

SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*

PART 2  
DESTINIES  
IN  
DARKNESS



Kaldor  
Saga 3

Scarlet Hyacinth

### Kaldor Saga 3

## Destinies in Darkness, Part 2

Eric is building a new life at Keenan's side. An unlikely visitor from a different world changes the course of his destiny.

While out on an expedition to eliminate the threat of the demons in New York, Keenan and Eric rescue Gabriel from his captors. Almost at once, Eric befriends Gabriel, finding kinship in the other man's pain. But Eric's closeness to the young Kaldorian stirs Keenan's jealousy. With Keenan's possessive instincts rearing their ugly head, Eric's relationship with his lover becomes increasingly strained.

As tensions grow, Kaldorians Cade and Kalin arrive in search of Gabriel. They request Keenan's help to find Cade's missing brother. All the while, Keenan is still looking for the traitor who escaped his grasp. Eric and Keenan embark on an impossible quest to aid their new friends and fulfill their duty. What secrets will their journey reveal?

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

**Length:** 75,744 words

**DESTINIES IN DARKNESS,**  
*Part 2*

*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

Welcome to the second installment of *Destinies in Darkness*. I know you were probably surprised, perhaps disappointed, about my choice of pairing after *Over the Edge*. In many ways, I expected it, since the natural supposition was that I would write Orin and Zeli. But life's not fun when one only does what's expected. I hope you enjoyed Keenan and Eric's story and the new characters I introduced. They will be very important for the next books.

With that said, I'll stop my rambling. As always, I'm open to any questions and comments.



# **DESTNIES IN DARKNESS,**

## ***Part 2***

***Kaldor Saga 3***

**SCARLET HYACINTH**  
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### **Chapter One**

Keenan watched the crowd surreptitiously, careful not to lose track of his pet. “Are you sure about this, Cassandra?” He glanced toward the female vampire now sitting by his side, examining her nails.

“Oh, calm down, Keenan,” she said, as she lifted her eyes to look at him. “You know this must be done. You can’t hunt for him forever.”

“But he’s just a fledgling,” Keenan protested.

Cassandra fiercely scowled at him. “I know he’s just a fledgling, Keenan. I sired him, remember?”

“Of course I remember,” Keenan gritted out. “I just wish you took your responsibilities more seriously.”

Keenan knew he’d crossed the line a second before Cassandra’s hand hit his face in a powerful slap. “Don’t you dare tell me I don’t know how to take care of Eric. For your information, tonight is necessary, because he needs to learn how to feed and hunt by himself. And if anything goes wrong, well, that’s why we’re here.”

Keenan gave her a dark look. “Yeah, but it still doesn’t make me feel any better.”

Cassandra chuckled. “You’re just jealous of whichever lucky person our little fledgling will bite tonight.”

Keenan growled at the female vampire, even though he knew she was right. He was indeed very possessive of his pet. He never missed the appraising looks Eric got whenever they walked into a public place. Even now, as his graceful silhouette moved sensually on the dance floor, several humans watched Eric—no, stalked him. Keenan could almost sense the lust burning in their veins. His pet was just too beautiful for his own good.

Eric had been an extremely capable student of vampirism. Between Cassandra and Keenan, Eric learned to control his abilities at least to some extent, although he still had a long way to go in order to fully master them. His mental shields still weren’t powerful enough, more so since the transformation multiplied his psychic abilities several times over.

For this reason, Keenan gifted a special wardrobe to his pet. There seemed to be a general tendency among humans to grab Eric’s arm or neck, or attempt any sort of skin contact—which, of course, caused Eric to see into their heads. Therefore, Eric wore a tight leather suit, matching Keenan’s, with the difference that Eric’s was cut open in several strategic places, where the material became transparent.

The clothing hadn’t been meant for seduction of prey. Well, not from his point of view. Knowing how much Keenan liked his pet’s body, Lucca proposed most of the designs. Being an incubus, he’d managed to create perfect clothes that emphasized Eric’s best features. The green of the suit matched Eric’s emerald eyes and made him look inhumanly beautiful. There couldn’t be a more adequate expression, since Eric wasn’t human anymore.

Keenan drank in the sight of his pet dancing, arousal coursing through his veins. Eric just embraced the music, flipping his hair and

extending his hands, as if attempting to catch the colors of the lights illuminating the club.

Keenan groaned as Eric moved his pelvis in tune with the music, imitating the motions of an act as old as time itself. The way Eric followed the song drove him crazy with lust. Keenan wasn't the only one suffering from this reaction to Eric's dancing. The siren's call that Eric's body practically broadcast made several humans step forward, swallowing Eric's frame with their own.

Keenan gritted his teeth in annoyance as one of the humans approached his pet from behind, while the other pulled him close from the front. Eric just smiled at the humans, never stopping the sensual motions of his body.

Keenan wanted to go rip the stupid humans to pieces, to prevent them from laying a finger on his pet. Luckily—or unluckily—Cassandra stopped him just in time.

“Oh, stop your fretting, Keenan. He'll be fine, you'll see,” Cassandra told him in an irritated voice that held an undertone of comfort.

Cassandra could do next to nothing to calm Keenan down. Keenan was thankful for her help, of course. Although in the beginning he'd been freaked by the change in attitude, he'd come to the conclusion that the female vampire genuinely cared about her fledgling. Hell, she'd even moved to the von Klein Tower, since, according to her, Keenan didn't pay enough attention to Eric's feeding and training.

In truth, Cassandra was the one who most spoiled Eric. If Eric gave her one of those puppy-dog-eyes looks, she didn't have a chance to say no to anything. It had been Eric's idea to go out in the first place, and of course, he'd managed to blackmail them both into agreeing. His pet was evil.

“I'm not evil, Keenan, just a little manipulative.” Eric's chuckle ghosted inside his head. “But Cassandra's right, Keenan. You know I can handle myself just fine.”

Of course, Keenan knew this. He acknowledged the fact that his pet could take down the two humans if he wanted to, but he was jealous. God damn it. Eric belonged to Keenan, and those idiots had no right to touch him.

Keenan took a deep breath, struggling for control. It wouldn't do to kill humans in a public place. No, it would be very bad, and it would defeat the purpose of training Eric in the fine art of vampirism.

Luckily for Keenan's sanity of mind, the song soon ended. As the last tones echoed through the club, Eric whispered something in the ear of one of the two humans, and Keenan grinned as the two men nodded in obvious enthusiasm.

Eric gestured in the direction where Keenan and Cassandra were waiting. As he exited the dance floor, the two men obediently followed.

Cassandra gave the older vampire a telling look. "See? I told you so."

Keenan glared at the redhead. "You do know that has to be the most irritating phrase in existence, right?"

Cassandra just shrugged and resumed analyzing her nails with nonchalance. Well, might as well play along. Keenan returned to his drink and waited for his pet to bring them his prey.

\* \* \* \*

Eric felt enthusiastic tonight. The hunt had been successful, with two men easily falling prey to his seduction. He almost laughed at his own thoughts. A few months ago, he'd never have thought he could ever see the world like this, feel so many things, hear so many distinctive sounds.

He was thankful to Cassandra for having turned him, not only because it saved his life, but also because it granted him a new vision of the world. Every day he saw something new, even in places he'd often frequented in his past as a human. Everything he learned and

felt was reflected in his paintings. For the first time in his life, his canvases actually showed bright colors, a symphony of fuchsia, scarlet, amber, jade, and aqua. His last painting showed a pair of midnight black eyes, framed in ethereal clouds of crimson and sangria.

Those black eyes watched him now as he confidently headed toward their table, his victims in tow. Eric knew Keenan felt jealous of every touch the humans tried, and in his heart, this made him feel happy. It meant that Eric was important to Keenan. Even if in the past few months Eric lost most of his insecurities, he still needed to be sure of Keenan's love for him.

Eric smiled at his lover as they got to the table. "I found something nice, Keenan," he purred in his lover's ear as he seated himself in Keenan's lap.

"Oh?" Keenan arched a brow. "Is that so?"

Eric nodded and gestured for his prey to come forward. A discreet chuckle sounded to their right, and Eric arched a brow at the antics of the vampire who had sired him. "Don't mind me." Cassandra gave him a look that radiated approval. "I'm off to see to my own...business."

Cassandra swiftly departed, leaving them and the two humans alone at the private table. Keenan gestured for them to sit down. "Would you like a drink, gentlemen?"

"Yes, please, sir," the tallest one said.

Gesturing for the service to come to the table, Keenan looked into the human's eyes. "So, you like Eric, do you now?"

Eric nearly chuckled at the way the human got flustered because of the intensity of Keenan's gaze. Of course, he wasn't that much better. Sighing in contentment, Eric placed his head on Keenan's shoulder, allowing his lover to decide whether his prey would be appropriate for the night's dinner.

"Umm...we were hoping that maybe, we could, you know, have some fun tonight?" The man laughed awkwardly.

The emotions flowing from the human amused Eric. “*Give the man a break, Keenan,*” he told his lover. “*Besides, it’s not his fault I’m so hot.*”

Eric gave a mental giggle, while Keenan tightened his hold around his waist. “*Looks like you’re getting a little spoiled, pet. Maybe I should cut the evening short and teach you some manners?*”

The words seemed harsh, but the tone of voice sounded teasing. “*If you want to, Keenan, I’ll be happy to oblige,*” Eric whispered, “*but we have to eat first.*”

Keenan showed no sign of having heard him, but Eric found himself feeling the ghost caresses of Keenan’s astral projection. He gasped, hiding his face in Keenan’s shoulder in embarrassment. The distinct sensation of a finger penetrating his backside almost made him squeak. “*Keenan, not here.*”

Keenan mentally snickered. “*See, pet. Newton’s law of physics—Every action has a reaction.*”

Turning to the humans, Keenan smiled seductively. “We’d like that very much. Especially Eric. Isn’t that right, pet?”

Eric couldn’t manage a coherent answer, as the ethereal fingers played with him. Instead, to his shame, a muffled moan escaped his throat.

“Keenan, please,” he begged. God, he needed to be filled, to feel Keenan’s fangs at his throat, to feed off his lover. The humans were no longer of importance.

Keenan must have picked up on the thought, because the next thing he knew, his mouth ravaged Eric’s. Eric wrapped his arms around Keenan’s neck, surrendering to the pleasure of feeling his senses overwhelmed by his lover.

A weird melody interrupted their impromptu make-out session.

Eric rolled his eyes at his lover’s ringtone, a rock melody called “Full Moon.” In times like these, Keenan showed his eccentricity. Keenan gave Eric a regretful look as he picked up the phone. “Wait a minute, pet. It’s Jacob.”

