Sometimes, he found himself touching the spot and a pang of arousal would shoot through him. He had to force himself not to do it again because a hard-on at school was not a comfortable thing. Even now, in the courtyard of the SVA, he couldn't help but dream about Keenan. Keenan von Klein.

The pencil stopped sketching as Eric suddenly realized something. Keenan von Klein was the name of one of the most powerful New York magnates. No, it couldn't be.

Eric took a deep breath, urging himself to think logically. The von Klein Corporation held many businesses in the United States and abroad. Even Eric knew about it, and that meant a lot, since by definition, he could never keep up with all the facets of the world around him.

Of course, it made sense that Keenan was rich. It stood to reason that he'd accumulated wealth in the many years of his life. Plus, Eric had seen the inside of Keenan's home so he already knew that Keenan had money. He'd been too wrapped up in his new romance to realize this when Jean Luc mentioned Keenan's full name.

Eric made an effort to recall Jean Luc's last name. Jean Luc D'Argent, Keenan said. He also owned a large corporation with numerous branches in Europe, particularly in France. Eric had missed the connection between their names and their correspondents in his own human reality. It seemed so clear to him now. The two were one of the few firms that managed to keep their business in the aftermath of the financial crisis that hit the United States. Eric always wondered about the reason behind that amazing feat, but now, he understood.

Eric groaned upon realizing the contrast between his own position and Keenan's. He was just a poor art student, barely making a living on a scholarship and a meager salary from a coffee shop, which he didn't even have anymore, since he had been fired. Keenan was a corporate magnate with businesses all over Europe and Asia. How could he ever compare? Surely, that didn't mean that he was just a toy for an eccentric vampire.

Eric cursed himself, realizing the stupidity of his own doubts. Keenan wouldn't care either about his lack of money or the fact that he didn't have a job. Hell, Keenan accepted him in spite of his psychological problems. Keenan loved him, and Eric needed to stop doubting that love. Smiling to himself, Eric resumed his previous activity. On impulse, he'd taken out his sketchbook and was now in the process of immortalizing Keenan's face. He analyzed the sketch critically. The quality of the materials used didn't do the model justice. He'd have to work on a better one on a real canvas soon.

"Hey there, beautiful." A sudden voice startled Eric, and his pencil slipped, almost ruining Eric's entire progress at the Keenan sketch. Eric

cursed himself for being so lost in his Keenan dreams that he hadn't heard Scott Richardson approach. Richardson also studied at the SVA, and for some reason, he'd set a goal in getting into Eric's pants, something which, of course, would never happen. Eric had done his best to try to convey that, but he'd achieved nothing. He'd just decided to avoid the other student. Unfortunately, he hadn't been sufficiently focused on Scott's existence to do it today.

Sighing, Eric focused on Keenan's nose on paper and ignored the idiot. If Eric tried to make his escape, Richardson would just follow him. At least here, there were people around.

"You missed class today. Where did you go?"

Eric shuddered in revulsion as Scott sat down next to him on the bench. He could feel waves of lust radiating from Scott, and the idea that the other student knew that he missed class scared him. Taking a deep breath, he focused on strengthening his mental shields, to drown Scott out. Unfortunately, Scott must have taken this as a sign of his agreement to be touched because the next thing Eric knew, the other student put his hand on Eric's shoulder to pull him closer.

Eric jumped up as if he'd been burned, holding his sketchbook to his chest like a shield.

"Hey, don't do that!"

Scott tilted his head, and his mouth split into a predatory grin. "Oh, come on, beautiful! Why not? You know you want me."

Eric tensed at the forward statement. For some reason, Scott hadn't been so daring in the past. Perhaps he just never had the chance, since Eric deftly avoided him, but still, it didn't feel normal.

Eric's nervousness increased. Picking up his backpack, he turned to leave, not answering the other student. Obviously, Scott had other thoughts. He stopped Eric's retreat with a heavy hand on his shoulder.

Eric found himself pulled against Scott's chest. "Hey now, don't run away like that," Scott whispered in his ear. "Why don't you come over to my place? We can play a little. It will be fun, I promise."

Eric broke away from Scott's hold. Struggling to hide his mind's reaction to Scott's repulsive touch, he scowled at the other student. "Thank you, but I'm not interested," he answered in an arctic tone.

Scott glared at him, all pretense of niceness forsaken. “Oh, it’s like that, then?” His voice dripped with disdain, and he glared at Eric. “Do you only like older men? Or you just spread your legs when there’s some sort of gain involved? Tell me, how much for full service?”

Eric blinked in confusion at Scott. What was the idiot talking about? He’d only slept with Keenan. Granted, he may fall in the category older since, despite his appearance, Eric suspected Keenan might be disturbingly old. He made a mental note to ask Keenan about his age.

At any rate, Scott couldn’t know about Keenan. His surprise grew to stupor when Scott took out his wallet and started counting bills. “Fifty bucks enough? One hundred, maybe?”

Eric stood in shocked silence, just looking at the other student, trying to understand his words. Could this idiot seriously be trying to buy him? Eric felt a surge of anger flow to him, and a rock flew at Scott, hitting him in the back. Eric’s eyes widened in shock as he noticed other objects around them shaking. Holy shit! He couldn’t do this at school. *Think happy thoughts, Eric, think happy thoughts!*

Fortunately, the stone came from somewhere behind Scott and the other student was too busy scrutinizing that direction angrily to look around him.

“Who threw that? Who the hell threw that?”

Eric thanked God for the fact that most other students seemed to have chosen a different spot for whatever they spent their break on. Those witnessing the scene didn’t realize what was happening or were too busy staring at Scott’s sudden rampage.

The fear of discovery put a damper on Eric’s anger. He managed to control the flow of energy, and before Scott turned his attention again to him, he managed to be reasonably calm.

“Hey, did you see who threw that, McAllister?”

Eric just shook his head. Scott angrily looked behind himself for a second time. Before Scott could turn his attention toward him once more, Eric turned around and began walking.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t silent enough in his retreat, and Scott stopped him yet again.

“Oh, don’t leave yet, beautiful...”

Eric suppressed the surge of annoyance threatening to surface again.

“Look, I have to go now. I have class.”

“But we still have business to discuss. Come on, tell me, how much?”

Eric turned to glower at the other student again. “I’ll just say this once. I’m not sleeping with you, no matter how much money you have. Now get out of my way!”

Scott returned his glare. “So it’s only professors you fuck, is that it?”

Eric gaped at Scott’s reply. Professors? What the hell was he talking about?

Scott laughed. “That shut you up, didn’t it? Yes, we know all about how you let Nelson fuck you to get in the exposition.”

Understanding dawned on Eric. The idiot thought he used sex to get into the exposition. “I don’t need sex to convince Mr. Nelson of the value of my art,” he sneered at Scott. “Just because your own work is worthless, doesn’t mean the same thing applies to the work of others.”

“Arrogant little slut,” Scott snarled. “I’ll fucking kill you.”

Eric took a step back in the face of Scott’s murderous rage. If he used his powers, he would have no problem in dealing with the idiotic pervert. Still, to do such a thing at school would be insane. Luckily, Eric wasn’t forced to such extreme measures. A voice behind him interrupted Scott’s show of anger. “Is there a problem here?”

Eric turned and hid his surprise upon seeing Mr. Nelson behind him. Scott lowered his fist and said between gritted teeth, “No problem, sir. It was just a small dispute.” He let out a little laugh, and an evil glint appeared in his eyes. “A lovers’ spat, if you will.”

Mr. Nelson didn’t even grace Scott with a look. Instead, he looked at Eric. “Oh? Is that so?”

Eric felt his face flame with embarrassment. He hated the fact that the idiot made him lose face in front of a man he respected. “No, Mr. Nelson. It is most definitely *not* a lovers’ spat.”

The professor nodded, apparently satisfied. “Well then, at any rate, I needed to speak to you about something, Mr. McAllister.”

Eric ignored the snicker coming from Scott’s direction because of the sudden unease in his gut. What could Mr. Nelson want to discuss with him? A flash of Scott’s accusation passed through Eric’s mind. Could it be that the professor expected that from him? Sexual favors? No, that couldn’t be it.

Nelson turned around and signaled for Eric to follow. “If you’d come with me, please, Mr. McAllister.”

Eric nodded and followed the professor obediently. Nelson led them to his office, shut the door, and gestured for Eric to sit down. Eric paled when he heard the distinctive sound of a key turning in the lock.

He struggled to control himself, but his hands started trembling. Mr. Nelson wouldn't do anything ethically incorrect.

The professor smiled. "Okay, then, now that I've ensured some privacy, we can get to the matter at hand."

That didn't comfort Eric much. He needed to say something fast, to let Mr. Nelson know his attentions were not wanted. "Mr. Nelson, sir, if I may...I really respect you, but I don't like you that way. I'm already involved."

Nelson stared at him for a second and frowned. "Is that what you think this is about?" His gray eyes analyzed Eric critically. "I would think you knew me better than to assume such a thing."

Eric lowered his gaze, feeling uncomfortable and stupid. He'd insulted his professor, a man who was only worthy of his respect. "I-I'm sorry. I just...Scott said...and it makes sense because I'm not good enough for..."

He didn't realize that he was crying until Mr. Nelson came forward to him and gently brushed his tears away. "It's all right. Don't cry, Eric. You are good enough. Your art is splendid. But that is not why I called you here."

The professor handed Eric a tissue and waited while Eric blew his nose. Eric gave his professor an apologetic look and said, "What did you want to discuss then?"

Mr. Nelson sat down on his chair, looking out the window. "I received the most interesting phone call today, Eric. Do you know who it was from?"

Eric shook his head, although it was obviously a rhetorical question. "Well, the name isn't that important," Nelson continued. "But this gentleman who called me works for an acquaintance of yours. Does the name von Klein ring a bell?"

Eric felt a little light-headed. Von Klein. Keenan. Oh, God! He struggled to answer and felt proud when his voice didn't shake. "Of course, sir. Who hasn't heard of the von Klein corporation?"

His professor chuckled, but the sound held no amusement. "Ah, yes! What an appropriate answer. Who hasn't indeed?"

Eric bit his lip, wondering at the strangeness of the situation. Just minutes ago, he'd acknowledged Keenan's public identity and been shaken by it. Now his professor mentioned it. Why? What was Mr. Nelson's purpose?

Mr. Nelson stopped laughing and met Eric's gaze with his unfathomable gray eyes. "I will be straightforward on this, Eric. The phone call I mentioned instructed me to take good care of you at all times, or else Mr. von Klein would be very angry."

Nelson sighed, suddenly looking very tired. "I understand that a young man such as yourself might feel attracted by the glamour of Mr. von Klein's billions. But please, I urge you to think things through. Do not throw your life away."

Eric struggled to understand Mr. Nelson's words. He realized that Keenan had, for some reason, asked his professor to take care of him. The art professor now assumed the same thing Scott mentioned before, that he sold himself for profit.

Eric bit his lip until he tasted blood in his mouth. His power threatened to come out, and unlike in Scott's case, he wouldn't like to hurt Mr. Nelson. But he'd have words with Keenan, oh, yes.

In the meantime, he needed to convince Mr. Nelson that he wasn't a whore. "Mr. Nelson, it's not like that. I assure you."

The professor leaned forward, his expression turning earnest. "I'm not judging you, Eric. I know you have financial difficulties. Look, by rights, I shouldn't be saying this, but I am a well-off man even without this job. So, if you need money, I can always lend you some, no strings attached. You don't have to tie yourself to a man like von Klein."

Eric studied his professor and saw just honest concern in his eyes. Lowering his shields, he felt around the man and caught the same emotion—worry over his well-being. He couldn't be angry, not when faced with this.

"Mr. Nelson, listen, I do appreciate your concern, but Keenan and I, we have a special relationship."

Nelson arched a brow, his expression turning stony. "Oh? A special relationship?"

Eric almost winced at the sarcasm in the professor's tone. "I know you don't believe this, but I am not with him for money. In fact, I did not realize he was so rich when we first met."



When they'd met, he'd been too busy being terrified for his life. Naturally, Eric didn't tell his professor this. He didn't think Mr. Nelson would like hearing such a thing.

Nelson made a face. "So you *are* sleeping with him then?"

Eric blushed and nodded. He mentally struggled to find anything else that could convince his professor of his truthfulness but couldn't come up with any solution.

"I hope, for your own sake, that you are telling the truth." Nelson sighed and paused, as if in silent debate. "I know this is intrusive, but physically, is he at least not repellent?"

Eric tilted his head, considering the question. Keenan kept his physical identity a secret from the public eye. Even so, there couldn't be any harm in showing his professor, right? He rummaged through the pack and got out his sketchbook. Pointing to the sketch, he said, "This is him."

He instantly regretted doing so. Nelson's eyes widened as he stared at the sketch in disbelief. "Is this some sort of joke, Eric? Surely not!"

Eric debated inventing that it was an artistic depiction of Keenan's soul. Nelson would see right through it. So he nodded and said, "I know, young, huh? I think he's the son or something like that." It was a plausible lie and probably how Keenan made his way through bureaucracy anyway.

Nelson analyzed the sketch thoughtfully. After a few seconds, he returned the sketch to Eric. "Well then, with this in mind, I think your story of a real relationship is more believable. Although I still don't understand his reasons for asking me to take care of you."

Eric suppressed a sigh of relief at the realization that his professor no longer believed he spread his legs for money. "He worries a lot," he replied, keeping in mind that he still needed to have a talk with Keenan.

Nelson played with a pencil, twisting it around his fingers. "That makes sense. I would do if you were my lover." He rubbed his temples, seemingly in thought.

"At any rate, I will keep this under wraps like I've been asked. I'm making you my assistant starting today. That way it will be easier to keep an eye on you."

Eric winced, thinking of the rumors already flying around. "You know, Mr. Nelson, people will say things about us."

Nelson just shrugged. “Who cares? I needed an assistant anyway, might as well get one who actually has talent. So I’m multitasking here.”

Eric stared at his professor in disbelief. Nelson actually made a joke. Eric was too shocked to even laugh.

Mr. Nelson looked at the clock and said, “Well then, I do believe you have another class.”

Eric automatically nodded, just registering the professor’s words after a second. He looked at the clock as well and jumped up. “Oh, shit! I’m late.”

Mr. Nelson laughed at Eric’s behavior. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Mr. McAllister.”

Already packing his sketchbook into his backpack, Eric spared a moment to offer his professor a smile. “Yes, sir. Thank you very much.” And then he ran out of Mr. Nelson’s office, to his next course.

## Chapter Eleven

Keenan awoke in a room he didn't recognize as his own. He was confused for a moment, but then a memory flashed through his head. Eric. His pet had woken him up in a frenzied panic, and Keenan had used his astral powers to calm him. He grinned, thinking of the way he pleased Eric's body. Sometimes, the perks of being a vampire really outweighed the disadvantages.

His good humor died when he remembered the events from the previous morning. Giovanni, his friend, put an incubus spell on him. Giovanni toyed with his mind, and Keenan had been close to cheating on Eric.

Keenan took a deep breath, struggling to control his annoyance. It was his own fault, for biting Giovanni. In the end, Giovanni was an incubus, and Keenan should have known better than to take Giovanni up on his generous offer.

Taking this into account, he'd decided yesterday to crash at *Extase* instead of going to the demon's penthouse. On a normal day, Keenan didn't consider Jean Luc anywhere near as trustworthy as Giovanni. Given the circumstances, though, sleeping at the incubus's place just would have made things worse. He'd also brought Giovanni along, since he still didn't think the penthouse could protect his friend in case of a hunter attack.

Getting up from the bed, Keenan grimaced. He would be forced to wear the same clothes as the day before, and he didn't feel very pleased about the fact. *Mental note—find a more permanent residence and move wardrobe there.*

Luckily, leather was known for its resilience, so the clothes from the day before seemed to be in a reasonable enough state. The only thing that bothered him is that they still maintained a tinge of Giovanni's incubus scent. He would have to go change tonight if he went and saw Eric.

Of course, even that particular aspect would be troublesome. He couldn't be sure if Eric was under surveillance or not. Even with his vampire powers, he might be seen going to Eric's apartment. A very slim one, but it existed nevertheless.

He checked the connection between him and Eric, and his pet perked up at the other side. "*Keenan? You're awake?*"

"*Yes, pet, obviously,*" Keenan said, with a smile in his voice.

At the other side of the connection, Eric paused, and Keenan felt something troubled his human. He scowled, wondering what could have upset Eric so. "*Pet, what's wrong?*"

He felt Eric hesitate for a second, then the human blurted out, "*Why did you tell my professor to keep me under supervision?*"

Keenan blanched at the sudden annoyance in Eric's voice. "*I only arranged some surveillance for your security, pet, to keep you safe,*" he explained, cursing himself and his luck. He hadn't been able to discuss anything with Eric, and now, it could blow up in his face.

"*My security.*" Eric mentally scoffed. "*Mr. Nelson thinks I'm your whore now.*"

Keenan made a face at Eric's hurt voice. "*I'm sorry, pet. It wasn't my intention.*" Keenan paused, registering Eric's words. "*So Mr. Nelson's opinion matters to you?*"

"*Of course,*" Eric answered irritably. "*He's my professor, and I respect him a lot. He's helped me, too, Keenan. Oh, I forgot to tell you...*" As was his habit, Eric shifted from being annoyed to being enthusiastic in mere seconds. "*Mr. Nelson arranged for me to participate in the exposition organized by the SVA in a few weeks. Isn't that just great?*"

Keenan scowled, feeling a sudden surge of antipathy toward the art professor. He knew who Mr. Nelson was, of course, since he'd looked into the best possible person that could take care of Eric at school. Forbidding Eric to go to the SVA wouldn't be an option. Despite the fact that Eric had normal surveillance, it would be nevertheless tricky for them to act on a threat. That would disclose the fact that Keenan still maintained an interest in Eric. Even so, Keenan began to feel sorry he'd chosen Matthew Nelson for the task of caring for his pet. After all, the human professor wasn't at all bad looking. "*What else did Mr. Nelson do?*" he mentally asked Eric, unable to keep his voice neutral.

"He made me his assistant," Eric answered, suspicion in his voice. "Why aren't you happy for me, Keenan?"

Eric's voice held a hurt undertone, and Keenan rubbed his eyes. Eric was so fragile, and the slightest thing could cause him pain. If he lied, Eric would catch on to his real thought. Sometimes, it sucked that Eric was a psychic, and the strength of their connection also had disadvantages.

In the end, Keenan decided to choose truth. *"I'm just jealous, pet. He's not a bad looking guy and knowing he's around you when I can't be..."*

Eric didn't say anything, but Keenan could feel a sudden surge of happiness through the connection. *"Keenan? When can you be with me?"*

Keenan grinned to himself, noting that, indeed, truth was the best way with Eric. *"I'll try in a few hours, pet."*

Eric let out a mental sigh. *"I'll wait for you. Tonight and the next, until you come. And then I'll show you my paintings..."* Eric laughed happily at the other side of the connection.

Keenan smiled. *"I saw them, pet, when I was at your place. They're very beautiful, like you."*

He felt Eric's shrug. *"Not those, I'm working on something new."* Eric paused, as if considering something. *"I'll just show it to you when you come over. Or maybe another day. It's not done anyway."*

Keenan sent a mental caress over the connection. *"Finish it, pet,"* he growled. *"You won't have time for painting once I get there."*

He felt Eric's arousal, but unfortunately, he didn't have time for a round of astral lovemaking. *"Goodbye, pet. See you tonight."*

*"Goodbye, Keenan. I'll be waiting."*

The connection faded, and Keenan knew that, for all his good intentions, he couldn't *not* go to Eric's apartment. It would probably be most unwise, taking into account the present circumstances, but what other choice did he have? Abstinence didn't sound good at all.

Suddenly feeling irritated, Keenan exited his room at *Extase*. He made his way to Jean Luc's office. They needed to deal with this traitor problem and fast. If not, his poor cock would suffer the consequences.

He heard voices coming from the Sidhe's office, and his vampire hearing identified them as belonging to Pierre and Jean Luc. He caught several random phrases and arched a brow in amusement. Pierre was full of surprises. He didn't bother to stay and eavesdrop further, since, most likely,

Jean Luc already sensed him. The Sidhe had an uncanny talent of controlling everything that moved in his club.

Keenan knocked at the door, more out of manners than because he actually needed to announce himself. "Come in, Keenan," Jean Luc said, confirming his previous guess.

Keenan opened the door and sauntered in. "Good day, Jean Luc, Pierre. Did I interrupt anything?"

"Actually, we were discussing a Sidhe issue, but your expertise might be of some assistance," Pierre replied with a frown.

Jean Luc lit a long cigarette and shrugged. "And it is most likely that you already heard half of it, *non, mon ami*?"

Keenan nodded and grinned. "Yes, indeed. Congratulations, Pierre. I didn't know you were getting married. Who's the lucky girl?"

Pierre smiled gently. "Her name is Claire. She's such a magnificent creature," he said with dreamy eyes. His smile vanished, and he sighed deeply. "Nevertheless, I fear for her safety. If your guess is correct and this person, whoever he or she is, is targeting Council members and their loved ones, perhaps it would be best to postpone the wedding."

Pierre turned an eager look toward him.

"What do you think, Keenan?"

It occurred to Keenan that this conversation seemed extremely odd. Not because of the subject matter, but because he'd slept with Pierre. Now the two Sidhe turned to him for advice on Pierre's wedding. It made him feel just a little weird.

Then again, maybe it would be best not to make a too well-defined point. He still needed to find out the identity of the traitor, so just in case, it was better to be vague. "Perhaps. It depends on your urgency, of course." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. "Anything you'd like to share with the club? You making Jean Luc here an uncle anytime soon?"

Pierre blushed, and Keenan congratulated himself for efficiently drawing attention from himself. "I don't know, it's a possibility."

Jean Luc grimaced, extinguishing his cigarette in the ashtray on the antique table. "Then why are we discussing this anyway? The wedding goes on as planned."

In the meantime, Keenan was half focused on Jean Luc's voice and half on a new presence, closing in from the hallway.

He turned toward the door in time to see a familiar figure step through it. “What wedding?” Lucca asked.

Keenan smiled at the extravagant incubus. He was more than pleased to see Lucca. It meant that things must have gone well with the demons. Lucca would also be able to help him with Giovanni if need be.

He extended a hand in greeting and opened his mouth to greet his friend. When he met Lucca’s honey-brown gaze, the incubus’ eyes chilled him to the bone. What the fuck?

Lucca ignored him entirely and smiled at the two Sidhe.

“Hello, Pierre, Jean Luc. What’s this I hear about a wedding?”

Jean Luc arched a brow, noticing the tension.

“Pierre’s,” he answered. “He’s marrying the daughter of one of the richest Sidhe aristocrats in the world.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds like I’m marrying Claire for money or position,” Pierre shot back, scowling at his brother.

Keenan cleared his throat, not wishing to go into such a debate. “Anyway, how did it go with the demons?”

Lucca ignored him again and instead answered Pierre, “Nobody thinks that, Pierre, don’t worry. You’re a good person, unlike other people around here.”

The last innuendo was too much for Keenan to take. He grabbed the incubus’s arm and forcibly turned him. “What the hell is this, Lucca?”

Lucca’s skin heated, and Keenan let out a curse, looking at his now-burnt hand. “Don’t think you can bully me as easily as you do Giovanni, Keenan.”

Keenan groaned. This was just great. Lucca only used his fire magic in moments of extreme anger. In spite of only being stepbrothers, Giovanni and Lucca had a bond that seemed to be stronger than that of many true siblings. It didn’t surprise Keenan that Lucca reacted like this if he thought Keenan hurt Giovanni. He’d hoped he could speak with Lucca before Giovanni, but apparently, any chance of that happening vanished. “What did he tell you?”

“He didn’t *tell* me anything. He was too out of it to even speak coherently. But I saw the bite at his neck. Who do you think you are, playing with Vanni’s mind?”

The tension in the room skyrocketed.

“Keenan, you hurt Giovanni?” Jean Luc asked, his voice as cold as ice.

Keenan cursed himself and his loss of control. He would never again bite incubi, not even if his life depended on it. It wasn’t worth the trouble.

“This issue is between Giovanni and myself. It does not concern you, Jean Luc. Lucca, can I speak to you in private?”

The incubus glared at him, flipping his multicolored hair.

“No, you most certainly cannot. Our friendship ended when you hurt Vanni. You will not speak to him or me, starting today.”

Keenan made a face and prayed for a miracle to happen so that he wouldn’t have to explain Lucca’s anger or Giovanni’s sudden bout of sickness to anybody.

Obviously feeling Keenan’s nervousness, Eric spoke in his mind. “*Keenan, what’s wrong?*”

Keenan let out a mental sigh. “*Nothing, pet. Long story.*”

Eric didn’t say anything. Keenan added, “*It’s just a misunderstanding with Lucca. Don’t worry, pet. I’ll deal with it.*”

Eric hesitated before asking, “*Are you still coming over?*”

“*I wouldn’t miss it for the world,*” Keenan replied, his pet’s affection doing wonders for his morale.

The connection faded in the background of his mind, and Keenan focused on the paranormals still staring angrily at him. Luckily, he wasn’t forced to say anything because another person appeared.

“Would you stop being such an ass, Lucca? I don’t need a knight in shining armor, you know,” Giovanni said from the doorway.

Keenan turned to his friend and cursed himself as he noticed Giovanni’s pallor. The incubus lifted a hand, stopping the apology on Keenan’s lips. “Don’t say it, Keenan. I offered. It’s not your fault.”

“I shouldn’t have accepted,” Keenan replied, feeling angry with himself. “I knew what would happen.”

“You’re a vampire. You can’t control your impulses. Stop berating yourself for nothing.” The incubus sighed and gave Keenan an apologetic look. “In fact, it is me who should apologize. I pushed you in an unforgivable manner. I can’t begin to explain how embarrassed I am.”

Obviously confused at the exchange, Lucca cleared his throat. “Excuse me, but would you be so kind as to explain why you are apologizing to this bastard when he fucked your mind up into unconsciousness?”



Giovanni let out an embarrassed laugh. "I'd rather not speak of it in front of an audience."

Lucca scowled at Giovanni, and the other incubus finally snapped. "Fine! In short, he was hungry. I offered, and he fed from me. I got high from the bite, but he said no. So I put an incubus spell on him. Happy now?"

Lucca froze at his stepbrother's hasty explanation. It was indeed very peculiar that Giovanni would put an incubus spell on anyone, especially Keenan.

While Lucca was busy gaping, Pierre inquired, "You put a what?"

The question seemed to snap Lucca out of his trance.

"Incubus spell," he answered between gritted teeth. "It makes the target see the person they most want instead of the incubus himself."

Pierre arched a brow in disbelief. "You can do that?"

Lucca turned to the Sidhe, and Keenan felt a sudden flash of power sweep through the room. Pierre blinked, dazed for a second, then stared at Lucca. He took a step back, shaking his head. Then he looked at Keenan, confused.

"*C'est pas possible*," he murmured. "*Vous êtes deux?*"

Keenan arched a brow. Two? Two of who? Of him? He shared a knowing look with Giovanni. Well, that was a piece of embarrassing information. So much for Pierre's love for Claire.

Laughing awkwardly, Lucca dissipated the spell.

"Well, now you know how the incubus spell works."

Pierre glared at Lucca venomously. "Don't ever do that again!"

He took a menacing step toward the incubus, but Jean Luc took his arm.

"*Mon frère*, don't worry about it, *oui?*"

Pierre stared at his brother for a second then nodded. "I'm getting a drink," he said, shakily.

The blond Sidhe turned and went to the bar. Keenan arched an inquisitive brow at Jean Luc. "What was that all about, Jean Luc?"

"Nothing of import." Jean Luc waved a hand dismissively. "Anyway, how did it go with the demons, Lucca?" He lit another slim cigarette.

In spite of the peculiarity of the entire thing, Lucca allowed Jean Luc to change the subject. "You know how they are. Even after that thing in Europe, most of the demons here keep to themselves. If anything, they prefer to keep out of the affairs of humans."

Keenan made a face at the news. He'd hoped that the demons would finally show some cooperation, but it would seem that wouldn't be the case. "So no luck, huh?"

Lucca shook his head, confirming his suspicions. "No luck."

Jean Luc blew smoke out of his cigarette. "I think, maybe, we should pay them a visit. If not now, after we deal with this inner problem."

Keenan nodded. He'd been displeased with the demon population of New York for quite a while now. The demons preferred to keep their independence, but they were all officially under the authority of the Council. Last time the demons went their own way, the aftermath of the disaster affected countries all over Europe.

Keenan pushed back the memories and looked at the incubi. "Well, then, shall we make the announcement to the people?"

Predictably, Giovanni backed down. "Don't count on me. Alas, I am on sick leave." He grinned, and Keenan glared at him.

"So it's the three of us," Jean Luc said. "Cassandra won't be showing up to socialize, that's for sure, and the shifters have their own kind to worry about."

Conveniently, Jean Luc didn't mention his brother, who was nursing a drink, brooding in the darkness of the room.

Jean Luc extinguished his cigarette and got up. "Shall we go, gentlemen?"

\* \* \* \*

Keenan walked into the premises of the von Klein Tower, his shoulders heavy with new burdens. The "discussion" with their people hadn't gone well. He felt sorry for having done it in the first place. Perhaps they should have just kept it under wraps. But it didn't feel right, them being hunted and not knowing.

In hindsight, he reflected that they probably would have found out anyway, and it would have been worse. Hell, some of them had already heard about the deaths in the Sidhe community, others about Ulrike or the werewolves. They couldn't place them all under the excuse of some mysterious plague. Nobody would be stupid enough to believe it.

Unlike humans, paranormals had a more distinctive sense of self-preservation. It was inherited from times of old, when the different races came from another world. Keenan's father had told him all about it, how the demons and the Sidhe, the sprites and elves showed up one day. At that time, the vampires and were-shifters had been the only magical creatures inhabiting Earth. Some didn't take the arrival of the newcomers well, but in the end, they managed to reach a compromise.

Of course, nothing worked out as planned. Things rarely ever do. Keenan half blamed the demons on that other world, who'd insisted on maintaining the connection. In truth, he knew that it hadn't been their fault.

Sometimes, he wondered if the paranormals ever wished they'd never left their home planet. It was too late for them to go back. Keenan knew this. And yet, instinctively, he also knew that their world must be a more hospitable place for people like him. For people like Eric.

Keenan passed through his penthouse, not really registering anything around him, and went to the bathroom. The hunter attack left barely any traces, and everything was still in working order. Keenan shed his clothing and stepped into the shower. As he washed, he thought about a different world, a world where he could be with Eric every day, wake up by his side, fuck him whenever he felt like it, and without fearing traitors or human hunters.

As expected, Keenan's cock answered the thoughts of his pet and immediately hardened. For maybe one second, Keenan considered jacking off, but decided against it. He would soon see his pet anyway. Why would he use his hand and his imagination when he'd have the real thing?

Keenan washed faster and stepped out of the shower. He dried his hair with a towel and tied it back. It wasn't completely free of moisture, but who cared? Then he went to his wardrobe, rummaging through the drawers. He extracted a pair of black leather pants, a black sweater, and took out a long leather coat. He strapped on his knives and guns and covered them with the coat. He knew that, despite his vampire powers, it was always useful to have some kind of weapon with him.

Taking the Lexus would be pointless and far too conspicuous for what he intended to do. While flying, he could easily disguise himself in the darkness of the night, but with the Lexus, it would be harder. He checked his

weapons once again, and with a smirk of anticipation, he went out the terrace door to fly into the night.

\* \* \* \*

Eric smiled to himself as he painted. By now, Keenan was probably heading in his direction. He couldn't wait to see his vampire, to touch him, to feel him, to kiss him.

Eric half-wished he could prepare something for Keenan's arrival. Alas, he was but a poor art student. Most of the time, he lived on ramen and cheap junk food, barely managing to pay his rent and buy charcoals. He couldn't afford to buy expensive wine or whatever Keenan liked.

Maybe one day, he would become a famed artist. Then he could buy everything Keenan liked, maybe a little house for them to live in.

Eric laughed at himself. What a silly notion. Keenan didn't need his illusionary money. He already had more than he could possibly need. Keenan had the world at his feet. And still, Keenan came to see him, in his little rented home. Eric couldn't help but feel a little smug at that.

Eric smiled as he added some color on Keenan's silhouette on canvas. Originally, he'd thought of painting a portrait of Keenan, but something else burst out. He blushed a little as he worked on his own nude form. He hoped his lover would like it. He wanted to give it to Keenan, as a present. For his birthday? When was Keenan's birthday anyway? And how old was he? He'd have to remember to ask.

Eric jumped a little when he heard a fluttering of curtains. Keenan. Eric turned, sheltering the painting with his back. He hoped Keenan didn't see it. He wanted it to be finished, to be perfect, when he gifted it to his vampire.

Keenan was dressed in black leather, and the outfit seemed to contribute to his natural aura of sensuality and danger. He gave Eric a predatory grin.

"Hello, pet. What is it that you are hiding there?"

Eric shivered at the sexy voice, trying in vain to control the way his body responded to it.

"N-nothing. Just a painting."

Keenan arched a dark brow at his reaction. "Oh? Now you've made me curious."

His vampire moved faster than he could see. In a heartbeat, he took Eric in his arms and turned him so that they could look together at Eric's new art piece. Keenan's perfect nude body, holding Eric's thighs apart, thrusting inside Eric, while his fangs threatened his bare throat. For some reason, Eric painted himself on top, but there was no question as to the real dominant one of the couple. Eric's face looked less contoured, though, because he didn't feel certain of the expressions he should immortalize. Perhaps it was best that he'd showed it to Keenan. He could ask.

"Mmm...nice," Keenan purred in Eric's ear.

Eric trembled as Keenan's hands roamed his body.

"D-Do you like it? It's not finished yet."

Keenan turned his face so that they could look at each other and not at the painting.

"Is that what you want? Me fucking you? Biting you?"

Eric whimpered and nodded. He knew that when he'd painted his new piece he'd been projecting his desires. Without another word, Keenan took Eric into his arms, and in a flash, they were in Eric's bed. Keenan pressed his mouth to Eric's, kissing him aggressively, while he made swift work of Eric's house clothes.

Eric didn't protest. He wanted everything his vampire had to give. Clumsily, he tried to work on Keenan's leathers but just managed to frustrate himself. His hands shook too much, and he couldn't work the buckle of the coat.

Keenan laughed huskily, and Eric pouted. "Don't worry, pet. I'll do it."

Unlike with Eric's clothes, Keenan took a while in divesting himself. By the time Keenan removed the last garment, Eric wanted to beg to be fucked, which undoubtedly had been Keenan's intention. Eric didn't care. He'd beg and plead and do whatever Keenan wanted if it made his vampire sink that perfect, huge cock inside him.

Keenan moved on the bed, covering Eric's body with his own. Eric's bunk was hard and uncomfortable. Some of the springs were broken, but right now, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but Keenan, his warmth, his comfortable weight on top of Eric, and his voice whispering in Eric's ear.

"What do you want, pet? Tell me."

Eric shivered and spread his legs. "You, you...I want you to take me."

Keenan shook his head, while at the same time giving him a wicked grin.

“Details, pet. Tell me in details.”

Eric whimpered, feeling peeved at the situation. He was going mad with arousal and Keenan could still speak? That wasn’t right. He took a deep breath and blurted out, “I want you to fuck me like this, looking into my eyes, I want you to bite me and feast on me and make me scream. Then I want to ride you until—”

Eric’s words died as Keenan’s mouth took his once more. The kiss seemed to go on and on, and they couldn’t seem to get enough of each other. When the vampire separated their mouths, his voice held a desperate undertone.

“Lube, pet...Where?”

It took a second for the question to register then Eric’s eyes widened.

“I don’t have any.”

Keenan cursed and growled in frustration. “Anything we could use?”

Eric thought about it, and then an idea came to mind.

“Shower gel? Does that work?”

Keenan was on his feet and into the small bathroom in seconds. Eric thanked God for his small indulgence of buying shower gel. He didn’t know what they’d have done without it.

His thought process stopped as Keenan glided back into the room. He was already coating himself with gel and pouring more of the lotion in his hand. Eric let out a desperate sound, and Keenan climbed on top him, separating his thighs and working his way to his ass.

“God, pet. I want you so bad. I’ll go slow next time, I swear.”

Eric wanted to say that he didn’t need to go slow, that he wanted it hard and fast, but he didn’t get the chance. Keenan’s finger penetrated his ass, and Eric gasped at the sensation.

For all his urgency, Keenan seemed more than a little thorough with preparation. Eric was mindlessly fucking Keenan’s fingers by the time his vampire deemed him ready for the actual penetration.

Eric screamed as his lover pushed inside of him. Sensations bombarded him—in his mind, in his body. As Keenan pounded into his ass hard, hitting his prostate with every powerful thrust, Eric could feel Keenan’s ecstasy, as well as his own. Their connection flowed open, as natural as breathing, so

beautiful and right, and Eric didn't know how he'd even lived without it before.

Eric heard himself beg and plead, a very distant part of his mind aware that it was him making those noises. He simply couldn't focus on anything else but Keenan. The feel of Keenan's cock inside his body and Keenan's emotions in his own heart and mind couldn't be compared to anything he'd ever experienced. Even the joy of painting seemed only a pale imitation of the ecstasy he experienced at Keenan's hands. So much love, so much pleasure, power, and relief swirled around them, almost as if he'd fallen inside a rainbow of emotions, the palette of a divine painter of hearts.

For a moment, Eric thought he could even see their connection, as if it were a palpable bond. He heard Keenan growl above him, and then, the world exploded into millions of stars and colors as Keenan's fangs sank into his throat. It was the most beautiful painting Eric had ever seen. He screamed his lover's name as he came violently, almost blacking out again because of the overwhelming pleasure.

Keenan collapsed next to him, panting hard, and they rested in comfortable silence. Eric suspected his lover wasn't even tired and just wanted to be considerate for Eric's sake.

Keenan got up and went to the bathroom, bringing back a wet rag and lovingly cleaning Eric's stomach and privates. He smiled at Eric, but there was nothing sexual in his eyes, just gentleness.

"You're so beautiful right now, you know? Like you're glowing."

Eric blushed at the praise, and Keenan laughed and kissed him on the nose. "Also, you're very loud."

Eric's eyes widened.

"Oh, my God, the neighbors!" He moved to get up from the bed, and in his haste, he hit Keenan's nose with his forehead.

Keenan rubbed his nose and held Eric back on the bed.

"Your neighbors surely know you've been doing the nasty, pet. If anyone gives you trouble, just let me know."

His eyes glinted dangerously, and Eric couldn't help a small shudder of arousal.

"And about that, pet," Keenan continued, seemingly oblivious to Eric's wantonness, "I'm not happy with you living in this place."

The irrational lust started to fade at Keenan's words. Eric couldn't help but tense at that final statement. He couldn't afford to live in a better place, and he hated the feeling of inadequacy that Keenan's remark gave him.

"There is no place else for me to go."

He dug his fingers into the skin of his palms, fighting back the surge of irritation.

Keenan shook his head, giving Eric an exasperated look.

"You know I don't mean it like that, Eric. I just want you to be safe and comfortable. This neighborhood isn't good enough for you."

Eric looked down, feeling ashamed for his reproachful thoughts. Of course, Keenan had only his best interests at heart. "I just don't want to cause any trouble."

"You could never cause any trouble for me, pet. Still, just to be safe, I could rent you an apartment, through Nelson." Keenan watched him carefully. "Do you think he'll help?"

Eric considered the question for a minute. "Mr. Nelson is a good person. I think he'd help if I asked him to, but it might cause trouble at the college. Some students already tease me about—" He stopped himself just as he was about to tell Keenan of the Richardson episode.

Keenan's eyes turned dark as Eric paused. "What is it, pet? Go on."

"It's nothing. Just this jerk, hitting on me," Eric replied, shrugging.

Keenan gritted his teeth, but Eric could feel his anger boiling at the surface. "Name, pet."

Eric took Keenan's hand and gave him a comforting smile. "It's not important, really. If you do something now, you'll just attract attention."

"I have my ways, pet," Keenan replied. He smirked wickedly, and before Eric even knew what was going on, his lips proceeded to ravish Eric's mouth. Eric lost himself in the kiss, and he nearly missed the slight stirring inside his head.

Eric separated their mouths and glared at his vampire lover. "Hey. That wasn't nice."

Keenan just smiled and raised his hands up in the air in a show of harmlessness.

"Come on, pet. Don't be angry. I'm just doing what's best for you."

Eric harrumphed, feeling irritated with his vampire. How dare he go around snooping in his head like that? Well, technically speaking, they did



have a connection, so it wasn't like Keenan trespassed or anything. Eric himself had given Keenan the key to his mind. Still, he wished Keenan respected him more and stopped doing things like this.

Keenan caressed his cheek gently. "I'm sorry, pet. I do respect you. Can I make it up to you somehow?"

Eric tried to hang on to his annoyance, but the seductive purr of his lover's voice melted his every barrier. He glared again at his vampire lover but failed to summon the strength to resist him. In the end, it was for the best. The rest of the night became a frenzy of lovemaking and insane pleasure.

## Chapter Twelve

Keenan looked outside the little window of Eric's apartment. Dawn loomed ahead. It was time for him to leave. He'd stayed more than he'd planned anyway, more than it was safe, but Eric had a gift of making him lose his reason. Simply the memories of his pet riding him, and the beautiful sounds he made when Keenan touched him, or the way he exposed his neck for Keenan's fangs, made Keenan want to throw caution to the wind and ravish Eric again.

Eric didn't help Keenan's resolve to leave any, since he cuddled his very nude body to Keenan's. Even in sleep, his human was so beautiful. Eric murmured something in a low voice, placing his head on Keenan's chest and sighing in contentment when he found a comfortable position. Eric's golden hair spread out like a curtain around his beautiful face, and Keenan couldn't resist the urge to play with the silky blond locks, twirling them around his fingers.

Alas, the comfortable moment came to an end as the unforgiving rays of the sun in the horizon urged Keenan to get up from Eric's embrace. Keenan sighed as he fought to escape the embrace of his human without waking him. Eric protested the movement and whimpered softly, but didn't wake. Perhaps it would be better. Every man, paranormal or not, had his limits. If he saw those green orbs sparkling at him, he'd lose it for sure.

Careful to remain silent at all times, Keenan put his clothes on. He considered flying out the window, but it was too risky. If the traitor hired spies to watch over Eric, Keenan probably dodged them last night, but in the sunlight, it would be harder. He'd have to go out the back door or something like that.

He opened the door to the apartment and grimaced. He needed to discuss with Nelson regarding the possibility of buying his pet a house in a better area. This place wasn't good enough for Eric. He mentally pulled the

lock in place after exiting the apartment, but he knew that that flimsy chain wouldn't ensure Eric's security.

Keenan went over his "to do" list with things he needed to take care of before he could turn in for his rest. First off, he needed to deal with the idiot Scott Richardson. Nobody dared to touch his pet and got away with it.

Next task on the agenda—talk to Matthew Nelson in person. Eric seemed to trust him for some reason. He could always alter the man's memories, but for now, perhaps the art professor could be of use. Keenan needed to know if Nelson was reliable enough to ensure his pet a better shelter and if he could be trusted not to take advantage of this.

Of course, he still had the issue of the traitor. It was getting more and more difficult for Keenan to concentrate on his job, but he knew he had to figure out the identity of the person behind the assassinations. There was no telling when the hunters would hit again.

Walking out of the building, he stayed in the shadows and kept an open eye for anyone who might be watching. His senses didn't reveal any source of danger, but Keenan didn't know whether to feel pleased about it or not. Perhaps there wasn't a source of danger *now*, but what guaranteed that there hadn't been surveillance before?

A chill went through Keenan's spine. He couldn't abandon Eric here. Even if his people guarded him, he couldn't leave Eric alone while some crazed traitor targeted them.

Perhaps they couldn't live in the penthouse, but at any rate, he'd have to make arrangements for a new residence for himself. He'd just take his pet along.

The Council members weren't fools. If he thought about it, why did Pierre asked him, of all people, whether he should suspend his wedding with Claire? Easy—they hadn't bought it.

He nodded to himself and reentered the building. Eric wasn't safe in this place. He conveniently set aside that part of him that told him he wasn't doing this only for Eric's security.

As he walked inside, Keenan felt Eric stir at the other side of the connection.

*"Pet? Are you awake?"*

Eric's answer came promptly, even if it was a little sleepily.

*"Mhmm...Just...Where are you anyway?"*

*"Close by."*

He felt Eric wanted to say something else, but instead, his lover paused for a second.

*"Pet?"*

*"Wait, someone's knocking at the door."*

Keenan's restlessness increased tenfold at Eric's reply. Why did he ever consider leaving Eric here? It had been a stupid idea to begin with.

*"Pet, don't answer that!"* he shouted.

*"But Keenan...It's probably nothing,"* Eric argued.

*"It could be someone out to hurt you."*

His human seemed out to cross him today. *"I'll just see who it is, without opening the door,"* Eric decided. It was obviously his attempt for a compromise.

Keenan didn't want Eric to become a mindless toy that obeyed his every whim, but in this situation, he couldn't help but curse Eric's stubbornness. *"Just wait a second, I'll be up in no time."*

Keenan knew he had two alternatives, to go back out and climb to Eric's apartment from the fire escape or to use the stairs. The stairs would be faster since it was the direct way, but it would also disclose Keenan's position to the person knocking at Eric's door.

*"Pet, wait, all right?"*

To Keenan's relief, Eric agreed. *"Okay, Keenan. Just hurry."*

Having decided on the fire escape, Keenan hurried to his destination. If necessary, he could always use his supernatural speed to get there faster. He preferred to be with his pet, in the apartment, when Eric received his little visit.

\* \* \* \*

Eric put on some house clothes and started cleaning up the room a little to waste some time. He knew that Keenan thought there was some assassin out to get him. Somehow, he doubted that his early morning visitor wanted to murder him.

Nevertheless, it wouldn't hurt to be cautious. The closest thing he had to a weapon in the house was a pan in the kitchen. Why would he take the chance with Keenan just a minute away?

He felt his vampire enter rather than hearing him. Keenan came in through the window and nodded at him. Eric smiled, abandoning his task, and went to the door.

“Who is it?”

The answer made him feel irritated and uncomfortable at the same time. “Mrs. Harper. Please open the door, Mr. McAllister.”

Eric groaned. What could his landlady possibly want to tell him at this hour?

“My landlady,” he mouthed to Keenan. His lover nodded, looking a little amused. Eric cracked the door open and faced his landlady. “Yes?”

Mrs. Harper was a middle-aged woman, but you wouldn’t have guessed it from her aspect. Her life prematurely aged her, and Eric always felt some sort of compassion for the woman. Despite the fact that she was a bitch, Eric guessed that there had been some pain in her life to make her so bitter.

He’d once tried to ask her about it, but it only resulted in Mrs. Harper raising his rent and badgering him about the most insignificant issues. He abandoned any thoughts of good deeds regarding his landlady after that day.

The woman observed him critically through narrowed eyes. “Can I come in, Mr. McAllister?”

Eric suppressed a grimace and opened the door a little further. “It’s a little messy. Is this an urgent issue?”

Mrs. Harper gave Eric an ugly look and nodded. “Yes, it is, and a rather unpleasant one as well. I’d prefer we didn’t discuss it in the hallway where everybody can hear.”

Eric sighed, already knowing what issue Mrs. Harper wanted to discuss. Just like Keenan said, he’d been excessively vocal last night. Such an early visit seemed a bit excessive, though. The woman had to be furious to knock at his door at five in the morning. For all she knew, Eric’s lover could still be here.

Knowing he didn’t have a choice, Eric opened the door fully, making a sign toward Keenan to hide. He hoped that his vampire had enough sense to do as he was bid.

“Please, come in, Mrs. Harper.”

The woman made her way inside and scanned the room. Eric felt himself flush. Despite the fact that he’d picked up the clothes and arranged things around a little, the scent of sex lingered, unmistakable in the air.

He bit his lip, avoiding the scrutiny of Mrs. Harper. The woman sat down gingerly on the only chair available, close to its edge as if fearing the contact of the furniture.

"I suppose you know the reason of my visit, Mr. McAllister," she said in a stern voice.

She got right to the point. Well, it was a good thing. Eric struggled against the feeling of shame pooling in his stomach. There was no reason to be ashamed, God damn it! He met the gaze of his landlady, nodding.

"I apologize for the racket last night. I will endeavor to keep it down in the future."

The woman couldn't hide the shock at his statement. She must have been expecting him to apologize for something else entirely. Eric didn't have any intention of doing so, not now and not anytime in the future. He paid for this flimsy place, and he had every right to bring whomever he wanted here.

After the shock wore off, the landlady said, "Actually, you will not."

Eric arched a brow in surprise. "Excuse me?"

Mrs. Harper grimaced. "I was not aware of your inclinations when I agreed to allow you to stay here. Now that I am, and I must say, because of a very unpleasant reason, I must urge you to pack your things and abandon the apartment at once."

Eric gaped at the woman. "But I paid for this place for the rest of the month!" he protested. What she wanted to do to him couldn't be legal.

The landlady shrugged. "Don't expect to receive a refund. I'm afraid you forfeited any right to it when you brought your perversion here."

It was Eric's turn to be shocked. Did this woman really want to throw him in the street?

"But you can't just...Where am I supposed to go?"

Mrs. Harper brushed imaginary lint off her skirt. "I don't know, and I don't care. But I expect you to be out of here in twenty-four hours."

Eric felt his world crash around him. Sure, this wasn't a great place, but at least Eric could afford it. As a plus, it had a small bathroom. Most of the buildings in this neighborhood provided for communal bathing, something Eric hated with a passion.

Of course, it was impossible for Mrs. Harper to change her mind. Eric briefly considered begging, but the very idea of giving the bitch the satisfaction irked him.

*"Don't even think about it, pet."* Keenan's voice fled in his mind.

His lover exited the bathroom, looking as impeccable, sexy, and dangerous as ever. Eric couldn't help feel smug when he saw the eyes of the landlady practically burst out of their sockets.

"You...you...he..."

"Hello, madam. I've heard so much about you." Keenan smiled, but the warm greeting didn't reach his eyes.

Mrs. Harper looked shocked by Keenan's sudden appearance. Of course, Keenan had that effect on people. The way he moved, dressed, and spoke betrayed a dangerous elegance. His demeanor would be enough to intimidate anyone, even if that person wasn't aware of Keenan's power.

Keenan moved to Eric's side and gave Eric a peck on the cheek. He then turned to the woman again.

"I would have hoped that the circumstances of our meeting would be more pleasant," Keenan said.

Mrs. Harper recovered from the shock of seeing Keenan and went into battle mode.

"Please refrain from such disgusting actions in my presence. This is my building, and I do not tolerate such perversion here. Who do you think you are, showing such blatant disrespect?"

Keenan hugged Eric's waist. "Ah, where are my manners? I can't believe I forgot to introduce myself. I am Keenan von Klein."

The landlady paled, Keenan's name obviously having the desired effect. "Keenan...von Klein?"

Keenan smirked. "I do believe you've heard of me. At any rate, I must say, I am most displeased with your attitude toward me and particularly toward my Eric. It wasn't nice, don't you think so, pet?" Keenan whispered in Eric's ear.

Eric shuddered a little as Keenan's lips touched his ear. "N-no, not nice at all."

Keenan nodded, satisfied. "See, you hurt my pet with your bigotry. I'm afraid I just don't take that well. I'm sure you understand."

He paused a little for effect. "And since you mentioned this building was yours, expect an eviction notice from the mayor by tomorrow."

The woman's complexion went pasty.

"B—but you can't. I don't have any debts."

Keenan seemed to consider this for a moment. "Don't you? I actually recall you borrowing a healthy sum of money you never paid back. How very careless of you..."

Keenan shook his head, *tsking*, and Eric was suddenly afraid for the fate of Mrs. Harper. Sure, she'd wanted to throw him out the street, but he didn't want her to rot in jail or die on the streets because of an imaginary debt.

*"Keenan? Are you actually going to do this?"*

Keenan's mental laughter echoed through their connection. *"Don't worry, pet. I won't have to."*

As if in agreement with Keenan's statement, the woman got up and extended her hands toward Eric. Keenan stopped her before she could touch him, though. Mrs. Harper gave Eric a pleading look.

"Please, I'm sorry. Don't do this."

Eric gave the woman an uncertain look. He could feel her genuine distress. Keenan's smug laughter flitted into Eric's mind.

*"See, I told you. She's like a hyena. Strong when it comes to those that can't defend themselves. But when a stronger predator shows up, she backs down and begs."*

Eric sighed. In truth, Mrs. Harper didn't deserve his compassion, but what would be the point of taking the woman's home? And at any rate, Keenan didn't need the complications. In fact, he suspected Keenan never had the intention of fulfilling his threats in the first place.

He turned to his vampire lover and said softly, "Keenan, come on..."

Keenan studied him for a second, and in his mind, Eric heard a sexy growl. *"You're too beautiful for your own good, you know that?"*

Out loud, his lover sighed. "Fine, pet. Just this once, because you are asking it of me."

Mrs. Harper could barely contain her glee.

"Oh, thank you, thank you so much!"

Eric just shook his head, feeling more and more awkward and wishing the landlady left already.

"Nothing to thank me for. Again, I apologize for the inconvenience."



Mrs. Harper shook her head, her attitude having undergone an obvious change. "Quite all right. I understand entirely."

The woman headed toward the door. "I'll just go now. I'm sorry for intruding."

Keenan gave Mrs. Harper a polite nod. There was no sign of the threat that had been there a minute ago.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Madam."

The landlady laughed a little. "Likewise, Mr. von Klein."

Then she opened the door and made her hasty retreat to her own apartment. Eric couldn't be happier for her choice.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan pushed the door shut behind his pet's landlady. Sometimes he hated humans, naturally, with the exception of his pet. Keenan had already decided Eric was special.

He wondered how he would convince Eric to move in with him. Technically speaking, he didn't even have anything prepared. His people were efficient, but they'd received a strong blow with the hit at the von Klein Tower. It didn't matter. Keenan hadn't acquired his current position by relying on human underlings. How hard could it be to find a place for both of them to live?

"Pet, there's something we left unfinished from last night."

Eric looked at him, and Keenan could see the little wheels working in his head. If Eric had been a puppy, his ears would most likely have perked up to listen closer and his tail would be wagging.

"And what's that, Keenan?" his pet said, playing with the fastening of Keenan's buckle.

Keenan sighed, forcing himself to stop Eric's wandering hands. He knew that if he took his clothes off now, all chance of conversation would vanish. Business first, then pleasure.

"Not now, pet."

Eric gave him a pleading look and pouted a little. Keenan suppressed the urge to smother him with kisses. He did look just like a puppy. An incredibly sexy, blond, green-eyed puppy.

"Hey, I'm not a dog!" Eric glared, his voice full of indignation.

Keenan laughed. "Of course not, pet. That would make me a zoophile."

Eric blinked in confusion at the absurd exclamation. Then crystalline laughter started sounding in the room. Even Eric's laughter was beautiful.

Keenan cursed under his breath. If he didn't stop admiring his pet, he'd never get on with the actual conversation.

As Eric wiped a tear of mirth from his eye, Keenan said, "I was thinking about us moving in together."

Eric froze, his eyes widening at Keenan's abrupt suggestion. "But you said we couldn't because of the traitor."

Keenan sighed, fighting to find a way to explain the difficult situation to Eric. "That's true. But as much surveillance as I provide for you, I am simply not at ease with the idea of you being here, alone. It's not safe, pet."

Eric bit his lip in obvious nervousness. "You sound like you've been thinking about this quite a while." He tilted his head inquiringly. "How didn't I know this? You'll have to explain to me one day how our connection works."

Keenan laughed, kissing Eric on the forehead. "You don't catch all my thoughts, pet. It's like this—remember when I bit you, that first time?" Eric nodded. "Well, technically speaking, that bite should have given me access to your thoughts and not the other way around, but since you're a psychic, it kind of backfired on me."

Keenan chuckled at the awed look on Eric's face. "At any rate, you don't have your gifts mastered, so more often than not, you catch random thoughts. Even if you had your power under control, most of the time, our connection stays somewhere in the background. If we shared a mind, pet, we'd both be insane."

Eric seemed to be considering this, and was about to say something, when Keenan's cell phone rang. The human arched a brow at the soft sound of the ringtone.

"Keenan, who is it?"

Keenan checked the display and frowned. "Jean Luc. I wonder what he wants."

Keenan flipped his phone open and took the call. "Keenan von Klein."

"*Mon ami*...It happened again."

Keenan felt cold dread pool inside his stomach. "Who?"

“Cassandra...” Keenan cursed at the soft-spoken reply. Another of his own. “Luckily, they didn’t kill her,” Jean Luc continued.

For a second, Keenan thought he hadn’t heard right. “Say again?”

“She suffered many injuries but got away alive. She’s recovering.”

Keenan pondered on that. They’d killed Ulrike, but not Cassandra. Ulrike had been more powerful and older than Cassandra. How peculiar.

“Are we meeting again this morning?”

At the other side of the line, Jean Luc sighed. “*Oui*, Keenan. At *Extase*.”

Keenan nodded. “I’ll be there in,” he did a mental calculation, “an hour or so.”

If Jean Luc thought much of his delay, he didn’t say it. The assassination attempts seemed to affect the Sidhe to an almost frightening extent. Jean Luc’s good-bye was nearly a whisper.

“*Mon ami*, be careful!” The dial tone stopped Keenan from replying.

As Jean Luc hung up, Keenan looked up at Eric. “Pack up anything essential, pet. I’m most definitely not leaving you here.”

As Eric nodded and obeyed, Keenan started dialing a number on his cell phone. He needed someone to take care of his pet while he dealt with this issue, even if it was only a human.

## Chapter Thirteen

Eric tried to focus on the task at hand, but he couldn't make himself do so. When he saw Keenan dial, he opened his mouth to ask his lover what was going on. But then the person on the other side picked up, and Keenan began, "Mr. Nelson, a pleasure to hear you again. I apologize for the early hour."

Eric let out a sound of surprise. No way! Keenan called his art professor at five in the morning. To do what?

"I'm afraid I have a little favor to ask. I need someone to look after Eric today while I deal with some important work-related aspects. If it wouldn't be too much trouble, could you help?" The tone left more than clear that it was an order and the art professor could not refuse without dire consequences. Eric groaned, suddenly feeling the urge to kick Keenan where it would most hurt.

Nelson said something Eric couldn't hear, but it must have pleased Keenan. His lover smiled and walked to Eric, giving him a brief peck on the forehead. "Thank you very much, Mr. Nelson. Forty-five minutes fine with you?"

"I don't need to be babysat," Eric snapped at Keenan. How did Keenan dare do something like that? His professor would be furious with him.

Keenan nodded in reply to something said at the other end of the phone and placed a finger on Eric's lips. "Thank you again. Both Eric and myself appreciate it."

He said good-bye and hung up. Instantly, Eric's fury descended on him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? It's five in the morning. Who calls at this hour to ask for a favor?"

Keenan waited for him to rant and rave then, after ten seconds, he shut Eric up in the most efficient way possible—with a kiss. Eric attempted to struggle against the unfair battle tactic, but of course, he didn't have a

chance. He forgot all about Mr. Nelson and Jean Luc and anything else that didn't involve Keenan, Eric, nakedness, and any flat surface. Keenan was just too damn good at kissing.

Obviously satisfied that he'd achieved his purpose, Keenan stopped their kiss. Eric whined a little. He wanted more. Maybe he could coax Keenan into a little morning sex. Rubbing against his vampire's body, Eric moaned, picturing an image of them fucking in his head, conveying the message to Keenan in the best way possible.

He could tell Keenan also wanted to fuck since Keenan now contemplated if they had time for a quickie. Alas, apparently they couldn't afford the delay, as Keenan separated their mouths and said, "Come on, pet. Gather your things, we're leaving."

Eric would have been irritated, but he felt too smug to be annoyed. Eric's playful "daydreams" had a very interesting effect on Keenan. Eric chuckled as the vampire shook his head, obviously trying to dissipate some of the arousal. Well, he deserved it for using sex to shut him up. The nerve of him!

Eric scuttled to gather some of his most important possessions. He bit back tears, realizing that he would have to leave his precious canvases behind. Still, if Keenan said he had to go, it was probably for the best. He'd just have to paint others.

He sniffled a little, making sure to grab his charcoals and paints and packing them up with care. Eric froze when Keenan's arms landed on his own.

"Don't worry, pet! I won't let your work go to waste. We'll get them as soon as we can."

Eric gave Keenan a weepy smile. He nodded, hugging his vampire tightly.

"Thank you. I know it's silly, but I can't help it."

"It's not silly, pet," Keenan said, dropping a kiss on his cheek. "It's your art, and you put your heart into it. Of course we'll take them along. I wouldn't have it any other way. If only I'd brought the car yesterday."

Eric broke the hug, already feeling better.

"Don't worry about it! Besides, surely you have other more important issues to attend to than my paintings."

Keenan gave him a serious look. "If I could, I would stay only with you. Unfortunately, my age and position come with duties that are important, and more so now."

Eric squeezed his lover's hand. He understood that, and he would never expect Keenan to neglect his responsibilities. Eric resumed his packing, but after a second, he threw a look over his shoulder.

"By the way, how old are you, Keenan?"

Keenan seemed momentarily startled by the question, but then husky laughter started sounding in the room.

"Pet, you're just too..."

When Keenan's laughter died to a chuckle, he finally managed to answer the question.

"If you must know the exact date, I was born on November 19, 1478, in Saxony. My father is a powerful German vampire lord, and my mother is of French origins. I remember the date because vampires are very thorough with things like that. Anyway, I'll tell you more about my family history another time."

He winked at Eric. "Maybe I'll even introduce you to them. They're always torturing me about getting stable with someone."

Eric felt his knees weaken at the overwhelming information. Sure, he'd known Keenan was old, but he didn't expect him to be quite *that* old. And his parents were still alive?

"You...you want me to meet them?" Eric asked.

Keenan smiled. "Of course, pet. Come now, don't look so glum. They're extremely nice, by vampire standards."

Somehow, that didn't comfort Eric very much. His backpack fell from his hand, and he fell on his rump on the floor. Keenan was by his side in a second.

"I'm sorry, pet. I didn't think it would shake you quite so much. I don't mind if you don't want to meet them."

Eric leaned against his vampire, taking comfort in his warmth.

"Do you have other family?"

He felt Keenan's nod. "I have another brother. His name is Aidan, and he lives in Japan."

For a second, Eric remained silent, digesting the newly acquired information.

“Do you love them?” he finally asked in a small voice.

“I suppose,” Keenan replied. “Vampires don’t love their families the same way humans do.”

Eric felt his eyes fill with tears.

“My family never loved me,” he said in a broken voice.

“Oh, pet...” Keenan squeezed Eric to his chest. “I’m sorry. I never should have brought it up.”

Eric shook his head, furiously wiping at his eyes.

“No, don’t be! I’m happy you did. I’d love to meet them. Maybe they can be my family, too, right?”

“Of course, pet! They already are,” Keenan said in a wistful tone.

The melancholic mood broke when a loud car horn sounded outside. Keenan seemed to shake out of a trance, looked at the time, and cursed.

“Come on, pet. Hurry, we have to get going.”

Eric hastened to his feet and continued his packing frenzy. He didn’t say anything else, but for some reason, his heart felt like it was warm and glowing. A family. Could he finally have one?

\* \* \* \*

They arrived at the art professor’s apartment in record time. Matthew Nelson lived in a posh loft in a recently developed neighborhood of New York. Keenan couldn’t say he was surprised since, after recent developments, the area had become a haven for artists. The complex mix of architectural styles in DUMBO gave the neighborhood a unique allure.

Keenan didn’t have the time to contemplate the virtues of Brooklyn right now. He still needed to drop by the von Klein Tower, change, and take the Lexus to *Extase*. Cassandra would have fun badgering him into the next life.

Well, fuck her. His pet came first. The art professor buzzed them in and went up to the seventh floor, carrying Eric’s few bags. With the exception of his canvases, Eric didn’t own a lot. Keenan would arrange having them moved to Nelson’s place until he could secure a more permanent establishment for the both of them. He couldn’t leave the canvases in the abandoned apartment. Even if Eric tried to put up a brave front, Keenan knew something like that would break Eric’s beautiful, fragile heart.

When Nelson opened the door, he was handsomely dressed with casual elegance, in tight blue jeans and a black turtleneck. Keenan felt sorry for bringing Eric here, but on such short notice, he didn't have many options. Outside the paranormal world, he didn't have many people he could trust. Matthew Nelson would have to be enough for a few hours. After dealing with this Cassandra issue, Keenan would talk to Giovanni and Lucca to find another solution.

"Good morning, Mr. Nelson. I'm sorry for disturbing you at such an early hour."

The human offered him a cool smile, his gray gaze fathomless.

"Good morning, Mr. von Klein," he said. "It is no problem." He pushed the door open, inviting them in. "It is an honor to meet you in person, and of course, it's always a pleasure to see Eric."

Eric blushed, and Keenan suddenly wanted to throttle the art professor.

*"Pet, if he tries anything..."*

Eric gave Keenan a wide-eyed, startled look.

*"Don't worry, Keenan! He's just my professor, okay? And you and I will keep in touch during the day."*

At Eric's words, Keenan fought to suppress his irrational jealousy.

"I'm afraid I can't stay," he told Nelson, unable to keep the warning from his tone. "I have very pressing issues to attend. Please, take good care of my pet."

Nelson couldn't suppress a grimace, and Keenan frowned. He needed to do one more thing before he left. He extended his hand politely. When Nelson took it to shake, Keenan pulled him forward and pressed his hand to the man's forehead.

"Keenan! What are you doing?" Eric shouted in indignation.

"Checking for any baleful intentions. Don't worry, it's entirely safe."

And it *was* safe, for the most part. The human would just end up with a slight headache. Of course, if Nelson harbored any inadequate fantasies over his pet, the result would prove to be most unpleasant.

Mr. Nelson's feelings toward Eric were more fatherly than anything else. He disliked the fact Keenan called Eric a pet, as he found it degrading for Eric. He didn't have a clue that Eric was a psychic, but he somehow felt that the boy was special. Pleased, Keenan didn't go very far with his



exploration. There would be no point in straining the mind of the professor too much.

Keenan removed his hand from Nelson's forehead and returned to his former position. The human blinked dazedly. "I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

Keenan gave the professor a concerned look. "Are you all right, Mr. Nelson?"

Nelson rubbed his eyes, trying to shake off the feeling of lightheadedness Keenan knew he'd feel. "Yes, I'm fine. I seemed to have zoned out for a second."

"Maybe you should lie down. I mean, we did wake you up kind of early," Eric offered.

Nelson nodded. "Yes, I'll do that."

The professor shook Keenan's hand and gave him an odd look, as if trying to decipher him.

Keenan just smiled. Nelson would never remember the little mind-reading episode. "Good-bye, Mr. Nelson. Thank you again."

He briefly pecked Eric on the cheek. "Good-bye, pet. See you tonight."

In Eric's mind, Keenan whispered, "*Don't be angry with me. It was just making sure. Your professor's just fine.*"

Eric analyzed him carefully. As weird as it must have seemed to Nelson, Keenan didn't care. He didn't want to leave Eric angry. Their relationship was still young, and they had a long way to go. One bad step and it would all go down the drain, especially taking into account Eric's fragility.

*"I know you trust him, but it never hurts to check. I have enemies, pet, and they'd hurt you just to get to me."*

Eric's lip trembled a little then, in a barely audible whisper, he asked, "You'll come see me tonight?"

Keenan smiled softly at Eric. "Yeah, pet. Anyway, we'll have to find a place to move you."

Eric nodded and hugged Keenan tightly. He sniffled in Keenan's chest, and Keenan thought he could feel hot tears prickle at his own eyes.

"Keenan, I'm frightened. Be careful, all right?" his human said through their connection.

Keenan wrapped his arms around Eric, considering Eric's words. Jean Luc had said the same to Keenan earlier on the phone. How weird.

*"I'll be careful, pet. Be good, and if anything suspicious happens..."*

Keenan lifted Eric's head gently and met his lover's gaze. Eric's eyes shone with tears, and Keenan's heart hurt knowing that he could do nothing to comfort his pet. He was already horribly late and his duty waited.

Eric wiped his tears with his hand, giving Nelson a grateful look when the art professor offered him a tissue. He blew his nose and laughed awkwardly. "Go, okay? I'll be fine. I still have school today, and maybe I'll paint some."

Keenan nodded. "Bye, pet. Take care of yourself." With another brief kiss, that didn't linger long enough, Keenan turned around and exited the apartment of Matthew Nelson.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan felt irritated. Out of all the possible days to have a cloudless sky, this had to be it. It wasn't enough to make him unable to function, but it did make him cranky as hell.

Had that been the only problem, Keenan would have done a happy dance. Of course, Keenan didn't have a chance for such a peaceful day. In fact, Keenan left the warm and very sexy arms of his pet—yes, even Eric's arms were sexy—to be badgered by a mob of irate paranormals. Even worse, he had no clue whatsoever what to do to calm them down.

A vein twitched in Keenan's temple as he fought for control. He directed a glare at Elis, as the were-cat opened his mouth to say something that would undoubtedly be insanely bitchy. The moment Keenan had arrived, the were-panther expressed his poor opinion of Keenan in very graphic terms. What could you expect from Elis anyway? Jean Luc kept silent, smoking his cigarette while Pierre busied himself with removing a bandage off Cassandra's arm.

Everyone was in a terrible mood, and of course, it all exploded on his head. He came in later than expected, a fact which neither the shifters, nor anyone else for that matter, appreciated. He could even see Lucca's quiet disapproval, although the incubus said nothing to support the were-panther and the werewolf. Thank God for small mercies.

"So now that you've graced us with your presence," Jacob began, "care to tell us what solution you have for this problem?"

Keenan tried to be calm about this, but it was pointless. His temper burst out.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Jacob? Why must you assume that, automatically, I should be the one to solve the problems? I may be the oldest one here, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t have a fucking life!”

Keenan knew he was being unfair and immature, but he could only deal with so much. The Council members had reason to be angry with him, but they needed to do their own part as well, rather than continuously place the blame on Keenan.

Cassandra laughed at his reply. She’d started to recover from the attack, but her normally flawless skin still bore burn marks.

“Well, while you’re out there living your fucking life, some of us are losing ours.”

Jean Luc blew a wisp of smoke in the air.

“Yeah, about that. How come you’re alive anyway?” he asked Cassandra in an indifferent tone of voice.

Cassandra shrugged, wincing in pain as the movement bothered some of the still-healing wounds. Since she was younger, it took her a bit longer to heal than it took Keenan. Even so, she would be back on her feet in a few hours.

“Just lucky, I guess. How the hell should I know?”

“Lucky,” Keenan repeated skeptically. “So what did they do?”

Cassandra glared at him. “What, are you hoping for all the gory details? Well, after the first dozen shots, I don’t remember much.”

Keenan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He knew she’d been injured quite severely, but why had she been left alive?

The most obvious thing would be that she was the traitor and she purposely organized her attack to throw the blame off of herself. This possibility bothered Keenan since it seemed too obvious. Plus, she hadn’t been under a much greater degree of suspicion than any of them.

Someone else might have organized the attack and left her alive deliberately with the intention of framing her as the traitor. This option made more sense to Keenan. In this case, Cassandra would be excluded from the list of possible suspects. It could have been an accident or just luck, Keenan supposed, but the conclusion was the same.

Of course, the traitor could guess the way his mind worked, in which case, all these options would be obsolete and useless. Damn, there were so many unknown variables, he didn't even know where to begin.

Oblivious to his analysis, the Council members continued their discussion regarding their attack.

"Procedure?" Jacob asked.

Keeping half an ear on the report of the attack, Keenan silently considered the members of the Council as each of them spoke. Elis and Jacob had a motive. Indeed, as a feline shifter, Elis would be devious enough to enact such a plan just for gaining the upper ground in New York. Most of the people from the Council were aware of what the two did behind closed doors. If Jacob feared his pack finding out, he could have decided to eliminate the problem.

"I was attacked while I went out to feed," Cassandra replied to Jacob's question. "The one thing I can remember noting would be the size and strength of the group. I think there might have been over a dozen hunters around me."

Cassandra was an ambitious bitch. She'd always resented Keenan for his position, calling him a bastard and an asshole. Keenan couldn't argue with that particular opinion, but then again, he could afford to be an asshole. He wouldn't put it behind her to try to assassinate him with a rocket. Ulrike was a different story, though. He thought that Cassandra even liked the older female vampire, as much as Cassandra could like anyone. Keenan also felt reluctant to believe that Cassandra would cooperate with humans in such an endeavor. The only humans she could stomach were a handful of people bred for the purpose of serving her. Still, he wouldn't cross her out entirely. She wouldn't be loathe to use humans if she thought it suited her purposes.

"If what you say is correct, why would they leave you alive?" Giovanni asked, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

Keenan turned his attention toward his demon friends. What reason could they possibly have? Trying to set aside his own personal feelings for the incubi, Keenan simply couldn't find anything. From what he knew, they didn't have any actual ambitions for power or ruling the world. In fact, by demon standards, they were quite peaceful. Leave them to fuck and you didn't have a problem with them. The only thing that would push the incubi into violence would be the injury of one of them.

Jean Luc abandoned his cigarette and started giving his fellow paranormals an extended report in his own clinical fashion. Even if it did seem a little creepy, Keenan couldn't help a small smile.

"The victim presented ten bullet wounds, out of which five were in areas of extreme importance—two in the stomach and the other three in the chest. However, the heart was spared. There were significant burn marks, especially across the chest, but also in the lower regions of the body of the victim."

The Sidhe were a more complicated business. Jean Luc and Pierre D'Argent. Jean Luc was perhaps the most mysterious and indecipherable creature he'd ever encountered. And Pierre...Keenan hated to admit it, but he knew even less about Pierre than he did about Jean Luc.

"Hey, would you stop speaking like I'm dead?" Cassandra snapped at Jean Luc. "I'm right here!"

Keenan looked around at his fellow Council members and realized with dismay that his analysis didn't help him reach any conclusion whatsoever.

Perhaps he was going this about the wrong way. He'd known these people for so long, and he might disregard some important things. He reached out to Eric through their connection.

*"Pet? What are you doing?"*

Eric replied at once. *"Hmmm? Nothing much, just making some tea. You wouldn't believe the teas and weird herbs Mr. Nelson has. Damiana and Suma Root and Maca Root and so much..."* Eric paused and let out a little, awkward laugh. *"Sorry, I'm rambling. You want to ask me something?"*

*"Yeah, actually. You remember the members of the Council?"*

*"Of course,"* Eric replied. *"How could I forget?"*

*"If you were to make a guess, who would be the traitor here?"*

The connection was silent while Eric pondered the question.

*"Well, I know who's not. Jean Luc. Remember that time when I saw into his mind? I just got impressions, scattered images, but nevertheless, I'm quite certain it cannot be him."*

"Why?" Keenan asked, satisfied that it occurred to him to ask Eric. In the background, he heard Elis shout at him, and he was distantly aware that indeed he needed to pay more attention to the ongoing discussion.

*"It's complicated. I don't know. But mostly because I didn't see any burning anger or desire for vengeance or anything like that. Just raw pain."*

Keenan considered this, looking at Jean Luc. He remembered the way the Sidhe told him to be careful on the phone. Eric was right. It couldn't be him.

*"What else, pet?"*

Another extended pause followed. Keenan looked around the room, focusing on their connection and sending images to his pet. The paranormals probably thought he was losing it, since he hadn't responded to any of Elis's more recent taunts.

*"I can't be certain about anyone else, but I can tell you if I see them again."*

Keenan didn't feel too enthusiastic about bringing Eric here again.

*"Hmm...Nothing else you can tell me now?"*

*"Those were-thingsies...I don't think it's them either. They're too angry for such a devious approach. But of course, I can't know that for certain."* He felt Eric mentally shrug.

*"What about Cassandra?"* Keenan asked.

Eric laughed over the connection. *"She hates you, she hates me, and I hate her. I can't make an adequate guess in these circumstances."*

Keenan felt proud of his pet. Someone else might have just shoved the blame on the person he hated.

*"Okay, pet. Go drink your tea."*

*"You're coming tonight, right? I'll save some for you. I heard it's quite stimulating."*

Keenan held back his arousal as much as he could. With everything that happened, he didn't get any satisfaction this morning, and now, in a Council member meeting, he had a hard-on that could cut glass.

*"You're an aphrodisiac, pet. I don't need anything else."*

Eric giggled flirtatiously, but then his tone changed. *"Take care of yourself, Keenan. Those people are dangerous, and I don't want to see you burnt to a crisp again."*

Keenan cursed, feeling his pet's pain at having to see him hurt.

*"I'm dangerous, too, pet. You won't have to."*

Eric assented, although Keenan could feel a lingering fear from him.

*"Okay, Keenan. I'll see you soon."*

It occurred to Keenan, just as the connection faded, that he had no clue why his pet had been making aphrodisiac tea.

## Chapter Fourteen

Eric chuckled as he felt Keenan's distant dismay. He almost felt guilty for teasing Keenan but discarded his concern. Making tea was a completely innocent endeavor. Keenan really needn't be worried over it, even if said teas were sexual stimulants. And besides, the aphrodisiac plants had been a totally random discovery. Why not take advantage of it?

It was entirely Keenan's fault. If not for Keenan's insistence on playing around Mr. Nelson's mind, Eric's professor wouldn't have ended up with a headache, and Eric would have never offered to make him some tea. Of course, at the time, he hadn't guessed that he would bump into his professor's secret stash of aphrodisiacs. He wondered what Mr. Nelson kept in the bedroom if he kept *that* in the kitchen.

Eric's face flamed as he realized what he'd just considered. He didn't think of his professor in a sexual way. It was just innocent curiosity. Eric nodded to himself as he went to the stove and picked up the boiling water. How foolish of him to get so worked up over some simple ginger tea.

Eric sighed, his thoughts turning to Keenan again. Would he manage to discover the traitor in his group? Eric couldn't quite shake the feeling that something very bad would happen. Perhaps it was just the memory of Keenan's burnt body, but he doubted it. This whole affair with the traitor gave him the chills.

"Eric, how's that tea going?"

Startled by Mr. Nelson's sudden voice behind him, Eric dropped the mug in his hand. The professor peeked into the kitchen, and Eric gave him a sheepish look. "I'm sorry. I broke your mug."

He bent down to pick up the shards of glass and hissed as one of the sharp pieces cut into his unprotected hands. "Hey, now, be careful." Mr. Nelson cursed as he saw Eric's bloody hands. "Get up! Leave the shards. I'll clean up later."

Eric felt terrible about giving his professor so much trouble. He'd wanted to make a nice gesture for Mr. Nelson, and instead, he'd only fucked up, broken a mug, and cut his hands.

The professor ran out of the room, leaving Eric to muse over his stupidity.

*"Pet, what's wrong?"*

Keenan's voice rang out in Eric's head, a tone of concern mixed with jealousy.

*"Nothing, Keenan."* Eric sucked on his cut finger absently. *"I just dropped a cup and cut my hand. Don't worry about it!"*

Just then, Mr. Nelson came back in the kitchen, first aid kit in hand. He froze in the doorway, staring at Eric, mouth agape.

For a second, Eric didn't realize what affected his professor so much. Then, he realized that he was still sucking on his hurt finger. Eric let out a little awkward laughter, releasing his finger from his mouth. "I think it stopped."

*"Pet?"* He could almost hear Keenan's arched brow in his voice. Was that even possible?

Eric contemplated telling Keenan about the complicated situation. Keenan could catch enough from his mind, and it'd be for the best to explain. *"It's nothing. Mr. Nelson is helping me tape my hand, that's all."*

He winced at Keenan's mental growl. *"Pet, if he lays one finger on you—"*

Eric didn't know whether to feel irritated or flattered. In the end, he felt neither because Keenan's low growl awoke the fire of arousal inside him.