Eric nodded, although he did wonder what Jacob could want from Keenan. He hoped it wasn't something urgent because he had other plans, most of them involving himself, Keenan, and a flat surface.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan picked up the phone with an irritated sigh. "Yes, Jacob? What is it?"

"Bad news, Keenan," the werewolf replied. "The demons are acting up."

Keenan made a face. Of course, he'd expected something unpleasant, but nothing like this. "The demons? What did they do now?"

"Well, word is out about Pierre and Jean Luc's departure. The demons think they can beat us now, and they seem to have attacked several sectors we control. It's not too bad yet, but I think we should pay them a visit."

Keenan growled in exasperation. "Fucking idiots. Can't they just crawl away someplace and die? Or at least not talk."

Keenan didn't like demons very much. With the exception of Giovanni and Lucca, demons were generally very arrogant and tended to act on impulse, which caused all sorts of trouble. Under normal circumstances, that wouldn't have bothered Keenan. Last time the demons had been left unchecked, though, they'd caused a nuclear disaster.

"Fine. We're coming. Where's the meeting point?"

As Jacob gave Keenan the address for the demon coven, Keenan considered how to tell this to his pet. He refused to take Eric along in such a dangerous situation.

*"Forget about it, Keenan. I'm coming."* Eric growled in his head.

Keenan turned around, only to realize Eric had disappeared from the table. He felt a moment of alarm, but a brief mental check revealed that Eric had gone to look for Cassandra.

Indeed, in mere minutes, Eric reemerged from the crowd, followed by his sire. Cassandra stopped by their table and swiftly worked on the minds of Eric's prey, erasing their memories and sending them along.

"So, what's the deal with this, Keenan? This little vamp won't tell me a thing."

"Demons. They're up to their old tricks again."

Cassandra arched a brow. "They are so irritating. You'd think they'd have learned not to mess with us by now. I'll make them regret the day they were born."

"My thoughts exactly." Keenan took Eric's arm and led both Eric and Cassandra out to the Lexus. The New York traffic buzzed around them even at that time of night, but judging by the lack of urgency in Jacob's voice, Keenan didn't think the demons were causing too much of a problem.

"Pet, you should be staying at the tower," Keenan said as they got in the car.

Eric shook his head stubbornly. "No way. I'm coming with you."

"Eric."

"Keenan's right," Cassandra intervened. "This isn't a game."

"I know it's not a game," Eric shot back. "I can help, damn it."

Keenan gave Cassandra a helpless look. She looked as stumped as he did. When his pet got angry, neither of them knew what to do but relent. He didn't even want to consider forcing his pet to sleep. "Okay, pet," he said, "but you're staying close to me or to Cassandra at all times."

Eric nodded happily and gave him a peck on the cheek. With a sigh, Keenan started the Lexus and concentrated on navigating the car through the New York streets.

\* \* \* \*



The meeting place Jacob described to Keenan turned out to be one of the most dangerous parts of Harlem. Eric made a face as they walked through the dirty streets. They'd left the Lexus several blocks back because it would have attracted too much attention, and Keenan's ownership over the vehicle would not have lasted the trip.

However, Eric did not feel very pleased with the result of their abandoning the car. As they passed through the streets, prostitutes and drug dealers emerged, tempting them or whistling at them. Eric sighed to himself. Even if they'd left the car behind, both Keenan and Cassandra radiated old money. Only a limited number of reasons could determine a rich person to come here.

Keenan ignored the humans who were trying to attract his attention. Cassandra just gave them a dark glare and they backed down. "*Are you sure you still want to come, pet?*" Keenan whispered in his mind.

Eric growled in irritation at his lover, releasing Keenan's arm in a show of distaste. So Keenan wanted to convince him to go back. "*Yes, I'm sure,*" he barked back, rejoicing in Keenan's wince.

Noticing the obvious lovers' spat, Cassandra promptly intervened. Taking his hand, his sire said, "There now, we're just worried for you."

"I know, but I'm not a child." Eric spoke out loud, so that both older vampires could hear him at the same time.

"We're well aware of that, pet, but we can't help it," Keenan said softly.

Eric glared at Keenan, displeased with the obvious attempt to placate him. "Fine, but I'm still going with you."

Both vampires sighed at the same time, knowing nothing could convince him. Satisfied with the outcome, Eric smiled to himself, ignoring the humans staring at him.

Sooner than Eric expected, Keenan took a turn on an alley, and Eric instantly knew they'd arrived. In the shadows, several silhouettes

waited. Eric recognized the shifters and the incubi and guessed they'd assembled to raid the demon coven as well.

Eric suppressed the feeling of regret that appeared every time he saw the members of the Council together. There were people missing there, and it bothered him. Despite the fact that most members of the Council, including Cassandra and Keenan, resented Jean Luc for his deception, Eric still couldn't find it in his heart to hate the Sidhe. In fact, something told him that Jean Luc was in trouble, and he didn't know why. He wished he could help somehow, especially since Jean Luc saved both his and Matthew's lives. Unfortunately, Eric knew nothing of the Sidhe since that fateful night three months back. Jean Luc disappeared along with Pierre, and Giovanni's inquiries as to his location had been met with silence.

Well, at least Matthew was okay. His friend had come to terms with the past issues between him and Aidan von Klein. True enough, Aidan worked a lot to earn this forgiveness, but in the end, the two lovers reconciled. They had both left for Japan a week ago, since Aidan needed to deal with several problems in his own city.

The thought of Aidan von Klein reminded Eric of an issue that still made him cringe, Keenan's parents. The von Klein hadn't taken Eric's new status as a vampire too well. In spite of being sired by Cassandra and accepted by the High Mother, Eric still didn't meet their approval. He doubted he ever would.

Eric willed his thoughts away, acknowledging the importance of their current mission. Right now, his personal insecurities didn't matter. Eric had a job to do.

"Oh, hi, guys. Good thing you showed up," Giovanni said merrily as Lucca smiled at them.

Elis just nodded his head in greeting, and Jacob shook Keenan's hand. Eric couldn't help noticing the fact that the two shifters no longer stood side by side, and for some reason, that bothered him as well. He pushed the peculiar emotion away. It was none of his business.

“Come on, let’s go,” Keenan urged.

Lucca whispered something under his breath and gestured with his hand, as if chanting. Seconds later, fiery symbols appeared above the door and then vanished in a poof of smoke.

“Hurry,” Lucca said, gesturing them forward. “The spell won’t neutralize the wards for long.”

The group followed Lucca’s instructions, and they moved inside the dark building. Eric wondered where their targets were. It surprised him that even his vampiric hearing couldn’t pick up a trace of sound. Perhaps he should have gone to the Tower after all. This seemed out of his league.

Shaking his head at his own uncertainty, Eric followed the group as they walked through the darkness. Everybody froze when they heard the distinct sound of a struggle nearby. Elis gestured for them to be quiet, and they stealthily moved in the direction of the sound.

As they got closer, Eric began to distinguish words. “Stand still, little bitch! I finally caught you. You’re mine.”

Another voice followed the first one. “No, never yours. Don’t touch me!”

These words sounded strange, not quite right. Eric guessed the person speaking to be a foreigner of some sort because his voice held a strong accent that modified the shape of the sounds.

Eric didn’t have time to contemplate this. The sound of the struggle intensified in the room. Eric could hear several curses uttered in rough voices and concluded that the foreigner was fighting against his attacker.

Well, he wouldn’t be alone in the fight. Elis’ and Jacob’s forms blurred as they turned into their animal forms. Keenan gestured with his fingers, and the mental count emerged in Eric’s mind as well. “*One. Two. Three. Go!*”

The Council of the Paranormals of New York burst into the room they’d identified as the scene of the attack. Indeed, as Eric followed Keenan inside, he could see several demons surrounding a smaller

person, a man futilely trying to defend himself with a piece of wood that seemed to be part of a chair. He wore some old rags that didn't fit his small frame, and his hands, face, and black hair were dirty. Even so, Eric could guess with ease that the stranger was very beautiful.

The demons turned their attention to the new intruders, losing sight of their former prey. They growled menacingly, recognizing the attack for what it was and not bothering with diplomacy. Fangs and claws appeared, fire emerging from their fingertips. Eric dodged a fireball, avoiding getting singed through sheer luck. Keenan wasn't so fortunate. As he dispatched a demon, Keenan received a bolt of fire in his side.

Eric's psychic powers emerged with his anger, and the demon who dared to attack Keenan flew across the room, crashing against the wall with a powerful thud. Objects started flying around, hurling themselves at the demons. While the vases weren't perhaps enough to hurt them, they served as distraction for tables, chairs, and armoires. Several demons fell under the assault of their own furniture.

As he controlled his telekinesis, Eric took a look around, realizing that all the members of the Council were doing their own damage. The shifters tore into necks and arms and dodged the magic with amazing speed. Cassandra slashed into the throat of an enemy, while feasting on the blood of another. Eric was amazed that such a violent action could look graceful. The incubi manifested their own fire magic, apparently just as strong as that of the other demons. And Keenan, well, Keenan did the most damage, and the demons fell in his path like flies. It seemed that the previously received fireball hadn't even affected him.

It was only a matter of time before the demons would be beaten. Just as Eric thought this, however, one of the demons shouted, "Stay back. Stay back, or I'll kill him!"

The shout barely overcame the racket in the room, but nevertheless, it drew the attention of the fighters. Eric saw with

dismay that the demon had the foreigner in his grip, claws threatening his neck and his stomach. "I'll kill him and his kid, I swear!"

Eric gave Keenan a look of confusion. What kid? He couldn't see any child around there. Nevertheless, the threat to the foreigner's well-being was real. Behind the dirt covering his face, his countenance had gone pasty, and he turned midnight black eyes to Eric, giving him a pleading look.

Eric felt his anger flare and suddenly wanted to hurt the coward holding a defenseless person prisoner. At his fury, the demon's wrists turned at an awkward angle, and his hands twisted back with a nauseating crack, releasing the stranger. Instantly, the foreigner disappeared from the demon's hold, dodging the opponents still standing at an alarming speed and strategically placing himself at Eric's side. Eric blinked in confusion, as the other man gave him a thankful look. How had the stranger gotten there so fast?

*"Clearly, he isn't human, pet,"* Keenan whispered in his mind.

Eric nodded and pulled the mysterious man out of the room as the other paranormals finished dealing with the demons.

As they reached the corridor, the stranger hugged his neck, whispering, "Thank you much. I was in trouble. They hurt us if not you."

Eric struggled to understand the other man's words, despite the fact that they were practically incoherent. He guessed that the stranger didn't know English too well, but that didn't matter much for now. The first urgency was to find out the man's identity and how he ended up in the demons' clutches.

He broke away from the hug and looked into the black eyes of the stranger.

"Tell me, what's your name?" he asked softly.

The stranger tilted his head for a second, as if processing the question. "Name, yes. Know name. Gabriel."

“Okay, Gabriel, I’m Eric. Now, how did you get here?” Gabriel gave him a look of confusion as Eric spoke. “Do you have family, relatives?”

Gabriel gestured for him to speak slower. “Family?”

Eric repeated. “You know, people close to you.”

Gabriel’s eyes lit up in understanding before turning into sad pools of darkness. He nodded his head. “I have my *svathean*, but I lost him.”

“*Svathean*? What’s that?”

“It’s the Kaldorian word for mate.” Eric turned to see Lucca exiting the room that had been the scene of the battle. “Isn’t that right, little one? You’re from Kaldor.”

Gabriel nodded, giving the incubus a confused look. “You demon? Why not with them?”

“Long story.” Keenan smiled at Gabriel as he situated himself behind Lucca. “Anyway, I don’t think you want to hear it now. You must be exhausted, especially taking into account your state.”

“His state?” Eric tilted his head.

“*Pet, listen. Listen to his body,*” Keenan said mentally.

Eric turned to Gabriel and focused his senses on the other man. He was still young and hadn’t yet mastered the control over them. Nevertheless, he gasped as he realized something. “Two heartbeats! There are two heartbeats,” he said out loud.

Lucca arched a brow at his shock. “He’s pregnant, Eric. Stop freaking out, okay?”

Eric took a deep breath, trying to grasp how a man could be with child. These days it wasn’t impossible, but still...A pregnant man? What the hell?

“So, you are going to have a child, huh?” he asked awkwardly.

“Yes, a son.” Gabriel gave him a miserable look. Eric didn’t have to think much to determine the reason behind that sadness. Gabriel wanted the child, but he obviously missed the child’s father. His *svathean*.

As Eric contemplated these new revelations, another person joined the group in the hallway. Cassandra's eyes sparkled as she spoke to Gabriel. "Well, anyway...We'll deal with the details later. Come on, fledgling, you need to rest and eat. A baby needs a lot of food, you know."

As Cassandra took his arm, Gabriel let out a sound of panic and anger. He broke out of Cassandra's hold and glared at the woman. "Not touch! Leave me! What you want?" He sounded even more incoherent than before. Obviously in panic, he placed a protective hand over his stomach.

Cassandra gave Eric a confused look, as if asking what she'd done wrong. Eric looked at Gabriel and realized the other man attempted to find exits, most likely frightened by the idea that someone might hurt his son.

"Everything okay out here?" Jacob's voice said, adding to the confusion.

Together with Elis, the werewolf emerged from the doorway, both their nude forms covered in blood. Their appearance must have sufficed for Gabriel to decide that they were dangerous. Seconds later, the young man took off in the direction of the door. Eric wanted to be furious with himself and the others for startling Gabriel, but he didn't have the time for such useless things. Gabriel needed help, but he didn't trust them with the safety of his son. Taking into account the circumstances, Eric didn't blame him.

"After him!" Giovanni shouted.

At once, Eric followed Giovanni's suggestion. To his surprise, he couldn't catch up with Gabriel, and they reached the door of the building without having any luck in their chase. As he ran out, the shadows of the two shifters in animal form passed him. He felt himself being lifted and recognized Keenan behind him.

"It will be faster if I fly you, pet."

Eric nodded, well aware that he had not yet mastered all the gifts that came with vampirism. The three vampires launched themselves in the night sky, scanning the streets for Gabriel's silhouette.

Cassandra clucked her tongue in irritation when all of them failed to detect Gabriel. "He's resourceful, I'll give you that. I can't see him."

"Just follow the shifters," Keenan said. "It'll be easier, since they must have his scent by now."

Indeed, Eric could see that the werepanther and the werewolf were hot on Gabriel's trail. The vampires followed them from above until they reached a little park. The shifters panted hard, since they'd run at an alarming speed to get there. Young Gabriel seemed to be quite fast on his feet.

Just as he thought this, Eric observed a lone figure standing on the ground, looking distinctly ill. "Oh, my God. Do you think he's hurt himself by running so fast?"

"I don't know, pet. It's possible," Keenan answered glumly.

The paranormals made their way into the park with care, so as not to startle Gabriel further. Eric realized how this must look to Gabriel, all of them hunting him, cornering him, like he was prey. He needed to try to make Gabriel see they didn't mean him any harm.

"Wait." He lifted his hands in a placating gesture to his companions. "Let me talk to him for a minute."

Keenan gave him a reluctant look but nodded. They stopped, and Eric stepped forward by himself. "Gabriel? Gabriel, are you all right?"

Gabriel's eyes snapped toward him, narrowing in suspicion. "Stay back!" he whispered menacingly, rubbing at his temples.

"Gabriel, we only want to help. You're not in any condition to roam the streets alone. It's dangerous." Eric took another step forward.



“No! Stay back!” Gabriel shouted at him. Something hard hit Eric in the chest, and he flew across the park, landing on the ground with a thud.

\* \* \* \*

What the fuck? Keenan cursed, not believing his eyes. He hastened to his pet’s side, checking him for injuries. “I’m fine, Keenan,” Eric said. “What happened? What hit me?”

“A plant,” Keenan answered, still in a daze. “A huge root.”

Eric arched a brow. “Say again?”

“Our little Kaldorian seems to have some hidden gifts,” Giovanni said from the edge of the park. At some point, they’d arrived here, as well.

Keenan looked toward Gabriel, the young man still standing alone, facing them. The plants around him twitched as if with a life of their own. Keenan frowned to himself. Gabriel’s behavior aggravated him, but it reminded him a lot of Eric, of the way his pet had lashed out in his first days with Keenan. Strangely, that mere resemblance made Keenan want to protect Gabriel.

In this situation, there was only one thing he could do. “Cassandra, stay with Eric,” he whispered.

As Cassandra nodded, Keenan lunged toward Gabriel at superhuman speed. The plants reached for him, but they didn’t have time to catch him. Before they could attack, Keenan was already behind the little Kaldorian and placing his hand on his forehead.

With a sound of protest, Gabriel fainted in Keenan’s arms. Immediately, the magic in the plants faded, and the herbs fell lifeless—or back into plant life—to the ground.

Giovanni and Lucca advanced to Keenan’s position and took Gabriel’s hand. Eric gave them a concerned look. “Will he be all right?”

The incubi sighed. "From what we can tell right now, he's just exhausted," Giovanni said. "But we do have to take care of him, make sure. If by any chance something happens to this kid, we're all going to be in serious trouble. The Ancient Ones are not someone you want to have angry at you."

"Are you certain the Ancients are involved?" Cassandra asked.

Lucca nodded. "There is a limited number of races on Kaldor that have males capable of bearing a pregnancy. Obviously, he is not a merman, nor is he a sprite. Ergo, the kid belongs to a demon."

Keenan rubbed his eyes in fatigue. Was it so much to ask to have a little time for himself? Just him and his pet. A little holiday, somewhere nice, perhaps Europe, the Alps? He sighed, knowing that wouldn't be happening any time soon. The Ancients' last intervention on Earth was commonly known as Chernobyl.

As Keenan cursed his bad luck, Cassandra joined them and knelt on the ground. "Poor thing. Don't worry, we'll take care of you."

She removed a handkerchief from her coat and wiped Gabriel's face of all the grime. "He really is beautiful, isn't he?"

Keenan nodded absently. He would have been surprised by Cassandra's motherly attitude, but he could only focus on his pet. Eric seemed entranced by the sight of the Kaldorian's face. What the hell? Sure, the man was pretty. Okay, he was gorgeous, but Keenan didn't look so bad himself, right?

Eric prodded him with his elbow. "Keenan?"

"Mmm? What?" Keenan growled.

"Doesn't he look awfully familiar?"

Keenan looked at Gabriel again and blinked. Now that Eric mentioned it, he did see a certain resemblance. "I can't believe it. This isn't happening."

Eric gave him a sympathetic look. "Well, at least we found Pat's son."

Keenan groaned, burying his face in his hands. Matthew Nelson's cousin, pregnant with the kid of an ancient demon. Splendid! His life had just become ten times more complicated.

## Chapter Two

It was early morning, and the sun edged away from the clouds, painting the skies a crimson red. Since he'd been turned into a vampire, Eric had become acutely aware of the threat of the deadly rays. Even so, he didn't bemoan the loss of his humanity or his recent inability to revel in the sunlight. He accepted it and understood it and was even thankful for it, as it had been a more than satisfactory trade-off with having a real family and a lover so close to his heart.

What he didn't understand, however, was the small Kaldorian who'd suddenly appeared in their lives that night, currently out cold in Eric's arms, the peculiar young man named Gabriel.

Keenan was driving them back to *Extase* to make sure Gabriel received adequate medical attention. A club that catered to a mostly paranormal clientele, *Extase* also served as headquarters for Council meetings. Courtesy of its previous owner, Jean Luc D'Argent, it also had the latest in medical equipment. With luck, Gabriel wouldn't be too affected by the night's events, and they wouldn't have to make use of those supplies too much.

Eric certainly hoped that would be the case, at least. He felt a strange connection to Gabriel, a feeling of familiarity he'd never found in anyone else. Through some twist of fate, Gabriel bore a striking resemblance to Patrice Nelson, the young aunt of Eric's teacher and dear friend, Matthew Nelson. Keenan and Eric suspected Gabriel may even be Pat's missing son. But beyond that, Eric saw himself in the scared and haunted eyes of the other young man. He could feel Gabriel's pain as his own. How had Gabriel survived on the New York streets—especially in his state? God, and that pregnancy

thing...Eric wouldn't have believed it if not for seeing the evidence with his own two eyes and hearing the two heartbeats in one body. Even now, Eric could sense the little being Gabriel carried within him. It both awed and concerned him.

Sighing, Eric leaned against the tinted windows of the Lexus, wondering how Gabriel would react upon waking up. The young Kaldorian hadn't been very thrilled with the idea of going with them.

Eric threw a nervous glance toward Keenan. His lover frowned fiercely, deep in thought. "What do you think we should do, Keenan?"

"There's not much we *can* do," Keenan replied. "For now, we'll take him to the club and have Giovanni check him for injuries. If he is carrying a child of the Ancients, we can't afford to let anything happen to him."