Keenan must have felt the traces of Eric's passion as his jealousy skyrocketed. *"Pet! That's it! I'm coming over."*

Eric considered the advantages of such a course of action. He would be more than happy to see Keenan. Alas, he was now cohabiting with his art professor, which voided any chance of any lovemaking. And Keenan still had the traitor problem to deal with. Keenan's coming over implied some significant bodily harm to his professor, and that was unacceptable.

*"Keenan, I'm fine. Nothing's going on, I swear."*

Keenan snarled menacingly, and Eric shuddered, still unable to keep his arousal in check.

*"You mean to tell me that what I'm feeling from you is fake?"*



Eric shook his head. “*No...But it’s all you...Just because of you.*”

Eric grimaced, knowing that his denial did nothing to gain his vampire’s trust. He supposed he’d have been upset about it, but that would be hypocrisy, taking into account the circumstances. So, instead, he concentrated on his connection and focused on Mr. Nelson.

“Eric? Eric? Are you all right?” His professor looked concerned, and Eric wondered how many times Mr. Nelson attempted to speak to him while he was in the middle of his conversation with Keenan.

The professor splashed Eric’s face with water, and Eric sputtered. “I’m fine, sir. Thank you. Just a bit tired, I guess.”

He gave the other man a little smile, hoping that it would stop Nelson from asking any further questions. Nelson gave him a critical look and sighed. “Very well. Let me look at that cut, and then you’re going straight into bed. I’ll have a talk with that boyfriend of yours for exhausting you like this.”

Eric blushed at the implication of his professor’s words. It didn’t help that he could feel Keenan’s smug laughter in his head. “*Oh, shut up. This is all your fault, anyway,*” he sent to Keenan.

The next thing he knew was the feel of a ghostly caress on his face, down his neck and chest, phantom hands toying with his nipples and with his now-aroused member. Eric gasped at the otherworldly feeling, not knowing whether to curse his vampire for playing with him like this or beg him for more.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Nelson led him to what seemed to be a guestroom and nodded toward the freshly made bed. Eric obediently sat down, although in truth, sleep was the last thing he could think of. Nelson’s eyes turned concerned when he placed a hand on Eric’s forehead. “Oh, my God, look at you! You’re all flushed. Do you have a fever?”

Eric prayed his professor wouldn’t realize the reason of his sudden “fever” because in such a situation, he’d die of embarrassment. Luckily, his nether regions were covered by his clothing, but Eric wondered if Mr. Nelson couldn’t catch sight of his arousal regardless. “I’ll make you some tea. I have a lot of herbs that can cool you down.”

The professor disappeared from the room, and Eric heard the distinctive sound of pots and pans clashing together. He got out of the bed and made his way to the kitchen door, unseen by his professor.

Eric considered asking Mr. Nelson outright, but then he remembered the embarrassment he felt when he brought it up in their discussion at SVA. Perhaps, he could somehow catch the professor's thoughts? He'd never done it at a distance and without contact, but that didn't mean it wasn't possible, right?

If Eric could do it, Mr. Nelson would never know. His professor was human, and he had no clue of how the paranormal world worked.

Eric took a deep breath and focused on Mr. Nelson. He allowed his mind to flow freely and connect with that of his professor. He wasn't prepared for the inflow of thoughts that flooded his mind.

*"Oh, my God! What the fuck am I going to do? Right, focus. Focus, Matt. Tea, where can you get tea? I need to get some tea. I wonder if there's some tea that acts as an arousal inhibitor. Pat would know. Maybe I should call and ask. But then she'll probably just give me more of those weird plants of hers. Oh, fuck! Did Eric see those? Oh, my God! What am I going to do? He's my freaking student! He's not supposed to be attracted to me, and I'm not supposed to be attracted to him. Calm down, Matt. Calm down! Deep breath. He told you in the office that he wasn't interested in you. So he's faithful to his filthy rich lover. Oh, God! If von Klein finds out about this, I'm a dead man. What the fuck is wrong with me? I need to get laid, God damn it! But who the hell sucks on his finger like that?"*

Eric struggled out of Matthew Nelson's head. He'd heard enough. It was difficult to stop the onslaught of frantic thoughts. In truth, he'd not expected it to even work. But then again, he always blocked his gifts, not used them.

*"Pet? What the fuck is going on there?"*

Keenan's panicked voice burst through their connection. *"Keenan..."* Without really thinking about it, Eric blurted out, *"I kind of accidentally flirted with my professor, and now he's freaking out on me."* He paused a little, realizing what he'd just said. He could feel Keenan's shock over their connection.

*"You flirted with him?"* Keenan boomed.

*"It was completely accidental,"* Eric tried to explain. *"I was sucking on my finger to stop the bleeding and he walked in with the first aid kit. And then you...with the astral thingy...and now he has the wrong idea."*

Keenan groaned at Eric's rushed explanation.

*"I never should have left you there. You'd tempt even a monk."*

Keenan sighed, but thankfully accepted Eric's explanation. *"What was that outburst of power I felt earlier?"*

Eric grimaced a little, feeling ashamed of what he'd done. It wasn't like him to go around snooping in people's heads. Surely, Keenan could tell him if he'd hurt his professor in any way. *"I sort of spied on his thoughts."*

Keenan's annoyance and jealousy flooded the connection. *"Pet, I thought you said that you flirted with him accidentally. Now you go and touch him to read his mind?"*

*"No, no! I mean, I didn't touch him."* Eric buried his face in his hands, feeling frustrated. *"I did it from a distance,"* he finished lamely.

His vampire remained silent for a second. *"You can do that?"* he then asked.

*"Apparently. It helped that he doesn't have mental shields and he practically broadcast his thoughts."*

Keenan sighed again. *"You're more powerful than I thought, pet. Take care with that gift. It can be dangerous."*

*"What should I do, Keenan? I mean, about Mr. Nelson. I feel so bad about all this..."*

*"Do you think he'd sexually assault you or something like that?"* The question seemed harmless enough, but his tone held a threat not to be denied. Eric wanted to punch Keenan for it. His professor was a respectable person. *"No. He wouldn't,"* he answered, flooding their connection with his certainty and sincerity.

*"Hmm, maybe you should just ignore the whole thing. If you say something, it'll just make him feel uncomfortable. When I get there, I can make him forget and—"*

*"No."* Eric interrupted Keenan. *"No more mind-raping my professor! Twice in one day is enough! I'll just talk to him. Surely, he'll understand."*

*"Pet..."* Keenan's voice held an undertone of warning.

*"Keenan... You don't doubt me, do you?"* Eric suddenly felt sad. If his vampire doubted him... Eric's eyes filled with tears. How did he get into so much trouble?

*"No, no, of course not. Go talk to your professor and tell me what he says, okay?"*

Eric sniffled a little. *"Really?"*

*"Yeah, really. Just don't cry."*

Eric hated himself for feeling pleased about Keenan's concern, but there it was. He was happy that Keenan didn't want him to cry, happy that Keenan worried about him. He brushed his tears away and smiled as he felt a brief phantom kiss on his forehead.

Eric knew that Keenan still felt jealous, but he couldn't do anything about it right now, just convey his feelings and hope his lover understood. There was no one like Keenan in his life, nor would there ever be.

Through their connection, Eric sensed his lover settle down a little. Eric supposed that his jealousy was a good sign since it meant that Keenan cared about him. After all, he'd been jealous of Jean Luc as well and his only reason had been a late phone call. Jealousy was irrational like that, and he had no right to blame Keenan for not trusting.

Eric silently sighed. His life seemed to be getting more and more complicated by the second, but he would meet it head-on. First step, speak with Mr. Nelson.

He entered the kitchen, where his professor still busied himself with the tea. He knocked at the door, causing the man to jump and drop the container he held. Eric amused himself at the sensation of déjà vu. Damn, this was a weird day.

"Mr. Nelson?"

His professor met his eyes, giving him a neutral look. "Yes, Eric? Is something the matter? Why aren't you in bed?"

"Ummm...I needed to talk to you, sir."

Eric hated the hastily concealed flash of caution that appeared in Mr. Nelson's gray eyes. By this time, he knew the professor well enough to know that his poker face hid many things. He could place a bet that Mr. Nelson thought that Eric would come on to him now or something of the sort. Damn Keenan for being right! He should have just shut up. But it would have been an embarrassing thing for both of them, better clear it up and start over, right? Anyway, there was no going back now.

His professor seemed to think differently. "Maybe you should go lie down some more," he suggested. "I don't want you to get sick."

Eric knew he should take the chance to get out of this conversation, but somehow, he wanted to be honest to the man. He didn't want Mr. Nelson to think that he cheated on Keenan or he fucked people randomly. He respected the man too much for that.

“Right, about that...I’d like to apologize. I think maybe I may have given you the wrong idea...or something...”

Eric flushed, feeling embarrassed. He knew Nelson liked him on some level, but the professor wasn’t aware of Eric’s abilities. He could just deny it, like he had in the office. Damn him and his unconscious flirting. Had he done that before? He hoped not.

After a moment of awkward silence, Nelson just laughed, scratching his head. “That’s a relief. I mean, it must be obvious that I sort of...Well, I was a bit affected by you. But I never meant to act on it, you being already engaged in a relationship and all.”

Eric felt relieved at his professor’s reply. “I know that. I just sort of wanted to make things clear. You’ve been so nice, helping us and all. Nobody’s ever been so nice to me, well, except Keenan. But he’s different.” Eric bit his lip, knowing he was messing things up again. “I guess that’s what I wanted to say. And thank you again, Mr. Nelson.”

His professor smiled back at him. “Eric, why don’t you call me Matthew? The Mr. Nelson makes me feel old. Having you here is no problem whatsoever. Maybe we can be friends, yeah?”

Eric nodded enthusiastically, pleased that his professor understood his rambling explanation. “I’d like that.”

Mr. Nelson, no, Matthew beamed at him, and his gray eyes sparkled with relief. Eric felt much better now that they eliminated this distance between them. Now, Eric earned himself a friend. Wow, a friend! He’d never had a friend before. Keenan was the only one he’d ever let into his heart, but Keenan was in a category of his own.

“Okay, then. What do you say we clean this mess up? Then I have to visit my aunt Patrice to get some more of these teas. Would you like to come along?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to be in the way or anything.”

Matthew just waved his concern away. “Nonsense. She’d love to meet you. She’s always badgering me about not having a life and living for my art. So you being there might get her off my back.”

Eric couldn’t help but laugh at the expression on his professor’s face. He considered the option for a moment. Why not? He had time until classes started, and maybe he could make another friend. This Aunt Patrice sounded like a pleasant person.

“Okay. If she won’t mind, I’d love to go.”

Matthew nodded, smiling in satisfaction. “That’s great. Why don’t you go and change while I take care of this?”

Eric turned to obey, before asking, “Do I need a specific type of clothing?”

Matthew blinked, confused for a second, and then let out a sound of realization. “Oh. You mean formal wear? Hell, no! Anything is fine. I only said to change because you have some blood on what you’re wearing now.”

Eric suppressed a sigh of relief. He didn’t own any formal clothing. “Okay. I’ll just go then.”

He hastened back to the guest room he was occupying, where he discarded his packs earlier. Rummaging through his luggage, he discovered a clean pair of jeans which weren’t too worn and a black T-shirt. Casual wear, but they would do.

*“Keenan, I patched things up with Mr. Nelson.”*

*“Did you?”* Keenan’s voice dripped skepticism, and Eric arched a brow.

*“Come on, Keenan, don’t be like that. He’s really nice. He said he’d be my friend, and he invited me along to see his aunt.”*

Keenan’s jealousy flared again. *“Pet...If he gets too friendly...”*

Eric shook his head, even if Keenan couldn’t see. *“He won’t. Don’t worry! Anyway, what are you doing? How’s it going with your task?”*

His vampire let out an irritated sigh. *“It’s frustrating as hell. Cassandra’s being a bitch, which is a common enough occurrence, but well, since she was just injured, she’s more of a bitch than usual.”*

Eric frowned. Keenan hadn’t told him much about what happened exactly. *“So Cassandra was the one attacked?”*

*“Yes, pet.”* Keenan paused, his tiredness and concern invading the connection. *“Look, if you go out on this visit of yours, be careful, all right? Watch your back at all times. Or maybe you shouldn’t go out at all. I have a bad feeling.”*

Eric bit his lip. He’d also had a bad feeling earlier, but he already promised to go, and he felt excited to meet Matthew’s aunt. *“I can’t back out now, Keenan. I’ll be careful, I promise, and we’ll keep in touch. Besides, there’s no way anyone could know that I’m here.”*

*“Be careful anyway, pet.”*

*“Okay. You, too. Love you.”*

He felt the familiar sensation of the ghostly caress and then Keenan's lips in his ear whispering, "Love you, too, pet."

The connection faded, and Eric concentrated his attention on the task at hand. He washed and dressed then started to comb his hair, tying it back in a neat ponytail. As he arranged his hair, a knock sounded at his door.

"Eric? Are you ready?"

Eric finished tying his hair back and opened the door. "Yup. Let's go."

\* \* \* \*

The shop Matthew's aunt owned wasn't very far from the complex where he lived. In fact, they didn't bother to even take the car since it was a pleasant day outside and the shop was within walking distance.

As they headed toward their destination, Eric found that any remnant of awkwardness vanished between them. Matthew seemed to be determined to make him feel comfortable for some reason, to be his friend. They talked about many things, but most of all about their common passion—art.

"Can I ask you a question, Eric?" Matthew suddenly inquired. As Eric assented, Matthew continued and asked, "Your paintings? Where are they?"

At that, Eric felt a little sad and lost. He loved his art a lot, and being without those paintings hurt him a bit. "Back at my old place. Keenan will arrange for them to be taken out." He thought about Keenan's promise back in the apartment. Yes, Keenan would take care of things.

"You must love him a lot," Matthew said thoughtfully.

Eric beamed, already losing himself in thoughts of Keenan. "I do. He's a very special person."

His new friend chuckled, looking amused by Eric's attitude. "Well, I'm very happy for you. You deserve someone who appreciates you."

Eric wanted to answer something but didn't get the chance. Matthew stopped walking and gestured toward a pretty shop. "We're here."

Pat's Angels. It seemed a somewhat weird name for a florist's. Eric wondered if Matthew's aunt was a fan of the movie. It wouldn't be impossible. Anyway, this Patrice already promised to be an interesting person.

They walked inside the establishment, and Eric's eyes fell upon a breathtaking sight. Plants appeared to be everywhere, from daffodils to roses

or orchids to exotic species Eric didn't even know the name of. The mixed perfumes of so many flowers created an incredible effect. It looked like a piece of heaven on earth. The name of the shop turned out to fit it perfectly.

The shop owner was nowhere in sight, though.

"Aunt Patrice?" Matthew called out. "Are you around here? Aunt Patrice?"

Matthew turned toward Eric and urged him further inside. "She must be in the back, tending to her precious flowers. She's a plant maniac, I swear."

Just as Matthew said this, a woman emerged from behind one of the big ferns. "Now, what kind of introduction is that for your favorite aunt?"

She made a sound of disapproval, and Matthew gave her a sheepish look. "Sorry, Aunt Patrice."

The woman waved a hand in his direction, discarding his apology. "If you want my forgiveness, you'll call me auntie or Aunt Pat. No more of that Patrice nonsense." Matthew made a face, and the woman laughed. "My God, you're so formal. But anyway, introduce me properly, Mattie."

Matthew cleared his throat and said, "Right, Aunt Patrice, I mean, Auntie, this is Eric McAllister, a good friend of mine. Eric, my aunt, Patrice Nelson."

Eric smiled at the florist. He hadn't expected Matthew's aunt to look like that. She was a truly beautiful woman, and very young, too. Eric guessed she was probably a few years over thirty. She had beautiful black hair, flawless ivory skin, and black eyes that sparkled with kindness. Eric wondered how many of the flowers here were sent by admirers.

"Very pleased to meet you, umm...Madam." He didn't know whether he should kiss Patrice's hand or shake it.

The woman just laughed and pulled him into a hug, "None of that. You *will* call me Pat, please. Don't follow this one's example."

Patrice's warm smile put Eric at ease, and he smiled at the beautiful shopkeeper. "Okay, Pat."

Pat smiled back in satisfaction. "See how easy it is?" She glared at her nephew as she took Eric's hand. Her nephew...How weird! Mr. Nelson even seemed older than her.

"Now, Eric is it?"

"Yes, M...I mean Pat."



Patrice chuckled at Eric's stuttering. "Well, Eric, I'm glad my Mattie finally found someone to spend some time with. He's all the time cooped up in that studio of his. It isn't healthy." She lowered her tone and whispered in Eric's ear, "Should you be calling me auntie as well?"

Eric blushed, shaking his head. "No, we're not...We're not like that."

Matthew separated Patrice from Eric. "Aunt Patrice, stop harassing Eric!" He gave Eric an apologetic look. "She's always trying to hook me up. Sorry."

The shopkeeper made a gesture of exasperation, lifting her hands, as if praying for patience from the heavens. "I'm only trying to help."

In response, Matthew scoffed. "You're just eight years older than me, Aunt Patrice." Matthew's tone sounded teasing, and Eric realized that the only reason the man refused calling her Pat was because he wanted to annoy her.

"Yeah, yeah, Mattie." Pat pulled Eric to her again. "So anyway...Sit down here, and let me get you some tea. Or would you prefer fruit juice? I have the best fruit cocktails in town."

Eric didn't doubt it, if he could judge by the amount of plants inside the store. "If it isn't any bother, fruit cocktail."

The woman grinned. "Coming right up."

"Oh, and Aunt Patrice, hold the liquor. He has school afterwards," Matthew added, going into professor-mode.

"Okay then, but it won't taste the same." Patrice pouted.

Minutes later, Eric was served a delicious fruit drink and homemade cakes. "This is really good," he muttered around a piece of chocolate cake.

Pat beamed, obviously pleased with his compliment. "So tell me more about yourself. Mattie never introduces people to me, so I must admit, I'm very curious."

Eric opened his mouth to speak. He felt strangely at ease with this woman. She seemed so nice, and there was just something about her. She *called* to him somehow.

Just then, the doorbell rang, announcing a customer. "Hold that thought. Be right back."

Matthew swallowed his own cake and asked, "So what do you think?"

"She's wonderful." He looked in the direction Pat had vanished and added, "A special person."

Matthew arched an inquisitive brow. "Special like your Keenan?"

Eric spluttered with his juice. Amazingly, Eric found it quite easy to glare at his new friend. "No! Not like that. Jesus. She's just...unique."

Matthew nodded, his expression turning pensive. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

Before they could say anything else, Pat appeared again. "So? What did I miss? Gossip much?"

The art professor grinned and said, "Eric was just telling me how much he likes you."

Pat let out a gasp in mock surprise. "No! Really? I'm so flattered, Eric. I don't know what to say."

Eric blushed and glared at both Nelsons. "You two...Stop making fun of me."

The woman chuckled, and somehow with her, it sounded cute and even elegant. So much so, that Eric couldn't stay mad at her. "Sorry about that. I hope you're not too angry to tell me some things about you."

Eric faked considering it, then after a brief moment, he said, "Nope, not too angry. It's not much to tell. I'm an art student at SVA."

Pat rolled her eyes. "Oh, no. Not another one." She paused as realization struck. "Wait...Did you say student?"

Eric nodded. "Mr. Nelson is my professor."

Pat elbowed Matthew in the stomach. "Ohhh, someone's being a naughty boy."

Matthew glared at his young aunt. "Stop it, Pattie. I told you, we're not like that. You're making me feel sorry I even brought him along."

Pat gave Eric a sheepish look and zipped her mouth. "I'll be good, promise. Please continue."

Eric cleared his throat. "So I'm an art student. I am involved with someone. His name is Keenan, and I love him very much."

Pat smiled, pleased. "I can see that from the way you speak of him."

"Other than that, I love to paint," Eric continued. "By the way, could I maybe paint you and this place sometime?" He gave the woman a pleading look.

Pat's face showed obvious surprise, but then her gentle smile widened. "Of course! I'd love to. Just tell me where you want me."

“Unfortunately, I don’t have any supplies with me,” Eric said with regret. “But maybe tomorrow, or the day after, or—”

Pat nodded enthusiastically, interrupting Eric. “You can drop by whenever, of course.”

Eric sipped another drink of juice. “Thank you very much. I must say, it’s a wonderful shop. It suits its name.”

Pat’s face fell a little, and her eyes turned sad. Eric wondered what he’d said to upset her.

“The name of my shop doesn’t come from the plants.” She sniffled a little, then got up. “Sorry, I think I heard another customer come in.”

It was an obvious lie. Eric gave Matthew a concerned look as Pat took off.

“What is it? What did I say?”

Matthew sighed and rubbed his eyes. “It’s not your fault. It’s the name of the store. Long story. I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but the gist of it is that Pat married very young, when she was just nineteen. She had a son, named him after the Archangel Gabriel. But one day, just a few months after the child’s birth, her husband just disappeared, and Gabriel as well. He left behind a note, saying that she couldn’t be a good mother for their son. He was taking Gabriel away, and she would never see him again. No matter how much she looked, she never found any trace of them. It was like they vanished off the face of the planet.”

Eric’s eyes widened in horror. “Who would do something like that?”

Matthew’s face hardened with anger. “I don’t know, Eric, but if I ever set my hands on him, I’ll rip him apart.”

When Pat came back from the visit of her fake customer, her eyes looked red and puffy. Eric wanted to say something to make it better but knew that nothing he could do would take the hurt away, so he welcomed the fact that Matthew excused them. “Eric still has to prepare for school. He has classes this afternoon and with all the commotion...”

Obviously, Pat was still lost in her past pain because she just nodded and smiled gently. “Of course. Please, come again. And bring your canvases next time!”

On impulse, Eric hugged Pat. “Thank you so much.” He tried to convey peace of mind, to ease Pat’s pain just a little.

His action seemed to have an opposite effect. Pat burst into tears, desperate sobs that spoke of the broken heart of a mother who'd lost her child. Feeling a bit intimidated, Eric held Pat as she wept. Her emotions and memories slipped into Eric's mind, and he almost pushed her away at the onslaught of overwhelming feelings. Somehow, he knew he couldn't do that. He needed to hang on. His presence seemed to be helping Patrice for some reason, and Eric would not let go because of his own cowardice.

He could practically feel the warmth of a newborn baby cuddled in his arms, the joy of having a son burning as bright as the sun. A little boy with dark hair and dark eyes just like his mother, so frail and yet so beautiful. Then the little bundle in his arms was taken away, and Eric's eyes widened in pain as he saw the cradle where the child had been lying empty and abandoned.

Tears flowed on Eric's cheeks as he held on to the brokenhearted mother. He hoped that the man who hurt this wonderful woman burned in the hottest fires of hell. He deserved it.

## Chapter Fifteen

As it turned out, the meeting had no actual result other than several of the members of the Council jumping at each other's throats. Fuming over his pet's sudden flirting mistake and then Nelson's sudden desire to be friends, Keenan had snapped at Elis and pointed out that he was Jacob's bitch. After his gaffe, proceeding with any actual work ended up impossible.

It had been an idiotic thing to do, since the last thing he needed now was more enemies. Alas, there could be no going back now. The liaison between the two shifters was common knowledge in the Council, yes, but Keenan didn't have any right to expose it in such a crass manner. He didn't blame them for taking offense. On a normal day, he wouldn't have done it, and he berated himself for allowing his frustration get to him. As much as Jacob and Elis irritated him, he respected the shifters. He even agreed with his pet in regards to their innocence in the traitor issue. Jacob simply wasn't the type to stab people in the back. While Elis might have been a more devious predator, he wouldn't go against his lover's opinion.

Of course, he could be wrong, and Jacob's principles might not be strong enough in front of the threat of his pack, in which case he'd just given them a further motive to assassinate him. Not to mention the fact that his incubi friends weren't speaking to him because of his outburst. For some reason, he only now found out that the two demons felt protective of the relationship between the two shifters. Who knew?

This left him with Jean Luc, who in front of it all remained stoic and impassible. Keenan even dared to say that a knowing look appeared in the Sidhe's silver eyes, like he was aware of something the rest of the world ignored. He felt thankful that at least Jean Luc hadn't abandoned ship because of his outburst. One soldier would be better than none.

Keenan passed a hand through his hair, exhaustion threatening to overcome him. Too many things were happening at once, and he couldn't

deal with them. Feelings he didn't know how to deal with bubbled inside him. He'd never felt jealousy as acute as when his pet told him of the things going on in Nelson's apartment. In fact, he thought, he'd never felt jealousy at all.

Everything seemed to be piling up, and he didn't know how to deal with it all. The members of the Council had a point. It was his responsibility to find a solution for the hunter situation, and he acted like a fourth grader with his first crush. He couldn't help it. As luck would have it, he'd discovered his ability to feel at the worst possible moment. He'd been honest when he told Eric that vampire families didn't love like humans did. He cared about his family, of course. Well, he didn't want them dead. They were nice enough for vampires. In fact, Keenan could say he felt some degree of affection for them, especially for his brother. Maybe he should give Aidan a call. He might be able to help.

Keenan sighed, knowing that he was on his own with this one. His brother would show up in a life-and-death situation. Right now, New York was an example of poor management—*his* poor management. When did he lose control so much?

He thought about the members of the Council. Each of them was independent, with his or her own powers, abilities, and helpers. Keenan's own human staff was temporarily incapacitated. True, the von Klein Tower would soon enough be at full capacity again, since he brought people from his other residences and properties. Even so, the whole process would take time, time he didn't have. If this traitor struck now, Keenan would be vulnerable.

He'd been stupid and overly trusting in their arrangement with the humans. He'd thought the defenses of the Tower were impenetrable. Obviously, this was not the case. The IT department from von Klein had yet to discover why the security systems ended up failing so thoroughly. And through all this, Keenan had a terrible feeling, like something would soon happen.

"Keenan? What's wrong?" his pet said through their connection. Eric's sadness flowed over Keenan, immediately alarming him.

"Nothing new. Just the meeting. It didn't go well. But leave that for a minute. What's going on with you?"

Eric's voice came a little shaky through their connection. "*Oh, Keenan...It's just so sad. This woman, Pat...*"

Pat? Who was this Pat?

"*She's Matthew's aunt,*" Eric replied to his unspoken question.

Matthew? Now Nelson was Matthew? What the hell? Keenan fought the surge of jealousy, remembering what his pet said about the professor wanting to be Eric's friend. *Deep breath, Keenan. Calm down.*

"*Please, Keenan. There's no reason for that.*" Eric's voice sounded so sad that Keenan forgot about his jealousy. Well, almost forgot.

"*So? What happened to her? Tell me, pet.*"

"*Oh, Keenan...*" Keenan could practically feel Eric's tears. "*Pat...She had a son when she was younger, but her husband left her and stole her child. She's such a nice woman. She gave me cookies and everything. Why would someone do something like that to her?*"

Keenan frowned. His human hurt for this woman, whoever she was.

"*Come now, pet. Surely there must be something we can do.*"

Eric's mental sob broke Keenan's heart. "*No. No matter how much she looked, she couldn't find them.*"

Keenan thought a little about the situation. Obviously, Eric felt touched by this woman's sorrow. If Keenan could help and take Eric's pain away, he would do it. It would have to wait until he managed with his current tasks, but he'd manage somehow. Perhaps he could contract some detectives who weren't directly involved with von Klein. He knew of many detective firms that were good enough in the Big Apple.

"*True enough, pet, but I'm sure she doesn't have the money and resources that I have. I may have more luck.*"

He felt Eric's enthusiasm through their connection and couldn't help a smile. "*Truly? You'd do that?*"

"*Sure, Eric,*" Keenan said with a small smile. "*But don't tell her anything, though. Since it's been so long, it'll be difficult to find a trace. No use working her up if we don't manage to get a result.*"

"*Yes, yes, of course!*" Eric hastily agreed. "*Thank you, Keenan.*"

Keenan smiled to himself. "*No problem, pet. Let's just hope we manage to find her son.*" Keenan paused. "*Anyway, I wanted to say something else. Be careful today. I'd prefer it if you didn't go out again.*"

Eric's enthusiasm shifted to caution. *"Why? Why did you say the meeting didn't go well? Did something happen?"*

*"Yes, kind of. I had a fight with the shifters. Everybody's furious at me, and with good reason."*

He felt Eric's restlessness stir. *"Those guys were angry since before. Keenan? By any chance, does this have anything to do with me?"*

Keenan rubbed his eyes, struggling to keep control of the connection. His pet would feel guilty if he knew the motive of the argument. *"Keenan?"*

Keenan settled for a half-truth. *"They weren't too pleased that I arrived late, no. But that's not your fault, pet."*

Keenan winced as Eric's skepticism combined with sadness. *"There's more, isn't it? You were angry at me...and you did something."*

Feelings overflowed the connection, sadness, guilt, confusion, worry. Keenan groaned, knowing that Eric would not be thwarted in his search for the truth. Hiding it made it so much worse, particularly since his human was such an adept psychic. *"Pet, don't worry about it! Things like that happen all the time."*

*"Yes, but not at this particular time!"* Eric's worry turned to outright hysteria. *"You need all the help you can get, not to argue with your colleagues because of me. God, Keenan, I'm so sorry. And me here, thinking about Pat, when you're in so much trouble."*

Keenan wished that he could be near his pet, to hug him, kiss him, and make the sadness go away. He focused his astral presence on his pet, imagining Eric's blond hair, his emerald eyes and ivory skin.

*"That's just you, pet, worrying about others all the time. Never mind me. I'll deal with this eventually. Just don't go to the SVA today, all right?"*

*"I'll go back now," Eric agreed. "We were sort of heading in that direction, but I'll go back to Matthew's if you think it's for the best."*

Keenan breathed a sigh of relief at his lover's reply. Thank God Eric wouldn't argue about this and understood the importance of being cautious. He didn't want his pet out in the open, especially with what was going on. He just hoped his human didn't berate himself too much for being the assumed cause of Keenan's problems. Despite the fact that Eric's presence complicated his life so much, Keenan didn't know what he'd do if his pet would one day be gone.



He sent his lover a final kiss through his astral connection as his vampire senses detected a presence approach. “*Have to go now, pet. Be careful, okay?*”

Eric answered by conveying his own feelings, and Keenan suddenly felt better about the whole situation. He’d find this idiot who was messing around with them eventually, and then he’d enjoy his new relationship like he should have.

With that thought in mind, he turned his attention to the new presence.

“Hey, *mon ami*? Care to share your thoughts?” Jean Luc sauntered in, looking as relaxed and dangerous as always.

Keenan shrugged. “There’s just so much going on. I feel like—” He paused, not entirely comfortable with telling Jean Luc his innermost feelings. Their relationship had changed so much in the past few days as the Sidhe helped Keenan with Eric and supported him in the Council. Even so, Keenan felt reluctant to trust this sudden shift in attitude. Relying on Jean Luc too much wouldn’t do.

Jean Luc didn’t question his discretion and just nodded as if he understood. “Well, anyway, we have to find this traitor, and soon. Care to come on a scouring mission with me?” The Sidhe grinned. “Maybe we can find a hunter to torture.”

Keenan arched a brow at Jean Luc’s sudden idea. “You know they’re not out at this hour.”

Jean Luc sat back down on the leather couch, balancing his legs on the coffee table. “Yeah, well, what else is there to do? You have to let the shifters cool down before you try for a formal apology. Giovanni and Lucca are probably around here in a sex frenzy. They always do that when they’re mad about something. Cassandra – well, it’s safe to say that she’s turned in for the day. And my little bro’s with his famous fiancée. In conclusion...”

Keenan rubbed his eyes tiredly. “This sucks, Jean Luc.” He got up nevertheless, since he preferred a scouting mission with no real purpose to just waiting around feeling useless. “Come on, let’s go! It’s worth a shot, I suppose.”

They were just exiting *Extase* when Keenan felt his pet’s pain as a physical blow. It passed through the connection so strongly, like Eric were there, not miles away.

Keenan's eyes widened, and he screamed as agony gripped his body. His pet was in danger, in terrible danger.

"Keenan!" Eric's panicked voice came through their connection. "Keenan, help me," Eric stammered out through their connection.

Keenan didn't know whether to feel relieved or not. His pet was alive and capable of mental conversation, but that didn't give him any guarantees. "Pet? What is it? What's happened?"

"We were attacked. Some men, I don't know who. I felt them, but...but I didn't realize until it was too late. I think they aimed at me, but Matthew—" Eric broke off, and the connection nearly dissolved in incoherent mental sobs. "Oh, God, Keenan, there's so much blood. I don't know what to do."

Keenan struggled to think, the panic of knowing his lover was in danger making his mind almost as incoherent as Eric's. "Eric, listen. Are you hurt?"

Eric's voice turned almost vicious. "Aren't you listening? They shot Matthew, not me!"

"Pet, don't lie to me. I felt your pain." Keenan took a deep breath, trying to calm down and focus on the situation. "Never mind...Just tell me where you are!"

Eric's mental state shifted uneasily. "Keenan, I'm frightened...Help me..." Eric's voice broke off, his connection with Keenan shaky and unstable.

Keenan gritted his teeth. His pet's emotions were all over the place, and he worried that Eric would have a mental breakdown. And in broad daylight, in the center of New York, Eric losing control of his powers could make the situation even worse.

At least with people around, the hunters wouldn't pursue their attack and try to shoot at Eric again.

"Eric, tell me where you are. Right now!"

The connection remained silent for a second, confirming Keenan's guess on Eric's instability.

"Subway station. Oh, God, Keenan, there's blood all over the place...My hands, my clothes...So much blood."

"Hang in there, pet. I'm coming."

Keenan allowed the connection to fade a little. It was difficult to monitor Eric's state of mind and function properly as well, but he had no

choice. He targeted his attention toward Jean Luc, who gave him a concerned look.

*“Mon ami?”*

Keenan was suddenly very thankful for Jean Luc’s presence. Perhaps the Sidhe could do something for Nelson. His pet also suffered some sort of injury, he could tell, but the worst of the damage was to his psyche. Jean Luc would be more skilled than Keenan in healing mental damage. He’d done it before, he could do it again.

Keenan grabbed the Sidhe’s arm and pulled him to his Lexus.

“I don’t have time to explain. I need your help. We need to go now.”

The Sidhe nodded, although Keenan could see a touch of concern and perhaps suspicion in those silver eyes. He’d deal with that later. Right now, he had a pet to save.

\* \* \* \*

Eric stood, trembling in the shadow of a pillar, futilely trying to stave the blood flow from Matthew’s wound. He had managed to bandage it somewhat, following his friend’s instructions, before Matthew blacked out. Even so, the makeshift bandage wasn’t enough, and Eric started to get desperate. He didn’t know what he was supposed to do. He felt lost in the dark.

Everything happened so suddenly. One minute, he was telling Matthew that he needed to go back to the house and that he didn’t feel well. The professor expressed his concern and offered to go with him, to watch over him at least for a little while. After that, it all became a blur. Matthew somehow pushed him out of the way of the bullets, but in the process, he ended up severely injured. Eric didn’t know how many bullets hit his friend, but there was so much blood, so Eric knew it had to be more than one.

Eric remembered having caught something, something bad in the air, stalking him, just as they walked into the subway. He’d focused on Keenan and Pat and his own dilemmas and discarded it. Now, Matthew lay in his arms, bleeding, dying, because of his stupidity.

Eric knew Keenan would come, and it was his only hope. Even this hope started to fade, and he could feel himself slowly slip into that area of his mind reserved for his “bad days.”

Eric clutched his head with bloody hands, fighting against the panic that threatened to overcome him, fighting against the voices of the past that rang out in his head out of nowhere. It was so hard. He couldn't stop them. They were all around him, laughing, cornering him.

*"Pet, calm down! Focus!"*

His vampire's voice rang out in his head, an anchor of a reality Eric was losing touch with. Eric clung to Keenan's voice, struggling to listen, struggling to obey.

Eric took a deep breath. His Keenan would come, and he'd chase the shadows away.

*"Okay, good! Now, I don't want to ask you this, but how bad is Matthew?"*

Eric trembled as he looked down at the bloody body in his arms. He focused on the connection, sending Keenan the image of Matthew's injuries. His vampire cursed and it did nothing for Eric's morale.

*"Okay. Listen, pet. Try to stay calm and out of sight! Focus on your friend, on keeping him alive. I'm bringing Jean Luc with me, and he can help. Just buy us some time."*

Eric felt hope flare inside of him. Maybe they could save his friend. Maybe Matthew wasn't going to die after all. If he could keep Matthew with him just a while longer...

It was a long shot, but he had to try. It would strain him, especially since he now realized that his own shoulder crushed him with a terrible pain. He distinctly remembered hitting the floor hard, hurled back by Matthew's weight. Did he hear a crack then? Perhaps. He didn't know, and he didn't care.

Eric focused his mental powers on his friend's mind. It was hard, and his professor's pain combined with his own acted like an efficient deterrent. Ignoring the agony he felt, Eric delved into Matthew's mind and found himself floating above the ocean. The image of himself walking on water looked so disturbing he lost his concentration for a minute and sank in the silent waves. Eric tried to tell himself it wasn't real, but instinctively, he knew better. Everything that happened in the realm of the mind was very real, on a different plane, but still just as genuine. This unfortunately meant that he could very well drown.

He didn't have to test that theory because a hand reached him for him in the dark depths of the ocean. He was lifted up above the surface, back in the position where he'd originally been, but this time, to meet not just the silent waters, but Matthew's gray gaze.

"Eric? What are you doing here?" The man scratched his head, confused. "Where is here anyway?"

Eric focused a little and managed to calm down. He'd locked on his friend, which meant that Matthew was still alive. Taking a deep breath, he brushed his now-wet hair out of his face and concentrated on hovering above the surface of the ocean.

"This is your mind, Matthew, well, I think so at least." He couldn't know for sure what the ocean actually represented. He'd never done anything like this. "You remember, don't you? Getting shot?"

His friend tilted his head inquiringly. "My mind is an ocean? How very poetic." Matthew's lips twisted in a sarcastic smile.

Eric nodded, despite the fact that Matthew didn't mean the words. It was, in fact, poetic, beautiful, yet so very lonely. The wind whispered of feelings buried deep inside, feelings of an artist lost in a world without friends. In the distance, Eric saw dark and menacing clouds, and he couldn't help a shudder, despite the fact that the energy of the storm seemed to have no effect over the calm waters. In the opposite direction a light shone, so bright Eric could see nothing beyond it.

"Well, that still doesn't explain anything, or why and how you're here, wherever here is." Matthew arched a brow.

Eric didn't know what to say, how to explain. He settled for a half-answer. "Well, I'm here to stop you from dying, of course."

Matthew rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "So you're a hallucination of sorts?"

For a minute, Eric considered allowing his friend to think that he was, indeed, a figment of imagination, but he decided against it. "Not exactly. Anyway, we have to go back. We need to get you some help."

Matthew scowled and crossed his arms against his chest. "Go back? To...?"

"Umm, reality?" Eric squirmed under Matthew's professor's glare. "I don't know, okay? I'm just here so you don't go away."

Matthew watched him for a moment in silence. Finally, looking around him, the man shrugged. "Okay then. Let's go!"

He turned around and started walking – if floating on the water could be considered walking – in the direction of the blinding light.

Eric panicked. He was certain that the blinding light would *not* be a good destination. He knew they needed to take the direction of the stormy clouds. He ran to his friend and grabbed Matthew's ethereal arm.

"No! The other way!"

Matthew's eyes narrowed as he threw a glance over Eric's shoulder. Eric knew that the older man was studying the menacing storm, comparing it to the beautiful, comforting light. Even he felt drawn by the shelter it offered. It seemed so soothing, like a warm balm to his soul. He shook himself, gazing straight into Matthew's eyes.

"If you go there, you'll die."

Matthew glared at him, shaking his hand off. "How can you know that? And what do you care? It's not like I have anything to live for."

Eric felt a pang of hurt at the cruel words but refused to be deterred.

"I care. And what about Pat? Will you leave her all alone?"

That seemed to sway Matthew a little. He turned away from the promise of the light.

"The storm...Are you sure?"