As if knowing the ongoing conversation concerned him, Gabriel stirred, moaning in a language Eric couldn't understand. Eric barely caught the mentioning of a name—or what he thought was a name. "Luce." Could this person be Gabriel's mate, the Ancient whom Keenan feared so?

"I do not fear them, Eric," Keenan said, having caught on to the thought. "I fear what they might do should something happen to Gabriel. They are known for swift and brutal retaliations."

*"They could hurt you, pet,"* he finished softly in Eric's mind.

In spite of his exhaustion, Eric couldn't help but feel exceedingly happy at the affection in Keenan's tone. "I'll be fine, Keenan."

Keenan's dark eyes watched him from the rearview mirror, and smoldering heat swept over Eric. God, this wasn't the time to get an erection, not with Gabriel lying against him. "Maybe you shouldn't be keeping him so close, then," Keenan muttered, eyes again on the road.

Eric just smiled as he petted Gabriel's hair. Keenan knew he was the only one for Eric. Nothing and no one could change that. All the while, Gabriel unsurprisingly remained trapped in his dreams, Keenan's compulsion to sleep impossible for him to break through.

“He’s all alone,” Eric told Keenan. “I want to help him.”

“We will, pet. We will.”

\* \* \* \*

“Are you sure about this, Giovanni?” Eric gave the demon a concerned look, earning himself a glare.

“We have to make sure he’s okay,” Giovanni snapped. “And we can’t really take him to a hospital, now can we?”

Eric nodded, feeling a bit taken aback. He agreed with Giovanni, but the place still gave him the creeps. He still remembered the nightmarish scenes that had almost led to his death, the fight with Pierre, Cassandra turning him into a vampire. He’d almost died here, and therefore, it wasn’t the most comfortable place for him to be. And now Giovanni and Lucca were acting so strangely. He’d never seen the two demons so snappish and irritable.

“*Pet, do you want me to take you home?*” Keenan’s gentle voice slipped into Eric’s mind, making the young vampire smile. “*Cassandra and Giovanni can deal with things here.*”

“No, Keenan. I want to make sure he’s okay.”

Keenan nodded, obviously not surprised. “*Don’t be upset about Giovanni. It’s just...The Ancients are a problem we aren’t prepared to deal with.*”

Unaware of the conversation between the two vampires, Lucca glanced longingly after his brother and sighed. “I wish Jean Luc were here.”

Eric had just about had it. Everyone bemoaned the terrible situation, the future appearance of these Ancients, but no one would tell him anything. “Why? Who were they, these Ancients? What were they? Why are you all so concerned about them coming?”

Keenan made a face at Eric’s outburst. “It’s complicated, pet. As you surely understand by now, Gabriel is not from our world. He is from a different dimension—a world called Kaldor.”

“Right, I understood that much.”

Lucca gave Eric a look, as if considering whether or not he should share the information with him. In the end, the demon must have realized that hesitating didn’t make any sense. Eric was one of them now. “But what you don’t know is that Kaldor is our original home world, our place of birth, if you will.”

Eric gaped at the demon. He turned toward Keenan and practically screeched, “You’re an alien?”

Already used to Eric’s peculiar temper, Keenan didn’t even blink. “Um, no. Actually, vampires are native to Earth.”

Cassandra nodded. “Vampires and werewolves are Earth creatures, which is why I think the fledgling freaked so much upon seeing us.”

“Anyway,” Lucca cleared his throat, obviously wanting to get the explanation over and done with, “here’s the deal. According to our more ancient records, a long time ago, some weird catastrophe happened on Kaldor. This determined people from many races to try and find a way out from their doomed world. They found their new home here, on Earth. By the time Kaldor became a welcoming planet again, they had already established themselves here. Going back was no longer an option. Most paranormals actually draw their ancestry from those times—demons like myself and Giovanni, Sidhe, the Mer, and many others. There are a lot of things to explain about that, but since that wasn’t the original question, I won’t go into it. The Ancients are actually the ancestor race of the demons—the Xeetah.”

“Why are you afraid then? If push comes to shove, you can beat them.”

Keenan shook his head. “The Ancients are not like Lucca and Giovanni, pet. The demons here on Earth have lost a lot of their former power. As for the Xeetha...I can safely say that one of them could beat an elder vampire—even myself. They are extremely powerful and very dangerous.”

“Unfortunately, they don’t like us very much either, fledgling. Our history with them is one of bloodshed,” Cassandra finished.

Eric wanted to ask more, to ask about what exactly had happened, but he forgot about his questions when Giovanni appeared in the doorway. “Right. For now, he’s still out of it, but he’ll be fine. As far as I can tell, he’s a healthy young man. He’s just very exhausted.”

“Good,” Keenan replied. “There’s something else. I’d like a DNA analysis, to compare a sample from Gabriel with another one. Can you do that?”

“I just need a sample from the other person. A lock of hair would be enough.”

“If it is true that he is related to your friend, this is the best moment to make sure,” Cassandra said.

Eric rubbed his temples. The whole business gave him a headache. He still had trouble wrapping his mind around the idea that his art teacher was sleeping with his almost brother-in-law. Now, things seemed to be getting even more complicated and so freaking weird. He didn’t even understand some of the stuff happening around him. From what he’d gathered from the earlier brief conversations, some particularity of these Ancients allowed for male pregnancy. There had to be a perfectly logical explanation, but that didn’t mean the whole thing didn’t freak him out.

A sudden thought flashed through his mind. “Keenan? I’m not gonna find myself in the same situation, right?” he blurted out.

Keenan gave him a confused look before their mind link did its job. “No, pet. Don’t worry. My body can’t change yours like that.”

Eric felt strangely disappointed at the thought. For some reason, he would have wanted to give Keenan a child. A son to inherit Keenan’s black hair and his own green eyes...Wouldn’t that be nice? Eric shook his head to dispel the strange idea, but he knew Keenan had caught on to it simply by the look in his vampire’s eyes. “Pet...”

Cassandra cleared her throat. “Are you going to deal with the sample already, or should I?”



Keenan made a face in distaste, obviously not in the mood for the tedious task of DNA sampling. “Eric, would you like to come with me?”

Eric shook his head. “I want to stay here...” *To look after Gabriel*, he finished mentally. He didn’t want to offend the rest of those present by suggesting that they couldn’t look after Gabriel by themselves. He didn’t want to leave Keenan alone, either, but he knew that if he did join Keenan in his task, they would end up fucking someplace and forgetting all about Gabriel and everyone else.

“Okay, then.” His lover sighed, and Eric thought that if Keenan were someone else, he would have pouted. “See you soon.” Keenan leaned forward and took Eric’s lips in a devouring meeting of mouths. Keenan’s kiss tasted possessive, but it was more than that—maybe a little uncertain. Eric wanted to say something, to reassure his vampire, but he didn’t think Keenan would be comfortable. After all, despite Keenan’s openness regarding his sexuality, emotions were a whole different matter.

Keenan shared a look with Cassandra, and Eric grimaced, already understanding the wordless instructions for Eric’s care. As if further precaution was necessary. Between Cassandra and Keenan, he was the most coddled fledgling to have ever existed in the vampire world.

Keenan disappeared in the hallway, obviously intending to keep a low profile and use the Lexus for his task. Eric remained alone with Cassandra and the incubi. He wondered where Jacob and Elis had gone. He hadn’t seen them since the battle.

Either way, the best thing he could do was stay here and take care of young Gabriel. He already liked Gabriel. He hoped that Keenan would, for once, be wrong, and Gabriel’s arrival wouldn’t bring bloodshed to their homes.

“I’m gonna go see Gabriel for a bit.” He slipped into the infirmary, where Gabriel’s unmoving body lay on the bed. He still wore the old, dirty clothes, and Eric made a mental note to provide him something to change into as soon as possible. However, Giovanni

had cleaned his face, and Eric could see that his first impression had indeed been correct. Gabriel was extraordinarily beautiful.

The sight of the young man on the bed made Eric's heart constrict in his chest. He looked so fragile, so alone, so lost. Back in the park, he'd looked so frightened. It reminded Eric of himself, just a few months before, before he'd met Keenan—before he'd found a family among all these unusual people.

Why was Gabriel here? How had he been separated from his mate? Would the Ancients come after Gabriel like Keenan thought? And what would happen if they did?

Eric was so deep in thought, he nearly jumped when Gabriel's eyelashes fluttered and his black eyes opened.

"Hi. How are you feeling?" Eric asked slowly, trying to sound as unthreatening as possible.

Gabriel blinked, obviously confused and trying to clear his vision. He took a look around, clinging to his pillow and placing it in front of him like a makeshift shield. "What? Where? Where am I?" His voice sounded broken and scared, and Eric instantly wanted to comfort him.

"It's all right. You're safe. Don't be scared."

Gabriel touched his stomach, the panic in his features easing a bit as he felt for his son. "What...What do you want?" he stammered. He looked around the room desperately, and Eric suspected that if there had been any plants in the infirmary, he would have found himself yet again in a very unpleasant situation.

"Please calm down. You're in a hospital. And we just want to help, I promise."

Eric reached for Gabriel's hand, but Gabriel snatched his hand away. Eric sighed. "Please, just listen. We don't wish you harm. If we'd wanted to hurt you, wouldn't we have done so already?"

Gabriel gave Eric a suspicious look. "You...you won't hurt us?"

"No, of course not. I know we're a bit scary and overwhelming, but really, we're not so bad."

“I don’t know...” Gabriel bit his lip, seemingly considering his words. “I just...”

“Give us a chance, okay? I’ll tell you a bit about myself, and then if you like, you can tell me about you.”

He didn’t expect a response, and he didn’t receive any. Ignoring the silence, Eric took a deep breath and began. “I was born on a ranch in Texas. But you probably don’t know where that is, since you’re not from around here. Anyway, my childhood was okay, I guess, until my parents discovered that I had psychic abilities. That is, I can move things with my mind and, to an extent, see into people’s heads. After that, well, let’s just say they weren’t very nice to me.”

Eric grimaced at the memories he conjured by his own words. “Anyway, I managed to escape them and come here to New York to study art. It was very hard, living in such a big city, with my ability. But it was worth it because then I met Keenan.”

“Keenan?”

Eric nodded, mentally applauding himself for managing to strike up a conversation with the scared youth. “You’ve met him. The other vampire, the one with gorgeous black eyes and stunning body and...”

He blushed as he realized that he was rambling—about the qualities of his lover, no less—and gave Gabriel a sheepish look. He was surprised to see Gabriel smile. “I understand,” Gabriel said. “I feel the same for Luce.”

It was the first thing Gabriel volunteered since the beginning of their conversation. “The father of your son? Your *svathean*?”

Gabriel’s eyes turned sad once more, a distant expression of almost desperate longing. “Yes,” he whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Eric answered sympathetically. He didn’t know what he would do if he ever lost Keenan. He still remembered the pain and despair he’d felt when the von Klein Tower had been attacked and Keenan had been burnt by the missile. And back then, their relationship had only just begun. Gabriel must feel the same for his mate. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have mentioned...”

"It's fine. I think about Luce always." Gabriel paused, as if attempting to choose his words. "I'm so worried about him," he said.

"What happened?" Eric blurted out, cursing himself for his curiosity. Gabriel obviously didn't need someone to dig into his past.

"His parents. Why did they do that? But he will come for me, he will." Gabriel's soft voice dissolved into words Eric didn't understand, and Eric realized Gabriel wasn't talking to him, not anymore. Gabriel's words confirmed Keenan's fears, but Eric didn't want to think about that now. He opted for changing the subject to a more practical issue.

"Would you like something to eat?"

Gabriel snapped out of his peculiar trance and gave him a small smile. "That would be nice. Thank you."

As if on cue, Cassandra chose that particular moment to knock at the door. She slipped in the room, carrying a tray with food items. "Hey. I'm Cassandra." She smiled kindly. "Sorry if I scared you earlier."

Gabriel gave her a tentative smile. "Hello," he answered, almost inaudibly. "I'm Gabriel."

It wasn't much, but it was progress, anyway. Eric decided to try and help the interaction between the two a bit. "Cassandra is my mother, sort of. It's a long story." He leaned toward Gabriel and whispered conspiratorially in his ear. "But the point is, she is absolutely crazy about babies. It's freaky. When I first met her, she acted like a real bitch, and it turns out, she's a baby maniac." It was more a symbolic gesture, since Cassandra could hear them anyway. It worked, though, because it made Gabriel's smile a bit wider and more genuine.

"I can understand that," he said. "I love babies, too."

Cassandra gave him a cautious look, most likely not wanting to freak the young Kaldorian again. "I just want—you know—you need to eat for two and..."

Eric couldn't help it. He tried, he really did. After all, Cassandra was his sire, and he owed her his respect. But the whole situation was too funny. Cassandra looked so awkward trying to talk to this poor frightened youth that he burst out laughing. Cassandra directed an ugly glare at him. "Fledgling! You are disrespecting me in front of our guest."

Eric's laughter died as if it had never been, and Gabriel inquired, "Can I ask? So you are a vampire, too?"

The question took Eric by surprise. Gabriel seemed to be an extremely smart young man. It was Cassandra who answered the question. "Yes, young one. I turned him to save his life, but that is a story for another day. Feed now and rest. You needn't worry about a thing, we'll take care of you now. You are safe."

Something in Cassandra's tone reached out to Gabriel, the same thing that had allowed her and Eric to bond so well after the incident in which he'd been sired. Gabriel's eyes filled with tears, and he burst into sobs. "Thank you. Thank you so much. I...thank you."

Eric shared a smile with Cassandra as she approached the bed. It would be a while until they got Gabriel to trust them fully, but they'd taken a valuable step today.

## Chapter Three

The Lexus sped through the busy New York streets, its driver oblivious to the angry horns and screeches his excessive speed caused. There were so many things on Keenan's mind tonight. He'd thought that maybe, after dealing with the demons, he could get some peace and quiet, some well-deserved rest at his pet's side. But Gabriel's appearance signaled the advent of a whole new series of problems on an entirely new scale. An Ancient wouldn't leave one of their own like this, stranded, alone in the middle of an unknown Earth city. If he judged by Gabriel's behavior and the unpleasant episode with the demons, he suspected Gabriel hadn't fared very well on Earth. When the Ancients showed up, it would all fall on Keenan because, after all, New York was his city, and he was in charge of the paranormal activity here.

Then, the issue of Jean Luc and Pierre still weighed on his mind. He was loath to admit that he worried about the Sidhe, but as much as Keenan wanted to deny it, he considered Jean Luc a friend. And Pierre...He still had trouble coming to terms with the fact that the sweet, innocent Sidhe he'd known in Paris had been the mastermind behind all the attacks, behind Ulrike's death. However, the truth couldn't be denied, and while Ulrike's assassination could have been overcome, it wasn't the case with the attack on his pet.

Eric. His beautiful pet. Why did Eric show so much interest in Gabriel? Keenan admitted Eric's insistence to stay at *Extase* to take care of Gabriel didn't please him at all, especially since he knew how uneasy the club made Eric. Why was Eric suddenly so attached to the Kaldorian stranger?

An idea itched in the back of Keenan's mind, an awful idea, which he didn't even want to contemplate. It irked him, nudging at his consciousness until he couldn't take it anymore. It couldn't be right. Yes, Gabriel was beautiful, but his pet loved Keenan. Didn't he?

Unable to bear it any longer, Keenan focused his mind on the connection between him and Eric. *"Pet? What are you doing?"*

*"Keenan? Oh, I'm here with Gabriel and Cassandra. He actually seems nice once he stops panicking and you get past his skittishness. You should see him and Cassandra talking about babies. It's so cute!"*

Keenan's hands tightened their hold on the wheel, and he squeezed it so hard his knuckles turned white. Eric had no need to socialize with Gabriel. He had no need to think anyone else but Keenan was cute.

The overflow of feelings passed through their mind link with ease. *"Oh, Keenan, stop it, stop it right now!"* Eric's voice was soft, but at the same time, stern. *"Don't you ever doubt me, you hear?"*

Keenan wanted to believe—he really did—and he knew that deep inside, he didn't doubt Eric. How could he? Eric had been willing to bear his son. He'd actually been thinking about that minutes before Keenan left the club. What more proof of love could Keenan ask for? Still, he couldn't help but feel jealous. Gabriel only just now appeared, and he already monopolized his family's attention. And when the hell had he started considering Cassandra family? God!

*"Keenan?"* Eric's voice slithered in his consciousness again, the tone of reproach gone as if it had never been. In its stead, Keenan found his mind being invaded by a mouthwatering image—Eric, nude in their satin-covered bed, back at the von Klein Tower, beckoning to him with a seductive smile, his blond hair spread on the black pillows. Keenan's dick immediately responded to the image and was rewarded by the most incredible feeling in existence. Keenan found his cock engulfed in the heat of Eric's mouth, feeling his pet's head bobbing up and down as he greedily sucked on Keenan's shaft.

It felt so unbelievable that Keenan lost control of the vehicle he was driving. The Lexus swerved, swaying on the busy street, and almost crashed into a red truck. Keenan cursed out loud. *"Fuck! Pet, I'm driving here."*

*"Sorry, Keenan,"* Eric whispered mentally, not sounding very repentant. *"Hurry with the DNA, 'kay? I'll be waiting."*

*"You do that, pet. Because when I come back..."*

Keenan trailed off, knowing that Eric understood what he meant. He could still feel Eric's excitement when the connection broke. He knew better than to doubt his pet. Eric loved Keenan, but his gentle nature urged him to help others. That's all there was to it.

Shaking his head, Keenan parked the Lexus. He didn't think he could focus enough to drive after that. Exiting the vehicle, he launched himself in the air, careful to cloak his flying figure in the shadows. He landed on the roof of the building next to his parked car, unwilling to use his full abilities during the day. At this early hour and with the winter weather, sunlight wasn't much of a threat, but one never knew who could be watching. Flying would have been easier and shorter, but this route worked just as well. In five minutes, he'd reached Patrice Nelson's current residence.

Before Matthew left with Aidan to Japan, he'd insisted that his aunt come and live in his former house, a larger and more lavish residence than Patrice's previous place. Pat's income as a florist didn't allow for useless luxuries, and she'd wanted to refuse Matt's generosity. In the end, after many arguments over the issue, she'd accepted the offer. The entire situation struck Keenan as very peculiar. If Pat was indeed Gabriel's mother, it meant that, indirectly, Keenan was related to the little intruder.

Well, he'd worry about that when the time came. He slipped inside Pat's house, easily bypassing the alarm systems he himself had arranged. Upon Aidan's request and, of course, Eric's, he'd sort of taken over the additional responsibility of watching over Patrice.



Because of her indirect connection to the vampire world, hunters could come up with the idea of targeting her.

The human woman seemed deep in sleep when Keenan entered her bedroom. He collected the requested lock of hair and decided to take a sample of blood, as well, just for safety. The woman stirred when he pricked her with his claw hard enough to draw blood, but strangely enough, other than that, she showed no sign of registering Keenan's presence inside the house. However, just to make sure, Keenan slipped into her mind and carefully analyzed her thought processes. Tired after a hard day's work at the shop, she'd blame the pinprick on a mosquito bite or a rose thorn. She would have no clue of Keenan's presence in her house.

It occurred to him that if he was correct, Gabriel had inherited his mother's power with plants, albeit a modified version. It made so much sense it almost terrified him. Humans like Patrice had their own peculiar skills. Since these abilities weren't as intense, or rather, as visible, the gifted individuals disregarded them as run-of-the-mill "talents." Patrice's "green thumb" was nothing short of exceptional, and her power, combined with whatever other ancestry Gabriel boasted, could have resulted in the mind-numbing display in the park.

But he was counting his chickens before they hatched. He'd have to see the results of the DNA tests and then analyze everything. Nodding to himself, Keenan exited Patrice's apartment and launched himself again into the night sky. His duty was done, and with this over and done with, he could return to his pet. He needed to see Eric again, to claim him, taste his blood and make sure that they were still the same, that nothing had changed between them. And for the sake of his sanity, he needed Eric to fulfill his promise.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Keenan returned from Pat's house, Eric was already dozing on their couch. He woke when he felt his lover approach,

smiling to himself as he recalled the promise they'd made to each other. They did need some time together after such a busy night. Since both Cassandra and Gabriel had gone to bed, and everyone else to their respective residences, perhaps they had a chance in achieving this.

Keenan came in, his stride stiff and angry. Concern filled Eric as he realized his lover had been out in the sun. Even a vampire Keenan's age could be vulnerable to sunlight.

"Keenan? Are you all right?"

Keenan looked up at him and smiled. "I'm fine, pet." He leaned forward to press a kiss to Eric's lips. "Thanks for waiting up."

Eric wrapped his arms around Keenan's neck and pulled his lover closer. "Mmmm...My pleasure."

Keenan chuckled. "Oh, it's going to be your pleasure, pet. I can guarantee that."

Eric shuddered at the sinful promise in Keenan's tone. "God, yes," he gasped out before he could stop himself.