Eric nodded, with a certainty he didn't quite possess. He was sure, but not in the way Matthew meant. At any rate, he knew he had to follow what he felt or else they would both die here.

Together, they walked on the clear surface of the ocean until they reached the stormy area. The water rippled and sizzled with electricity, and high waves clashed against each other in a chaotic symphony. Strangely, there seemed to be a certain barrier, and the waves didn't pass over it.

They looked at each other for a moment, hesitating at the edge of the hurricane. Matthew took Eric's hand, bracing himself. Together, they stepped inside the storm. Seconds later, the hurricane engulfed them both, dragging them down in the abyss. Eric screamed as Matthew's hand slipped from his grip and his friend disappeared from his sight, lost in the sea. Separated by the angry waters from his friend, Eric knew without a doubt that he would die right then and there. And it would all be for naught.

\* \* \* \*

Eric spluttered and coughed, feeling water overwhelm his lungs and the pain in his dislocated shoulder increase to an alarming intensity.

“Pet! Pet! Wake up!”

Eric clung to the lifeline of Keenan’s voice and opened his eyes to the familiar sight of his vampire. Keenan breathed a sigh of relief and wrapped his arms around Eric. “Thank God, pet! You’re awake,” he murmured softly.

Turning a little, he threw over his shoulder, “Jean Luc...”

The voice at the Sidhe came from somewhere behind him. “Yes, I heard. Let me concentrate, *mon ami*. I have a difficult job to do here.”

“Is he healing Matthew?”

“Yes, pet. You did a good job, keeping him alive, although I wish you didn’t risk yourself so.”

Keenan gave him a disapproving look, but Eric faced him dead on. “There was no other way, Keenan. I had to help him somehow.”

His vampire sighed, enveloping Eric in a tight hug once more. “*I thought I’d lost you, pet,*” he whispered mentally. Eric could feel the remnants of Keenan’s terror, of his pain, of his insane anger. He hugged his lover to his chest, doing his best to put Keenan’s fear to rest. He was fine, and he wouldn’t be going anywhere.

But Matthew wasn’t fine. Eric remembered all the blood, and then the ocean and the storm. At some point, he’d lost Matthew in the storm.

Eric made a move to get up, but his lover pushed him back down. “It’s all right, pet. I told you, Jean Luc is taking care of him. Just lay down, okay?”

Eric knew the smartest thing was to obey, but fear and guilt swelled inside him, choking him. Matthew had taken the bullet for him. He knew the attack aimed to kill him. He’d felt the surge in hatred, just before the gunshots. It froze him in place, like a punch in the gut. And Matthew paid for it.

Behind Keenan, a familiar silhouette appeared, startling Eric out of his thoughts. “Keenan, we came as soon as we could.” It was the purple-haired incubus, Giovanni.

“And how are you, *piccolo?*”

Eric tried for a smile and hated the fact that his voice came out shaky and small. "I've had better days."

Behind Giovanni, someone else stepped in. Eric guessed that this had to be Lucca. "Well, then, we finally meet. I have heard a lot about you, Eric McAllister. I am Lucca di Moretti, Giovanni's stepbrother."

A low growl sounded behind the incubi. Keenan sighed, and Eric saw the graceful body of a panther and that of a wolf stalking closer. They morphed into the now familiar and very nude forms of Elis and Jacob.

Eric remembered what Keenan told him about having a fight with the incubi and the shifters. Why were they all crowding here then? Why did they want to help him?

*"It isn't about helping me or you. It was a hunter attack, pet. There may be clues around. Plus, we have to ensure nobody remembers our presence and how we got to be here in the first place."*

Confirming his vampire's words, Jacob growled fiercely at Keenan, and Elis hissed in such an animalistic manner it startled Eric. He wondered what Keenan did to offend the shifters so much.

His lover turned, opening his mouth to speak, obviously meaning to apologize. He didn't have time to speak, though. In the blink of an eye, Jacob lunged at Keenan. Eric's head started spinning even as the werewolf's form flew backwards, hitting the wall hard. His vision dimmed, and he barely had time to register Keenan's presence at his side before he faded into unconsciousness.



## **Chapter Sixteen**

Keenan's heart leapt into his throat as his pet's head lulled to the side and his body became limp.

"Pet!"

Gathering the unconscious form of his human to his chest, Keenan stretched his vampiric senses, looking for a pulse. He feared what he would hear.

Eric's pulse seemed steady, if a little dulled. The mental exertion exhausted Eric, and the shoulder injury didn't help, but Eric would live. Keenan lovingly brushed Eric's hair out of his face, taking his fragile body off the cold concrete floor.

Keenan directed a glare toward the shifters. "I intended to apologize to you, Jacob, but not anymore. Now we're even."

Jacob growled low in his throat. Eric's psychic couldn't have helped his mood. Elis put his hand on Jacob's arm, shaking his head. With another glare, the werewolf turned to his lover and ignored Keenan.

With Eric in his arms, Keenan moved to Jean Luc's glowing form. The Sidhe was, indeed, quite beautiful, more so when bathed in healing energy. He truly did look like the angel his pet called him. Of course, not even Jean Luc could compare to Eric. The blond hair and emerald eyes, the flawless ivory skin, the sweet taste of his blood, the innocence and the generosity, the passion and the talent, everything about Eric was perfect.

The sound of a throat being cleared startled Keenan from his admiration of his pet's attributes. Jean Luc smiled knowingly, looking tired, but also amused.

"Well, now, if you're done mooning over your human, we should get moving."

The Sidhe made a move to get up, but obviously, he'd underestimated his weakness, because he lost his balance and almost collapsed to the floor.

Luckily, Giovanni was there in time to catch him. The incubus took Jean Luc in his arms, holding him in bridal pose, much to Jean Luc's irritation. Jean Luc cursed in French and glared at the demon, but seemed to decide on practicality rather than on conserving his injured pride.

Keenan arched a brow. He'd never seen the Sidhe in a vulnerable position before, and the fact that Jean Luc allowed it to happen, for the benefit of healing a human who was only a stranger, amazed Keenan. Jean Luc wasn't the cold bastard he appeared to be. Keenan would have smiled, if not for Eric's unconscious form in his arms.

Sniffing the air, Elis silently approached. "Jacob and I will stay behind, see what we can find."

Lucca joined the shifter and discretely placed himself between Keenan and Elis. "I'll stay, as well, to deal with any possible human complications. We've already taken the first precautionary measures, and the Agency representatives should arrive any minute now."

Keenan assented with a nod, thankful for Lucca's offer. By rights, he was the one supposed to be here, finding possible clues regarding the hunters. And, God, he wanted to do it! He wanted to rip the throats out of the people who dared to hurt his pet. It would have to wait. The hunters were gone, he knew it, and he needed to make sure Eric was safe from any further danger before making them become prey.

"Wait a minute," Giovanni intervened. "If I'm carrying Jean Luc and you are carrying your human..."

Keenan mentally slapped himself. "Who's taking Nelson?"

Jean Luc glared at both of them. "I can freaking walk! Put me down, *maintenant!*"

Obviously deciding that making the Sidhe angry would be hazardous for his health, Giovanni released Jean Luc from his arms. The Sidhe flipped his silver hair disdainfully and huffed.

"*Bien.* Now, take the human. We still have to erase his memories, and it's risky to do it now."

The three paranormals and the two unconscious humans made their way out of the subway station. As Lucca said, human activity in the area had been kept at a minimum. Police lines restricted the access, and if anybody got too close, officers from NYPD respectfully instructed them to stay away from the crime scene. Several vans blocked the direct view to the entrance

in the subway, and Keenan almost smirked at the efficiency his incubi friends demonstrated.

Of course, it helped that the paranormals practically owned the police. Hell, a decent number of shifters joined the force. The Sidhe infiltrated many aspects of human life, mostly in education and the arts. Vampires, such as Keenan, tended to look after the shadier aspects of the delicate balance between humans and paranormals.

None of the creatures that dwelled in the underground showed their ugly faces around. Keenan didn't think he could deal with an invasion of imps or God knows what at this time. He'd taken a gamble in bringing it up in the Council, but luckily, Giovanni knew him well enough to judge that he'd never considered resorting to underground help. The day he did that would be a very dire one indeed.

The group of paranormals made their way to Keenan's Lexus. It was a long walk, since Keenan abandoned the car a few blocks away from the actual subway entrance, exasperated by the slow movement of traffic. He didn't want to take it in the first place, but causing widespread panic by flying across New York at midday wouldn't have been the best way to help his pet. In the end, he gave up on the car and used his supernatural speed to get to the subway station, taking care to stay in the shadows or in back alleys. Keenan didn't even know how he'd managed to maintain enough reason to do this. It was probably more instinct than an actual conscious decision, since his mind focused on his pet, overwhelmed by the terror of no longer being able to contact Eric through their connection.

Keenan sighed. His human took too many risks. Eric's gift was not one to be toyed with, and without proper training, his pet could hurt himself or others. Keenan didn't actually care about others, but he knew Eric would.

At any rate, he needed to discuss this issue with Eric. As he mused over this, they reached the car. It was difficult to decide which place each of them would take, but they agreed on the fact that it would be best for Giovanni to take care of the unconscious humans in the backseat, while Jean Luc sat shotgun. Keenan got behind the wheel. Unfortunately, his coupe was not designed for having three people in the back. Even with Eric's slender form, the fit ended up very tight. Keenan cursed himself for buying a sports car—a convertible, no less. Why did he need a convertible? He was a fucking

vampire, and he hated the sun. Half the time, he didn't even drive it. Jesus Christ.

Everybody remained silent during their drive, lost in their own thoughts. Unfortunately, they were caught in one of the famous New York traffic jams, a fact which didn't surprise Keenan, taking into account the attack at the subway. By the time they got to the club, everybody was both extremely irritated and very grateful. Particularly, Giovanni looked annoyed and cursed Japanese cars for their idiotically tight backseats. It seemed a bit hypocritical, taking into account that Giovanni's own car didn't even have a backseat. Nevertheless, Keenan wondered how the incubus even managed to sustain two unconscious people in the little space. Wonders never cease.

Despite their tiresome ride, Keenan felt silently thankful he'd brought the car. It would have been next to impossible to get his pet and Nelson to *Extase* without it. The incubi's car would be next to useless, and at any rate, Lucca needed it to get back. Asking Elis or Jacob was out of the question, and the only other option, borrowing an agency car, would have been the most humiliating thing in Keenan's life.

Keenan entered the club and froze. Well, he'd thought the day had been rotten so far. It had just taken a significant turn for the worse.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan suppressed a wince at the powerful slap connected with his face. "Hello, *Mutter!*" he said under his breath.

Elise von Klein scowled at him, apparently not very happy about his less than enthusiastic welcome.

"Don't you dare call me mother! What kind of son are you?"

She crossed her arms across her bountiful chest and scrutinized him with those all-knowing dark eyes. Keenan suppressed the urge to squirm. His mother always had the gift to make him feel inadequate, like a little child who still needed education.

Behind her, Keenan's father appeared. His Aryan looks hadn't changed one bit, and he looked just as young as the year he'd sired Keenan.

"Give the boy a break, Elise," he said. "Surely, there has to be some sort of explanation for why he hasn't contacted us."

The words seemed kind enough, but the tone in which they were said made Keenan take a step back. His sire was angry with him. Now, of all times, he would be forced to deal with an angry family. Couldn't they have gone on one of their extended vacations?

A familiar chuckle sounded somewhere to his right.

"I'm pretty sure the reason is obvious, sire. And said reason has blond hair and an extremely beautiful mouth, if I may say so myself. I bet he has a tight ass, too."

Keenan growled at his brother. "Watch your mouth, Aidan!" He didn't appreciate his promiscuous brother making such remarks about his pet. Never mind that he'd been just as promiscuous himself before last week. It all changed with Eric's appearance in his life.

"In fact, there is a very good explanation," Keenan said.

He faced his father head-on. He wasn't a fledgling anymore, God damn it. "There has been a wave of hunter attacks in New York, and I've been very bus—"

"—getting shot at," his mother finished. Keenan winced at her expression. "We heard all about the explosion at the Tower, Keenan. How could you not call us? I was so worried."

His mother embraced him awkwardly, and Keenan wanted to comfort her. Alas, his hands were busy with his pet and his family hadn't given him the time to put him in a comfortable location.

"Ummm...I'm sorry, *Mutter*," he said in an apologetic tone and gestured toward Eric's still form. "Can you just, give me a minute to—?"

"Wait just a minute, boy," his father interrupted. "First, you'll tell us why you didn't call and why we couldn't even contact you mentally."

Keenan gaped. They couldn't contact him? He cursed, realizing that it must be because of his connection with Eric. How could he possibly explain this to his family? *Gee, Mom, Dad, I sort of bonded with a human psychic, and it kind of backfired on me, and now we're in each other's minds half the time. God!*

Elise's frown deepened at his silence. "Keenan? Talk to me."

Keenan rubbed his eyes. He'd never been able to lie to his mother, but how could he tell her the truth? Elise loved him and Aidan, perhaps more than any vampire mother loved her children. On the rare occasion she showed it, Keenan could deny her nothing. Vampires weren't meant to be

vulnerable or show feelings, but his mother was different. Perhaps he was a little like her. Perhaps she would understand.

“Can we take this someplace else?” Keenan asked his family. He realized that Giovanni and Jean Luc still waited behind him, observing the scene. He could almost hear Giovanni’s silent laughter and see Jean Luc’s smirk. Damn it all to hell.

His sire didn’t argue, obviously deciding that it was indeed best to keep this a family affair. “Before we go, though,” Keenan said again, remembering his manners, “I’d like to introduce you to two good friends of mine. Jean Luc D’Argent and Giovanni di Moretti. Jean Luc, Giovanni, this is my mother, Elise, my father, Günter, and my older brother, Aidan.”

“We’ve already met. Mr. and Mrs. von Klein, a pleasure to see you both.” Jean Luc kissed his mother’s hand and shook his father’s and Aidan’s hands. “It is an honor to have you here.”

Elise smiled gracefully. “And a pleasure to see you, Jean Luc. It’s been a while since you moved from Paris, I believe.”

An awkward pause followed Elise’s remark. Keenan knew she meant to be polite, but Jean Luc felt very sensitive about that time of his life. Giovanni diverted everybody’s attention from Elise’s unfortunate lapse, mimicking the Sidhe. “Welcome to New York. I do hope you enjoy your stay, despite the unfortunate circumstances of your arrival.”

“Have you already arranged for accommodation?” Jean Luc inquired.

Günter arched a brow at the Sidhe’s question. “I assumed that we would be staying at the von Klein Tower. Surely my son has managed to repair it by now.”

The disapproval sounded obvious in his father’s voice, and Keenan just prayed for death. Of all the times...Gritting his teeth, he answered his father. “The structure in itself is fine, but there was a security glitch, and I’m revising all the systems. It isn’t safe to stay there yet.”

“So where are *you* staying?” Aidan answered.

“Actually, I crashed here.” Keenan cursed himself for his own words the minute they exited his mouth.

“*You crashed?* My sons don’t crash anywhere!” Elise snapped angrily.

“I assure you, Mrs. von Klein, it’s quite safe.” Jean Luc intervened to placate Keenan’s mother. “Many of us have living quarters here at *Extase*.”

"I will not have my wife or my sons sleeping in a nightclub," Günter bellowed at Jean Luc.

Aidan patted their fuming sire on the back. "Oh, come on, Dad! Stop being so old fashioned. I'm actually looking forward to the idea."

"You would." Günter glared at his eldest son, and Aidan just shrugged.

"So, shall I make the arrangements?" Jean Luc asked in a neutral tone.

Giovanni came closer and whispered in Keenan's ear, "Your family sure is a handful."

The incubus's initiative brought both him and his burden to the attention of the von Klein family.

"Who's this?" his sire asked, pointing to the art professor.

"His name is Matthew Nelson. He's a friend of Eric's," Keenan replied. When Günter gave him a blank look, Keenan realized he hadn't yet explained who Eric was. "It's a long story," he finished lamely.

"Well, you'll have to tell us everything, Keenan." Elise came closer to Eric and brushed a golden lock from his face. "I assumed you fed from him too much, because he looks a little pale." She touched Matthew's hand gently. "But this one is different. What happened?"

"They were attacked by hunters. Eric became a target because of me." Keenan clenched his jaw as renewed anger gathered in his chest. "Matthew got in the way."

"Will they be all right?" Aidan asked softly.

"Eric is just exhausted. His injuries were minor, and I'll deal with them as soon as I can," Jean Luc answered Aidan. "As for Matthew, I managed to heal him, but he lost a lot of blood. His condition is stable, but we have to look after him, so he doesn't have a relapse."

"You have that kind of equipment here?" Elise inquired.

Jean Luc just nodded absently, and then he disappeared in the back of the club, starting to give orders in French to his staff. In the meantime, Aidan approached and examined the face of the unconscious art professor. Keenan couldn't help but stare as his older brother, seemingly entranced by Matthew Nelson's aristocratic features, extended a hand to touch the human's cheek. Then, shaking himself, Aidan retracted his hand. He turned his back on Giovanni and Keenan and sat back down.

Their sire cleared his throat, breaking the sudden peculiar atmosphere. "Well, then, can go somewhere private to discuss, Keenan?"

Keenan nodded. “Yes, of course. Right this way.” He led his family through the club and to his quarters. He gestured a good-bye as Giovanni disappeared in a different direction, still carrying his human burden. He couldn’t help a little smile when he noticed how his brother’s gaze turned almost longingly toward the same hallway the incubus vanished into. Maybe Aidan would find more than he’d expected here in New York.

\* \* \* \*

“So, that’s pretty much the gist of it.” Keenan offered his father and brother a drink as he summarized everything he knew about the hunter attack, Ulrike’s death, and his suspicion of the Council members.

“Yes, that’s all very interesting, little brother. But you still haven’t explained the issue we’re most interested in. Him...” Aidan pointed in the direction of the bed, toward Eric’s slumbering form.

“Well?” Elise arched a perfect brow, noticing her son’s hesitation.

Keenan cleared his throat. It was embarrassing to talk to his family about things he didn’t yet understand too well himself. How could he explain these feelings he had for Eric, this unique connection?

“Well, his name is Eric, and he’s an art student. We met completely by accident while I was out hunting. He’s twenty years old.” Keenan paused, knowing that wasn’t exactly what his family wanted to hear. Exasperated, he blurted out, “I’m in love with him.”

Silence filled the room, so heavy it seemed almost palpable. Elise spoke first. “Are you certain, son?” she said softly.

Keenan looked into his mother’s eyes—eyes so much like his own—that now scrutinized him with an almost oppressive intensity.

“Yes, mother, I am.”

The face of the female vampire lit up with a smile.

“Oh, Keenan, I’m so happy for you.”

“Now, don’t be hasty, Elise. We have to meet the boy first.”

Elise waved a hand. “Oh, stop being such a smart-ass, Günter. I stand behind my son’s choice all the way. As long as he loves you back, of course.”

Keenan nodded, feeling a knot in his stomach. He’d told his pet the truth when he said that his family was nice by vampire standards. But still, they



weren't the type that gave each other Hallmark cards on Christmas and lived in a white picket fence house with a dog. Hell, they didn't even celebrate Christmas, and he'd missed going to Europe last Samhain. He couldn't even remember why. Business? Pleasure? They kept in contact, of course, and he loved them. But still, he didn't know what to believe about his mother's enthusiasm. This had to be the strangest day ever. First, the hunters attacked, then, his family showed up out of nowhere, scolding him for not calling, and now, they congratulated him for his success in his love life. Keenan couldn't help but feel skeptical.

Elise laughed, and Keenan realized he'd been quite obvious in his musings. "Stop looking at me like that! I'm feeling sentimental lately." Keenan gaped as his mother's eyes filled with tears. "My son, my brave, handsome son," she whispered and hugged him.

\* \* \* \*

Eric woke up to the most unpleasant sight of an unknown woman hugging his vampire. He blinked dazedly, certain that it had to be a weird hallucination or something like that. His displeasure grew when he realized that it was no hallucination, but a very real thing, and the unknown bitch clung to his vampire like a damn street whore. Didn't she know that Keenan was taken?

He made an effort to get up, glaring at the woman, willing her away. It made him dizzy as hell, and it made his head hurt. But at least Keenan moved out of the embrace of the bitch and gave him a concerned look. The woman turned her head toward him, analyzing him with perfect, onyx orbs. *Bitch! Bitch! Get away, get away!*

"Pet, you're awake!" Keenan hastened to his side, and Eric gave him a hurt look.

"Well, obviously, but if you're busy with someone else..."

The woman giggled, and Eric glared at her. Keenan was his, damn it! Keenan interrupted his mental rave, just when he wanted to vocalize it.

"Pet, I'd like you to meet someone. Can you stand?"

Eric looked at Keenan inquiringly as Keenan helped him up. What was going on? Keenan supported him, but Eric couldn't help having a very bad feeling, especially since, all the while, their connection stayed silent.

Keenan led him in front of the unknown woman. Eric now noticed there were two more people in the room, two blond men with blue eyes. They obviously shared the same genetic material.

As he thought this, a terrible suspicion arose in Eric's mind. No, it couldn't be.

"Eric, I'd like you to meet my mother, Elise, my father, Günter, and my older brother, Aidan. *Mutter, Vater*, Aidan, this is Eric McAllister, my lover."

Eric felt silently thankful for Keenan's support at his side because without it, he'd have collapsed from the shock. Keenan's family! Oh, God! This was *not* the best way to meet them.

It occurred to Eric that he'd called Keenan's mother a bitch and probably his vampire heard. "*Keenan, oh, God, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to offend your mother. Don't tell her I said she was a bitch, please.*"

Keenan squeezed his waist a little. "*Don't worry, pet! I'm quite flattered by your jealousy. If anyone else said it, though...*"

Eric's face flamed, and he started to say something, anything even remotely nice or not ridiculous. The woman now identified as Elise, Keenan's mother, didn't give him the chance, though.

"You didn't tell us he was gifted, son," she said with a smile.

Behind Eric, Keenan tensed. "I didn't get the chance."

Eric paled, remembering the way he'd pushed Cassandra away from Keenan and hurled Jacob back with his power. Oh, God! He'd assaulted Keenan's mother. He guessed she managed to resist his attack because of her power. How old and powerful could she be really? If Keenan was over five hundred years old, his brother would be even older, and his parents...God, Eric didn't even want to think about it.

Eric's legs gave out, and he almost lost consciousness again. He wanted the ground to open up and swallow him.

"Pet? Are you all right?"

A soft, delicate hand touched his, and Eric nearly jumped at the contact. The melodic sound of a female voice ghosted in his mind. "*Hush, child. It's all right.*"

Eric's eyes widened, and he struggled in Keenan's grip. "*Pet, calm down.*" Keenan enveloped him in his arms, caressing his hair gently.

“Mom, get out of his head, you’re upsetting him,” he heard his vampire growl.

“I’m sorry,” Elise said out loud. “I didn’t realize he would be frightened like that.”

Eric took a deep breath and moved out of his vampire sanctuary. “No, I should apologize, Mrs. von Klein.” He struggled to keep his voice steady. “It is just that, I’m not used to having voices in my head, other than Keenan’s, of course. And about before...”

“Don’t worry, child,” Elise said. “No damage done.”

A glass of water appeared from above them, and Eric smiled gratefully at the person bringing it, who turned out to be Aidan, Keenan’s brother. “I must say, this is the first time someone nearly fainted out of fear at the sight of my mother.”

He grinned good-humoredly as Eric blushed. Keenan’s mother scoffed. “Feeling better now?”

Eric nodded, smiling at Elise. He liked her. For some reason, she reminded him of Pat. They were both brunettes and boasted dark, midnight black eyes, but they still looked so different. While Pat was lovely in a warm and very human way, Elise’s beauty was of that unattainable type, clearly showing her paranormal nature. And yet, somehow, they both seemed to regard him with kindness, albeit for different reasons.

Keenan’s father cleared his throat. “Now that you’re feeling better, why don’t we get to know each other a little?”

Eric gulped at Günter von Klein’s fixed stare. Oh, shit! He was in big trouble now.

## Chapter Seventeen

Eric struggled to prepare himself for whatever questions Keenan's father would fire at him. *Fire*. Eric's eyes widened as he remembered something else, something with no connection to Keenan's family.

Oh, God! Eric felt dizzy as flashes from the subway passed through his mind's eye. Matthew! Matthew had been shot protecting him.

His mind whirling, Eric pushed away from Keenan's embrace, ignoring the look of surprise he received from Elise von Klein. At the sudden movement, he realized his shoulder was still dislocated and a terrible pain passed through his arm. How could he have even forgotten about it? He needed to see Matthew.

Keenan intercepted his thought and tried to soothe him. "*Pet, it's all right. He's fine. He's being looked after.*"

Eric wanted to believe Keenan. Intellectually, he did, but he still had to see his friend with his own eyes. He felt so guilty for Matthew's wound. Those men had been after Eric, and his friend ended up injured because of it.

Dimly, he realized he was being rude to the von Kleins. He'd have to worry about Keenan's family and his shoulder later.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I just remembered I have somewhere to be."

Günter nodded, even as Keenan wordlessly took him in his arms and walked them to the door. Eric felt thankful for Keenan's support. For all his desire to see his friend, he didn't know where Matthew could be. The only time Eric wondered around *Extase* by himself, he followed his connection with Keenan to detect his vampire's location. Without the guidance, he would easily get lost. The club was a maze of doors and shadowed hallways, confusing anyone who ventured inside. Eric wondered how the section for

the public looked like. It was weird that he'd never managed to see it. He seemed to be spending a lot of time here lately.

As an added complication, his shoulder hurt like hell. When he saw Keenan's mother hug him, he somehow discarded the pain, but now, it returned with a vengeance. He'd have to deal with that later. Despite Keenan's comforting statement, he couldn't shake the image of all the blood, on his hands, on his clothes, everywhere. He looked at himself, startled when he realized he no longer wore his bloodied clothes, but a garment he didn't recognize as his own.

Shaking his head, Eric berated himself for considering such trivialities. He winced as the movement sent a jolt of pain through his arm. A wave of concern swept through his connection with his vampire, and Eric gave Keenan a strained smile, attempting to reassure his lover.

Just as they were exiting the room, he heard a voice behind them say, "Wait! I'm coming with you." With considerable effort, Eric turned, looking confused as Keenan's brother made his way to their side with vampiric speed. He tilted his head inquiringly but didn't say anything. Through their connection, Keenan must have felt his confusion, because his vampire said, *"I think Aidan's taken a liking to your artist friend."*

Eric didn't know whether to feel pleased, amazed, or relieved. He decided that the shock was too strong to feel anything else. Keenan's voice snapped him out of his trance. *"I have to say, I was a little surprised myself. You have to admit, pet, it's quite convenient."*

Eric bit his lip as they exited the room. He knew Matthew felt lonely, but was it right to plan for a hookup during his convalescence? Eric shook his head, deciding to consider this new dilemma later.

The group stayed silent as they hastened through the empty corridors of *Extase*. Eric leaned against Keenan, needing to feel his vampire's comforting warmth. He wished they'd get to Matthew's room faster. He knew that they were, in fact, moving faster than humanly possible, but the nagging feeling of wrongness returned, and the silent corridors of the club unnerved him. Keenan seemed to want not to jolt his arm too much, so Eric suspected they weren't moving as fast as they could have.

*"Keenan? How much further?"* He impatiently squirmed in Keenan's arms, jostling his shoulder in the process.

Keenan sighed. *“The infirmary is separate from the rest of the club, but we should get there quite soon. Just stand still, pet, and don’t move your arm. I don’t want you to overexert yourself, since you’ve passed through quite a strain.”*

Eric gave Keenan a suspicious glare. Was Keenan just taking him to the infirmary to take care of his arm? The concern warmed Eric’s heart, but he really did need to make sure his friend would be all right.

Keenan gave Eric a crooked smile, kissing him on the forehead. *“Don’t worry, pet. You’ll see him, and we’ll have someone look at your arm, as well.”*

Eric nodded, mentally chastising himself for doubting Keenan’s actions. Of course his vampire would want to help him, but he wouldn’t lie to get his point across, right? Anyway, Aidan had no reason to come along if they weren’t actually going to see Matthew.

Lost deep in his thoughts, Eric was surprised to realize that they’d reached their destination. In front of them, at the end of the corridor, light shone through an open door, signaling that it led to an occupied room. In mere seconds, they stepped through the door, and Eric shuddered a little at the view.

At first sight, the room didn’t seem very different from a normal hospital reception room. It looked well-equipped, boasting all the hi-tech equipment necessary for all types of interventions. Eric couldn’t even recognize some of them, but judging by those that he could identify, he could tell the place was used fairly often and for a wide variety of purposes. Still, the stainless steel counters, holding an assortment of vials and bottles of different shapes and sizes, the big refrigerators, and the shelves keeping all sorts of syringes and other types of tools scared Eric. It wasn’t very helpful that some of the stainless steel platforms seemed to be equipped with restraining equipment. He didn’t like drugs, syringes, and he most definitely didn’t like those big, metal cuffs. Suddenly, Eric didn’t want to even be there at all.

Aidan whistled at his side. “Man, little brother, I’ve never seen a hospital room equipped with bondage gear. Cool.”

Eric couldn’t help but resent Keenan’s brother a little for his opinion. But before either Eric or Keenan could answer, someone else showed up. “I assure you, it is not for bondage purposes, at least—” Eric jumped a little in

Keenan's arms, startled by Jean Luc's sudden appearance. The movement made his arm throb painfully yet again, and a sound of pain escaped his mouth.

The Sidhe arched a brow at him, continuing the previously interrupted phrase, "— at least not in the sense you suggested. Now, I assume you're here about the arm?"

Keenan nodded, but Eric shook his head. "Actually, I wanted to see my friend. How is he feeling?"

Jean Luc gave him a skeptical look, but nevertheless answered, "Your friend is much better. I removed the bullets and healed most of the damage back in the subway. Now, he's resting, because he's lost a lot of blood. Given a little time, with proper alimentation and rest, he'll be as good as new."

Eric breathed a sigh of relief. "Can I see him? Just for a little, I mean."

Jean Luc nodded and pointed to another door. "Right this way, if you please." He led them out of the main room and into a separate hallway. The Sidhe wore a robe that bore a striking resemblance to a doctor's outfit. He seemed to blend in completely with the environment, and for the first time, the fact that he could see Jean Luc as cold as a sterile hospital room freaked Eric out.

Eric shuddered, trying to shake the image of those manacles. He couldn't help but wonder why they were there. Were they part of some kind of torture device? He didn't think Jean Luc would do such a thing, and Keenan wouldn't condone it. His vampire would never allow something like that.

*"Pet, stop thinking about unpleasant things."*

*"I can't help it. Do you know why those cuffs are there?"*

Before his lover could answer, the Sidhe turned and smiled a little, as if guessing what troubled Eric.

"Please, don't be bothered by the somewhat off-putting image of the receiving room. Those manacles are there because I have to treat shifters and they tend to be troublesome patients at times."

Eric nodded as he struggled to conceive that. A doctor having to restrain his patients? Well, it made sense, for shifters, that is. Veterinarians sometimes did it as well, right?

A bout of laughter reverberated in his mind, and Eric gave Keenan a chastising look. *"Vets? Oh, my God, pet...You're killing me!"*

Aidan sighed in irritation. "Can we get this show on the road? I'd like to see the human, if you don't mind."

Jean Luc arched a brow at his imperious tone, but nevertheless, he nodded and continued to lead them quickly to a separate chamber.

"I must ask you not to wake him or do anything to disturb him. He needs a lot of rest right now," Jean Luc said, in full doctor mode.

As the door opened, Keenan walked slowly inside with Eric in his arms. Eric gasped at the pale figure on the bed. It wasn't a horrified gasp. In fact, he felt stunned that, despite his pallor, Matthew didn't seem that much worse for the wear. If Eric ignored all the machines and perfusions around his friend, he could have sworn Matthew was just sleeping peacefully.

Jean Luc leaned back to whisper in Eric's ear. "We've given him a mild sedative that will keep him unconscious until his body recovers. As I said, there is no cause for concern."

Jean Luc's words appeased Eric. The machines in the room obviously detected any change in Matthew's state. His friend would be well taken care of.

Obviously, Aidan had something else in mind. Silently, he walked in the room and took Matthew's hand. Jean Luc started to protest, but Keenan shook his head. "If he's been sedated, it should be okay, right?"

The Sidhe frowned, but reluctantly nodded. Eric became too absorbed in the scene to register any of Jean Luc's reactions. He watched in awe as Aidan brushed his lips to Matthew's cheek then across the art professor's neck.

"Aidan!" Keenan's voice bore an undertone of warning. Aidan got up and nodded to Keenan.

"Let's go then." Kissing Matthew's hand, he turned around and exited the room.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan inwardly groaned at his brother's peculiar behavior. He didn't understand Aidan's sudden infatuation with the art professor. Of course, he didn't mind. In fact, he thought it was awfully convenient because he didn't



feel comfortable with the idea of Matthew hanging around Eric with lusty thoughts.

He owed Nelson a great debt, though, one he could never repay. The human saved his pet, at the cost of his own blood. Therefore, Keenan would protect Matthew, even from his own brother.

Keenan never fully understood Aidan, and he couldn't quite grasp the reasoning behind the actions of his older sibling. It was weird enough that Aidan insisted on coming with them to see Nelson, but now, he'd been a step away from biting him. Keenan simply couldn't find an explanation. To his knowledge, Aidan had never seen Matthew Nelson in his life.

Shaking his head, Keenan directed his attention to more urgent issues. His pet still needed his arm fixed. Exiting the room, he looked at Jean Luc's white-clad form. "Can you heal Eric's arm now?"

The Sidhe looked at Eric, touching his hand gently. He sighed and shook his head. "I'm afraid not. With the other human's healing, I exhausted almost all my powers."

Keenan was startled at Jean Luc's declaration. He'd asked the question more or less out of manners, not really expecting to be declined. "But you said..."

Jean Luc gave him a stony look. "I said I'd deal with his arm, but I can't heal him the Sidhe way. You have to understand, Keenan, Matthew Nelson's injury required a tremendous amount of energy to heal. We'd have to take a more old-fashioned approach, I'm afraid."

Before Keenan could say anything else, Eric softly intervened. "That would be fine. Thank you very much."

Jean Luc nodded, acknowledging Eric's words, and turned around, walking away from the chamber in which Nelson rested and back toward the previous room. Taking the hint, Keenan followed, distantly wondering where his wayward brother ran off to.

As they walked inside the infirmary room, Eric shuddered again, and Keenan grimaced. For some reason, Eric felt freaked about the room. He guessed that it had to do with Eric's past. Keenan never managed to find out what caused Eric's mental instability, mainly because, somehow, Eric seemed to have developed a peculiar defense mechanism, isolating those memories deep into the recesses of his mind. The little things he caught now

were just a shadow of what lay beneath. He knew this since that night he'd, on impulse, immobilized Eric.

So much remained untold, uncovered. And yet, Keenan knew that, whatever Eric's past, he could not feel anything less for his human. This love he felt for Eric wasn't even rational. It was almost an obsession, an overwhelming feeling that urged him to possess Eric. These days, his passion, his concern, and his anger struggled for supremacy inside his head, until he couldn't focus anymore, until his whole world was Eric.

Right now, removing his pet's pain ranked highest on his list of priorities. The next item on the agenda would be executing the hunters who'd caused this pain, preferably in a very agonizing manner. Keenan would enjoy killing them ever so slowly, draining their blood until they couldn't move, feeling their terror as he broke their limbs one by one, hearing them beg even as they prayed for death.

*"Keenan?"*

Eric's concerned voice snapped through his fantasy of gore. Keenan inwardly cursed. He didn't want his pet to see that side of him. As a vampire, he couldn't help certain things, and as much as he wanted to restrain himself, his mind was wired differently. He wouldn't have cared much about it. Living as a vampire meant you couldn't hold to scruples or useless morals. The paranormal world was a harsh one to live in, and vampires taught their children to fight from a very young age. Eric didn't know the realities of the vampire world, though. Keenan needed to be careful and rein in his bloodlust impulses. He didn't know what he'd do if Eric ever saw him as a monster.

*"I'm sorry about that, pet,"* Keenan whispered through their bond. *"I can't seem to help it. When I think about what could have happened..."*

His beautiful human just beamed at him. *"You know, you think too much."* A mental giggle passed through the connection before Eric's tone turned serious. *"You're not a monster, Keenan. I'll never see you like that."*

Keenan couldn't help but feel very warm inside at Eric's honest love. He settled for brushing his lips across his human's forehead. Then he focused his attention on Jean Luc.

The Sidhe gestured to one of the examination tables, and Keenan gently set his pet down. Feeling Eric tense at the loss of contact, he whispered, *"Don't worry, pet. I'm right here."*

Eric nodded, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. Keenan held his lover's hand, and Eric opened his eyes, smiling. *"It'll be all right, won't it?"*

Keenan nodded, doing his best to comfort his human. He felt Jean Luc move behind him, before the Sidhe pulled the curtain and reappeared, a syringe in his hand. Eric's eyes widened and he scuttled back violently, letting out a small moan of pain when the movement hurt his already hurt arm.

Jean Luc slowly came closer, and Eric's eyes fixated on the syringe. "Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you." The Sidhe's voice sounded low, almost soothing, as if he attempted to calm down a frightened animal.

Eric didn't seem to hear him, just staring at the needle in frozen terror. Several objects started to rattle in the room, moved by an unseen force. "Throw it away," Keenan growled.

Jean Luc sighed and put the needle down. "He has to face his fears eventually, Keenan. You have to speak to him about this."

Keenan cursed, suddenly feeling a surge of resentment for the Sidhe. "What the hell do you know?"

Through their connection, Keenan snapped Eric out of his terror-induced trance. *"Pet! Pet!"*

Eric blinked, his eyes going hazy for a moment, but the fear started to evaporate. The rattle of the objects stopped as Eric inquired softly, "Keenan?"

"Shhh, pet...It's fine, I'm here."

Eric buried his blond head in Keenan's shoulder, while Keenan glared at Jean Luc. "Who the hell do you think you are? Making experiments like that?"

"I'm sorry, Keenan. He looked much better than the first time I met him." Jean Luc shook his head. "I have been noticing some other changes as well. I wonder if you know what treatment he takes, whether he's been taking it lately, stuff like that. And if you know things about his powers..."

Keenan gulped, now feeling completely inadequate. "I'm not certain about the name of the meds. I don't think he's been taking them since that night. His powers seem to have been growing, though."

Jean Luc gave Eric a thoughtful look. "I assumed as much. Well, that can be a good thing, but it can also be a bad thing. If he pushes himself...Humans aren't meant to hold such power, Keenan."

The warning in Jean Luc's tone echoed Keenan's own fears. Eric didn't know how to use his power and tended to push himself too hard. Keenan felt concerned that he might hurt himself because of it. "Well, for now, I'll just give you a mild sedative. It shouldn't put a damper on his powers, but it will help him control them. That way, you'll find it easier to help him train his powers." The Sidhe gave Eric a look, as if considering something. "About the shoulder, I think you have to knock him out. Then I'll administer—"

The phrase seemed to snap Eric out of his shock. "Wait! Knock me out? What on Earth are you talking about?"

Keenan winced at the anger in his pet's voice. "Pet, it's just to avoid the pain. I did it before, that time in the park, remember?"

Eric scowled at him, a suspicious look in his eyes. Mentally, he asked, "*No syringes or drugs?*"

Keenan crossed his heart, offering Eric what he hoped was a comforting smile. "*I swear, pet. No syringes.*"

He couldn't say "no drugs" since he didn't know exactly whether or not Eric would need a painkiller or something like that.

Eric made a face, but nodded nevertheless. "*Okay, but remember, you promised.*"

Keenan nodded, and Eric closed his eyes as he prepared for the jolt that would knock him out. The jolt never came. Keenan felt someone else approach, two other people coming closer and closer.

Eric cracked an eye open, studying Keenan. "Keenan?"

"Someone's coming," Keenan answered absently. He focused on detecting the identity of the new arrivals. He didn't have any problems in recognizing one of them as Aidan. The other was harder to figure out, but Keenan managed to identify it as Pierre.

Keenan smiled at his pet. If Pierre came, he'd be able to heal Eric's shoulder in no time. Even as he thought this, the blond Sidhe and Aidan stepped inside the room.

Pierre seemed distressed and immediately assaulted Jean Luc with a shot of concerned questions. "I heard about what happened. Why did you not call me, Jean Luc?"

Jean Luc gave his brother a stony look. "I was busy," he said coldly.

Keenan arched a brow, finding Jean Luc's demeanor toward his sibling peculiar. In the end, he decided against solving the dilemma of Jean Luc D'Argent. Instead, he focused on Pierre. "Pierre, now that you're here, can I ask you a favor?"

Pierre tilted his head and gave him an inquiring glance. Taking in Pierre's elegant features, Keenan remembered why he'd slept with him in the first place. He banished the thought as quickly as it came, hoping Eric didn't catch it.

Alas, Lady Luck seemed to have something against Keenan today because Eric's outrage swiftly washed over their connection. "*You slept with this guy? When?*"

*"It was a long time ago, pet. Long before you, and just a fling."*

Eric harrumphed. "*Yeah, right. And what was that just now?*"

*"An objective observation. Pet, come on,"* Keenan begged. "*Trust me.*"

Eric glared at him. "*Nothing going on between you and him now?*"

*"Nothing, pet. I swear."*

Oblivious to the exchange, Pierre observed them curiously, while Aidan just looked amused.

"Okay, so as I was saying, can I ask for a favor?" Keenan started again.

Pierre's blue eyes seemed to shine in confusion. "Sure. What is it that you need?"

Eric mentally scoffed, and Keenan couldn't help but feel a little smug at his pet's jealousy. "I'd be very grateful if you can take a look at Eric's shoulder. It's dislocated, and Jean Luc's exhausted."

*"You want him to heal me?"* Eric mentally shouted.

*"Pet, hush! It's for your own good. It's either that or the previous method, which, I must say, would not be pleasant."*

Pierre nodded and gave them a pleasant smile. "Of course, Keenan."

Eric frowned at the Sidhe, irradiating displeasure. Keenan gave his fuming human a pleading look. "*Pet...*"

*"Didn't you hear how he said your name? Keee-naan. He's after you, I can tell!"*

Keenan rubbed his eyes tiredly. Taking into account what happened with the incubus spell, Eric was at least half-correct. At any rate, it didn't

matter. Since Pierre could heal Eric, ethical or sentimental issues needed to be laid aside for a while.

*“Pet, please. Obey, all right?”*

Eric harrumphed but, in the end, assented. As Pierre came next to the platform, Keenan heard another interruption. “I don’t think this is a very good idea,” Jean Luc said.

Keenan arched his brow at the older Sidhe. “Why not? It’s the same as with you, is it not?”

“Well, not quite...” Jean Luc hesitated. “Pierre is still young. He still has a lot to learn.”

“I can do it, Jean Luc,” Pierre snapped at his brother.

Without another word, Pierre took Eric’s hand. Even as the healing light began to glow, Eric’s eyes widened, and he screamed.

## Chapter Eighteen

Eric's cry echoed in the sterile room of the infirmary, urging Keenan into instant action. He pushed Pierre away and snarled at the Sidhe. "What did you do?"

Pierre gave him a confused look. "Nothing. I just tried to heal him, like you asked me to."

Keenan couldn't detect any deception in Pierre's tone, but he couldn't quite believe the other man. He turned his attention to his young human, who seemed to be staring somewhere into space, covering his ears with his hands and whimpering softly. Keenan wanted to scream at the pain Eric felt because of jostling his injured hand.

"Pet. Eric!"

Eric didn't give any sign of hearing him. His whole body trembled, and he was shaking his head, as if denying something Keenan couldn't quite see. Frustrated and worried beyond belief, Keenan pushed through their connection. He blinked in confusion as he emerged in Eric's mind, which, strangely enough, had gained the appearance of a common New York alley. It felt weird. This had never happened before when Keenan attempted to connect with Eric. The only time that came close was back in his penthouse, but he'd never managed to merge with Eric's mind like this. Keenan remembered his conversation with Jean Luc. Had his pet's powers gone out of control?

Shaking his head at his own thoughts, Keenan scanned the alley for any sign of Eric. He was nowhere to be seen, and the alley seemed deserted.

A surreal voice appeared somewhere in his mind. "*Shh, Keenan,*" Eric whispered. "*I'm right here, but don't say anything, or he'll feel you.*"

He? Who was "he"? And where did Eric go? Keenan wanted to turn around and look for his pet but found that he could not. In fact, his body seemed to not be obeying anything he wished. What the fuck?

Even as he thought this, Keenan caught a glimpse of a brunette dressed in a smart business suit, her dark hair impeccably tied in an elegant, yet simple chignon. Keenan frowned at the familiar image of Ulrike, feeling confused. How could his pet have known the elder female vampire?

The answer came embodied in the voice that rang out from the body Keenan currently resided in. The man kissed Ulrike's hand, whispering seductively, "As beautiful as always, my dear Ulrike." It wasn't Keenan's voice saying the words. Not that Keenan ever used such endearments with Ulrike. He'd been civil with her, but their relationship didn't extend to having pet names for each other.

Ulrike just smiled. "And you, Pierre. Such a flatterer. Stop being so formal."

Keenan—or rather Pierre—laughed and pulled Ulrike to him for a passionate kiss. Keenan inwardly gaped. He'd never known that Pierre and Ulrike had been together. Besides, the weirdness of feeling Ulrike's lips on his own—which, in fact, weren't his own—made his head ache.

Keenan considered the issue for a second. This couldn't be happening right now. Ulrike had died in the hunter attack, and Pierre was back at *Extase*. Keenan could only find one explanation. Both Eric and he were lost in a memory—Pierre's memory. He could sense even echoes of the Sidhe's feelings. The entire thing, three people in the mind of one, seemed insane. If it had been happening right then, Pierre's mind couldn't have withstood the pressure. In fact, Pierre was merely a robot with registered feelings. It was a little like movies watched in 3-D, just that Keenan knew the events actually happened sometime in the past.

As Keenan thought this, Pierre worked on unbuttoning Ulrike's jacket. The woman helped her lover, carelessly discarding the expensive piece of clothing on the dirty asphalt. Next followed the elegant, yet sexy blouse and Ulrike's skirt.

Keenan had a bad feeling about the whole situation. He didn't know when this happened, but a terrible suspicion appeared in his head.

*"What do you think, pet? Can we manage to spy a little on his thoughts?"*

Keenan felt his human hesitate, but then Eric assented. Together, they focused on the memory, penetrating the thoughts of the person who owned them.



*Pierre separated his mouth from Ulrike's soft lips and analyzed her with predatory eyes. She looked beautiful, her lips swollen from his aggressive kisses and her nipples erect behind the lace bra. He could easily detect her arousal through her unfocused gaze and her labored breathing.*

*The fact that he had this creature, so strong in her own right, literally at his beck and call made him feel powerful. She was so stylish and arrogant, but with a mere phone call, he could make her come wherever he said. He could fuck her in the dirtiest alleys of New York, and she wouldn't complain.*

*Pierre grinned as he pushed Ulrike on her knees on the pavement. Eagerly, Ulrike worked the buttons of his pants, pushing his boxers down, and took his erection in her warm mouth. Being the lover of an elder vampire could have its perks. She gave the best blow jobs possible.*

*Even as Pierre thought this, Ulrike started to lick him like a delicious lollipop, tracing the veins in his cock with her tongue. Even that teasing touch felt so good. She used her hands to play with his balls, but it was still not enough. Pierre growled at the woman, warning her to get on with it.*

*Ulrike obeyed, taking his erection in her mouth, starting to suck in earnest. She swirled her tongue in an expert movement around his shaft, deep-throating him with enthusiasm. Pierre looked down to see Ulrike on her knees in the dirty alley, her mouth eagerly working his cock. He grinned smugly in the darkness as he started thrusting violently in and out of Ulrike's mouth.*

*The woman moaned around his dick, but as much as both of them enjoyed this, Pierre knew Ulrike wanted something else. Oh, yes, he knew too well the reason why the woman had been so eager to come to him.*

*The Sidhe pulled Ulrike off his cock and pushed her violently against a wall. With her inhuman eyes clouded by desire, Ulrike spread her legs in invitation, wrapping them around his waist. Pierre grinned as he felt the evidence of her desire. Her lace underwear was already moist with her juices. He ripped the panties off her, and she moaned his name, begging him to fuck her hard.*

*Pierre didn't waste any time in burying himself in her wet heat. The woman arched her back as he fucked her forcibly against the wall, pinning her with his weight. Tearing the bra, he buried his face in her breasts, laving her nipples with his tongue. Her pretty, sensitive nipples seemed to be*

*begging for his attention, peaking in sign of the arousal of their owner. As Pierre dedicated his attention to her neck and nipples, Ulrike moaned his name again. "Oh, yes, Pierre...Pierre..."*

*Over and over, he thrust into her tight channel, rejoicing in the feel of her heat gripping him tightly, in her hands gripping his shoulders, and in the sound of her voice, begging him to fuck her harder. He enjoyed the beautiful sounds she made. It was a pity, really. But oh, well...One cannot make an omelet without breaking the eggs.*

*It didn't take long for the furious fucking to bring Ulrike over. He felt her pleasure wash over him and seconds later climaxed inside of her. Even so, he needed more. Gripping her hair, he pushed her on all fours and thrust into her again from behind. When they got together, once was never enough. She almost managed to satisfy him. Her breasts bounced beautifully as she impaled herself on his cock, meeting him thrust for thrust. She panted hard, and her hair, now free from its knot, scraped across the alley floor. "Oh, God, yes! Harder, Pierre, harder!"*

*Pierre considered making her beg some more but decided against it. He could feel his second orgasm just seconds away. Why delay the inevitable? Things needed to follow their course. And besides, there was someone else entirely he wanted, someone better than her.*

*He picked up speed and thrust harder and harder inside her wet cunt. Ulrike screamed and came again, and Pierre followed her with a groan, releasing his seed deep inside her.*

*Breathing hard, the woman leaned against the pavement. "Oh, fuck, Pierre, you're so good at that," she whispered.*

*Pierre grinned in the darkness, answering with a touch of affection in his voice. "Of course, my love. How can I not be, with such a lovely partner?" He knew that, for some reason, Ulrike liked it when he said mushy things like that. It didn't cost him anything, and it kept her off guard.*

*He considered for a second fucking her ass, but alas, he ran out of time. Or, better said, Ulrike ran out of time. As if in answer to his thought, the woman tensed beneath him and whispered, "Did you feel that, Pierre?"*

*Pierre smirked, but his voice gave nothing away when he said, "I did, my love."*

*Still buried inside her, he removed the locket he kept hidden at his neck at all times, pressing a hidden button. Obediently, the locket turned into a*

*sharp knife, custom made and enchanted with special magic. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, even as he embedded the sharp knife in the back of her neck.*

*It wasn’t easy to kill a vampire, but the hit would incapacitate her long enough. Ulrike screamed, her surprise and horror mixing with the pain. She tried to fight him, but the knife deeply imbedded in her neck made her movements awkward and unfocused. Howling fiercely, Ulrike pushed him away, and Pierre flew off, hitting the ground hard. Her eyes sparkled with deadly intent as she headed for him. She didn’t have time to enact her revenge.*

*The sound of bullets and crossbow fire filled the alley, and Pierre knew he had won.*

Keenan and Eric stopped listening to Pierre’s thoughts. It was enough for Keenan to confirm his suspicions. In truth, the following image of Pierre staking Ulrike through the heart would have been enough, but he hadn’t guessed that something so horrid could slip into Eric’s mind. He wondered what else his pet saw, and he berated himself for forcing the psychic to hear those terrible thoughts.

*“Pet?”*

A terrible sensation washed over him as Eric didn’t answer his mental voice. *“Pet? Eric?”*

A little laughter ghosted inside his head. *“Wow! How amazing.”* Eric sounded so weird, like an entirely different person. It scared Keenan, and he cursed himself for his stupidity.

*“So cool,”* Eric finished, and Keenan wanted to shake him. Only, he didn’t have hands, and he remained trapped inside the memory. Fuck! Now, the body they resided in stood over Ulrike’s body, admiring his handiwork. Ulrike was obviously not dead yet, but very much immobilized. Keenan knew what would happen, and he didn’t want Eric to see it.

*“Pet! Snap out of it!”* he growled.

*“What? Keenan?”* He felt Eric’s mind stir, and his pet returned to normal. Eric’s horror and terrible fear washed over him like a wave.

*“Keenan, I killed her. Did you see? I killed her.”*

Keenan groaned. *“No, pet, you didn’t. It’s a memory. Pierre’s memory. You don’t even know Ulrike, how could you have killed her?”*

“*But—*” Eric paused, trying to calm himself down.

Keenan’s restlessness increased with every second that passed in silence. Finally, Eric spoke again, a little calmer.

“*Yes, that’s true. For a moment there...Oh, God, Keenan. This is so awful! How could he do something like that?*” His voice started to shake with tears.

Keenan wanted to hug his pet, to keep Eric away from the darkness that shrouded the paranormal world. Somehow, he hadn’t been prepared to see such a thing either. He never expected such a thing from Pierre. Even if he’d kept Pierre on his list of possible suspects, half of him never believed Pierre could be the traitor. To see him do something so utterly wrong shook Keenan to the core.

Even as a vampire, Keenan always refrained from killing his victims. In his younger years, he hadn’t been so careful, but in time, both his family and the vampire nation as a whole realized that it would be better to be on good terms with the humans. Despite the fact that those like Cassandra still considered humans only as food, Keenan knew better. Humans could be dangerous, and they could be powerful enemies. In a world that overflowed with them, it didn’t pay to take such a risk.

The evidence of this lay right in front of his eyes, embodied in Pierre’s memory. The silent silhouettes of the hunters appeared from the shadows, heading toward Pierre and Ulrike.

“Well, that was a nice performance,” a tall African-American man said, giving Pierre an appraising look.

The Sidhe just shrugged. “She served her purpose. We can get inside the von Klein Tower now. Be careful, I want him alive.”

Another man nodded, irritation evident in his voice as he spoke. “Yes, yes, we know. Jesus Christ, we’re not children.”

As Pierre turned his gaze toward him, the other man took a step back. The African-American, who seemed to be the leader of the group, gestured for his subordinate to go, and the man disappeared in the shadows again.

“So, what do we do with her?” he asked Pierre.

Forgetting about the human that dared to speak up to him, Pierre smiled at the leader of the hunters. “You know what we do, don’t you?”

The African-American laughed and removed a huge blade from a support on his back. “Care to do the honors?”

Pierre assented and took the blade. He placed a final kiss on Ulrike's lips. Keenan knew that, even with the stake in her heart and pierced by arrows and special bullets, the woman still lived. If someone had removed the stake in her chest, she'd have probably been able to take them all down.

But it wasn't meant to be.

"Good-bye, my love," Pierre whispered. And without further ado, he separated Ulrike's head from her body. Keenan knew he'd have thrown up at the scene if he'd been corporeal.

*"Come on, pet. We've seen enough."*

Eric hastily assented, allowing Keenan to drag him back to reality. Keenan hoped that seeing and feeling that terrible scene wouldn't shatter his pet's fragile psyche. He'd never forgive himself if it did.

\* \* \* \*

Eric gasped as he opened his eyes, and for a second, he didn't know where he was. He remembered a dark alley, the smell of sex, the swish of arrows, and then death. Oh, God! That poor woman!

Eric felt ill. He grasped the platform, nearly falling over as he emptied the contents of his stomach. His arm protested the movement, but he ignored it. The images still flashed in front of his eyes, violent, terrible, perverse, and mocking him. He tasted murder in his mouth, and he felt dirty and violated.

*"Shh. I'm so sorry, pet. I never should have told you to do that,"* Keenan whispered in his head.

Eric gasped, grasping to the voice of his vampire like an anchor. "Oh, God, Keenan. H-he..."

Keenan hushed him, and Eric realized just then what the memory meant. Pierre was the traitor, and Keenan could punish him. His eyes snapped open as he scanned the room for his new nemesis. He felt so much hate for the creature that could do something so terrible without even blinking. An overwhelming feeling of anger surged inside him, a disgust so intense he'd never thought he'd experience.

Keenan squeezed his hand, and Eric made an effort to control himself. If he opened his mouth, the bastard could get away. He took a deep breath and focused on keeping his temper in check.

As he looked about the room, he registered everybody giving him a curious look.

“What just happened, Keenan?” Aidan asked. “He totally freaked!”

Keenan got up, heading for his brother. “Nothing, Aidan. He’s just fragile. It happens sometimes.”

Eric would have argued, since it irritated him immensely to be spoken of like he wasn’t there. However, he didn’t get the chance. Faster than the blink of an eye, Keenan shifted on his feet, and in a mere second, he pinned Pierre against the wall of the infirmary.

Pierre’s eyes widened in surprise. “Keenan? What in the world?”

“Shut the fuck up!” Keenan growled. He banged Pierre’s head against the wall, and Eric couldn’t help but feel a little satisfied. The bastard had done something similar to the poor woman. “You fucking murderer! You killed Ulrike and God knows how many more.”

“What the hell, Keenan?” Jean Luc growled. “What are you talking about? Let Pierre go.”

To Eric, it seemed weird that Jean Luc asked Keenan to let his brother go but didn’t actually *do* anything. He studied the older Sidhe, taking in the way his perfect features tensed and the peculiar way the silver of his eyes flashed.

“You knew, didn’t you?” he croaked out accusingly.

Jean Luc turned his attention to him but said nothing. “That’s why you didn’t want him to touch me,” Eric continued, “because you knew I would see what he’d done.”

Jean Luc looked at Eric, then at Keenan, still pinning his brother against the wall. Pierre seemed to find some sort of hope in Jean Luc’s attitude. “Jean Luc,” he began softly, “*mon frère...*” Pierre gave the older Sidhe a pleading look, but Jean Luc looked away.

Pierre’s blue eyes sparkled with unshed tears.

“*Mon frère*, please.” It was pointless. Keenan squeezed Pierre’s throat, and the Sidhe started to choke, even as objects began to move by themselves in the room. Keenan seemed unfazed.

“Shut the fuck up, little bitch! And stop that!” he barked.

“I can’t help it,” Pierre whispered in a pathetically small voice.

Well, Eric didn’t feel very understanding about Pierre’s plight. He yelped as an operating knife missed his face by an inch. Without losing

another moment, he took cover under the platform, hoping that the flying objects wouldn't get him there and ignoring the painful throb of his arm.

From his hiding spot, Eric couldn't see what was happening, and he suddenly felt very reluctant to try to observe the scene through his connection with Keenan. His head ached something atrocious, and he just wanted to sleep forever. Everything seemed to be falling apart around him, and the world turned grimmer and scarier by the second. He wanted to help, to support Keenan, but he felt drained and frightened, and everything ached.

*"Don't worry, pet. I can handle this bastard myself,"* Keenan said in Eric's mind. *"Just stay put."*

Confirming Keenan's confident statement, the objects started to slow their frantic movement, and Eric guessed that Keenan's squeezing finally got to the Sidhe. He crawled out from under the platform to take a look and breathed a sigh of relief. Pierre seemed immobilized. It was over.

But then something unexpected happened. A French curse sounded in the room, and Eric caught a flash of white before Jean Luc said, "Let him go, Keenan!"

Taken by surprise, Keenan released his death grip on the blond Sidhe. Pierre's eyes snapped open, and in an instant, chaos erupted again. An unseen force hurled Keenan back even as Pierre rubbed his neck. Pierre's demeanor shifted, and his eyes flashed with unrestrained anger. His lips split into an insane grin, and he nodded at Jean Luc.

"Good going, brother! I knew I could count on you."

Eric could barely suppress a yelp of fright as the platform flew off him and Pierre directed his anger at the one who'd unmasked him. The Sidhe didn't have time to set his plans into motion as Keenan's brother jumped him, attacking with ferocious intent.

Pierre didn't bother with pretending this time. Eric yelled as several sharp operation instruments headed unerringly toward Aidan. Before Aidan could do anything about it, the knives embedded themselves in his neck and back and Aidan lost his grip on Pierre.

In a swift motion, Pierre pulled his pendant from his throat, activated it, and, with a flick of his wrist, slit Aidan's throat. Just as swiftly, he embedded the same knife in Aidan's heart. Eric froze with horror, but the sight of blood made him want to kill Pierre, to cut his head off like the Sidhe

did to the woman. His temples throbbed even as syringes and other sharp objects flew in Pierre's direction.

Noticing the attack, Pierre lifted Aidan's body, and Eric barely managed to stop his impromptu weapons from hitting Keenan's brother.

"Ah, ah, ah. Bad boy!" Pierre said. "That's not very polite. After I wanted to help you and everything."

The immobile knives Eric had used now headed in the direction of their previous manipulator. Eric's eyes widened, but he was powerless to stop them. Luckily, Keenan pushed him down, and they both landed with a painful thud on the floor of the infirmary. His lover grunted at the impact the knives made with his skin, checked Eric for a brief second, and turned his attention again toward Pierre. "You might want to stay right there, Keenan," the Sidhe purred. "Or else your brother will find that he underestimated me and he'll pay for it with his life."

Eric could do nothing but watch as Pierre shielded his exit with Aidan's body. Even if he didn't struggle, his limp body weighed heavily on the Sidhe, a natural fact which just earned him other knives piercing vital organs. Tears started rolling on Eric's cheeks. Oh, God!

Eric and Keenan watched helplessly as Pierre exited the infirmary. Keenan moved toward the door, and Eric felt his acute pain and relief as he found Aidan's body abandoned outside.

\* \* \* \*

Aidan lay motionless just down the main hallway that opened into the infirmary. The knives were still embedded in his chest, in his stomach, and all over his body. He'd stopped breathing, and his eyes turned glassy. Of course, the worst of the wounds was the one to the heart. If not for the knife piercing his chest, Aidan could have fought the Sidhe and won. The little bastard had taken his brother by surprise. They'd indeed underestimated Pierre.

Torn between his brother and Pierre, Keenan decided on helping Aidan, despite the fact that it meant he would lose the Sidhe. He hastened to remove the knife from his brother's chest. His heart clenched as he began to extract all the foreign objects piercing Aidan's body. He was lucky that



Pierre must have decided he didn't have time for Aidan. If not, his brother would probably be dead now, just like Ulrike.

Still, it seemed so strange. Pierre never gave him the impression of being a coldhearted killer. Even after having seen his memory, for a minute, he doubted himself. It allowed Jean Luc to take him off guard and Pierre to escape.

Keenan cursed as he struggled with the blades stuck inside his brother's body. He knew that Aidan was far too old to die so easily, but the sight of his brother's motionless form still frightened him. The knife embedded in his chest stopped the functioning of his heart, and Keenan guessed it also had some sort of enchantment on it, preventing Aidan from using his powers. If Pierre chose another place to strike, Aidan would probably still be able to function and fight back. For vampires, their hearts were their weak spot. A strategically placed knife or stake could immobilize them for enough time to slay him or her.

As expected, Aidan started to breathe almost as soon as the offending object was removed from his chest. Keenan breathed a sigh of relief at the knowledge that his brother would be fine.

Keenan used his pants to wipe his hands of blood and gore, as he registered a new presence closing in. Instantly, he knew who approached. He grimaced, taking in his brother's appearance. His parents wouldn't like this.

Indeed, in mere seconds, Elise and Günter rushed into the hallway. Keenan registered his mother's shaken appearance in one look. Her eyes looked swollen and her hands were trembling as she knelt next to her oldest son.

"Aidan...Oh, Aidan! What did he do to you, my son?"

Günter grabbed Keenan's arm, growling at him menacingly.

"What the hell is this, Keenan? What kind of leader are you if you can't even take care of your own brother?"

Keenan gritted his teeth, feeling his temper stir. He hated the scorn his sire radiated, but he couldn't say anything in his defense. He did indeed feel guilty about the whole thing, about not being able to anticipate or stop Pierre's actions. Because of it, his brother lay injured in front of him and a vampire elder died at the hands of the hunters. Cassandra nearly lost her life

as well, not to mention the casualties from the other paranormal races in the city.

*“Keenan, it’s not your fault.”* Eric softly attempted to calm him down. *“You did the best you could. We were all taken by surprise. And then Jean Luc...”*

Keenan shook his head, feeling grateful for his pet’s support. Right now, he didn’t deserve it. He should have planned things better. He should have done things differently. He’d fucked everything up.

“I’m...I’m sorry, sire,” he said to his father, even as he registered Eric’s concern.

The elder vampire slapped him, and Keenan almost collapsed because of the force of the hit. If he’d been human, it would have probably broken some bones or at least some teeth. Due to his vampire nature, it just hurt like hell. But the physical hurt meant nothing compared to what he felt when his father spat in his face. “Don’t call me that. You’re not my son.”

Keenan clenched his jaw, knowing that arguing with his father when he was angry wouldn’t be very wise. He hoped his mother wouldn’t reject him as well.

Luckily, Elise seemed to have better feelings toward him. “Günter, please,” she whispered.

Günter glared at his wife but said nothing else. Keenan took his mother’s hand. “I’m sorry, *Mutter*. This is all my fault.”

Before Elise could answer, another voice replied. “No, it isn’t Keenan. It’s mine.”

Everybody turned to see Jean Luc in the doorway, with Eric in his arms. “It’s my fault,” the Sidhe repeated. “And I’ll do whatever it takes to make it right.”

Keenan didn’t know whether or not to believe Jean Luc. He didn’t like seeing Jean Luc hold Eric either, especially taking into account the recent events. Leaning toward the Sidhe, he snatched Eric away. Jean Luc had a lot of explaining to do, and he would start talking at once.

## Chapter Nineteen

Eric took in the scene with teary eyes. What a disaster! If only he'd realized Pierre was the killer sooner. If only Aidan hadn't attacked the Sidhe to save Eric. Everything seemed to be falling apart around him, and Eric didn't know what to do.

Jean Luc didn't look at Eric as he handed him over to Keenan. Eric knew the Sidhe blamed himself. He couldn't give Jean Luc understanding right now. The Sidhe helped him, and in truth, his situation turned out to be the most difficult thing imaginable. After all, it was Jean Luc's brother who'd been choking to death against the wall. That didn't change the fact that Jean Luc knew about Pierre's betrayal and did nothing. More so, he was a passive participant, since he hid his brother's actions and tried to keep them a secret. Eric began to doubt his first thoughts on the Sidhe. Could it be that he'd misjudged Jean Luc's memories? Was the Sidhe involved in the attacks, just like his brother?

Eric didn't want to think that, but he nevertheless felt much better when Jean Luc passed him to his vampire. For the first time, Eric saw Jean Luc look down in front of the scrutiny of Keenan's father.

"What do you mean, it's your fault?" Günter growled.

Eric suppressed a wince. The elder vampire seemed absolutely furious and willing to take out his temper on whoever offered. To his credit, Jean Luc didn't back down. He lifted his eyes proudly and looked Günter straight in the eye.

"I mean, I knew about Pierre's problem, and I hid it, from everyone. I sabotaged Keenan from the beginning. He couldn't have known this. He'd never have found out in the first place if not for Eric."

The elder vampire took a step forward, and Eric knew Günter would attack Jean Luc. At the last minute, his wife stopped him. As Elise placed a

hand on her husband's shoulder, she said slowly, "Please, elaborate! We would like to know more..."

Eric's blood froze in his veins at the sound of her voice. This wasn't the same woman that comforted him back in the room, but a cold-blooded killer with murder in her eyes and in her heart.

*"Don't be scared, pet! You must understand, Pierre threatened to take both her sons. It's a natural reaction for any mother,"* Keenan whispered in his mind.

Eric knew this, of course. He'd considered beheading Pierre as well or, better yet, burning him, to make him suffer the pain Keenan withstood. Even so, the transformation shocked him. The mild-mannered aristocrat suddenly became a lioness, ready to slay the enemy who threatened the lives of her children.

Jean Luc took a deep breath, as if preparing himself for something very difficult. "You see, Pierre—my brother is sick. He suffers from a peculiar syndrome that has affected my people from the beginning of our lives here."

He closed his eyes, and Eric could see that it was very difficult for Jean Luc to talk about this. "In general, it affects the kindest of us, and it perverts our nature until we're different persons entirely."

Günter scoffed in disdain. "Kindest. Yeah, right. I wouldn't say your brother was very kind to my son."

"Sire, please. Let him speak," a new voice said, sounding weak and shaky. To Eric's surprise, he realized it came from Aidan.

Elise knelt by Aidan's side and lifted his head in her lap, petting his hair gently. "Hush, fledgling," she said softly. "We'll listen, but you need to rest."

Eric felt Keenan nod. "Yes, we should take care of him first, then we'll deal with the rest. At any rate, Pierre is gone now. If you have any clue as to where he'd be, though..."

Jean Luc seemed to consider this for a second and then paled considerably.

*"Merde! Claire..."*

Eric gave the Sidhe a puzzled look. Who was Claire? Most of the people in the room seemed to share his confusion as they threw Jean Luc inquisitive glances.

As Jean Luc retrieved his cell phone from his jacket and hastily dialed, Keenan explained. "Claire is Pierre's fiancée. I take it that Jean Luc believes he might go there."

Eric couldn't help but be a bit surprised by Jean Luc's attitude to that particular fact. If they knew where Pierre was headed, they could catch him. That was a good thing, right? Giovanni answered Eric's unspoken question. At some point, the incubus had arrived, without Eric realizing it. "I think that's not the main concern. In his unreasonable state, he might hurt her, and their child."

Eric gaped at Giovanni. A child? A fiancée? Oh, God! This was worse than he first thought.

*"There's more to it than that, pet. Even if we do manage to catch Pierre, Claire and her son will be outcasts for life. She cannot marry Pierre now. Her child will be a bastard, and she'll be a whore for the entire Sidhe people. They're very aristocratic, especially in elite families, like Claire's or Jean Luc's."*

*"Oh, God! Poor woman...How did he manage to fool everybody like that, Keenan?"*

Keenan mentally sighed. *"You heard Jean Luc, pet. And as much as I resent him for Ulrike's death, it's entirely possible that it's true. I don't know, pet...The truth is he wasn't always like that. I've known them for ages, and I remember a time—"* He shook himself, obviously feeling pained by the memory. *"I must say, I never understood Pierre. I thought I did once, but lately, he's been different."*

Eric nodded. Although he didn't know Pierre that well, he guessed that the part he showed the world, the kind face that urged him to agree to Keenan's request, was a mask that had some time in the past been his actual self. He didn't know why he thought this, but somehow, it just made sense.

In the meantime, Günter picked his son up slowly, so as not to hurt him. Giovanni gestured toward the infirmary, and Eric wondered what kind of care they had in mind for Aidan. The sterile room still gave Eric the creeps, with its huge manacles and abundance of sharp and possibly pain-inducing instruments. It didn't help that it remained the scene of the very unpleasant Pierre incident just five minutes ago.

Alas, there seemed to be no other way. Keenan felt his discomfort and tightened his hold on him. *"I'm sorry, pet. I wish I could have kept you away from this mess."*

Eric suddenly felt very selfish. How idiotic of him to think about his own situation when Aidan just suffered through having several knives removed from his body. Even Jean Luc, Keenan, and Elise passed through such painful experiences. If Jean Luc meant his words, it must be very painful for him to accept his brother's actions. And Keenan...Eric would have done anything to spare his vampire the pain of seeing Aidan hurt.

Feeling his thoughts, Keenan gave him a kiss on the forehead and pulled a curtain, revealing a number of platforms, similar to those he had initially seen, but padded with some sort of soft material. "Don't worry, pet. I'll go see to Aidan, and then maybe I can get someone to take care of that arm of yours."

Eric nodded, feeling extremely out of place. He didn't know what to do, how to act. Half the time, everything here was so upside down and unusual. It felt weird to know that only last week he hadn't even been aware of it.

Nevertheless, even as he thought this, Eric knew that it would all be worth it. In the midst of it all, he still had his vampire.

With that in mind, Eric smiled wearily at his lover.

"Okay, Keenan. I'll be right here."

\* \* \* \*

Keenan made his way back to the main part of the infirmary. Jean Luc was still on the phone, and Keenan wondered what the hell he was saying to Pierre's fiancée. He couldn't say it surprised him. Given the circumstances, Jean Luc would be forced to calm down Claire's hysterics. Keenan couldn't even blame the woman.

He had his own problems to think about. His brother needed blood to help him recover from his injuries. With everything that happened, they still hadn't taken care of Eric's shoulder. It irked him that he would have to wait to deal with Eric, but Aidan's problem was more urgent. Despite the fact that he managed to speak briefly with their mother, his injury remained significant. He would fall into bloodlust if not given the appropriate nourishment.

Luckily, the infirmary here at *Extase* also held healthy provisions of human plasma needed both for normal injuries and for feeding vampires. Keenan hastily headed to the refrigeration equipment, where all the blood was kept.

He considered asking Giovanni to go help Eric, but Giovanni didn't have the healing abilities of the Sidhe. Keenan cursed. With all this Pierre fuck-up, how would he deal with Eric's dislocated shoulder?

*"Stop thinking about me, Keenan. I'll be fine,"* Eric whispered in his head.

Keenan couldn't help but smile a little. *"That's impossible, pet. You know I always think about you."*

He rummaged through the large refrigerators, retrieving several packs of blood. He supposed he should feel a little guilty, but he couldn't help feeling relieved that his pet managed to get away almost unscathed. True, the attack tired him terribly and the day put a tremendous amount of pressure on his mind. Eric needed to rest, and he needed his arm to be taken care of. Perhaps he would ask Giovanni to arrange something after all.

*"Keenan..."*

Eric whined, obviously catching on to the thought.

*"Hush, pet. You need to rest, and that's final."*

Eric didn't argue, although Keenan could feel his distress. He sighed tiredly. He wanted to be with his human, hold him in his arms, make love to him. Unfortunately, this couldn't happen anytime soon, not until they caught Pierre.

It could have been so much worse. Without the help of his beautiful human, he might have not been able to find out about Pierre's betrayal until it was too late. The entire situation bothered him. He knew the D'Argent family ever since they'd lived in Paris. His parents liked the City of Lights, so he often found himself visiting them there. They'd all been acquainted with Jean Luc and Pierre for quite a while, decades, before they even came to live in New York.

Back then, he'd never liked Jean Luc much. He was cold and arrogant and liked to challenge Keenan for some reason. Pierre had been different, kind and gentle hearted. One Samhain he spent in Paris, Keenan slept with him. It seemed like such a long time ago.

Keenan made an effort to remember the first time he met Pierre. Vaguely, he recalled the fact that his parents introduced him to the D'Argents sometime in the 1700s. At the time, Pierre hadn't been born, and Jean Luc was only a child. Keenan didn't know why he wanted to remember this so much. As he thought about the times he spent in Paris and the years he lived in New York, seeing Pierre every other day, Keenan frowned. Since when had the Sidhe been plotting against them? How much further did the betrayal go?

Keenan still recalled the exodus of the D'Argent siblings after Jean Luc's problem with the hunters. Did the sadness for his brother's plight contribute to Pierre's illness? If so, Pierre could have his hands in every aspect of the New York paranormal world. Maybe he even had accomplices.

Keenan considered this issue while heading back to the room to give his brother the blood. It appeared to be obvious that Ulrike aided Pierre in the sabotage of the von Klein Tower. Ulrike and Keenan used to get along well enough, but having two old vampires in the same city amounted to a bomb ready to explode. Even if they were both natural-born vampires, Ulrike always tended to distrust him and to begrudge his more powerful abilities. Still, he didn't think she would have acted on this impulse without a little external pressure.

At any rate, Jean Luc had a lot of explaining to do. He'd told them very little so far and most definitely not enough to justify his actions, or Pierre's.

Keenan handed the blood packs to his mother as he silently considered the dilemma. He found Giovanni looking distinctly uncomfortable and out of place in the room.

"Hey, Giovanni," Keenan said. "Could you take Eric to a room and make sure he's comfortable? Perhaps give him something for his arm, even if it's not permanent? Careful, though, he doesn't like drugs much."

He hated going against Eric's wishes, but he hated the thought of Eric in pain even more. Besides, a painkiller wouldn't be so horrid.

The incubus assented with a nod and gestured respectfully toward Keenan's family as he disappeared in the direction of Eric's bed. Keenan felt better knowing that his pet would at least have some amount of care.

He rubbed his eyes, feeling torn between his lover, his brother, and revenge. He wanted to tear the hunters into little pieces and carve Pierre's



heart out with a spoon, but at the same time, he just wished to stay here and take care of his pet. Why did life have to be so fucking complicated?

Oblivious to his fuming, Elise busied herself with feeding her oldest son. As Aidan feasted on the blood, his wounds closed, much to Keenan's satisfaction. Meanwhile, Jean Luc ended the conversation and entered the infirmary, his expression glum.

"I have some good news and some bad news."

Keenan inwardly groaned, knowing he didn't want to hear this. "Just spit it out, Jean Luc."

With a nod, the Sidhe continued to speak. "Apparently, Pierre called Claire just a little before I did and they established a meeting. She was on her way to the designated meeting spot when I called."

"What? How can that be?" Keenan asked. "You called five minutes after he left here! How could she have already left the house?"

"She loves him very much," Jean Luc said. "Also, she refuses to believe that he is a murderer." The Sidhe took a deep breath, apparently struggling to control himself. "She doesn't like me much."

Keenan wanted to say that Claire's attitude shouldn't take anyone by surprise. Normally, Jean Luc wasn't a very likeable person. In fact, for this reason, even his helpfulness with Eric surprised Keenan. Pierre had always been the nice one in the family. If Pierre managed to fool the Council, who knew what he could make Claire do? Perhaps he could even convince her to help him. He was, after all, the father of her kid.

"Did she say where they would meet?" Keenan asked, hoping that Jean Luc didn't ruin their chance for catching his brother...again.

"There's this bar in downtown Manhattan, but they probably won't see each other there anymore. Our safest bet is the private airport the Le Grange own. She'll want to get him out of the country if she thinks we're out to get him."

"Do you know where it is?" Keenan asked. "Perhaps we could intercept them."

The Sidhe nodded. "We don't have much time, though. They'll be gone soon, and there's no telling what will happen if he escapes with her."

Keenan understood Jean Luc's silent warning. Once Claire lost her utility, Pierre would probably kill her, just like he did Ulrike. Keenan couldn't help but wonder if, perhaps, Ulrike hadn't been bearing Pierre's

child, as well. The idea gave the whole situation a new level of horror. From the beginning of time, an unwritten rule forbade vampires to kill pregnant women or young babies. Even in the Middle Ages, when Keenan had been born, they'd practiced this code. His hands might have been stained with the blood of many, but not with the blood of an innocent child. That, he would never do.

But Keenan had a bad feeling about Pierre. He needed to know more about this mysterious syndrome. It was beyond weird that Pierre, a Sidhe, and a young one at that, managed to take down two old, natural-born vampires. In Ulrike's case, he could perhaps understand it. But with Aidan, the story was different.

There was no time to waste. They'd have to discuss this on the way because if Pierre got away, the consequences could be devastating.

Knowing that Aidan would soon be all right and his pet was under provisionary care, he could go deal with Pierre now.

"Well, let's go then," he said to Jean Luc.

The Sidhe looked reluctant as he grabbed his daggers and hunting gear. Keenan mentally sighed. He felt sorry for Jean Luc. If something like this happened to Aidan or, worse, to Eric, Keenan didn't know what he'd do.

While Jean Luc prepared, Keenan decided to check on his human and make sure Giovanni had everything under control. Following their connection, he detected the room his pet currently resided in. From what he could tell, the incubus still watched over Eric. And yet, their connection felt eerily silent. Keenan hastened his steps, hoping nothing happened to his lover.

As he entered the room, Keenan saw Eric in deep sleep. His panic increased tenfold, and he practically glared at the incubus.

"What's wrong with him, Giovanni?" he asked.

Giovanni just shook his head. "I just gave him a sedative so I can set the bone back in place. It would have been easier for you to have knocked him out, since you guessed right about his rejection of drugs. In the end, he accepted taking the pill I gave him."