Keenan let out a growl and swept Eric in a strong embrace. Eric could feel his lover's need to possess, more acute than ever, threatening to scorch him alive. He knew part of it was because of Gabriel. For some reason, Keenan seemed to be jealous of their new guest, although Eric, for the life of him, couldn't understand why. True, Eric had been welcoming and friendly with Gabriel, but not because of any feelings of arousal or some such nonsense. The only one he wanted—the only one he needed—was Keenan.

"And that's how it should be, pet," Keenan purred in his ear.

Eric intended to find a smart reply, but such thoughts were wiped away from his brain when Keenan took his mouth in a savage kiss. He felt Keenan move as they kissed but surrendered himself to his lover's ministrations, trusting Keenan to give them both what they needed.

When the kiss broke, Eric realized Keenan had taken them back to their bedroom. His lover placed him down on the bed, grinning darkly. "It's just you and me now, Eric. As it should be," he repeated.

Eric licked his lips, reveling in the phantom taste of his lover, wanting more. Keenan's kisses were addictive, and Eric could never get enough of them. He wanted to feel Keenan's lips take his mouth, his body, his dick. God, just the thought of having Keenan suck him off made Eric burn. When had they been together last? It felt like ages ago.

Keenan smirked. "Just this evening, pet."

"Really?" Eric said coyly. "I could've sworn it was at least a week ago. I need you so badly."

Keenan's midnight black eyes seemed to grow even darker. Before Eric could say anything else, he pounced, covering Eric's body with his own. As much as Eric enjoyed their not-so-subtle flirting game, he couldn't be more thankful that, in this case, Keenan was as impatient as he. Whether it was a delayed effect of the adrenaline of the battle or arousal stemming from the knowledge of Keenan's desire to possess him, the fact remained that Eric wanted to feel his vampire inside of him.

As they kissed, Eric heard Keenan rummage through the nightstand. He guessed his lover had been victorious in the quest for lube when Keenan's hands came to work on his clothes. "Off," Keenan growled against his lips. "Off, now!"

Eric did his best to obey Keenan's command and struggled out of his shirt and pants. In a flurry of ripped material, they rolled on the bed until they were skin to skin. Eric rubbed against Keenan wantonly, his dick hard and aching, his body throbbing with the need for release. And yet, as much as Eric wished for the ecstasy of orgasm, he wanted it to last. He wanted them to come together as one, lose themselves in each other's bodies for hours, until the whole world faded away and the only thing that remained was their love, their union. He was passion made flesh, and nothing short of the full expression of their connection could satisfy him.

"God, yes!" Keenan gasped. "I'll give you what you want and more."

Keenan separated their mouths and pushed Eric down on the bed. He straddled the pillows, framing Eric's shoulders with his legs. Eric found himself with Keenan's dick right in front of him. His mouth watered at the sight, and as Keenan fed him his dick, Eric eagerly opened up to take it. Rocking into Eric's mouth, Keenan groaned and supported himself against the headboard. The motions should have made Eric uncomfortable or cut off his breathing, more so since Keenan's weight on top of him pinned him down. But as a vampire, Eric didn't have the limitations humans did.

Still, the position didn't give him the freedom to do everything he wanted to. He shifted them on the bed until Keenan was on his back and Eric on top. Flipping his hair, he eyed his lover with a grin. God, Keenan looked gorgeous. Eric didn't even know where to begin.

In the end, he decided to continue with what he'd interrupted and went back to Keenan's shaft. "Go on, pet," Keenan urged him. "Suck me."

Eric smirked at the need in Keenan's voice, but nevertheless obeyed and lowered his mouth on Keenan's dick. He shamelessly used all the expertise he'd acquired in his time as Keenan's lover. He swirled his tongue in the corkscrew motion he knew drove Keenan crazy. First teasing, sucking on the head of the shaft, even giving the tiny slit the smallest hint of fang, without drawing blood. Truth be told, he'd have loved feeding from Keenan's dick in more ways than one. Keenan had done it to him, more than once, but Eric didn't want to risk it. He was still young and not experienced enough with his vampire powers.

"Go ahead, pet," Keenan said encouragingly, eyes dilated with lust. "I'll stop you if something happens."

Eric hesitated, still uncertain. Then again, he trusted that Keenan would keep them both safe in whatever circumstances. Their love play had been taken to the extreme since Eric's transformation. He could now give his lover sensations he hadn't been able to provide as a human, and he wouldn't allow fear to stand in his way.

*“Oh, something is going to happen,”* he said through their connection. *“I’m going to make you come so hard you’ll see stars.”*

It wasn’t empty boasting or exaggeration. Eric fully intended to send his lover to the highest peak of ecstasy, and he set himself to doing just so. He started sucking on the shaft in his mouth with all he had, no longer teasing, reveling in the sounds of pleasure he drew from Keenan.

As he bobbed his head up and down, he alternated slow motions with fast ones, keeping Keenan on the brink of orgasm. His left hand went to toy with Keenan’s testicles, whereas the other sneaked between Keenan’s ass cheeks. With a gentle finger, Eric prodded at Keenan’s hole.

They’d never had sex with Keenan on the bottom. Eric loved feeling Keenan inside him too much and hadn’t felt tempted to try it. Yet, now it occurred to him that there was no sense in limiting themselves. If Keenan wanted to as well, they’d have to try it one of these days.

“Whatever you want, pet!” Keenan said. “But today I want your ass.”

Eric agreed with that assessment but didn’t offer a reply. Instead, he took Keenan’s cock all the way to the base and swallowed around the head. He allowed his fangs to descend and gently bit down in the tasty flesh of the shaft. Even in the heat of passion, he refused to take any chances. Blood seeped into his mouth, mingling with hot cum as Keenan howled and found his peak.

Ever so slowly, Eric cleaned Keenan’s shaft of semen and licked the small bite marks, relieved to see that they were already closing. Keenan didn’t even give him the chance to finish his self-appointed task, however. Moving faster than the eye could see, he pushed Eric back down and flipped him on his stomach. Eric spread his legs, eagerly awaiting for what he knew would follow. “Keenan, please!”

A long, elegant finger prodded at his entrance, teasing it with the promise of the pleasure to come. Eric shuddered as the finger rubbed

around his willing hole and pushed his ass up, aching for more. Keenan chuckled. Even if he'd just come seconds ago, he now sounded completely in control.

The finger vanished, only to return in mere instants slick with cool liquid. Eric gasped as the digit wormed its way inside his passage ever so slowly. Keenan's gentleness brought tears to Eric's eyes, more so since he'd been so violent with his lover earlier. He couldn't help but wonder if Keenan had even enjoyed the blow job at all. He'd come, yes, but he could have done so without Eric fulfilling his own selfish desire.

Keenan tsked, and his finger sped up its motions in Eric's body. "Pet, you should have more confidence in yourself. I'll let you in on a little secret. You really did make me come so hard I saw stars."

Eric would have thought Keenan just wanted to make him feel better, but he could feel the honesty flow through their connection. Pushing his doubts away, he allowed his body to simply feel. Keenan took over, his expert hands manipulating Eric's pleasure the way a virtuoso played his instrument.

Another slick finger joined the first one and unerringly found Eric's sweet spot. Eric let out a moan as Keenan rubbed the tiny gland mercilessly. Eric tried to impale himself on the fingers, desiring more, but Keenan held him down. Maybe his lover wasn't so gentle and nice after all.

But in truth, Eric loved that about Keenan. The darkness, as well as the light, attracted him, drew him to Keenan like a moth to the flame. His lover represented a paradox of love, kindness, gentleness, mixed with a tough edge of bloodlust, violence, possessiveness, and, to an extent, selfishness. And Eric adored every single bit of that. It made Keenan be Keenan, the man he'd fallen in love with.

Unsurprisingly, Keenan caught on to Eric's thoughts. Soft, warm lips landed on the nape of Eric's neck even as the fingers retreated from his body. Keenan turned him around until they were facing each other, so close that Eric could feel Keenan's breath mingling with his

own. "My pet, my beautiful Eric," Keenan murmured. "No one will tear us apart."

Eric held Keenan's dark gaze and nodded. "Together forever."

And then Keenan lifted Eric's legs and pushed inside Eric's passage in an excruciatingly slow motion, his eyes still scanning Eric's face. As his lover impaled him, Eric bit his lip so hard, he tasted blood. He distantly realized his fangs had dropped again, but in moments such as these, he had no hope of controlling his vampire nature. Half of him wanted the rough, hard sex that only vampires on a blood frenzy could understand. With Keenan's blood still flowing in his veins, suppressing those instincts was next to impossible. Still, it was precisely due to the difficulty of holding back that their slow lovemaking meant so much to him.

"Not to worry, pet. We have time. For everything."

Eric's reply was lost in a moan as Keenan started thrusting in and out of his passage. Just like Eric knew he would, Keenan went slow, sending tendrils of soft ecstasy over Eric's sensitized skin. Keenan's hands reached to Eric's chest to tweak one nipple, and a small shock of pleasure went through his body, pooling in his dick.

Keenan's lips landed everywhere, on Eric's forehead, his eyelids, his lips, his collarbone and neck. The other man's tongue lingered over a spot on Eric's neck, the same spot Keenan loved to feed from. Eric ached to feel Keenan's fangs pierce his skin to create the bond of blood only the kiss of death could provide, but he waited. All in due time.

Keenan abandoned his ministrations on Eric's neck and lifted his head. A wicked smile fled on Keenan's lips, the only warning Eric got before Keenan impaled Eric with a hard thrust inside him. Eric yelped, but recovered soon and wrapped his legs around Keenan tighter, anchoring himself in his lover's presence. Growling, Keenan let go, the speed and strength of his motions increasing with every passing second. Soon, Eric was lost in sensation, possessed so utterly and completely that his sense of self could only focus on one being.

He thrashed on the bed, meeting Keenan thrust for thrust, no longer caring about anything but the here and now. It seemed to Eric that he'd been born just to live these moments, to belong to Keenan and have Keenan belong to him. As his lover's dick rubbed against his prostate, he cried out Keenan's name, over and over, until his throat felt raw and his voice hoarse.

Just a little more. Just a little more. He could feel his orgasm within reach, practically one thrust away. Keenan gave him that, and more. Just as he buried his dick inside Eric's ass, he did the same with his fangs in Eric's throat. Eric's vision went dark, and he screamed, the sharp, piercing pain turning into the pleasure he could never dream of denying. With Keenan sucking on his neck and feasting on his lifeblood, Eric came, exploding in a million pieces. Would he ever be able to pick them all up?

He allowed the orgasm to flow over him, taking every bit of strength the threat of sunlight had not yet depleted. So good, so amazingly dangerous, almost like being turned again—yet, so very different. The rush of power was the same, but the threat of insanity had disappeared, gone as Eric's soul healed. Now, just the ecstasy remained. It was beautiful, tranquil, peaceful. It was home.

The heavenly suction at his throat stopped, and bloody lips met his own. "Don't worry, pet," Keenan murmured. "I'll pick up all the pieces if you can't. Whenever you want me to."

Eric couldn't help but smile. In the background of the still-buzzing pleasure, fatigue wore heavily on him. Eric closed his eyes and cuddled closer to Keenan. As his consciousness faded, he thought he could sense a distraught presence, somewhere in the house. In Keenan's embrace, the image faded, leaving behind only a distant feel. He'd have to check it later. Much, much later.

\* \* \* \*



Eric woke up in a cold and empty bed. The sheets still smelled like sex, but Keenan had long ago left them. Eric wondered where his lover could have gone so early in the morning—well, in the evening.

The events of the previous night swept over him, and he remembered the frightened mind he'd sensed last night, even from the distance. Gabriel. Their young visitor from another world. Gabriel must be out of his mind with worry, and being all alone during the day couldn't have helped. True, Keenan had given his people indications to provide Gabriel with everything he needed, but that couldn't replace true human kindness. Or vampire kindness. Whatever.

Nodding to himself, Eric decided to scan the penthouse for Keenan and then go in search of Gabriel. Since he couldn't go out naked and bearing the smell of Keenan's possession, he took a quick shower then pulled some clothes on. Focused on his goal, he moved with the agility of a vampire, and in less than five minutes, he was out of the bedroom and ready to start the day.

As far as he could tell, Keenan wasn't in the penthouse. The office was empty, and in the living room, Cassandra waited. Eric guessed she'd been left to babysit him during Keenan's absence. He didn't particularly mind. He liked having her around. After all, she was the only mother he'd ever had. After knowing Cassandra's warmth, he couldn't consider the woman who'd given birth to him a real parent.

Cassandra lifted her eyes from the book and smiled at him. "Fledgling. Hello. How are you?"

"Okay, I guess. Why? Did Keenan tell you different?"

Cassandra flushed. Seeing Cassandra and Keenan try to get along for his benefit always made Eric both amused and thankful. "He told me to stay in the penthouse with you. He wouldn't have asked if he wasn't worried. And Keenan...He always goes overboard with you and then goes to one of his meetings without telling you. He's mistreating you, fledgling."

Eric felt a flare of annoyance but squashed it down. Cassandra was just concerned for him. No point in making things dramatic. He took his sire's hand and squeezed it. "I'm quite all right, Cassandra. Besides, if I need him, he's a thought away."

As if catching on to that phrase, Keenan's voice fled into his mind. *"You up already, pet? I didn't want to wake you. You looked exhausted."*

Keenan's voice seemed smug, but it held an undertone of concern. Even if Keenan couldn't see him, Eric shook his head. *"I couldn't be better. Well, I could. If you were by my side."*

Keenan laughed. *"You flirtatious little whelp. I don't know how I haven't fucked that insolence out of you yet."*

Eric felt his face flame and his dick harden. He desperately hoped Cassandra wouldn't notice, but that would probably be too much to ask for. Indeed, his sire rolled her eyes, grumbling, "You know what, fledgling? Whenever you talk to Keenan through your mind bond, remind me to leave the room. I have no desire to see my son as a sexual object."

Eric tried to stutter out a reply but failed abysmally. After all, what could he say? It was like getting caught by your mother watching porn, only worse. Eric hadn't been through that experience, but the current one traumatized him enough. Keenan's husky laughter didn't make things any better.

He crossed his arms over his chest, huffing in annoyance to disguise his discomfort. Maybe he couldn't convince Keenan, or Cassandra, for that matter, but he wouldn't stick around to continue their dispute either. "Whatever. I'm going to see Gabriel. I'm betting he won't make fun of me."

Cassandra arched a brow, but smiled. "Mind if I join you?"

Eric shrugged. "If you want to. I don't mind."

Keenan remained silent, but their connection thrummed with frustration and nervous energy. Eric mentally sighed. He hoped Keenan wouldn't be a jerk and make things difficult.

*“Be a jerk?” Keenan howled. “Make things difficult? What the fuck, Eric?”*

Eric winced, wondering how Keenan could be so loud when he wasn't even there. *“Just saying. It feels like you don't want me to go see Gabriel, that's all.”*

*“You bet your tight little ass I don't want you around him. Why would you feel the need to spend the time with that damn intruder?”*

*“Keenan, you're exaggerating. He's scared and alone. I could feel his fear this morning when I was in bed.”*

*“This morning? You were thinking of him while I fucked you?”* Disbelief and not a small amount of hurt tinged Keenan's tone.

*“No, that's not what I meant!”*

*“It's what you said.”*

*“Keenan...”*

*“No! You know what? Go see your precious Gabriel. He seems the only thing on your mind, both when we're in bed and when you first wake up. I'll see you whenever.”*

Before Eric could even think of protesting, Keenan's voice disappeared from his mind. Their connection remained in place, but it teemed with anger and...hatred? *“Keenan,”* Eric tried again. *“No. I didn't mean it.”*

Silence met his plea, and Eric had no choice but to let Keenan cool down for a while. He hoped his lover would reconsider. After all, just a few hours back, they'd vowed undying love to each other. Surely, a small misunderstanding like this couldn't shake their relationship.

Feeling a bit more reassured, Eric focused on his actual surroundings, more specifically, on Cassandra. His sire gave him a concerned look, having obviously caught on to the argument between him and Keenan.

*“Keenan is upset because of Gabriel,”* Eric explained. He left out the part about him saying he'd thought about Gabriel in their bed. *“We had a fight.”*

“Oh. Don’t worry, fledgling. Every couple has fights. Keenan has an ill temper, but he’ll soon see Gabriel isn’t a threat.”

Eric tried to muster a smile for Cassandra, but failed. “I hope so. I really hope so.”

He sighed to himself. Maybe he should stay at the penthouse and not go see Gabriel. After all, what did it cost him to indulge Keenan, just this once?

A flash of Gabriel’s frightened, dark eyes passed through his mind, and he remembered the many times he himself had been alone, desperate for someone to understand, to hold him and care for him. He’d been so lucky to be given a second chance at a family by Keenan’s side. He couldn’t deny Gabriel the comfort the Kaldorian so obviously needed. Keenan would understand. He loved Eric, and their connection would clear up any possible misunderstanding. But what if...? What if Keenan got even angrier? Maybe this whole thing wasn’t worth the risk.

That single thought made Eric angry. He wouldn’t be doing anything wrong, damn it! He was still an individual, not a slave at Keenan’s command. And truth be told, he knew he’d never forgive himself if he abandoned their new guest. Something told him that Gabriel needed more than Cassandra’s support, perhaps maybe more than her and Eric’s combined efforts just to hold on. Given time, Keenan would realize this as well.

Vowing to talk to Keenan as soon as possible, Eric took Cassandra’s hand and walked out of the living room. If he remembered correctly, Gabriel would be staying a floor down from them. He’d keep the Kaldorian company for the evening and then come back when Keenan returned for his duties.

## **Chapter Four**

*A few days later*

The penthouse was silent and dark, and the hour late, at least by human standards. For vampires, this was the time when they fed, partied, had sex. Lately, though, Eric had been deprived of much of the vampire nightlife. His lover had left the Tower yet again, in a fit of anger caused, as always, by Gabriel.

Over the past few days, Eric had become good friends with their guest. Gabriel had yet to share his past with Eric, but he seemed to be working on it. Unfortunately, this friendship didn't come without a price. With each passing moment, Keenan became more and more jealous of Gabriel, a fact which hurt both of them terribly.

Eric tried to reason with his lover. At first, Keenan accepted his words and, to a certain extent, his friendship with Gabriel. But things gradually became worse until, just the evening before, Keenan actually refused to touch him. Keenan had never done anything like that before. Even when Eric had been just recently turned, Keenan had never denied him. Back then, his lover would carefully give Eric everything he needed, without even taking his own pleasure. The thought that in a few days, that stability and relationship could shatter drove Eric crazy.

He'd been unable to sleep, more so since Keenan practically ignored him all night. Cassandra had been reluctant to interfere, but Eric knew that if things continued like this, she would become involved as well. She was fiercely protective of him, and somehow, that sentiment extended to Gabriel.

Eric didn't know what to do. At this point, whatever course of action he attempted only made things worse. As much as he hated the thought, he'd have even stopped seeing Gabriel. It wouldn't work, though. Keenan could see into his mind, and he'd know Eric missed his friend. Even if that didn't happen, Keenan would find some way to twist his actions into something malicious or sneaky. It almost seemed that Keenan wanted to believe Eric was cheating on him.

In Keenan's absence, Eric paradoxically ended up with Gabriel. Loneliness called out to loneliness, and while their two situations were vastly different, they both missed the other halves of their souls, in Eric's case, Keenan, and in Gabriel's, the mysterious mate he sometimes mentioned. Tonight turned out to be a particularly bad night, and they just stared out into the darkness, neither of them speaking for the longest time.

"Eric, you should sleep some," Gabriel advised him in the end. "You look very tired."

Eric gave Gabriel an exhausted smile. "Vampires don't sleep at night, Gabriel."

"Please? For me?" Gabriel coaxed.

Eric sighed, getting up from the couch they were currently lounging on. He couldn't say no to Gabriel. Besides, Gabriel had enough on his mind. He didn't need to be concerned with Eric as well. "Fine. I don't know if I can, but I'll try."

"Come on," Gabriel said. "Let's get you to bed."

Eric followed Gabriel out of the living room and into his sleeping quarters, the bedroom he shared with Keenan. His heart twisted in his chest at the sight of the cold, empty bed. It almost seemed to echo the state of his own body. Without Keenan by his side, Eric felt drained and bare, naked in the dark.

Gabriel pulled him along and pushed him on the large four-poster. As his friend tucked him in, Eric saw Gabriel's expression change. His eyes went hazy, and he swooned, collapsing on top of Eric on the bed.

Eric hastily pulled Gabriel by his side and checked on his friend's condition. After a few seconds, Gabriel opened his eyes and smiled. "I'm fine. Thanks."

"You should take better care of yourself," Eric said, concern sweeping through him.

Gabriel nodded and leaned forward to brush a kiss on Eric's cheek. A jolt of emotion hit Eric as their skin made contact. Gabriel felt very restless. His thoughts revolved on reaching Luce. Gabriel also hoped that, at least, he could somehow help his friend with his relationship. He felt guilty about the problems between Eric and Keenan.