As he said this, the incubus snapped Eric's shoulder back into position, and Keenan groaned. God, that had to hurt.

"If there's any lingering pain after a while, you should consider arthroscopic surgery. For now, I think it is best to wait," Giovanni said

while he bandaged Eric's shoulder. "Perhaps I'll manage to summon a Sidhe that will heal Eric directly." The incubus paused. "Keenan? What's going on?"

Giovanni obviously referred to the commotion in the main room of the infirmary. Keenan swallowed the lump that seemed to have formed in his throat at seeing his pet's pale face and forced himself to answer. "We're going to hunt down Pierre. There's a possibility he may attempt to flee the country aided by Claire, and we're heading to the airport to stop him."

"You, Jean Luc, and who else?"

Keenan considered the question. Elis and Jacob were still God knows where, probably sniffing out clues in the subway. He wondered if Lucca and Cassandra knew about all this. With all the shit going on, he didn't even have time to call them. "Did you call Lucca?"

Giovanni nodded. "I did. He said the humans are giving him trouble and he won't be able to come and help. The shifters aren't answering their phones. I'm guessing they're in animal form. I tried to call Jacob's beta, but he didn't answer, either, so I assume the entire pack is out hunting and probably most of the cats as well. As for Cassandra, she said she was on her way here. I am willing to go, of course."

"All things considered, perhaps it is best that you and Cassandra stay here," Keenan said. "With Aidan, Eric, and Nelson hurt, we can't leave them without proper care. Cassandra is still recovering from her injury, so it's best that she stays put for a while." In truth, Aidan would probably be just fine given half an hour and a few more blood pouches. Keenan didn't care all that much about Matthew Nelson, just to the extent that the man saved his pet and Eric considered him a friend. But Eric concerned him. Eric was mentally and physically exhausted, and Keenan cursed at having to leave him at such a time. The least he could do was to leave someone he trusted to look after him.

Giovanni didn't seem to agree. "You can't go by yourself, Keenan. You and Jean Luc can't deal with this issue alone."

"He won't be going by himself." Keenan turned to see his mother in the doorway.

"Mother? When did you change?" She now wore a black hunting outfit, more or less the female version of Keenan's own clothes. Seeing his

mother's curves hugged by leather disturbed Keenan in a strictly subjective way, but Elise would not be deterred.

She scoffed. "How long do you think it takes me to put some leathers on? Come on, your father's waiting." The incubus arched a skeptical brow, and Elise snapped at him. "What? Do you think I'm not up for the fight? I'll rip that little bastard into pieces so small they won't even be able to identify them." Keenan winced. His mother was on a roll, violently cursing in French. "*Imbecil fils de pute!* How dare he touch my sons? No one does that and gets away with it."

Well, odds seemed to be looking better already. Despite the fact that he'd originally been displeased with the arrival of his mother and father, Keenan now felt grateful for their presence. They would prove to be a most valuable asset.

Turning to his pet, he gave sleeping Eric a kiss on the forehead. "Take good care of him," he told Giovanni.

Giving Eric one last look, Keenan followed his mother out of the room. Duty called.

\* \* \* \*

The car remained silent for several long minutes after having left *Extase*. They'd taken Jean Luc's since, due to its larger size, it could accommodate the four of them better. The Sidhe had gone into soldier mode, and his face now looked as stony as ever. He seemed to lack any feeling or pain for the imminent battle with his brother.

Keenan knew that Jean Luc just used a mask, and this disturbed him to no end because it reminded him of the mask Pierre wore to fool them all. How long had Pierre been planning the whole thing? He resolved to finally question Jean Luc. After all, the Sidhe still needed to explain his actions.

"Jean Luc? You were telling us about that syndrome?"

After a moment of silence, Jean Luc nodded, keeping his eyes on the road as he started speaking. "Many of the Sidhe, those that are born with more tender and pure hearts, are prone to be affected by their lives on Earth. It is a sort of...double-personality disorder. We call it the DSS, the Dark Side Syndrome. Basically, the Sidhe falls prey to his or her dark side, to the innermost feelings of hate or anger that are too often suppressed. Most of

the times, we can tell when this happens even in the early stages. There have been cases when the Sidhe himself reports this and is subjected to treatment against the DSS.”

“Treatment? So there’s a cure?” Keenan inquired. If a cure existed, why didn’t Jean Luc do something earlier?

The Sidhe just shook his head. “There is no cure. Once a Sidhe falls into the DSS, there’s no way to bring him back to the way he used to be. The treatment is, let’s say, harsh. Many times, the Sidhe doesn’t even survive it. Or when he does, well, the results aren’t satisfactory.”

“So you feared for your brother’s death and for that reason you never said anything?” Elise asked.

“I hoped that I was wrong. I hoped that, in my paranoia, I was seeing things. You ask me what I feared. I feared turning my brother into me.”

Keenan’s blood froze in his veins, and he couldn’t help but stare at the Sidhe. Jean Luc continued to drive, seemingly undisturbed by his own words, as stony and cold as ever. All those times when Keenan saw the differences between Jean Luc, his Imperials, and any other Sidhe, he never considered this possibility. He remembered the time in the apartment when Eric briefly entered Jean Luc’s mind. *You should have warned me*, Jean Luc had said. *My memories are hard to stomach*.

Nothing he could say would make things right. Keenan wished he could speak with his pet. What would Eric say? Eric had a level of generosity and compassion that Keenan couldn’t reach. In spite of being angry with Pierre, Eric would say, “We’ll try to keep him alive.” Before he could help it, the words escaped Keenan’s lips.

He sensed his father’s glare and his mother’s fury at his declaration, but they said nothing. Keenan himself didn’t know if it was the right thing to do. But he knew that if he’d been in Jean Luc’s place, he’d have wished to try any alternative possible, even that dubious treatment of his. And anything would be better than death, right?

The Sidhe turned his head and looked at Keenan.

“Thank you for the offer, *mon ami*,” he said. “But truly, I think it is too late for Pierre.”

“It’s never too late. Anything is remediable, except death,” Keenan said.

Jean Luc just shook his head. “I cannot argue with that, Keenan, but I fear my brother is already dead.”

Silence fell again in the car. Keenan again had an impending feeling of doom, as if death loomed straight ahead. Suddenly, going to the airport didn't seem to be a very good idea.

\* \* \* \*

The airport owned by the Le Grange family was just twenty miles from the outskirts of New York. Despite the fact that human staff operated most of the machinery needed to regulate the normal flights, the Sidhe made arrangements with the Agency to maintain the location of paranormal means of transportation a secret. Keenan himself owned a private airport and a helipad at von Klein, but it suffered significant damages in the attack.

As they got out of the car, Keenan swiftly took in their location. Everything in the area seemed silent, and this increased his feeling of disquiet. He picked up his cell phone and dialed Jacob's number again. Nothing.

He dialed Giovanni's number next. It occurred to him on the way there that Pierre knew all the security codes of *Extase*. With Keenan and Jean Luc here at the airport, the club would be left with little protection. The incubus picked up and greeted him in Italian. "*Pronto*. What is it, Keenan?"

"Just checking up on you. Look, I was thinking...Close down the club. Everything in shutdown mode."

"You don't think...?"

"I don't know. I just have a bad feeling."

"Okay," Giovanni agreed. "I'll warn the staff, as well. If anything happens, we'll be ready."

"Take good care of him, Giovanni."

"Don't worry, Keenan. I will."

Hanging up, Keenan took in the expectant looks of his family.

"Do you think he'd try something on the club?" Elise asked.

"It's a possibility."

"I considered it as well," Günter said. "But *Extase* is well defended, is it not?"

Jean Luc nodded. "We have a lot of well-trained staff ensuring its security. If he tries to use the codes from before, he'll find himself with a surprise. I changed them, and it's next to impossible to hack them."

Somehow, that didn't comfort Keenan. He still felt terribly uneasy.

Keenan turned his head at his father's voice. "Let's go and check the airport and we'll head back."

Keenan considered this, looking at the airport in silence, then to the car and toward the busy city they'd come from. He couldn't go with his parents and Jean Luc to explore the Le Grange Airport. Something would happen at *Extase*, he just knew it.

"I'm going back," he said briskly. "Give me the keys, Jean Luc."

The Sidhe tossed the keys to his silver Toyota into Keenan's waiting hand, looking unsurprised.

"Just don't scratch it."

Keenan arched a brow at Jean Luc's capacity for irony even in this situation. He took the keys wordlessly and faced his mother and father. Günter looked angry, and Elise wouldn't meet his eyes.

"No vampire bearing the von Klein name has ever run away from a fight," Günter growled.

Keenan wanted to explain that he wasn't running away, that somehow he knew something bad would happen at *Extase*. He hated seeing that expression on his father's face. Nevertheless, he refrained from useless and time-consuming explanations. "I'm sorry about all this, Mother, Father. It's just something I have to do."

He nodded respectfully toward Günter and kissed his mother's hand. Elise pulled him up and looked into his eyes. Whatever she saw must have convinced her of his determination.

She hugged Keenan to her bosom and whispered, "Be careful, Keenan! Remember what we taught you."

It felt so much like "good-bye" that it broke Keenan's heart. He instinctively knew that they weren't the ones heading into the mouth of the dragon.

The von Klein couple and Jean Luc headed into the Le Grange airport, while Keenan headed back to New York. As much as Keenan hoped that his family would find Pierre, he somehow felt that it wasn't the case. He just hoped he'd get back to *Extase* before it was too late. If Pierre hurt anyone he loved, DSS or not, the Sidhe would die. Keenan would make sure of it.

\* \* \* \*

As the car disappeared in the distance, Jean Luc contemplated Keenan's sudden departure. He understood why the vampire left. In fact, he felt relieved because of it. He'd been uneasy about leaving *Extase* like that as well but suspected he could find something here, as well. Something told him he needed to stay, to look around.

The von Klein couple didn't look at him, and Jean Luc knew they would never forgive him his lie. Oh, well. He didn't mind so much. After all, they did love their sons, and they were vampires.

He couldn't help but be pleased by Keenan's sudden offer in the car, though. His words had been an unexpected surprise. Jean Luc thought having Eric as a lover really did change Keenan.

Jean Luc shook his head, feeling guilty for hiding his brother's disease for so long. Ulrike was dead, just like many of his friends and some of Jacob's pack. Eric could have died, as well, and Keenan and Aidan, and that other human, Matthew, too. He'd waited too long.

He'd hoped that his mind played tricks on him, making him see things that weren't there. Pierre was young by Sidhe standards, and DSS didn't usually start at this age. Jean Luc himself had been over one hundred when the first changes started.

He buried the memories of those times deep into the recesses of his mind. If only, if only there could be another way. Perhaps it would be even more compassionate to kill Pierre outright than strip him of his emotions, turn him into a murderer and a robot like Jean Luc was.

He'd thought once that he could live a normal life, that in spite of the DSS he could find love and be happy, but he'd learned the lesson well, back in Paris. He remembered everything so vividly, like it was yesterday.

*Somewhere in Paris, 2003*

*Jean Luc lay sprawled across the floor of the apartment, his nude body motionless as he looked at his lover with pleading eyes, begging him to understand.*

*But Min's features turned into a mask of anger, hatred surpassing everything they'd lived together. "You lied to me, Luc. All this time, you lied*



*to me, plotted behind my back to kill me. I loved you, God damn it! How could you?"*

*Min Yu passed his hand through his light-colored hair and looked straight into Jean Luc's eyes. "Was anything you've told me true? Do you even look like this?"*

*Jean Luc almost looked away as he allowed the illusion over his hair and eyes to fade. The blond of his hair turned to its natural silver, and the blue eyes turned violet again. "I'm so sorry, Minu. So sorry." As his lover turned from him, Jean Luc grasped his arm, suddenly feeling desperate. "Mon amour, je t'en pris! Don't push me away!"*

*"Don't call me that!" Min snapped, narrowing his eyes. His exotic face looked feral in his anger. "My name is François, and I'm not your love. I don't know who you are. Everything you've ever told me was a lie."*

*Jean Luc wanted to protect himself, but his guilty conscience wouldn't allow it. He'd lied to Min, deceived him in the most terrible way possible, but he loved Min so much. How could he have explained everything so that Min Yu would understand, so that he wouldn't leave him? "I never lied when I said I loved you."*

*He almost winced at uttering such a cliché phrase. It didn't surprise him at all when Min laughed in his face. Still, the derisive sound hurt in a way he never thought he would be hurt again. Feelings swelled inside him, swirling in his heart and in his mind, a dark voice whispering in his mind, "Kill him. He betrayed you first. He's a hunter, a killer, a danger for your people. Kill him, kill him."*

*Jean Luc shook his head, covering his ears, trying to push the voice away. Damn it. Not now. He needed to make Min Yu see, he needed...*

*"You need to kill him. Kill him before he kills you."*

*Jean Luc collapsed to the floor, holding his head in his hands. He ripped his pendant from his throat, the pendant every Sidhe wore and that hid a powerful weapon only he or she could open. Obediently, the knife opened in his hand, and without a second's thought, Jean Luc impaled his hand with the blade. It hurt, oh, God, how it hurt, but the pain didn't matter, and it gave him something to focus on. It pushed away the voices.*

*Blinking, he awoke, surprised, in the arms of his very concerned lover. "Luc? Luc? Are you okay, mon ange?"*

*Jean Luc nodded. "I'm fine. You know how I am. It happens sometimes."*

*Min Yu frowned, and Jean Luc felt him tense. "It only happens when we argue or when you're upset. Luc, are you truly sick, or is this a lie, too?"*

*Jean Luc pushed away from Min. The hurt of hearing his lover's accusations brought the voices back. It would only be a matter of time before he broke and he hurt Min.*

*"Yes, it's a lie. Everything was a lie. From the start, from the very beginning."*

*A gun flew from Min's private stash and onto the floor. The Sidhe smiled.*

*"If you don't kill me, I'll kill you."*

In truth, if Jean Luc thought about it now, he hadn't really expected Min to shoot him. A part of him had hoped that perhaps the young hunter still loved him. But he'd been mistaken. Min had taken the gun, shot him, and left him for dead.

They'd met by accident in Paris and fallen in love almost at first sight. Jean Luc had been devastated when he realized his lover belonged to a group of hunters. He kept Min's secret, though, and faked being human, so that they could be together. It failed abysmally, and the consequences that followed still followed him in his nightmares to this day.

He'd woken up here in New York, after being in a coma for several months. He still couldn't figure out why the DSS didn't emerge again after that. He must have been too brokenhearted to even consider hating. Perhaps he should be thankful for the way things ended up. Min would find someone else, someone sane who could give him everything he deserved.

But now, his little brother would suffer through the same thing. The loneliness and the torture and the pain.

Jean Luc made a face as the now-too-familiar voice rang out in his head. *"You don't have to be hurt. You have the power, the power to take over New York. The Imperials would listen to you. They'd obey blindly, and Pierre would help. You'd rule the world together. You'd make them pay for what they did to you. You'd make Min Yu pay."*

The voice of temptation. The song of a siren. Jean Luc shook his head. Every time he thought of Min, the voice appeared. Unlike his Imperials,

he'd never be able to shut down his emotions completely, and whenever he remembered his former lover, the voice reemerged.

Well, he would have time to worry about that later. Now, he needed to focus on his brother. Jean Luc pushed his emotions away and concentrated on exploring the airport. He knew the von Kleins were doing the same thing. Finally, Günter broke the heavy silence.

"I feel several presences to the western extreme of the airport."

Jean Luc nodded. He felt the same thing, although he couldn't tell from this distance whether or not his brother was there.

"We have to hurry," he told the vampires. "Probably by this time, they already know we're here."

Private airports owned by paranormals had very strict security systems. Jean Luc suspected that the cameras and sensors already picked up the car when they first stopped.

Without another word, Günter passed the gate flying, and Jean Luc followed, jumping over it with ease. At their side, Elise landed elegantly and pointed toward something in the distance. "There's movement there."

Indeed, Jean Luc could see a number of cars blocking the view to a building that looked like a hangar. A large number of people busied themselves with miscellaneous tasks, and the agitation told him they didn't have much time to intercept whatever was going on.

With paranormal speed, they started to head in that direction. For once, Jean Luc felt thankful for the DSS, otherwise, he'd never have been able to keep up with the pace set by the vampires. Even in the sunlight, they moved faster than the human eye could see.

They got to the hangar just in time to hear the roar of an engine starting and to see a plane taking off. Jean Luc cursed in French. They hadn't gotten away yet.

"Mr. and Mrs. von Klein, you take the wings," he said. "I'll take the front."

The vampires didn't question his suggestion. As much as they resented him now for his mistake with Pierre, they also acknowledged his experience as a fighter. Even in the light, they glided through the air like shadows and simultaneously severed the wings of the plane. Wingless, the aircraft fell from the sky like a wounded bird, and Jean Luc knew that this is where he came in. Despite the fact that vampires were physically more powerful, the

Sidhe's stronger psychic abilities compensated for that difference. Even as the vampire couple slowed the plane's descent, they wouldn't have been able to stop it from crashing. The combined weight of the huge machine and the force of gravity dragging it down would have been impossible for them to beat. Because of it, the plane came dangerously close to crashing. Focusing his mind, Jean Luc stabilized the plane and, ignoring the pain that threatened to crush his temples, created a force around it, managing to land it safely to the ground. Perhaps it wasn't the best landing possible, but the passengers were safe.

Of course, the vampire couple didn't have such noble concerns. As soon as the plane landed, Günter ripped the hatch open with his bare hands. Jean Luc couldn't help but partially hope they wouldn't find his little brother. He could easily see that Günter wished the destroyed plane hatch was Pierre.

Much to Jean Luc's dismay, and quiet satisfaction, he couldn't feel Pierre's presence inside the plane. He sighed, picking up the phone and dialing *Extase*.

Giovanni picked up on the first ring. "Yeah?"

"Pierre's not here, *mon ami*. Keenan is on his way, and we'll try to get there as soon as possible." The incubus cursed, and Jean Luc heard some background noise that sounded suspiciously like breaking glass. "Hey, what's wrong there?"

"Nothing, just..." Another curse and a loud bang. "Damn it, this day is getting on my nerves. Just get your ass back here, Jean Luc."

Jean Luc blinked and stared at the phone in confusion. Well, at least *Extase* wasn't under siege yet. He pasted a smile on his face and headed to talk with Claire Le Grange. This was going to be interesting.

## Chapter Twenty

Eric cracked his eyes open as the sound of something breaking woke him from his sleep. He rubbed his eyes, wondering what could have happened. At first, he didn't pay much heed to it, but as the noise increased, the haze of the sleepiness began to clear. Eric panicked. Had Pierre or the hunters attacked again?

Without sparing another second, Eric pushed the covers off and climbed out of the bed. He winced a bit as the brusque movement jostled his shoulder. It seemed to be a little better now, but it still hurt like a bitch.

Taking a deep breath, Eric made his way out of the room and headed toward the source of the noise. It turned out to be the infirmary—to be more specific, Aidan's room.

As Eric snuck inside, he watched in shock as his friend ranted and raved at Keenan's brother. "What the fuck, Aidan?" Matthew yelled as he hurled one of the medicine bottles in the infirmary at the vampire's head. "I can't believe you! What the fuck are you talking about?"

Aidan barely ducked the rack and made a pacifying gesture. "Beautiful, I told you, I didn't want to leave. Certain circumstances forced me to do it."

The reply did nothing to placate Matthew. "Circumstances, right? Tell me, did these circumstances involve leaving without a word with another lover?"

Eric gaped at the implication of the words. Matthew and Aidan had been lovers sometime in the past. Of course, he'd found it strange that Aidan insisted on seeing Matt earlier, but he never considered that they'd previously met. What were the odds of that happening?

Eric bit his lip, not knowing what to do. If he judged by Matthew's reaction and Eric's brief view of his friend's mind, he suspected Matthew still felt something for Aidan. He didn't have a clue on what happened between the two, but he wanted his friend to be happy.

Giovanni walked to Eric's side and gave the arguing couple a disgruntled look. "You should be resting," he told Eric. "Your shoulder's still not healed."

Eric scoffed. That wouldn't happen anytime soon, not with all the crashing and the yelling and the destroying of property. He winced as another piece of Jean Luc's expensive equipment crashed against the floor.

"Matthew, come on, let him speak!" Eric attempted to reason with his friend. "Surely, there must be some explanation."

"What explanation?" Matthew snarled. "He left me like I didn't have any feelings, like I meant nothing for him, only some sort of plaything for his pleasure."

Eric gave Giovanni a helpless look. Vampires did indeed tend to be like that. Eric knew how much Keenan himself struggled with his emotions. It wouldn't surprise him if Aidan passed through the same thing. He felt torn between loyalty to his friend and his lover's family.

"Do something," he told Giovanni. Scorned lovers were not Eric's field of expertise, but Giovanni was an incubus. He would be more versed in affairs of the heart.

Before Giovanni could take Eric up on his plea, the sound of the computer notified Eric of a new presence. "Warning! Proximity alert!"

Giovanni headed to the electronic panel. Thankfully, the angle of the fight prevented Matthew from inflicting any irreparable damage to the club's security systems. Eric followed Giovanni with his gaze, curious as to the identity of the new arrival.

Giovanni groaned, and Eric realized their visitor would be bad news. "Who is it, Giovanni?" Eric inquired as the fighting continued in the background.

"Cassandra," Giovanni muttered. Eric grimaced and felt vaguely amused when Giovanni echoed his expression. *Yeah. My thoughts exactly.*

Sighing, Giovanni headed toward a small room adjoining the infirmary and reemerged a few seconds later holding a glass of liquor. A wave of sadness swept over Eric's heart. So many things happening, so many people gone. Would he ever see Jean Luc again?

The door suddenly opened, and an irritated female voice filled the room. "Okay, I'm here. Now, can someone tell me what the hell is going on? What's this about Pierre being the traitor?"

Eric wanted to duck and cover. He didn't need another showdown with Cassandra right now. Giovanni downed the drink, looking as desperate as Eric felt.

At least Cassandra's entrance stopped the throwing of objects. Matthew frowned and asked in a threatening tone, "And who is this? Another of your lovers? How many do you have?"

Eric groaned as his friend grabbed another piece of prized equipment and threw it at the vampire. Cassandra looked at Giovanni for an explanation, frozen in front of the scene, but the incubus didn't say anything. Throughout it all, the pain coming from Eric's shoulder seemed to increase, radiating into his chest and up to his temples.

"Giovanni, care to explain all this?"

Giovanni just glared at Cassandra. "No, actually, I don't."

"You liar, cheater, fucking bastard!"

*Crash.*

"Mattie, love..."

*Crash.*

"Giovanni, what's all this? Where is everybody? What's going on?"

*Crash.*

Eric wanted to scream at the cacophony of sounds. He was tired, in pain, and not in the mood for any of this. He also worried about Keenan, and strangely enough, for Jean Luc, as well. Even with the Sidhe's betrayal, Eric couldn't forget the memories he'd seen. Giovanni looked a step from a mental breakdown, struggling to calm himself down. Eric understood him. His heart and mind hurt, and he just wanted everything to stop.

Before he could even attempt to stop himself, Eric let loose his psychic energy over the room. An object stopped in mid-flight and hovered above the ground for a second then landed on the floor with a thud.

"Everybody, shut up!" he yelled. "You're giving me a terrible headache. And you're swarming poor Giovanni with all your shit."

Eric glared at Matthew, Aidan, and Cassandra. "You two—now is not the time for dealing with sentimental issues! But since you asked, Matthew, Aidan is a vampire. I expect he wanted to protect you from the paranormal world. Isn't that right?"

Aidan nodded. "That's right. I was only thinking about your own good."

Eric felt his headache increase. Did vampirism involve being sentimentally challenged? Even Eric knew one didn't say something like that to a scorned lover, and he'd never even had a relationship before Keenan.

"For my own good? Yeah, right!" Matthew said. "And who believes that crazy shit about you being a vampire?"

Eric rubbed his temples, just now realizing his mistake. He'd practically blurted out the secret of the paranormals in a random conversation. He couldn't help it. His mind and body hurt, too worked up to judge things clearly. They needed a solution.

As if guessing his thoughts, Aidan used his vampiric speed and, in a mere blink of an eye, pinned Matthew against the wall.

"You believe me now?" he asked Matthew.

Matthew started trembling in Aidan's arms, as Aidan passed his fangs over his throat. Just like that, one of the annoying problems disappeared. Eric wished Aidan did that earlier. It would have saved him a lot of irritation and spared Jean Luc the expense.

He rolled his eyes and muttered irritably, "Get a room!"

Ignoring the couple now making out against the wall, Eric turned toward Cassandra.

"Basically, we found out that Pierre killed that other vampire, Ulrike."

Giovanni nodded, and Eric felt thankful for the incubus's support.

"Yes, Pierre attacked Eric and Aidan, and eventually escaped. They're out to catch him as we speak."

"What about those good-for-nothing shifters? Where are they?" Cassandra asked.

"Tracking the hunters, I assume," Giovanni answered vaguely. Eric didn't miss his grimace at Cassandra's disdainful remark. Maybe Giovanni liked the shifters and didn't appreciate Cassandra's rude reference to them.

Cassandra arched a brow but refrained from making any idiotic comments.

"So what do we do? We just wait here?" she inquired instead.

"Precisely," Eric answered. "We wait."

"Are the von Kleins here as well?" Cassandra asked.

Eric caught a hopeful tone in her voice and somehow knew it didn't bode well for him.



“Yeah,” Giovanni answered. “They’ve also gone off to catch Pierre.”

At Giovanni’s reply, Cassandra turned toward Eric and smirked at him. “Well, then, I guess we’ll soon see who will win, little whore.”

Eric wanted to wipe the grin off her stupid face. “Pardon me?”

“Oh, don’t tell me you don’t know. You mean Keenan didn’t tell you?” Cassandra tsked. “How very forgetful of him. We’re engaged. Now that his family is in town, we’re finally going to be married.” She sighed dreamily.

Eric gaped at her, disbelief and anger warring inside him. “You’re lying,” he growled. Objects started to move by themselves in the room, rotating around them, ready to launch themselves at Cassandra.

“You don’t think that the von Kleins would actually accept you?” She laughed, seemingly oblivious to Eric’s fury. “I mean, look at you, you’re just a useless human whore, and a male one at that. How the hell are you going to give him heirs, hmm?”

Ice flowed through Eric at Cassandra’s words.

“*Pet, what’s wrong?*” Keenan’s voice sounded in his head.

Eric didn’t know how he managed to even answer.

“*She said...She said you are going to marry her. I’m useless to you because I can’t give you heirs.*”

“*Who said that? Cassandra?*”

Eric’s vision started to get blurry with tears as he realized his vampire wasn’t denying Cassandra’s words.

“*It’s true, isn’t it?*”

He felt Keenan debate how much he should tell Eric and immediately prodded. “*I want the truth, Keenan!*”

Keenan sighed. “*She may think it is. For vampires, preserving purity of blood is very important. But, pet, I don’t care about that. You’re the one I love.*”

Eric had heard enough. He understood now. Cassandra was right. Even if Keenan loved him, they could never be. So much of this had happened just because of him. Eric didn’t belong here.

He’d thought he’d found a place to call home and a real family. Cassandra’s words made him see reality. The von Klein would never accept him, a male human, unable to give Keenan children, unable to stand by his side to face the dangers of his world. The only thing he knew how to do was

to spread his legs and take it up the ass from Keenan. In the end, he was just a whore.

*“No, pet, that’s not right. She’s lying! I don’t know what my mother is thinking, but I don’t care about any of that.”*

Keenan’s desperate voice echoed through their connection, but Eric didn’t reply. He did not doubt Keenan’s sincerity. He’d been in Keenan’s head, and he knew Keenan had feelings for him. He also knew that he didn’t deserve them. After all, he would never be good enough for Keenan. He was flawed, just like his parents told him time and again as a child. One day, his vampire might come to resent him, because one such as him could never make someone happy.

*“No, pet! Don’t think that, it’s not—”*

Hearing Keenan’s voice was sweet agony, and Eric could not do it anymore. He visualized a barrier, shutting down their connection. He could still sense Keenan’s distress, though. It pained him to know that Keenan suffered, but he didn’t have a choice.

As Eric cut the bond between them, he felt something inside him fall apart. The floating objects fell back on the ground, scattering in pieces. Eric echoed the broken objects, leaning against the wall as he collapsed on the floor. He curled his body defensively and started rocking, and his muffled sobs echoed in the now silent room.

He heard angry voices arguing around him, and he covered his ears with his hands trying to block them out. It didn’t work. Now they seemed to be inside his head. Eric whimpered, gathering his knees to his chest, hoping that it would make things hurt less.

A hand reached for him, and Eric flinched away from its touch. Matthew’s voice reached out to him, clearing his mind a bit in an attempt to coax him out of his shell. It didn’t work, at least not in the way Matthew would have probably liked.

Eric did uncurl himself and lifted his eyes, taking in the result of his breakdown. Cassandra gave him a peculiar, concerned look. Their eyes met, and for a second, something clicked into place, a strange jolt of feeling sweeping through Eric.

The electronic voice of the computer broke the spell.

*“Warning, perimeter breach!”*

Giovanni hastened to the electronic panel and took in the images on the screen.

“Fuck!” Giovanni cursed.

“What is it? What’s the matter?” Cassandra asked, hastening to Giovanni’s side.

“We have guests...Uninvited guests.”

Aidan joined Cassandra and Giovanni by the computer. “Intruder? Who is it?”

“Pierre, of course.” Giovanni rubbed his eyes and muttered under his breath. “God, this is so not my day.”

Eric got up on shaky legs, supporting himself on Matthew’s arm. His friend gave him a concerned look but didn’t stop him from joining the group of paranormals by the computer. Eric stole a look at the security monitors. It was, indeed, Pierre, and he’d brought company. From their weapons and clothes, Eric guessed they belonged to the same group of hunters he’d seen in his vision. He watched in surprise as the intruders just stood there looking at the door.

“What in the world are they doing?” Cassandra asked.

“Jean Luc took precautions,” Giovanni explained. “A powerful blockade of metal enforces the club’s entrance and the walls to irradiate energy. If anyone even comes near, they’ll be instantly turned to KFC.”

Eric frowned. Pierre would doubtlessly be aware of that, wouldn’t he? God, Eric didn’t know. He couldn’t think. He wished Keenan were here. No, he didn’t want that. The hunters would hurt his vampire.

An explosion sounded somewhere in the distance, and Eric swooned on his feet. The lights in the club flickered before they shut down. The monitors instantly went black. The darkness made Eric even more frightened and confused. As his childhood fears emerged once more, Eric knew without a doubt they were coming.

“They must’ve cut the club’s energy supply,” Giovanni said, confirming Eric’s suspicion. “The backup generators should kick in though in a few seconds.”

“I have a bad feeling about this, Giovanni,” Cassandra replied. “Maybe we should go check, see if they don’t do something in the meantime.”

“That’s useless,” the incubus shot back. “By the time we’re there, the generators will already be up.”

Another loud crash sounded, this time closer. When the backup generators went up, the cameras from the entryway and the first hallway were disabled. The hunters had infiltrated the club.

The little part of Eric's mind that worked identified the source of their problem as the very small gap between the moment in which the club lost its supply of energy and the one when the generators came online. He concluded the hunters planned this attack long ago. They were too well organized.

Just as Eric thought this, the sound of shooting started in the front of the club.

"Giovanni, what other staff does the club have?" Aidan asked.

"During the day, we have only a skeleton staff of twelve Sidhe, Jean Luc's Imperials. They can handle themselves in battle, but these guys seem to mean business."

Eric did not know who the Imperials were, or if they could protect the club's entrance. In his humble opinion, even with the best skills and training, twelve men couldn't fight against the large number of hunters.

"I think the three of us should go out and stall," Cassandra said. "You, dark-haired human, what's your name? Forget about it, doesn't matter. You stay with the youngling."

Eric almost gaped at Cassandra. Youngling? A minute ago, Eric was a useless human whore. Everyone seemed just as surprised. Eric wondered if Cassandra also experienced that peculiar spell. Beyond that, he wondered what it meant.

"Come on! Why are you staring at me like that?" Cassandra glared at her fellow paranormals. "We've wasted enough time."

Aidan and Giovanni just nodded wordlessly. Cassandra threw another look toward Eric, and then the three paranormals left the infirmary, leaving Matthew and Eric behind.

\* \* \* \*

*Le Grange Airport, twenty miles from New York*

As he entered the plane, Jean Luc was met with a shower of bullets. Projecting a shield around himself, he scanned the contents of the aircraft.

He already knew that he wouldn't find his brother here, but perhaps he could still find out some valuable information. He grinned as he spotted the person he was looking for.

"Well, hello there, Claire. And how are you this fine afternoon?"

Claire glared at Jean Luc, at his sarcastic greeting.

"You freak! What the hell are you doing here?" She turned to her staff and snarled at them, "You idiots, what are you doing? Shoot him!"

As the men pointed their guns at him, Jean Luc rubbed his chin.

"Hmmm, I don't think you should do that," he said. "You do know that's treason, pointing a weapon at me?"

"Treason! Bah! You're scum and a shame to the royal family," she answered mockingly. "That's why they banished you here seven years ago."

Jean Luc made an effort to keep the shock from his face. How did she know that? Pierre. Pierre told her. It was true, his family officially banished him seven years back. They'd somehow found out about Min, and Jean Luc's subsequent injury represented a humiliation for them. When he'd awoken, he'd found himself abandoned here in New York. That didn't mean he couldn't still use his status as a prince.

Jean Luc smirked, not allowing her to see the turmoil in his heart. "Your point? I am still a prince, no matter what happens."

His calm reply seemed to fuel Claire's anger. "Pierre told me all about your plan." She clenched her fists, her body tense as a bowstring.

"He told me how you want to blame him for your crimes, so that you can take his place. I won't let you. I won't allow it, you hear?"

Jean Luc arched a brow at this. Her attitude didn't surprise him, of course. Claire loved his brother, and she'd never liked Jean Luc much. She was just a child by Sidhe standards, younger than Pierre. Jean Luc never agreed with their wedding, but taking her pregnancy into account, he'd been helpless to stop it. Or at least, before this entire nightmare started.

"Now, now, Claire, let's not start with the name-calling! We wouldn't want you to hurt your child, now would we?"

Claire paled, covering her abdomen with her hand protectively. "You wouldn't. He's your nephew. You wouldn't hurt him."

Jean Luc rolled his eyes, annoyed by the woman's dramatics. He didn't have time for this, damn it! Claire didn't understand the most basic things about their race. She'd been raised in a golden cage, shielded from the dark

realities of the world, and she remained blissfully unaware of the existence of the DSS. Therefore, she never understood why Jean Luc was so different from other Sidhe, why the Imperials always acted so coldly and why they, unlike most of those of their species, could kill without blinking an eye.

Claire's only concerns were always Pierre and her hair color. Today, Claire chose a peculiar shade of violet for her locks, but while the color suited Giovanni just fine, it looked unnatural on her. Jean Luc felt inclined to ask her how much she paid her stylist, but of course, that wouldn't contribute to the success of their mission in any way.

Claire's anger seemed to reach its boiling point. "You freak! I'll kill you if you touch my son. You're nothing but a whore, the whore of a human. Go spread your legs for your filthy little Minu!"

This time, Jean Luc couldn't hide his shock. How...how did she know about that? How did she find out his lover's name? And the nickname he used for Min Yu...It was impossible.

The voice returned, nearly deafening in its intensity. *"Kill her! What right does she have to speak in this way to you? She's only Pierre's slut."*

Jean Luc made a conscious effort to shut out the insidious whispers in his head. So his brother betrayed him again. Big deal. It was the fault of the DSS, not Pierre's conscious actions.

*"So what if it isn't conscious? They need to die! They will never laugh at you or hurt you, never again. They'll never hit you and humiliate you. Kill them, kill them all!"*

Holding his head, Jean Luc stumbled out of the plane. In his haste, he forgot that they didn't use an actual staircase and fell on the ground with a thud. It ended up being a good thing, though. The pain of the impact gave him something to concentrate on, something else that wasn't the voice.

The fall hadn't been high enough to cause some significant damage. Blindly leaning against the side of the plane, Jean Luc hit the surface with his shoulder with all his might.

The familiar pain felt welcome. He'd learned that dislocated bones hurt a lot and healed quite rapidly in a Sidhe. They made the perfect tool for countering DSS attacks. Slowly, the voice dimmed to an uncomfortable buzz in the background. When he again felt capable to function and opened his eyes, Jean Luc didn't know how long he'd been on the ground.

He grimaced a little, pushing the bone back into place. In time, he'd gotten used to the painful procedure, so it didn't hurt quite so much anymore. Getting up, he brushed his clothes with his right hand. There, much better. Now, for the unfinished Claire business. As Jean Luc entered the plane again, Günter gave him a puzzled look. Jean Luc wondered how much he'd seen and shook his head to himself. He'd have to worry about that later.

Jean Luc kept his silence as Elise von Klein attempted to get information out of Claire, in her own diplomatic way, of course. Elise's ability to deal with such situations never ceased to amaze him.

"There now, child," Elise said. "You must tell us where he is. He is very ill, and if we don't get to him, something very bad is going to happen. He might get hurt. You don't want that, do you?"

Jean Luc barely restrained hysterical laughter. Elise sounded genuinely concerned about his brother's fate. She was not. Well, not in a good way at least. She did indeed want to find Pierre, but only to cut him up into little pieces.

"He's not ill. I spoke with him, and he said he felt just fine. You're making things up for this, this, this *freak*."

Claire appeared just as set against him as before he stumbled out of the plane. Jean Luc wondered if she even knew how much her words affected him.

He couldn't help but be a little amused when the vampire couple shared a look, as if communicating silently. So, they were getting exasperated with the little bitch, too? Günter discretely touched Jean Luc's arm.

"Jean Luc, do you think it's possible for Elise to enter this girl's mind? Without harming the child, I mean?"

Jean Luc considered the question. The vampire's method of exploring thoughts always affected people in a negative way. Günter's proposal involved a certain shock, instilling fear in Claire's mind and maybe even hurting her physically, a fact which could cause complications in a pregnant woman. Not that he cared much about Claire's comfort right now, but her kid, Jean Luc's nephew, couldn't be faulted for the mistakes of the parents. Still, hurting Claire by proxy would be better than nothing, right? Decisions, decisions.

Jean Luc shook his head, trying to dissipate the fog of the DSS that yet again started to overwhelm him. Without another word, he exited the plane. This was a waste of time. His presence there just made him want to hurt Claire. He jumped down from the hatch, this time landing gracefully on the ground. In that moment, he recalled that Keenan took his car. Stupid vampire! Now, what could he use to go back to the club?

Perhaps Claire or any of the other Sidhe present had a vehicle around here. It seemed like a good enough plan. Only he didn't know where the cars were. Another thought flashed through Jean Luc's mind. Of course! He was in an airport. He could find some sort of aircraft to steal. Perhaps it'd be a little awkward, with his arm still a little hurt, but it would be much faster.

He managed to get halfway to the hangar before Günter stopped him.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" the vampire asked, glaring at him.

"There's nothing here for me, Mr. von Klein," Jean Luc answered, hiding the fact that he wanted to hurt Günter, and most everyone in the world, for that matter. He couldn't keep his disease at bay forever. He needed to get out of there before he did something he'd regret. "Claire would just get even more freaked if I'm still around," he continued. "Besides, there's a good chance that Keenan guessed right and Pierre went to the club again."

Günter seemed to agree with this and nodded with obvious reluctance. Of course, Jean Luc knew better than to trust the von Kleins. They were vampires after all and cared after no one, perhaps with the exception of their sons. Jean Luc wondered if they would accept Eric as a member of their family. Or the other human, Matthew.

Jean Luc mentally grinned, knowing that the von Kleins weren't aware of Aidan's involvement with Eric's friend. He couldn't wait for the moment when they found out. He didn't like the von Kleins much because they were arrogant and self-centered. Perhaps their close relationship with his parents might be a factor as well. He hadn't missed Mrs. von Klein's jab earlier on in the day. Well, fuck her! What did she know? Perhaps he should tell them what he found out from Matthew's mind when he healed him. No, it would spoil all the fun.

Without sparing another thought to the von Kleins, Jean Luc entered the hangar. Finding a helicopter that suited his needs, he considered calling



*Extase* again, but decided against it. He would get to the club soon enough anyway.

As the helicopter took off from the Le Grange Airport, Claire's words echoed in Jean Luc's mind. One question wouldn't leave his mind. Perhaps Pierre knew of Min's existence from their parents. But how could he have known about Jean Luc's nickname for his lover? How?

## Chapter Twenty-One

The infirmary fell into silence after the departure of the three paranormals. In the distance, Eric could hear sounds of gunshots and if he strained his hearing, even the occasional scream.

Matthew stuck by his side, probably confused and frightened by the overwhelming events. Eric could understand that. Even if he'd gotten used to the idea of a paranormal world, he still had difficulty with dealing with the sudden assassination plots and peculiar twists.

The shots still echoed in the distance, and the sound shook Eric out of his daze. Right, the bad guys were here. Cassandra, Keenan's brother, and Giovanni left to face them alone.

*Oh, God!* They could get hurt, Eric thought. He couldn't allow that. Eric knew that Keenan loved his brother very much and that Giovanni was his longtime friend. If Cassandra died, who would give Keenan the children he deserved? Eric couldn't allow it.

Shaking off Matthew's hand, Eric headed toward the infirmary door. He couldn't stay there any longer. He had to help.

"Wait, Eric," Matthew said as he intercepted Eric. "Wait, you can't go out there. It's too dangerous."

Eric just smiled sadly. He knew his friend would try to stop him, but Eric needed to do this.

"I can, and I will. Stay inside."

"No, I won't let you!" Matthew used his body as a blockade in front of the door. Eric couldn't help but feel a little warm inside at his friend's concern, but he'd made his decision. He used his mental abilities to push Matthew away.

"Stay inside, Matthew," he said as he left behind an astonished Matthew.

Eric headed toward the closest source of screaming. He could never find his way around the weird corridors of *Extase*, but somehow, he knew his destination.

A tall man in uniform appeared from Eric's right. He held a rifle in his hand and immediately pointed it at Eric. The surge in hatred reminded Eric of the time in the subway. The man didn't have time to shoot. Eric used his powers to slam his enemy against the wall with incredible force, once, twice, until he rendered the man unconscious. Ignoring his now incapacitated enemy and the now useless weapon, Eric continued on his way. He stopped for a minute when the lights flickered then went out completely. Shrugging, he continued walking down the obscure corridor, slithering like a shadow in the darkness. It became nearly impossible to see, but Eric didn't hesitate for a second. He knew his purpose, and nothing would deter him.

As he walked, thoughts flashed through his mind, memories long buried, forgotten, and put aside. His parents, staring down at him, twin expressions of hatred distorting their features. Pages of clumsy sketches burnt, the ashes of his dreams scattered in the wind. The pain of the riding crop, terror and drug-induced forgetfulness.

Eric wondered why he'd been afraid to remember all these details. True, he'd always remembered his parents, in a somewhat distant way, as if through a thick, choking fog. He remembered their hatred, their disdain, sometimes their voices, but never everything that happened in his childhood. He vaguely recalled running away, but somehow, he'd never questioned why everything else remained a blur. He'd just taken it as a reality he accepted like it wasn't even there.

But now, everything became clear, vivid in his mind as if it happened just yesterday. He remembered their house in Texas, the neigh of horses, the sound of cattle. He'd liked the horses a lot and always wanted to go out and draw them. He even did so as a little child. Those little awkward sketches represented the pride of his childhood. But after his confinement, he was never able to see the horses again. When he tried to run out of the house just to see them, maybe give them a treat, he only got as far as the main living room. They never let him go out. He was the shame and the brand on their perfect lives.

He also remembered a cowboy, who always protected Eric, talking to him, showing him around. His name was John. Eric didn't recall too much about him as a person, just that he was a big man with a reddish beard covering half of his face. Still, as a child, he'd liked the rough cowboy. John never laughed at Eric's clumsy drawings and always let him around the horses, taking the time to teach him things. He'd been Eric's only friend.

But then, something else happened, something terrible, that changed Eric's life forever.

*Eric laughed happily as the pony chomped down his carrot, clopping his hoof down and demanding another treat. Patting the brown horse on the head, he turned from him to look for another carrot. He giggled, amused, as the pony pranced in his shed, obviously impatient.*

*"Yes, yes, I'm coming, just wait a minute."*

*Humming happily, Eric rummaged through his pack, where he kept the treats he brought for the horses and the dogs, as well as his sketchbook and crayons. He loved to draw the animals. The way they moved held something so very beautiful, and their eyes sparkled with kindness.*

*Maybe one day, he'd be a famous artist. Then he could have a ranch of his own, with lots of horses and dogs and cats and even sheep. He could then draw everything he liked. It would be so great!*

*Lost in the daydream, Eric didn't hear the other presence approach and jumped, startled as he felt a big hand in his hair. He breathed a sigh of relief as he heard the familiar voice.*

*"Whatcha doin', kid? Daydreamin' again?"*

*Eric turned and smiled up at his friend.*

*"I'm just feedin' the horses. You should see 'em, John, how excited they get. They're so beautiful."*

*"Yeah, they are," John said, smiling softly at Eric. "Anyway, kiddo, you spoil 'em too much. They'll get fat and useless, and then I'll have to shoot 'em."*

*Eric giggled, knowing John would never shoot a horse.*

*"Stop your frettin'. They won't get fat from just a carrot a day."*

*"Come on, Ricky, leave the horse feedin' to me and go outside and play!"*

*Eric gave John a pleading look.*

*“Just a minute longer, please? I promised Honeybell another carrot.”*

*John shook his head, but in the end, didn’t argue further.*

*“Fine, then. Give the freakin’ horse your carrot. But after that...”*

*“Thanks, John.” Impulsively, Eric hugged the big cowboy. Of course, since their heights were so different, Eric’s head barely reached John’s stomach. Eric giggled as he turned to feed the horse.*

*Before he could even give Honeybell his treat, Eric heard a dreaded sound outside. Heavy footsteps signaled a new presence approaching the stables, a presence Eric knew and feared. Eric dropped the carrot and hastily looked around to find the bag with his sketches. He couldn’t allow them to be seen.*

*Alas, he didn’t have the time to achieve his goal. In what seemed like mere seconds, his father stepped inside the stables.*

*Liam McAllister was a tall, but slim man. Even if he fancied himself a rancher, he never participated in taking care of the horses or the cattle. Eric thought his father just kept the ranch to boast it to his stuck-up friends. Unlike Eric, both his father and mother disliked the smell of animals, and everything else connected to farming, for that matter. Eric heard them many times talking about the cattle and even the men tending them as ugly and not sanitary.*

*As paradoxical as it would seem, they also disliked Eric’s passion for drawing. For this reason, his father always punished Eric whenever he escaped to the stables to pet the animals and sketch their raw perfection. Eric needed to obey two rules while living in his father’s house. No artistic hobbies or occupations, as they were for queers and not respectable men, and no fraternizing with the rednecks or going to see the animals. Eric had broken them both. His father would be furious.*

*His father’s eyes fell on the sketches that lay next to the horse’s stall.*

*“What is this?” he asked in a deceptively calm voice.*

*He picked up the little notebook, browsing it with a curious expression on his face.*

*Eric waited in silence for the outburst he knew would come. After all, he needed to “man up” anyway, to take over the family ranch one day.*

*“I thought I told you to stop this ridiculous nonsense, Eric.” His father glowered at him. “I told you time and again, but it seems you just don’t get it.”*

*"I'm sorry, Daddy," Eric said, desperately wishing to be anywhere but there. "I won't ever do it again."*

*He meant it, too, although he knew that he wouldn't be able to keep his promise.*

*His father must have guessed that little fact and snarled at Eric.*

*"Don't lie to me, little boy! If ya were sorry, ya wouldn't disobey me like this!"*

*Eric winced as the Texan accent his father usually kept at bay started to appear. His daddy must be very angry for that to happen. Without another warning, Liam ripped the notebook of sketches in two. Eric's eyes filled with tears as he watched his father hatefully do away with the drawn horses and kittens he loved so much. He gasped and reached out, futilely trying to stop his father, hoping at least to manage to save some of his work.*

*His efforts just made Liam angrier. He slapped Eric across the face, so hard Eric fell over.*

*"I'll teach ya a lesson you'll never forget, little boy!"*

*Eric whimpered as he saw his father retrieve his riding crop. He knew how much the riding crop hurt, especially when it was wielded by his daddy.*

*Much to Eric's surprise, John stepped between Eric and his father, practically blocking Liam's path.*

*"Now see here, Mr. McAllister," John said. "The boy disobeyed, but I'll not have ya beatin' him for wantin' to draw the horses. That's just wrong."*

*"And who do you think ya are, Dillinger, to try and give me a lesson? You haven't even finished high school."*

*Eric's father snorted derisively, and Eric wanted to punch his daddy for being so cruel to his friend.*

*"I may be just a cowboy with no education, but at least I don't hurt helpless children," John replied coolly.*

*At John's retort, Liam's anger seemed to increase tenfold. Eric watched in horror as the riding crop he knew so well whooshed through the air with a grotesque sound and hit his friend's left cheek. John let out a sound of pained surprise, the force of the blow making him take a step back.*

*Eric's father grinned, a little evil twinkle appearing in his green eyes.*

*"Not so brave now, are ya, Dillinger?" he asked.*

*Eric wanted to tell John to stand back, to leave the stables and let Eric take the brunt of his father's anger. It wouldn't be so bad, since Daddy*

*didn't want to leave marks on Eric's skin. He reached out to his friend, but John didn't see. Either that, or he ignored Eric's silent plea.*

*"I've been silent long enough," John said. "Won't let ya hurt this boy no more."*

*John took a step forward, seemingly oblivious to the angry red welt left by the riding crop on his cheek. Liam didn't even grace the cowboy with a reply. He just lifted his crop again, obviously intending to hit John once more.*

*He didn't get the chance. The crop flew out of his hand, and Liam found himself propelled backwards by an unseen force. Wide-eyed, John reached for Eric.*

*"Eric, stop! Stop!"*

*Eric didn't know what his friend wanted him to do. His head hurt terribly, and he whimpered in pain. John grabbed his wrist, apparently intending to convince Eric to stop whatever he thought Eric was doing. He squeezed Eric's arm, and Eric gasped at the onslaught of feelings and emotions. The same force that pushed Liam away slammed into John, and Eric let out a shocked gasp as he watched his friend's body fly through the air.*

*Eric saw John land somewhere on the floor with a crack, his arm twisted at an awkward angle and blood covering his face. To Eric's right, his father lay unconscious, several heavy objects having somehow fallen on his body. Horror gripped the boy as he started screaming and screaming.*

His desperate screams alerted the rest of the ranch hands, but when they tried to take him away, they were flung like toys against the walls of the stable, as well. Eventually, they managed to subdue him by shooting him with a tranquilizer gun. He woke up in the basement of the house, and he never saw the horses or the stables until the day he'd managed to run away.

It was quite funny that he would remember John now of all times. Eric wondered what happened to him after the episode in the stables. His injuries must have healed easily enough. Eric's wounds, however, never healed. That day had also been a fateful one. It marked him forever.

Eric tried to forget the stain in his heart and in his mind, but it could never go away. His power was a curse, and it could turn against Keenan any day now.

Perhaps he could still do something. He could use his power for one thing alone, for hurting people. He would make these bad men go away. He'd help his vampire, and then he'd just disappear.

As he advanced through the club, Eric ran into several other hunters whom he immobilized as easily as the first one. Strangely enough, with the task clear in his mind, his mind also became focused. The physical pain faded in the background. It was just a shadow that didn't even bother him. The sorrow of Keenan's absence never vanished, but Eric didn't expect it to. He thought of his vampire's warmth and the love between them, and it gave him strength to go on.

All of a sudden, the sound of a struggle reached his ears. Eric couldn't hear any gunshots like before, so he guessed it must be a struggle between paranormals. That could only mean one thing. Pierre was out there.

Taking a deep breath, Eric stepped forward. The lights flickered briefly, allowing him to take in the sight in front of his eyes. Pierre had Cassandra trapped against the wall, and his power seemed too hard for her to fight against. She would soon be dead if Eric didn't help her. Horror filled Eric, and he knew he couldn't allow Cassandra to die. Pierre would have to pass over his dead body to do it.

"Stuck now, are we?" Pierre asked. "That's too bad. Want me to give you a hand, *chérie*?"

Cassandra's body slowly started to go limp. Even as she tried to fight Pierre, it was obvious she didn't have a chance. Her strength seemed to be waning. They were both running out of time.

Pierre laughed disdainfully. "You're so pathetic, Cassandra. And to think, I considered letting you in on my plan."

"Fuck you, you bastard!" she barely managed to choke out.

Eric didn't know why the two paranormals missed his approach. Perhaps they'd gotten too caught up in their fight to care about one pathetic human. Well, this human would give Pierre a lesson the man would never forget.

"Get away from her, you traitorous bastard!"

Pierre turned in surprise toward Eric and tilted his head, as if wondering how Eric dared to challenge him. In the process, he dropped Cassandra to the floor. The lights went out once more, but Eric caught the heavy intakes of breath and concluded Cassandra would be fine.



“Well, well,” the Sidhe said. “If it isn’t little Eric. How interesting.”

“What’s so interesting about my being here?” Eric shot back. “It’s probably why you came back.”

“True,” Pierre replied. He paused, and even in the darkness, Eric felt the Sidhe’s scrutiny. “To be honest, I expected more of you. I thought Keenan had better taste. It would seem I was mistaken. You really are just an idiotic whore.”

Eric gritted his teeth, refusing to let the Sidhe get to him. To his surprise, a female voice reached out to him, desperate and pleading.

“Eric, get out of here. He’ll kill you.”

Something in Cassandra’s tone called out to Eric, like her gaze had back in the infirmary. He didn’t know why, but he thought she would be a good mother for Keenan’s children. He felt a warmth inside her, a deep kindness hidden under the chill of her vampire nature. Perhaps Cassandra herself didn’t realize it, but Eric could sense it now, so clearly. He wanted—no—he needed it to survive.

He turned in her direction and smiled. “Don’t worry about it! Just take care of him, okay?”

He didn’t know if she’d seen him, but he guessed she must have. “Eric, stop!” she shouted seconds later.

Eric ignored her desperate plea and turned toward the other paranormal in the hallway. Even if his eyesight couldn’t give him a view of Pierre, his mind felt the emotions, and he could detect their source.

To his right, he heard a scampering noise and realized Cassandra must be trying to get up. “Stay out of this,” Pierre snarled at her. A loud bang and groan signaled Pierre had pinned Cassandra back down. “This is between me and the little human whore.”

Anger flowed through Eric, powerful and bright. “Bring it on, bastard.”

Human and Sidhe energies clashed in the darkness of the corridor. It crackled so white that Eric actually saw Pierre fly back and hit the wall of the corridor. Eric smirked in satisfaction at the shadow of surprise on the Sidhe’s face.

“Well, then,” Pierre said as he got up, “that’s quite impressive. Let’s see how long you can keep it up.”

\* \* \* \*

Just as he'd expected, the helicopter got Jean Luc to the club in no time. He didn't arrive early enough to prevent its assault, though. Noticing the massive power outage, he easily realized the hunters breached the defenses of *Extase*.

Cursing, Jean Luc landed the helicopter on the roof of the club. He hastily made his way down, passing through the third floor without glancing back. The upper levels held his private quarters and those of the Imperials. Despite the fact that he did keep another room downstairs, he needed another place in case he fell into one of his DSS fits.

The fighting was taking place in the first level of the club's private section. Where would Pierre go? Goddamn it! What would he do if he surrendered to the DSS? Go to the infirmary and kill Eric.

Jean Luc ran through the first level of the club, quickly dispatching any opponent that came into his path. His silhouette looked a bit like Pierre's, confusing them into inaction. It was an advantage for him, and it helped him go through groups of hunters much faster.

Jean Luc took a deep breath and sent out mental probes in search of his brother. He detected a faint trace of Pierre just ahead of him. There seemed to be other presences around him. At first, Jean Luc wasn't sure about their identity, but as he advanced, he realized that he could sense Cassandra and...Eric?

Jean Luc got to the corridor just in time to see Eric's body fly through the air and crash against the wall. The human didn't move and made no sign of being alive. *Merde!*

Pierre laughed and turned toward Jean Luc.

"Well, then...Glad you could join the party, *mon frère*."

Jean Luc glared at his brother. "Pierre, stop this madness. Stop right now, or I'll be forced to do something I really don't want to do."

"Oh? Lost your nerve? Perhaps your little human lover took it away when he shot you."

Despite the fact that Jean Luc expected his brother to know about this—since Claire could only find out from Pierre—it still made Jean Luc's blood boil in his veins. His vision swam with anger, and he could feel the DSS making a swift comeback.

“Shut the fuck up, Pierre. You don’t know what you’re saying,” he snarled.

He attempted to control the insidious whispering in his head. This time he wouldn’t have the chance to break his arm either. Damn.

“Oh, but I do.” Pierre laughed again. “I know everything about you and your beloved Minu. After all, I forced him to pull that trigger.”

Jean Luc forced himself to grasp the meaning of his brother’s words. No, it couldn’t be. His brother couldn’t have betrayed him like that. Besides, the Min Yu episode had taken place seven years ago. Surely, Jean Luc would have seen something earlier.

Taking advantage of his distraction, Pierre jumped him, his blade embedding itself in Jean Luc’s stomach.

“You know, I made him cry before I killed him. Your little Min Yu.”

Jean Luc saw red. He didn’t even recognize this person as his brother. Everything disappeared, and just his desire to kill and to hurt remained. Pierre flew off him in a flash, and Jean Luc grinned as he pulled Pierre’s knife out of him and licked the blood.

“Oh, come on, *petit frère*. Is that the best you got?”

Pierre instantly jumped back to his feet, his eyes glowing feral. “You die today, Jean Luc. I swear.”

Jean Luc laughed. “You always were good with words, and yet never capable to actually *do* anything on your own account. In everything you did, you were always worse than me. Weak, pathetic, helpless.”

“Shut the fuck up, bastard,” Pierre growled, sending a bolt of energy in Jean Luc’s direction.

Jean Luc dodged the surge of magic, *tsking*.

“Come now. Surely you can do better.”

Howling like an animal, Pierre blindly charged at him, just like Jean Luc wanted. Intercepting Pierre, he grabbed his arm and pinned him against the floor. He would make this little bastard suffer, but first, he needed to know something.

Pierre screamed and thrashed as Jean Luc violently pushed into his mind, searching through his memories, destroying an already destroyed mind. Jean Luc didn’t care. He’d cared long enough, and what did that get him? Incarceration, beatings, darkness, and humiliation. His parents used him as their own private killing machine and then pushed him away and spat

in his face. As soon as he finished Pierre off, Jean Luc would kill them, too—that bitch Claire and the von Kleins.

Jean Luc grinned, enjoying the knowledge of the pain of his victim, reveling in his agony and in his screams. And then, he finally found what he was looking for—the memory of that fateful day in Paris...

*Paris, 2003*

*“You lied to me, Luc. All this time, you lied to me, plotted behind my back to kill me. I loved you, Goddamn it! How could you? Was anything you’ve told me true? Do you even look like this?”*

*Hidden and cloaked by an intricate spell, Pierre reveled in the broken voice of his brother.*

*“I’m so sorry, Minu, so sorry. Mon amour, je t’en pris! Don’t push me away.”*

*It made Pierre feel both disgusted at his older brother and exceedingly pleased with his own actions. Arranging for the little half-human to find out about Jean Luc’s heritage had been so very easy. And as expected, the stupid hunter reacted so beautifully.*

*“Don’t call me that. My name is François, and I’m not your love. I don’t know who you are. Everything you’ve ever told me was a lie.”*

*Pierre wished he could see inside the room, but alas, he couldn’t risk going too close. Being here involved a significant risk in itself. Jean Luc lowered his guard around Min Yu, but Pierre knew better than to underestimate his brother.*

*“I never lied when I said I loved you.”*

*Pierre didn’t know whether to throw up or laugh at his brother’s unoriginality. Jesus, if you’re going to beg, try something less corny! He felt pleased when he heard the sound of the hunter’s laughter. This was going so well.*

*His human associates gathered outside the building, waiting for his sign to strike. Once Jean Luc killed Min Yu, he’d be too shocked of what he’d done to put up much of a fight. Then, Pierre would be rid of his irritating brother, the only obstacle that kept him here in Paris. He had other plans, bigger plans, but he needed to be free of Jean Luc to put them into practice.*

*Panicked shouts started coming from the room.*

*"Luc, stop it! What are you doing?"*

*Pierre smiled in satisfaction and licked his lips absently. Jean Luc was already under the influence of his anger. Perfect. He wondered how long the hunter would last against him. One minute? Thirty seconds?*

*In this state, Jean Luc would probably be much too lost to feel him, so Pierre dared to move a little closer. Silently, he got to the entrance of the room and peeked inside. Much to his dismay, he realized that his brother didn't attack the human as Pierre first thought he would. Instead, Jean Luc stabbed himself and now lay in Min Yu's arms. How very dramatic. Why did Jean Luc always have to make things difficult? Couldn't he kill the human already?*

*"Luc? Luc? Are you okay, mon ange?"*

*"I'm fine. You know how I am. It happens sometimes."*

*Pierre gritted his teeth, feeling irritated. If this went on like this, they'd end up fucking. Well, he could always kill them both while they basked in the afterglow, but he preferred to conserve that option as a last resort. Jean Luc might feel them if he wasn't concerned with his beloved Minu's anger.*

*God or the devil seemed to be on his side. The conversation shifted again, as the hunter inquired in a suspicious tone, "It just happens when we argue. Or when you're upset. Luc, are you truly sick, or is this a lie, too?"*

*Jean Luc didn't immediately reply.*

*"Yes, it's a lie," he said in the end. "Everything was a lie. From the start, from the very beginning. If you don't kill me, I'll kill you."*

*Pierre couldn't believe his luck. It was more than he'd hoped for. Easier even than he'd expected. Probably, Jean Luc wanted to be noble, to protect his human lover or some stupid shit like that. Well, it would be his undoing.*

*Astonished, the hunter picked up the gun, and Pierre smirked as Jean Luc closed his eyes. The stupid human didn't plan to shoot his lover, of course, but with a little encouragement from Pierre's telekinesis, the gun pointed itself at Jean Luc, slowly, slowly...Satisfied, Pierre mentally pushed the trigger of the gun, aiming for his brother's chest.*

*The silencer muffled the sound of the gunshot. Of course, hunter weapons were top-notch and designed to hurt paranormals. How so very convenient. Pierre grinned in the darkness as the hunter dropped the gun, eyes wide in horror.*

*"Oh, mon dieu, what have I done?" Min asked himself.*

*As Min Yu held his lover's now still form, Pierre melted into the darkness. Now to summon his little human friends and finish the job.*

Jean Luc exited Pierre's mind, having seen all he needed to see. The hunters captured and imprisoned Min Yu shortly after that. And Jean Luc had done nothing about it. He'd done nothing to get Min out.

As much as he hated this creature, Jean Luc knew that he had other priorities now. Getting up, he hurled Pierre's body with all his might across the corridor and smiled when Pierre landed with a satisfying crack.

In the corner, he detected Cassandra, holding the head of Keenan's lover. Whatever. If she wanted to kill Keenan's slut, that was just fine with him. Humming to himself, Jean Luc exited the hallway and went in search of his Imperials. He would need some help for this new task.

\* \* \* \*

Sometimes, people wondered what they would see in the great beyond, what it was like to die. Eric never had this curiosity. Many times, he'd been so depressed he wanted to die, but he fought too much for life to give up. Keenan had saved him the one time he slipped up, giving him back his determination and his will to go on.

In the end, when the time came, he didn't have a choice. He'd lost. He'd lost to the Sidhe, and now, he was dying.

Eric could feel it. The physical pain had long ago turned into excruciating agony. His mind felt burnt out, like a lightbulb short-circuited by a burst of electricity. Some part of him knew that it'd been his own stupid fault. He'd allowed the Sidhe to push him into overusing his abilities. His own power had defeated him.

Lost in the darkness and the pain, Eric didn't regret anything he'd done. He'd lived more in the past week than in years of being all alone, struggling to get by in New York. Memories flashed in his mental vision, the first time he'd seen Keenan, their first kiss, meeting Jean Luc and the other paranormals, befriending Matthew, finding that peculiar kinship in Cassandra. He'd been given the chance to know a world beyond his power of comprehension. He hadn't survived it, but he was still thankful for experiencing it.

He'd have liked to be by his vampire's side forever, to love Keenan and have Keenan love him. He'd have wanted to at least say good-bye. It wasn't meant to be, and Eric hoped his lover would forgive him for it.

Loneliness swelled inside him, amplifying the pain, and Eric would have cried if he had any tears left. And then, a warm light filled the empty space in his heart. "Don't let go, Eric," a soft voice said. "Keenan needs you. I need you. Don't let go."

Eric didn't understand. Who needed him? Who wanted him to stay alive?

The familiar image of a beautiful redhead ghosted in his mind. It should have surprised Eric, but it didn't. Too many emotions came from Cassandra, an assault of images and feelings crowding in Eric's mind. He couldn't distinguish his own thoughts from hers.

He saw himself through her eyes, blood pouring out of his nose and mouth, and absorbed her knowledge of his condition. He had extensive brain injuries, caused by the overuse of his power, and she feared he would not survive.

Beyond that, he felt something else, the genuine desire to be a mother, to hold a baby in her arms. It made no sense for a vampire to experience such emotions, but Cassandra did, and it humbled Eric to the core. He felt guilty for passing judgment on her without truly knowing her.

"It's all right, Eric," she whispered. "I've said and done so many horrible things to you that I don't deserve ever being forgiven."

Eric wanted to smile, to reassure her, but he felt his strength wane. The tenuous bond between them began to fade. It was the end.

"No, you don't," Cassandra said, and her forceful voice imbued Eric with power. "Open your mouth, Eric. Now."

Eric wanted to do it, but he couldn't make his jaw move. His teeth seemed clamped together by an unknown force. Cassandra wouldn't be deterred, though. She forced his mouth open, and seconds later, his mouth filled with warm, coppery liquid.

"Swallow," she said. "Do it."

A distant part of his mind acknowledged the fact that he tasted the blood of a person on his tongue. His body rebelled against it, refusing Cassandra's offering. He couldn't do it. God, he couldn't do it.

A drop of hot liquid fell on Eric's cheek, and by miracle, he actually felt it. Even in his damaged mind, the shock of it was too powerful to miss. It sent ripples of energy through him, like a powerful wave swallowing him whole.

In that one vampire tear, Eric found the strength to push back his revulsion. It took a superhuman effort, but he managed to obey. He started swallowing Cassandra's blood, and as he drank, the pain in his body and in his mind disappeared, replaced by a fire he couldn't even begin to understand. What was going on? *Keenan, Cassandra, help me! Please help me.*



## Chapter Twenty-Two

For the nth time that afternoon, Keenan cursed every deity in existence and every known race, and especially humans, their blasted crowded cities and their idiotic machines that just made his life difficult. Naturally, he'd run into a traffic jam at the worst possible moment. He hated New York so much sometimes. God, when all this was over, he'd move somewhere nice and quiet with his pet. He'd make a home for them, find a special place where Eric could paint in silence, and they wouldn't have to worry about hidden threats and traitors.

Keenan swallowed, knowing that this wish might well be impossible at this time. Eric shut him out after that bitch Cassandra boasted about their hypothetical engagement. It was entirely possible that his mother set something up. Cassandra came from an influential family, and her marrying Keenan brought up the possibility of heirs.

Still, Elise never mentioned anything like that, neither to him nor to Aidan. Keenan knew that his mother could be ruthless and even scheming at times, but he doubted that she'd stab him in the back.

At any rate, none of that mattered now. He was at his wits' end because Eric faded completely from his mind. Even when Eric closed the connection, Keenan could still catch distant traces of his lover's emotions and sensations—pain, resolve, hope, love. At one point, he felt a surge in power that amazed him, and he knew Eric was using his gifts. The possible aftermath terrified Keenan, and indeed, soon after that, Eric simply disappeared from his mind.

Keenan feared the worst. He feared that he'd never be able to look into those emerald eyes again or hear that sweet laughter. His heart trembled at the possibility that Eric might never be able to finish their painting, that the next time Keenan held Eric's hand, it would be cold with the chill of death.

Keenan wouldn't be able to survive such a thing. If his pet died, he'd personally kill each and every one of those who'd ever hurt him. Then, he'd find a way to kill himself. It would be hard, but not impossible, even for a vampire as old as him. He could always ask for assistance if need be.

For now, he needed to get to *Extase*. Abandoning the useless Toyota, Keenan launched himself in the air, not caring that thousands of humans could see him, about the sun or anything else except his pet. He wished that vampires could cast better cloaking spells, but even they had their limit.

None of it mattered, though, except getting to Eric's side, seeing him, at least knowing. He felt almost sure that Eric was gone, but he needed to be certain. One glimmer of hope still burned inside of him, a little spark that kept him in motion. If Eric was still alive when he got there, Keenan could turn him into a vampire. It would bring Eric back to him and heal any injuries Eric might have.

In all his years, Keenan never turned anyone into a vampire. Their race tended to be very aristocratic, and artificial vampires belonged to a class different from the natural ones. Despite common beliefs, vampires weren't undead creatures, nor were they affected by any holy object. They bred, breathed, and bled just like any living thing. Their only true particularities lay in their little penchant for blood and the fact that they could transfer their own power to others by turning them.

Keenan didn't consider turning Eric until now because there hadn't been any time for such concerns. Eventually, he'd have done it anyway, even if it meant going against the norms and taboos of his people. Those who received this gift tended to have been humans of significant value for the vampire sire. Since vampires weren't supposed to get attached to their prey, this was obviously frowned upon. Not illegal, but widely rejected.

Once, Keenan might have been refused creating an artificial vampire. Once, he might have cared about the opinions of the vampire society or of his parents. Now, it made no difference. If it meant saving his pet, he'd go over anything and anyone.

Through flying, Keenan shortened the duration of the trip to *Extase* considerably. The visual acknowledgement of the siege at *Extase* didn't surprise him, but the certainty of it still made him fear all the more for his pet. Eric was somewhere in there, lost, injured, helpless under the assault of the hunters.

Keenan wasn't inclined to irrational murder, but he knew that none of those hunters would survive this day. He'd personally make sure of it. They'd struggled so long for peace here in the United States. After the disaster at Chernobyl, both humans and paranormals agreed that attempting a peaceful coexistence would be the best course of action. Rogue hunters still roamed around, but their attacks lacked the organization and coherence this particular group showed.

He landed on the roof and caught sight of a helicopter with the Le Grange seal on it. He couldn't help but frown. How did the aircraft get here? Had Pierre really been at the airport? Anger and frustration flowed through him. He should have just flown here from Le Grange.

As he entered the club, Keenan guessed that Pierre was the root cause of all of this mess. Had Pierre hurt Eric? Despite his promise to Jean Luc, Pierre was a walking dead Sidhe if he'd touched a hair on Eric's body.

He hastened through *Extase*, trying to find a trace of his lover. He found occasional groups of hunters, most of them already unconscious and neutralized. There seemed to be so many of them. Where was Eric?

Keenan's heart did a little jump when he felt the connection between him and Eric start to come to life again. Oh, thank God! "*Pet?*"

Keenan received no answer to his call. The feelings he sensed seemed dim, like some sort of curtain appeared between them that hadn't been there before. The near certainty that he could lose his human forever terrified Keenan.

Moving at supernatural speed, he sprinted through the dark club. In efficient movements, he dispatched those few hunters that crossed his path. He didn't have any difficulties in doing so since they didn't even see or hear him coming. And as far as he could tell, the hunters lost the battle, anyway.

Keenan detected Eric somewhere on the first level. Ignoring the sounds of the battle he could still hear, he hastened in that direction. The image that he encountered when he reached his destination froze him in his tracks. No, it could not be.

Eric's body looked very still, his face covered in blood, and he lay in Cassandra's arms. The bitch had gone too far this time. This time, Keenan would tear her into little pieces.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Cassandra said softly.

Keenan wanted to make Cassandra regret her words, but if he catapulted the woman from her current position, Eric would get hurt. "Get away from him," he growled.

Cassandra just shook her head. "He needs me," she whispered, caressing Eric's forehead lovingly. Keenan was taken aback by her peculiar behavior. Did Cassandra lose her mind?

She didn't seem to present an immediate danger to Eric. Still, Keenan felt that he'd walked into another dimension. What could Cassandra be thinking?

He got his answer when Cassandra pressed her bloody wrist to Eric's lips. Paranormal blood sipped through the corner of Eric's mouth as she forced him to drink. It didn't make any sense. Cassandra would never turn Eric into her fledgling. Right?

Cassandra gestured for Keenan to come closer. "Come on, Keenan. He's coming back to us, but he'll need to feed when he wakes. If you give him some of your own blood, it'll help."

Keenan nodded, feeling dazed. Eric, a vampire. Cassandra's fledgling. He couldn't believe it. Cassandra shifted so that she could move Eric's body into Keenan's lap. "What happened, Cassandra?" Keenan asked, careful to keep the anger and jealousy from surfacing. He wanted Eric to be *his* fledgling, but Cassandra obviously saved Eric's life.

"Many things. I don't know how to explain. We had a fight in the infirmary, and it affected him a lot. I wanted to apologize, because I never intended to hurt him like that. But then the hunters showed up."

"When the security systems crashed, Aidan and Giovanni and I went out to intercept them. We left Eric and Matthew in the infirmary. By the way, did you know that human was your brother's lover? It was quite interesting to see them fight."

Keenan blinked at the sudden change in topic. He hadn't realized it, but the recent events must have shaken Cassandra more than she let on. "Cassandra?"

"Right, right. Sorry. Anyway, so we split up, and each of us took a different area. I don't know about the others, but in my case, it went reasonably well, until I met up with Pierre." She laughed bitterly. "The bastard kicked my ass, and he would have killed me, too, if Eric didn't show up."

Keenan gaped at Cassandra's words. "He is very brave, your little psychic, and very generous. Despite the fact that I'd just broken his heart, he faced Pierre for me, to save my life." Tears glistened in Cassandra's eyes as she spoke. "And he knew he would die because before fighting him, the last thing he said was *take care of him*."

Keenan took a deep breath, understanding what his pet had wanted, what he'd thought. Eric had been convinced that Cassandra could give Keenan something that he couldn't. He must have fought Pierre for Keenan, rather than for Cassandra herself. In the end, the result had been the same. "He lost."

Cassandra nodded. "The pressure ended up as too much for his brain to withstand. In the end, his humanity, and not Pierre, beat him. Luckily, Jean Luc showed up and beat his brother into a pulp. I have to say, that image still gives me the creeps." She shook herself and took a deep breath. "Anyway, leaving the Sidhe aside, there was no other way to help him than turning him. I hope you understand," she finished softly.

"I do," Keenan said. Truth be told, he *didn't* understand what motivated Cassandra to act in such a manner. "I am very grateful. I planned to do the same thing, but I probably wouldn't have gotten here in time. I just wish—"

Keenan's words died in his throat when his pet stirred in his arms. Eric whimpered a little, and his body started shaking. He was passing through the transformation. Keenan wished they could find a better place for this, a safer place, but this would have to do.

"Cassandra, can you stand guard?"

Cassandra glanced toward Eric and reluctantly nodded. "Take care of him," she whispered again. Getting up, she found a spot to efficiently guard them from incoming hunters.

As Cassandra watched over them, Keenan held his pet tightly in his arms. Through their connection, he could feel Eric's mind grow stronger, but also more and more erratic, agitated, and frantic. Keenan hoped that the transformation wouldn't push Eric's already fragile psyche into madness. Eric deserved better than an eternity of insanity.

Eric's trembling gradually increased, and he started making sounds of pain. Keenan's heart hurt with the knowledge that he could not do anything, not yet. He needed to wait for Eric's transformation to stop before feeding

him. Right now, he could only hold his human and try to comfort him with his presence.

When he got his hands on Pierre, he'd tear the traitorous creature into little pieces. His beautiful pet desperately struggled with death, all because of some insane Sidhe. Perhaps Keenan could have been understanding earlier in the day, but he'd run out of warm feelings and compassion when he'd first seen Eric's bloody form in Cassandra's arms. Someone would pay dearly for this.

Eric's trembling started to subside. Keenan wished he knew for certain that this was a good sign, but in truth, he couldn't be sure. Sometimes, fragile bodies didn't manage to pass through the transformation successfully and the human subjected to it died.

Just as Keenan thought this, Eric's eyes flew open. Deadly fire rimmed his pupils, and Keenan's heart fell as he realized he could see no reason in those eyes. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to calm down. It must be just the blood frenzy.

Keenan bit his lip, drawing blood with his fangs, and pressed his mouth to Eric's. Despite the fact that Keenan never sired a fledgling, he knew that the blood of elder vampires eased the transformation considerably. While Keenan wasn't as old or as experienced as his parents, his age did give him more than enough power to help his pet. Keenan wished he'd been the one to sire Eric so that Eric could have enjoyed that little stroke of luck. Even so, he still felt grateful to Cassandra. One could not turn a person who was already dead into a vampire.

The transformation was harder and more painful when a young vampire sired the fledgling. Still, if Keenan gave Eric his blood now, it would lessen the aftereffects greatly, and it would allow more stability for him to adjust to his new life. At this point, Eric needed all the help he could get.

Eric feasted on Keenan's mouth, greedily drinking the potent blood. When Eric seemed at least a little bit under control, Keenan separated their mouths and looked at his lover's eyes.

"More. I need more," Eric croaked out, reaching for Keenan in despair.

Kissing Eric with bloody lips would make little to no difference. He pulled Eric upright so that his human's mouth reached his throat. The vampire instinct would take over from there. Indeed, in mere seconds, Eric's new fangs pierced Keenan's skin as Eric started to feed.

Keenan shuddered as pleasure and pain flowed through him in tandem. Eric's feeding was sloppy, and given the circumstances, it would have probably been wiser to feed him off Keenan's wrist. However, that technique somehow seemed too impersonal. Eric's fangs would leave quite a wound, but Keenan didn't mind. The important thing was his pet's recovery. He could go out hunting later and find prey for the both of them.

Even with Eric's inexperience in feeding, Keenan couldn't find himself to regret his decision. His mind clouded with the ecstasy, an almost agonizing feeling that enhanced tenfold via their connection.

Keenan now realized that he'd been afraid that their connection might somewhat diminish because of the fact that Eric had a different vampire as a sire. He found with great pleasure that he needn't have worried and rejoiced in the overwhelming feeling of being one with his pet once more.

Cassandra's voice snapped him out of his trance.

"Keenan! Keenan!"

His eyes flew open, and he desperately attempted to focus on Cassandra.

"Yes? What's the matter?" he managed to croak out in a shaky voice. Speech came to him with difficulty, not because of any particular pain or incommodity, but because pleasure clouded his mind.

"Incoming, several Sidhe. I didn't tell you this in detail, but Jean Luc acted very strangely. He wrecked Pierre's mind. I've never seen such a thing like that in my life."

Keenan removed his pet from his neck, and Eric whimpered as his prize escaped him.

"Keenan," he whined softly.

"Later, pet." Keenan got up, smiling in relief. The light of reason returned to his pet's eyes, even if they remained red rimmed. Eric would be just fine.

Keenan indicated for Cassandra to move Eric in one of the adjoining rooms. Cassandra silently nodded and picked Eric up. Keenan almost laughed at the sight of a woman of her constitution carrying a fully grown male. Life as a paranormal was weird. Who'd have thought he'd be related to Cassandra by the end of this day?

Shaking his head at life's ironies, Keenan moved to where Pierre still lay abandoned. He strained his hearing to hear the Sidhe's pulse and caught a steady beat. However, the Sidhe gave no sign of feeling Keenan's

presence. That was the only thing that stopped Keenan from draining the Sidhe dry. He wanted to break Pierre into little pieces, and he would have had Pierre even twitched. But the Sidhe showed no sign of being aware of his surroundings, and Keenan wondered what Jean Luc had done to his brother. Cassandra's words came back to him and then Jean Luc's confession in the car. Keenan wondered if he wouldn't have a second insane Sidhe on his hands.

All too soon, he got his answer. He immediately felt their presence. The Imperials. As Jean Luc's private little army entered the hallway, Keenan narrowed his eyes. He couldn't help but wonder how much the Imperials had known about Pierre's involvement in Ulrike's death.

The entire hallway seemed to become chillier as they approached. Now that Keenan knew the reason of this impression, he couldn't look at them in the same way. Once, they'd all been happy and loving creatures, *too* happy and loving for their world. In the end, it doomed their hearts. Keenan pitied them all.

Jean Luc's second in command, Michel, stepped forward. Objectively speaking, he was a beautiful Sidhe, despite the fact that his blue eyes shone with iciness, two arctic jewels in a flawless face.

"Mr. von Klein. If we may have a word with you."

Keenan assented with a nod. "Yes, Michel, of course."

"We've come to retrieve Prince Pierre D'Argent. I understand that the issue is complicated, but I—"

Keenan gave the Sidhe a dark look, cutting him off. "You understand nothing. Pierre stays here, because he needs to be punished. Insane or not, I will not have him run off just because he is royalty. And where the fuck is Jean Luc? He should be here now to deal with his own messes."

Michel's eyes flashed for a second, but then he recovered his unreadable mask. "I'm afraid His Highness is indisposed at the moment. I have been delegated to deal with the issue in his stead."

"Well, I'm afraid I can't give you a positive answer. Pierre has too much to answer for."

"Mr. von Klein, please understand. This is a Sidhe issue, and we must deal with it in our own way."

"Sidhe issue, my ass," Keenan growled. "The people who died weren't all Sidhe."



As Keenan said this, he felt other presences approach. He smiled in satisfaction, even as he glared at Michel. “For Ulrike, Eric, Aidan, Cassandra, and myself, it is a vampire issue. For Caleb and all of Jacob’s brethren, it is a werewolf issue. I feel particularly assaulted since my own family and my staff were targeted. So you can’t tell me that it is a Sidhe issue and expect me to just let you release him just like that.”

“We don’t plan to release him, just to judge him our way.”

Behind the Imperials, Aidan and Giovanni emerged. “Yeah, right.” Aidan scoffed. “Like you would judge royalty.”

Keenan couldn’t help a sigh of relief upon realizing that his brother emerged unscathed from the conflict. He didn’t think he could deal with more heartache right now, and he still had his pet to deal with. Eric would need a lot of help until his body adjusted to the change.

“This is true, Michel,” Giovanni said. “I’m sorry, but you cannot take him.” Giovanni’s words caused all the Imperials in the room to tense. Keenan was prepared for an outburst of violence. He wasn’t an idiot. He knew better than to think the Imperials wouldn’t try to force them to give up Pierre. Even if Aidan and himself, and perhaps Giovanni, were individually stronger than one Imperial, they couldn’t deal with them all.

He picked up Pierre’s limp body and held his head at the level of his fangs. “Don’t do anything stupid, *mes amis*. Or I might, by accident, rip his throat out.”

A low growl sounded in the audience. It seemed to be a deadlock situation. He wasn’t about to give up Pierre, and the Imperials would not be willing to let Keenan have him either. How could they possibly solve this?

Keenan’s dilemma became unpredictably complicated when he felt a frantic presence approach. He barely had time to identify the presence as Elis when the panther burst into the hallway.

Keenan gaped, realizing Elis carried Jacob’s body, still trapped in wolf form.

“Keenan? Oh, thank God! I need Pierre or Jean Luc to—” Elis froze, and Keenan wondered how it must all look to the were-panther, Keenan threatening Pierre’s throat with his fangs, the Imperials standing there as tense as they could ever be, and Jean Luc missing in action.

“Keenan? What happened here? I just assumed a hunter attack, but I see that it’s much worse.”

“What happened is that Pierre betrayed us all. And now these guys want to get him out.” Keenan glared at the reunion of Sidhe.

Elis’s catlike eyes turned their feral gaze to the Imperials.

“There’s no way in hell that that is going to happen. Because of him, Jacob, Jacob is dying.”

Anyone who didn’t know that the two shifters were involved would have realized it now. Elis’s normally sarcastic voice sounded full of despair, despair at the thought of Jacob’s death.

Michel must have seen this, as well. “I’ll make you a deal. I’ll heal Alpha Jacob, but you must agree to release Prince Pierre in our custody.”

“Say what?” Aidan hissed. “You freaking bastard.”

Michel shrugged. “Just like you, we have our own goals and duties. What say you, Elis of the New York Felines?”

Elis seemed troubled and gave Keenan a helpless look. There was a look in his eye, a look Keenan had never seen—pleading. Elis knew that the final decision would be Keenan’s. Keenan suppressed a groan. In a different time, he could have been ruthless. He couldn’t be ruthless today, not when he understood Elis all too well.

“Fine,” he growled. “Heal Jacob and you can have the bitch.”

“In one piece?” Michel insisted.

“I give you my word that he’ll be just as he is now. Heal the werewolf already!”

Apparently satisfied, Michel glided to the side of the shifters. Elis put Jacob’s bloody form down. Keenan guessed Jacob must have been shot with special bullets. Most paranormal races had a particular weakness. For most shifters, it was silver, for vampires, UV rays or exploding bullets. UV rays worked for younger vampires but not so much for older ones such as Keenan and Aidan. They still hurt like a son of a bitch, but they weren’t incapacitating or deadly.

Michel’s hands started glowing as he worked on eliminating the poison out of Jacob’s system. Keenan held his breath, uncertain of the healing session’s outcome. Would Michel manage to heal Jacob? He hoped so. For the first time in his life, Keenan empathized with Elis. The twists and turns his fate took lately seemed to lead him on a very peculiar path.

Soon, the light faded, and Michel collapsed, looking exhausted. Another Sidhe supported him as he spoke. “It is done. He will be fine.”

Confirming Michel's words, the form of the wolf shimmered, Jacob's nude form appearing in its stead. The werewolf opened his eyes and looked up at Elis. "Kitten?" he asked in a confused voice.

Elis hugged his neck impulsively, and Keenan shook his head. Time for his own part of the deal. Keenan handed Pierre to the Imperial closest to him. "Here you go. But I won't forget this, Michel."

"We do what we must, Mr. von Klein," Michel said tiredly. "Perhaps we will see each other again in the future."

The Imperials rushed out of the room, having secured what they'd come looking for. Keenan felt angry about the outcome, but it couldn't be helped. Some things were just more important than others.

Sighing to himself, Keenan headed toward the room to his immediate left. His pet was waiting.

## Epilogue

Keenan rubbed his eyes as he looked over the detective's report. As promised, he'd initiated an investigation regarding Patrice Nelson's son, Gabriel. According to the information from Matthew, the child would be around nineteen years of age at present. Keenan scanned the few pictures that Matthew gave Eric for the purpose of the investigation. Gabriel was a beautiful child with fine features and dark hair, just like his mother. In one picture, Gabriel seemed entranced by a rose his mother put in his crib. Seeing those little hands reach for the flower made Keenan want to find this boy, to bring Gabriel back to his family where he belonged.

Alas, their investigation seemed to be doomed from the start. Aaron Smithe, the boy's father, appeared in no databases Keenan searched through. Keenan found a lot of Aaron Smithes, but none of them had any connection to Patrice Nelson. The man didn't even appear to be real. The sketch his pet drew after stealing a peak in the woman's mind didn't help. Even in normal clothes, the man looked almost too handsome. Keenan would have thought Aaron and Gabriel weren't even real, if not for the genuine pain Eric could feel from Patrice. They needed to keep looking.

If he went by the sketch, Keenan suspected that Aaron was a paranormal, most likely a Sidhe. Getting into Sidhe databases would be hard, especially since Pierre's and Jean Luc's disappearance—yet another problem he needed to solve. They couldn't cut off the Council's connection with the Sidhe. At the same time, Pierre still needed to be caught, and Jean Luc's disappearance represented a problem Keenan could not help but be concerned about. What could have happened to Jean Luc? Where were the two Sidhe princes? Keenan suspected he'd soon receive orders on how to deal with finding them.

"Still no luck, Keenan?" Eric's voice interrupted his musings. He stepped inside Keenan's office, giving him an inquisitive, yet loving look.

Keenan smiled up at Eric. His lover looked as gorgeous as ever, and Keenan's heart clenched at the realization that he could have so easily lost him.

Catching on to that thought, Eric walked around Keenan's desk and climbed into his lap to brush a kiss over Keenan's lips. Keenan's arms went around his pet's waist, and he passed his tongue over Eric's lips, silently requesting entrance.

*"You'll never lose me,"* Eric whispered through their connection as he surrendered to Keenan's kiss. *"Not ever."*

Eric's passionate words only enflamed Keenan's libido further. He took his lover's mouth, massaging Eric's tongue with his own. His hands roamed down his pet's body, and he squeezed the perfect globes of Eric's ass, rubbing along the crease through the material of his pet's jeans. Eric moaned into the kiss, and the buttons of the restrictive clothing started to undo themselves as Eric struggled to give Keenan more access.

Keenan didn't know whether to help Eric out of his jeans or to start removing his own pants. He needed Eric so badly it hurt. He hungered for the feel of his lover's tight heat enveloping his cock. He thirsted to feel Eric's essence in his mouth. They'd just fucked that evening, and yet, as much as Keenan took Eric, he could never satisfy that all-consuming need.

Alas, on this particular occasion, Keenan found with dismay that he would not be able to take his pet like he wanted to. Much to Keenan's displeasure, his vampire senses detected someone approaching his office. Eric felt it as well and broke their kiss, desperately trying to arrange his clothing with trembling hands.

Eric didn't have the time to make himself look at least half presentable. Keenan didn't even bother. As Cassandra entered his office, he directed a fierce glare at her. What in the world possessed him to allow her to live in the Tower? Oh, right, she was Eric's sire now and the closest thing Keenan would ever have to a mother-in-law. Cassandra, his mother-in-law. Jesus Christ. He would never get used to that particular thought.

Cassandra just arched a brow at Keenan's anger. Eric blushed fiercely at his sire's scrutiny, offering her a small smile. Cassandra smiled back, and Keenan felt a momentary pang of jealousy at the knowledge that his pet could share that unique camaraderie with someone else.

"I'm sorry to interrupt." Cassandra's smile vanished, and her tone turned serious. "I've just talked to Rebecca. Apparently, the elders are meeting in Sydney in a few days."

Keenan's eyes widened. Elder meetings happened once a decade, in good circumstances. He shared a look with Cassandra. They couldn't let this opportunity pass. They needed to get an audience with the elders and introduce Eric. For Eric's safety and his acceptance in vampire society, meeting the elders would be vital. Keenan only hoped they had enough time to make all the preparations.

\* \* \* \*

As he stared at the large, ornate doors, Eric fidgeted and suppressed the urge to chew on his nails. Keenan and Cassandra told him they needed to introduce him to the vampire elders, but he shouldn't worry too much. Since he'd been sired by Cassandra, he was now a van der Bilt like her, and the influential name of Cassandra's family would help them get over any possible difficulties. The fact that he was Keenan's lover and that he helped in detecting the traitor in the New York Paranormal Council would surely convince them that he could be trusted.

In spite of their words, Eric still felt anxious. How could he not be? He was going to meet some very important people today, and he didn't feel ready for it. In fact, he felt more inadequate than ever. What if they didn't like him?

*"Stop worrying so much, pet,"* Keenan whispered in his mind. *"It'll be fine."*

Before Eric could get a chance to reply, the large doors opened, beckoning them inside.

*"Come on."* Keenan took his hand and pulled him toward the doors, ushering him into the room. When they entered, Eric felt relieved to see Cassandra there, waiting for them in front of a dais that held a huge table. She looked back at him and smiled, and he couldn't help but smile back. Who would have ever thought that he would come to care about her? They'd hated each other on sight, and now, she'd become the mother Eric never really had.

She glanced toward him, giving him an unreadable look. The formal address almost made Eric cringe. "Come forward, Eric van der Bilt."

Eric van der Bilt. For the first time, Eric acknowledged his name change, and he briefly hesitated, finding that he couldn't do as Cassandra instructed. Keenan stopped walking and let go of Eric's hand.

*"Go. Next to Cassandra. Go."*

Eric knew that he would have to do this to meet the vampire elders, but he still felt a bit abandoned, and his nervousness increased. Nevertheless, he found courage in his connection with Keenan and his bond with Cassandra. They would help him if something went wrong.

He headed toward his sire, suppressing a wince when his steps echoed loudly off the marble floors. He was so new at this, and he didn't have the grace Keenan and Cassandra seemed to exude through their every movement. Joining Cassandra in front of the circle of vampire elders, he swallowed nervously, hoping they would understand the circumstances of his transformation.

He kept his eyes on the floor at all times, knowing it would be considered disrespectful if he looked at them without being explicitly told to do so.

*"Kneel, pet,"* Keenan whispered softly through their connection.

Eric obeyed and knelt. He really didn't want to kneel in front of anyone but Keenan, and then just to suck his lover's cock. Keenan's mental groan made him feel a little better. He knew that once they finished with meeting the geezer vampires, Keenan would give him a lesson on what thoughts not to project when in an important Council meeting.

An unknown female voice snapped him out of his musings.

*"Geezer vampires? I don't think I've ever been called that."*

Taken by surprise, Eric looked up to see who had spoken and was met with the clearest blue eyes he'd ever seen. Eric's hearing caught his lover's silent footsteps. *"Look down, pet,"* Keenan said in Eric's mind. *"Look down."*

Eric wanted to listen to Keenan, but the woman's eyes mesmerized him, so blue, like clear raindrops or perhaps little fragments of distant skies. He tried to struggle against their spell, but failed.

"I apologize, Your Ladyship," Eric distantly heard Cassandra say. "I will take any punishment for his inappropriate behavior." He acknowledged

her words, knew that he needed to look down and show appropriate respect, but found that he could not.

*"Pet, snap out of it!"* Keenan pushed into his mind more forcefully. This time, Eric blinked and managed to look away from the deep blue gaze that kept him captive.

"Keenan...Wha—"

A crystalline laugh interrupted Eric's reply, and he suppressed the urge to look up at its source. God, he'd really screwed up this time. He'd managed to single-handedly get the three of them in trouble with the vampire elders, just by that one errant thought.

Then again, how did the elder catch on to that particular thought in the first place? Eric felt irritation swell inside of him at the realization that his mind had been invaded yet again, and this time not by a vampire he cared about.

*"That's not very nice,"* he thought, knowing that the mind invader was still snooping around.

*"No, it isn't,"* the same female voice replied. *"But then again, I've never been accused of being nice either."*

"You can look up now, fledgling," the woman said out loud.

Eric lifted his gaze from the marble floor once more. He couldn't help but be curious as to the identity of the mysterious woman. He wasn't disappointed. The owner of the mesmerizing blue eyes and annoying mind-raping voice seemed to be a beautiful blonde woman dressed in a flowing white dress with an almost angelic appearance. Even if he still felt irritated by her sneaking into his mind, Eric wanted to draw her. She smiled sweetly, and Eric knew she heard his last thought.

*"Pet,"* Keenan growled, voice thick with jealousy.

"Calm down, my dear Keenan," the woman said with a laugh. "It's just the appreciation of an artist, is it not?"

Keenan quite visibly gritted his teeth, and Eric knew his vampire suppressed a scathing reply.

*"You should not appreciate anyone but me, Eric."*

Eric winced. He couldn't help it. When he saw something beautiful, his fingers itched to draw it. Cassandra smiled at him, and Eric knew she must have sensed the ache inside him. His connection with her didn't give them the ability to mind speak, partially due to Cassandra's young age, but most



of all because of Eric's connection to Keenan. Having two people inside his head like that would drive Eric crazy or, rather, crazier than he already was.

These thoughts vanished as the elders directed their attention toward him.

"Cassandra, please step back," the woman said, all naughtiness gone from her voice. "Refrain from using your connection with the fledgling. This applies to you as well, Keenan. You are not allowed to use the mind link until I say so."

Eric's heart almost stopped at those words. As he felt the bonds between him, Cassandra, and Keenan close, he let out a pained gasp. Keenan and Cassandra were his anchors in this unfamiliar place. What would he do without them?

"Rise, fledgling. Rise and look at us," a man's voice suddenly said, distracting Eric from further falling into despair. He hesitantly obeyed and got up, taking in the image of all the vampire elders in front of him. An overwhelming urge to flee took hold of him, sudden and terrifying. If the blue-eyed woman looked deceitfully angelic, two or three of the elders at the table didn't even bother to seem nice. Similar expressions of contempt twisted their perfect features as they glared at him. A dark-haired vampire even spat on the floor.

"Don't be vulgar, Josiah," another man said. The strength in his voice echoed in his appearance. He had long, blond hair tied into intricate war braids, a rough, blond beard, and he wore what seemed to be a warrior's outfit. With his impressive height and the width of his shoulders, he seemed to occupy at least half the space of the huge chamber. He reminded Eric of a Viking, a barbarian from ancient times magically teleported to the modern ages.

"Good guess," the man said. "Now, Eric van der Bilt. Tell us, why should we accept you into vampire society?"

Twelve piercing gazes fixed on Eric, and he found himself tongue-tied in front of the power these people exuded. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to breathe normally. They were only people, extremely powerful people, but in the end, not so different from him. Perhaps one day, in the distant, distant future, he could become like them as well.

"You should accept me into vampire society because I am a vampire," he replied simply. It was true. He didn't see why any fledgling should be

rejected without doing something wrong. Keenan explained to him that most vampires were purists and didn't like "artificial" vampires. For this reason, Keenan wanted to get the elders' approval of Eric from the very beginning. In Eric's opinion, even if they had differences in strength and abilities, all vampires were the same. Dividing their society would just weaken it.

"Very well said, fledgling," a new voice pointed out. Eric took a peek in the direction of the new arrival and was surprised to see a matronly-looking woman walk in. She wore casual clothes, a knee-length skirt and a comfortable blue sweater, something along the lines of what a human housewife would wear at dinner.

In spite of her harmless and innocuous appearance, Eric instantly felt her power. He dropped to his knees, bowing in front of the woman. He registered the vampires around him also kneeling and wondered who this woman could be. His body instinctively knew what his mind couldn't understand, and he focused on conveying respect and admiration to the woman.

Much to his surprise, the woman sighed. "Such foolish children. Rise and stop making me feel like an old woman."

Eric wondered if this applied to him, as well, or if he should continue to kneel. Everything was so confusing. He missed Keenan's comforting voice, the way his vampire always answered his every question, soothing his heart and driving away his uncertainty.

"Yes, you, too, fledgling," the old woman said, and Eric immediately got up, his body following her order before his mind could even process her words.

Eric swallowed back his fear. He didn't like not having control over his own motor abilities. Such power should never exist in the hands of one individual.

A growl sounded somewhere to Eric's right, and a low murmur started in the room. Eric's eyes widened as he realized that he'd thought something very disrespectful. Eric dared to glance toward Cassandra and Keenan and was startled to see them give him concerned and slightly reproachful looks.

"Silence," the woman shouted. Her voice echoed off the chamber walls, making Eric shudder with its intensity.

The murmur stopped at once, and Eric watched as the woman approached him. Her low heels clicked when connecting with the floor, but

somehow, Eric knew that she could have very well floated if she'd wanted to.

Eric's muscles froze as she came closer. His body and his mind screamed at him to kneel once more, to show proper respect and obeisance, and yet, he could not move. The reason became apparent when the woman stopped right in front of Eric and met his gaze. She had beautiful, gray eyes, but unlike Matthew's human ones, they looked almost too deep to be real. In fact, it seemed to Eric that her eyes couldn't even be considered simply gray. The word was too bland to describe them. Hundreds of shades of the same color swirled in those mysterious orbs, and Eric was awed by the sight. Even as a painter, he had not realized there could be so many nuances of gray.

The woman caressed Eric's cheek with warm fingers and smiled, showing sharp fangs that belied her harmless appearance. The fingers suddenly sprouted claws, and Eric let out a pained sound as they dug into his flesh. He felt the scent of his own blood fill the air and wondered if he could somehow convince this woman to just kill him and allow Cassandra and Keenan to leave.

"Please, High Mother," Keenan said from somewhere behind Eric. "I beg you. He is young and doesn't understand our ways. Forgive his disrespect."

The woman's piercing, gray gaze shifted off Eric and turned toward Keenan. Even through their locked connection, Eric could feel Keenan's terror. He focused on sending calming thoughts to his vampire. It would be all right.

"Keenan von Klein. With all my years, I never thought the day would come when you'd take a human lover. And you, Cassandra, I still cannot understand how you ended up siring him." She laughed softly. "I just had to come to see what is so special about this young human, or rather, this young vampire. That's what you are, isn't that right, Eric?"

Eric nodded, but he didn't think the movement was even his own. Like everything else, it seemed dictated by a force stronger than his own will.

"Yes," he heard himself say. "I'm a vampire."

"That you are." She pressed a kiss to Eric's bloody cheek and licked her lips.

*"Don't fear me, child," she said softly in Eric's mind. "You said it yourself, you are a vampire. You are my child now, just like Keenan is, just like Cassandra is."*

Eric's mind swirled at the woman's words.

*"Who... Who are you?"*

*"Call me Leba. And like I said, I'm your mother."*

Leba's bloody lips pressed another kiss to Eric's temple, and just like that, the peculiar spell that seemed to hold Eric captive dissipated.

"Welcome, fledgling," she said out loud. "Keenan and Cassandra, congratulations. You chose well."

Eric watched as Keenan and Cassandra approached, knelt, and kissed Leba's hand. "Thank you, High Mother."

Leba tsked in displeasure. "Now, children, none of that. You've done nothing wrong. In fact, I should be thanking you. You've given me an occasion to deal with a problem that has been bothering me for a while now." She looked at the vampires on the dais. "Isn't that right, Rebecca?"

"Yes, High Mother," the angelic woman, now identified as Rebecca, replied.

"You see, Eric," Leba began, "my children have forgotten that they weren't always the strongest predator, so to speak. They have forgotten their roots, and I can't allow that. Don't you agree?"

Even if the situation didn't convince him to agree with whatever Leba said, Eric actually *did* believe she was right. He suspected that if vampires had been united, the mistake with Pierre and Ulrike would have never occurred in the first place.

"You are quite right, Eric," Leba replied, although he hadn't said anything out loud. "How is it that a mere fledgling can see the consequences and the extent of our mistakes and you cannot?"

The elder vampires didn't reply, and Leba gave them a disgusted look.

"Keenan, Cassandra, Eric. Thank you for your presence here tonight," she said. "Now, I'm sure you have better things to do than hang around some stuffy geezer vampires?"

Eric took the dismissal for what it was and bowed low in front of the powerful vampire.

"Thank you...High Mother," he whispered softly, hoping he'd chosen the proper address.

Leba smiled at him once more, and this time, she seemed to have all the warmth and love her image and clothes suggested. “Until we meet again, Eric van der Bilt.”

With a final bow, Keenan ushered Eric and Cassandra to the door and exited the room. As soon as the black ornate doors closed behind them, Keenan took Eric in his arms and pulled him to his chest.

“Oh, God, pet, are you all right?” he whispered. “I thought she was going to kill you.”

“Who is she exactly? She said her name was Leba, but I...” Eric shook his head, uncertain of what he could say to convey the peculiar feeling he had after meeting the woman.

“They say she is the oldest vampire in existence,” Cassandra replied. “No one really knows how old she really is, though.”

“I didn’t know she’d be here.” Keenan gave Eric a look of longing and regret. “I never should have brought you to see them so soon.”

*“It’ll be fine, Keenan,”* Eric sent to his lover. *“She didn’t hurt me. In fact, I think she likes me.”*

*“She does, pet. That doesn’t change the fact that if she didn’t, you would be dead, and I couldn’t do anything about it.”*

Cassandra remained silent, although her eyes analyzed Eric with visible concern. Keenan sighed as he pulled them toward the exit.

“Come on, let’s get out of here. Believe me, you want no part of whatever’s going to happen in there.”

Eric obediently followed, his mind still on his peculiar meeting with the High Mother. Who was she really? And why did she accept Eric just like that? There was a mystery there, and Eric didn’t think he wanted to know the answers to his own questions.

\* \* \* \*

Dark, oppressive silence fell between the three vampires as Keenan drove through Sydney. The elders never met in the same place. They all had separate dens and separate cities they watched over. Leba herself lived in many places. Keenan knew her to frequently be in the Middle East, watching over the paranormal communities living in war zones, but other than that, she was a mystery to all. Keenan had no idea why they’d met in

Australia this time. Australia, of all places, where the sun always seemed to burn so hot, even now, in early spring. Still, even with all the weather discomfort, he considered himself lucky that he managed to introduce Eric to vampire society very early on. Or at least he had, until he realized Leba had come to see Eric's introduction ceremony.

Keenan never understood the High Mother. He suspected she didn't even look like the nice old lady she always appeared as and it was just a carefully engineered illusion. Keenan did know one thing, though. If the High Mother wanted to hurt Eric, he would have been helpless to stop her. He knew his limits, and Rebecca, Josiah, Bjorn, and all the other vampire elders were more powerful and more influential than him. He could have protected his pet from them, regardless, but not so with Leba.

Eric's comforting voice slipped once more through their connection.

*"Stop thinking about it, Keenan. It's over and done with."*

Keenan looked away from the road to briefly meet Eric's beautiful, emerald eyes. God, how he loved those eyes! To think, he'd once again been so close to seeing the light from them fade.

"Keenan," Eric began reproachfully, "would you stop worrying already?"

"I can't help it, pet." Keenan caressed Eric, whipping a smudge of leftover blood from his cheek to reveal Eric's flawless skin. The mark from Leba's claws faded, Eric's new vampire nature easily taking care of his injury. Keenan vowed that he would do his best to never allow that particular ability to be tested again. He'd rather go through all the fires of hell than see his pet suffer.

Obviously sensing the glum mood, Cassandra broke the awkward silence.

"Keenan, would you watch where you're going?" she said irritably. "I want to get to the hotel in one piece, thank you very much."

Keenan watched as a smile spread on Eric's face, and his spirits lightened. He knew Eric's life as a vampire made him happy. His lover had always wanted a real family, and now, Eric had Keenan and Cassandra by his side and many good friends. They would be all right. For whatever reason, Leba approved of Eric, and no one would dare go against the High Mother of the vampires.

Eric's fingers ghosted across his knee and toward his groin. Keenan's body instantly went into "need mode." He took a deep breath, knowing they were still quite a long way from their hotel.

"Pet," he growled, "be good."

Eric let out a low chuckle. "I don't want to." He freed himself from the seat belt and reached for the fastening of Keenan's suit trousers, pulling the zipper down. Keenan hissed as his lover released his aching cock from the constraint of his underwear. Cursing under his breath, he tried to focus on the road and not getting them killed, or at least hurt. It didn't work.

Smiling wickedly, Eric shifted in his seat to better reach for Keenan's cock. He stroked Keenan's member with sinful determination, maintaining a rhythm that drove Keenan crazy. Keenan desperately held on to the wheel while Eric struggled to sneak between his legs. Keenan had no choice but to allow Eric access, even if that meant that his control of the car became tenuous at best.

"I'm still here, you know," Cassandra muttered under her breath. Keenan ignored her. He wanted Eric so much it hurt, and he didn't think he could even wait until they reached the hotel room. Eric also seemed oblivious, having completely forgotten about his sire's presence. He seemed to be enjoying himself in devouring Keenan's cock. Given that Keenan had his pet on his knees sucking on his dick, Cassandra became nothing more than annoying background noise.

"Just stop the car, Keenan," Cassandra said with a sigh.

This time, Eric seemed to acknowledge his sire's words. Unlike back in the office, he didn't stop. In fact, he didn't even bother to lift his mouth off Keenan's dick. "*Do what she says, Keenan,*" Eric purred mentally.

Eric's voice gave Keenan a bit of his coherence back. "*Pet...You do realize Cassandra is your sire?*"

"*She won't mind,*" Eric replied confidently. "*She needs to feed anyway. And I need you so bad,*" he finished in a sexy whisper.

Keenan couldn't have protested if he wanted to. He understood Eric. His pet wouldn't normally do this, but the visit to the elders had shaken them both. Too many emotions and sensations clouded his mind and made his blood boil with passion. In fact, he felt thankful Cassandra suggested pulling over. Just a blow job would never be sufficient for the explosive lust that burned in his veins.

Regretfully, Eric abandoned his very pleasurable self-appointed task in order to allow Keenan to shift gears and to focus on the road. Keenan registered with surprise that the car was running on the road as if nothing mind blowing happened to its driver. With a smirk, he realized Cassandra kept them from crashing while he was busy getting his mind sucked through his dick. Since Cassandra was young by vampire standards, she couldn't keep doing so until they reached the hotel.

Keenan struggled through the Sydney traffic, cursing in frustration as there seemed to be nowhere to park. Oxford Street attempted to sabotage his sex life, as it seemed busier than ever. After a few minutes of pointless searching for a parking spot, Eric sighed and leaned back on the chair, refastening his seat belt in short, snappish movements. He looked as sexually frustrated as Keenan felt. Damn it!

Just when Keenan thought he could very well die out of the most serious case of blue balls in history, Keenan spotted Centennial Park in the distance. He could have whooped for joy. Surely, they could find somewhere to get off the road there. They pulled onto Carrington, and the traffic started to thin. At midnight, the park didn't seem to be very popular, even if the weather practically drew you out of your home and into the comfortable greenery. Keenan drove past a few late joggers and insomniacs and looked around to find a parking spot in a more secluded area. He didn't want to risk being caught, or stopped by a concerned and helpful policeman.

Finally, Keenan detected an appropriate location.

"Oh, thank God," Keenan and Eric said at the same time.

Keenan briefly looked away from the road to meet Eric's eyes and grinned. He shifted gears and turned to park, wincing as he almost scratched the rental BMW on someone else's vehicle. Not that he couldn't buy ten of these cars, but that one mistake showed how much he lost control whenever he was around his pet. Luckily, no one could see him make a mess of things due to pet overload.

Eric grinned at him, and his soft voice slithered into Keenan's mind. *"Pet overload? Should I let you sleep alone tonight, to rest?"*

Keenan arched a brow as he stopped the vehicle. *"Would you punish us both like that?"*

Although unable to hear their conversation, Cassandra snorted as she opened the car door and stepped onto the pavement.



“Don’t stain the leather. You’ll have to pay for damages.”

Cassandra’s snappish tone must have concerned Eric. Keenan couldn’t help but feel just a bit frustrated when Eric opened the window of the car and stole a look back at his sire. Sometimes, he felt jealous of every drop of affection Cassandra received.

“You’ll be fine, right?” Eric asked.

At Eric’s beautiful voice, Keenan’s jealousy dissolved into happiness. Having a mother helped his pet. In the end, it worked out for the best. After all, Cassandra really did care about Eric, but not in a romantic sense.

As if to prove Keenan’s thoughts, Cassandra’s eyes softened, and the tightness of her lips vanished. She leaned to kiss Eric on the forehead. “Yes, fledgling. Don’t worry about me. I’ll see you at the hotel.”

Eric nodded and hugged her clumsily through the car window. Cassandra directed a glare at Keenan. “You take care of him.”

“Of course,” Keenan said simply.

With that all too long good-bye, Cassandra stepped away from the car and disappeared into the night. “Now, pet...Where were we?”

Eric’s eyes snapped to Keenan, and his lips twisted into a small, naughty smirk. “I believe we were...here.” Hastily unsnapping the seat belt, he leaned over and pressed his mouth to Keenan’s.

Fire exploded into Keenan’s veins. Everything else evaporated from his mind, and all that remained was Eric—his warmth, his scent, his taste. He pushed Eric down on the chair and shifted to get on top of his sweet pet. Alas, the car seemed to have different ideas. In his zeal, Keenan forgot their location and hit his elbow against the steering wheel and his most sensitive parts against the gear shift. Cursing, he awkwardly landed on top of Eric, who grunted at the impact of their bodies. Keenan attempted to move off Eric, but his less than graceful movement caused his head to have a very unfortunate meeting with the top of the car.

“Maybe we should try this somewhere else,” Eric suggested, apparently attempting not to burst out into laughter.

Keenan gave his pet an ugly look. “I have never been defeated by others of my kind. I will not allow a stupid car to beat me, even if it is expensive.”

Eric looked like he wanted to say something else, but Keenan silenced him with a kiss. Because of their environment, he needed to be careful, but

he could make it work. Ever so gently, he took hold of Eric's body. "Wrap your legs around me, pet."

Eric obeyed, and Keenan grinned as he shifted both of them to the backseat. It would still be awkward, taking into account Keenan's height, but at least they didn't have to worry about castrating themselves with the car controls.

Acknowledging the fact that they would still need their clothes to get into their hotel, Keenan took a deep breath and carefully started removing Eric's Armani jacket. His pet looked delicious in a suit. Perhaps Keenan could convince him to wear one more often. Although, to be fair, Eric looked much better in tight leathers that revealed the perfect curve of his buttocks, or best of all, naked.

"You're so gay, Keenan." Eric chuckled. "Why are you thinking about clothing now of all times?" He pulled Keenan down by his tie and mashed their lips together.

Keenan's brain melted, and all thoughts of ever dressing his pet in anything vanished in an instant. Eric rubbed his body against Keenan's, and Keenan growled as he felt Eric's hard cock against his thigh. Keenan's hands hastily undid the buttons of Eric's shirt and threw it somewhere to his right, not caring much about where it landed. Eric desperately attempted to take off Keenan's jacket, but his hands trembled so much that Keenan decided to take over.

Their movements became a frenzy of desperate disrobing, passionate kissing, and awkward positioning. Even the backseat of the BMW was cramped, so finding an adequate spot turned out to be a lesson in resourcefulness. Keenan half-regretted his stubbornness to stay in the car, but he thought that, either way, they wouldn't have reached the hotel. The BMW would be much better than some dirty alley or parking garage.

In the end, Keenan didn't know how he managed to undress his lover without tearing anything apart. He suspected that his own jacket lost a few buttons, but he couldn't care less. Not when Eric somehow ended up with one leg leaning against the driver's seat, the other up in the air, against Keenan's shoulder, held up by Keenan's arm.

The position was weird to say the least, and Keenan felt the need to ensure Eric enjoyed this as much as he did. "Everything okay, pet?"

“Now he’s asking me if I’m okay,” Eric muttered under his breath. “Shut up and get on with it.”

Feeling Eric’s certainty and sincerity, Keenan caressed Eric’s cheek and met his gaze, smiling softly. Eric smiled back, and just like that, it didn’t matter that the space restricted his movements and that the position felt awkward. The only thing that mattered was the two of them, their bodies and their souls. Eric’s arousal echoed Keenan’s through their connection.

“Keenan...Please, I—”

Keenan didn’t allow his lover to finish the phrase, stopping him with another devastating kiss.

*“I know what you need, pet.”*

Breaking the kiss, Keenan extended his free hand to Eric’s mouth, slipping his fingers between his lover’s beautiful lips. Obediently, Eric fellated them with such skill Keenan felt the urge to make Eric suck on his cock instead.

*“Later, Keenan,”* Eric promised in his mind. *“Now your cock has a better place to go.”*

Hearing his pet talk dirty in his mind demolished the remnants of Keenan’s control. Removing his fingers from Eric’s mouth, he thrust them into his pet’s channel. Eric’s eyes widened at the sudden invasion, but Keenan knew his lover didn’t feel any pain. Eric’s new vampire nature allowed them to engage in rougher and more adventurous sex. Confirming Keenan’s thoughts, Eric whimpered and arched his back.

“Oh, God, yes, Keenan.”

Keenan steadily fucked Eric with his fingers, crooking them a bit so that he rubbed against his lover’s prostate. Their bodies had become so attuned to each other that Keenan knew exactly where to touch to make Eric cry out in passion and to coax that sweet channel into tightening around him. He lowered his mouth to Eric’s chest and flicked his tongue over his lover’s right nipple. It had already tightened into a hard peak, testimony of Eric’s arousal. Keenan sucked and licked on Eric’s nipples, at the same time continuing to prepare Eric’s channel. He could probably make his lover come with this alone. Half of him wanted to do just that, to see Eric come undone at his hands. But as pleasurable as that course of action would be, Keenan knew he would have to leave it for another time. The urgency that turned his insides into raw passion wouldn’t allow him to play with his pet’s

body more. By tormenting Eric, he tormented them both. Keenan's cock already throbbed with need, aching for release, for the ecstasy he could only find inside Eric's body.

Keenan removed his fingers from Eric's hole, smiling down at his lover when Eric whimpered in protest. "Shhh, pet. I know. Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere."

Carefully maneuvering himself into position, Keenan pushed inside Eric. Even if his lover was now a vampire, Keenan still didn't want to be unnecessarily rough. They didn't have any lube, so taking it slow would be best. Eric clung to him and pushed back, and their connection flooded with overwhelming pleasure. Seeing his pet's willingness, Keenan thrust home, embedding himself fully into Eric's body.

Eric let out an almost agonized moan. "Oh, God! Keenan, fuck me!"

Keenan didn't need to be asked twice. With hard, steady thrusts, he fucked his lover, always aiming for Eric's sensitive spot. Moans and groans filled the tight space, and Keenan distantly registered that the strength of his thrusts started to make the car move and screech.

As it always happened when he fucked Eric, Keenan felt bloodlust stir inside of him. His fangs ached for a taste of his pet's sweet blood. Keenan could sense a similar desire in Eric, his lover's need to feed on Keenan's blood and his passion. Giving in to his instinct, Keenan struck. His fangs sunk into the sensitive skin of Eric's neck, drawing the nectar of his lover's blood into Keenan's mouth. He eagerly drank, at the same time offering his chest to provide his pet with a position to fulfill his own desire. Eric took him up on his offer and sunk his fangs into Keenan's bicep. The sensation of suction that followed pushed Keenan over the brink, and with a final thrust in Eric's tight ass, he came, spilling his seed into his lover's willing body. A second later, Eric exploded as well, moaning Keenan's name.

His mind whirling from the onslaught of sensation, Keenan removed his fangs from Eric's neck and licked the wound. He shuddered in pleasure as he felt Eric mimic his action. His cock, still inside Eric's body, turned rock hard once more.

Perhaps he would have started another session of lovemaking if the car didn't sabotage him yet again. It received some sort of shock, and their bodies bounced painfully on the backseat, making Keenan's cock slip from Eric's channel in the process.

Eric gave Keenan a half-cautious, half-apologetic look.

“Keenan, what’s going on?”

Keenan just arched a brow. “As if you don’t know. Seriously, I told you to try and control your powers. Making our bed float is one thing, but the car, pet? The car?”

Eric blushed bright red and pushed himself up, somehow managing to avoid hitting the ceiling of the car like Keenan did earlier. “It’s your own fault.” He harrumphed. “You insisted in staying here.”

Keenan chuckled at Eric’s put-out expression. It was, indeed, Keenan’s fault, since it never occurred to him Eric could actually make the car float.

“Come on, pet. We have some damage control to do.”

Eric gave him a panicked look, but Keenan just smiled. Somehow, the thought of finding the people who might have seen the peculiar phenomenon didn’t annoy him at all. There couldn’t be so many people in Centennial, and Keenan would have fun finding them all and “interrogating” them. Eric’s blood opened his appetite, and he was in the mood to hunt. Perhaps he could continue Eric’s lessons in Vampire 101 while they were at it. There was one thing Keenan felt one hundred percent certain of at this point. Life at Eric’s side would never be boring.

# 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.

### *Also by Scarlet Hyacinth*

Siren Classic: Kaldor Saga 1: *Enraptured*

Siren Classic: Kaldor Saga 2: *Over the Edge*

Ménage Amour: *The Three Horsemen of the Black Forest*

Siren Allure: *Truth and Deception*

Siren Classic: *Reborn (sequel to Truth and Deception)*

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