Unfortunately, Keenan chose this exact moment to come into the room. Eric turned to look at his lover, suppressing a wince at Keenan's expression. The other vampire stood in the doorway, his eyes flashing with barely restrained fury. "Eric," he growled between gritted teeth. "What are you doing?"

Keenan must have seen Gabriel kiss Eric on the cheek. Damn it! As if things weren't already bad enough.

Eric couldn't deal with Keenan's jealousy anymore. He offered his lover a tired smile, hoping Keenan would leave him alone. "Hi, Keenan. Just thought I'd get some sleep. What's up?"

He almost winced when Keenan turned to look at him, the unbridled fury in his gaze driving a dagger through his heart. Why? Why did Keenan have to doubt him like that? "Eric, can I talk to you a few minutes alone?"

He didn't say it as a question, but as an order. Giving Keenan a frightful look, Gabriel got up. "See you later, Eric."

Eric nodded, trying to silently reassure his friend. He knew his friend's concern was justified, but Gabriel couldn't help him. The damage was done, and Eric would have to face the consequences alone. He got up from the bed and faced Keenan as he threw a reply Gabriel's way. "Bye, Gabriel."

Gabriel walked past Keenan, out of the room, and Eric breathed a sigh of relief. At least Gabriel was out of the line of fire and wouldn't get hurt if Keenan got mad again.

Keenan arched a brow. "Oh? And don't I have a reason to get mad, pet?" His voice had turned calm, almost thoughtful. To Eric, it seemed like the voice of a stranger. "After all, I did come home to see my lover with another man, in our bed. Wouldn't you think I would be fully entitled to exact my revenge?"

For the first time since they'd met, so long ago, in the park, Eric felt afraid of Keenan. The predatory tone he'd once used when stalking Eric and trapping him in their bed now turned dark, sending shivers of terror down his spine. Eric knew his lover wouldn't hurt him, not physically, at least, but Gabriel was a whole different matter.

He shook his head, trying to come up with something, anything to clarify the situation. It didn't work. His mind drew a blank. Keenan's demeanor changed instantly, and he crossed the room in a few angry steps. Keenan squeezed Eric's arm in an iron-vise grip. "So that's the way it is, huh? I'm a stranger now, and Gabriel is your only concern."

Keenan's familiar voice snapped Eric out of his trance. What the hell was Keenan doing? Surely, he'd not intended to hypnotize Eric. He'd done enough of that when Eric was still human. He'd hated it back then, and he hated it even more now. It was humiliating to think Keenan thought so little of him.

Forcing himself to stay calm, Eric snatched his arm out of Keenan's grip. One final attempt. Maybe this time, Keenan would understand. "Enough is enough, Keenan!" he said. "I've never betrayed you, not even in thought! Whatever doubts you have, they are completely unjustified."

Keenan snorted. "Yeah, right! That's why I find you with him whenever I come back to the Tower." He clenched his hands into fists so hard the knuckles went white. "That's why I find you kissing him."

"It was just a friendly peck on the cheek!" Eric cried. "There's no way you can't see that."



Keenan snarled. "It was way too friendly. In our bed, Eric? What the hell? I don't appreciate being supplanted like that."

"And I don't appreciate you not trusting me! What the hell? You can see into my mind! You know that you're the only one in my heart. Why do you insist on this madness?"

Keenan gave him a look of disbelief. "Are you kidding me, Eric? Half the time you're running around at this little bitch's bidding. Even when we're in bed, he's on your mind."

Eric rubbed his eyes tiredly. "Don't tell me you're still stuck on that one. I told you, I just felt his mind in the distance back then."

"Whatever, pet. I don't want you to feel his mind, or his hand, or his lips, or anything that is not mine, for that matter."

Eric gaped. He couldn't believe what his lover was saying. "Keenan, I may not be a human being anymore, but I'm still a person. You can't corral me like an animal, brand me, and give me orders."

"I can, and I will," Keenan said threateningly, "if it'll keep you away from that Kaldorian whore."

"Gabriel is not a whore," Eric shouted. "And this isn't even about him, is it? With Cassandra, you begrudged her for siring me. You hated that she took a part of me you can't reach, even if she saved my life in the process. You don't own me, Keenan! I have a mind and a heart. You can't order me whom to touch and whom to love."

Keenan froze, and Eric knew he'd gone too far. He took a step back as anger twisted the beloved features of Keenan's face. Eric didn't get the chance to move farther. A flash of black, and he collapsed against the hardwood floor with Keenan on top of him.

He let out a sound of pain, but Keenan ignored him, choosing to tear at Eric's clothes instead. "You may give your heart to whomever you like," he growled, "but your body is still mine."

Eric tried to fight Keenan off, but his lover was too strong. Even with his new vampire abilities, Eric didn't have a chance against Keenan. He found himself completely immobilized and at Keenan's mercy. In another situation, it could have been arousing. Now,

though, it scared Eric out of his mind. He didn't want this. What Keenan had in mind was a perversion of their connection, of their love. It would ruin them both forever.

"Keenan, please, stop!" he begged.

His lover didn't pay him any heed. Tendrils of darkness wrapped around Eric's wrists and thighs, much like they had a few months back, when they'd first met. Back then, Keenan hadn't known about Eric's past, but he'd long ago learned of Eric's childhood trauma and his fear of bindings. The fact that Keenan intended to use this against him spoke volumes of Keenan's anger and hate.

Even as Keenan's hands started to sweep over his skin, Eric's vision started to go black. He went limp against his lover, no longer having the strength or will to fight. If this was what Keenan needed to make sure Eric belonged to him, Eric would let him have it. He'd get over it in time, and he'd have Keenan by his side.

Suddenly, the weight above him vanished, and the ethereal bindings evaporated into thin air. Eric realized he was free again, no longer trapped in Keenan's unwanted embrace. Trembling, he looked up at his lover. He didn't understand anything anymore.

"Unwanted," Keenan said, sounding shocked. "Unloved."

He looked at his hands, and through their connection, Eric felt Keenan's horror at what he'd nearly done. Eric wanted to reach out to his lover, to tell him it was all right, but Keenan shook his head. He knelt at Eric's feet and wiped the tears Eric hadn't even known he'd been shedding. "It's all right, pet," Keenan murmured as he placed a featherlight kiss on Eric's lips. "I get it. Enough is enough."

He took Eric in his arms and put him on the couch, his hand lingering just a few seconds longer to caress Eric's skin. "I won't bother you anymore."

Without another word, Keenan turned around and left the room. Just like that, the doors to their mental connection snapped shut. Eric cried out and clutched his temples. He felt as if he'd been deprived of the most important thing in his life, as if the thread of his very

existence had been severed. He started choking, unable to breathe, the pain of the loss too much to handle.

And then slender arms wrapped around him, engulfing him in a warm embrace. Soothing murmurs brought him back to reality, and Eric leaned against his friend's shoulder, sobbing. "It's okay, Eric," Gabriel whispered softly. "It'll be all right. Keenan will come back. You'll see."

Once, Eric would have believed him. Now, he didn't know anymore.

\* \* \* \*

*One week later*

"So what you're saying is that Patrice Nelson is indeed Gabriel's mother."

"There's a ninety-nine percent chance of that being the case, yes." Giovanni nodded, confirming Keenan's statement and his original suspicion.

It had taken them one week to analyze the samples drawn from Patrice and Gabriel. Normally, with their equipment and technology, the time would have been much reduced. Their situation became complicated by the fact that Gabriel was obviously half human and half God-knew-what. Keenan hadn't yet managed to make Gabriel talk about his past much. Not that he'd made much of an effort. Just seeing Gabriel's face made him so angry he couldn't see straight. According to Cassandra, though, Eric insisted that Gabriel needed more time to trust them and adjust to his new environment.

Eric. The lover he'd lost to the little bitch who'd come into their lives and homes without so much as a by-your-leave. Keenan still couldn't believe Eric had given away what they had for his so-called friendship with Gabriel. But Eric had practically thrown his feelings for the little whore in Keenan's face. That led to Keenan almost

forcing himself on Eric. Whenever he thought about that, Keenan thought he would get sick. It haunted him, night and day. He couldn't get the sight out of his mind, Eric's tears as Keenan freed him from the bindings, that lost, torn expression. It was what stopped him from going in search of his lover to try and mend things. It hurt, God, how it hurt, but he knew that with Gabriel here, he'd just fuck things up further.

He admitted that Gabriel was a stunning man, and that knowledge just made him more frustrated. Perhaps if Gabriel had been a plain-looking individual, his friendship with Eric wouldn't have bothered Keenan so much. Instead, he begrudged every moment the two spent side by side. He hated the fact that these days, Eric's smile—the smile he'd usually keep just for Keenan—was reserved for Gabriel and, on rare occasions, Cassandra.

Keenan's hopes now lay with Gabriel's human mother. If he could get Gabriel to move there, Keenan could get some peace and fix his relationship with his pet. If not, well, he'd find another way. He'd ask Cassandra to take him. Anywhere but here at the Tower would work.

"So I suppose we have to tell them now," Cassandra murmured, oblivious to Keenan's musings.

"Ah, yes, but you forget, my dear, that we are talking about a very delicate matter here," Lucca said. "We are not talking only about reuniting a mother and a son, but about disclosing the very existence of the supernaturals to an outside human."

Keenan felt a migraine coming on. Lucca had a point. "Nevertheless, taking into account the circumstances, there is no other way. I will have to take the responsibility for this since, technically speaking, we are talking about my family here."

Everybody nodded solemnly. "Where is Gabriel now?"

"With Eric," Cassandra replied, and Keenan gritted his teeth to contain his howl of jealousy and frustration.

“But I think we can’t just rush in with him like that,” she continued. “After all, he is, you know, pregnant. I wouldn’t want him to have a negative reaction.”

*I would*, Keenan thought. He shook his head to himself. He didn’t want to hurt Gabriel’s son, but Gabriel was a whole other matter entirely. The knowledge of his failure with Eric hazed everything over, and the predator inside him wanted to strike back at the person responsible.

Ever since he’d closed his connection with Eric, the world had turned gray and dull. Eric had taught him to see the beautiful colors that surrounded him, the colors of emotion. Without it, Keenan felt lost.

Back then, their mind link had felt so erratic. All the time, Eric’s thought processes seemed to revolve around protecting Gabriel. Amidst it all, Keenan could still feel the affection in Eric’s heart. His own mind couldn’t process it anymore, though, and he couldn’t tell whom the affection was for. Whenever Gabriel and Eric were concerned, Keenan’s instincts took over.

God, he didn’t know anymore. He couldn’t separate his anger from his logic. Out loud, he replied to Cassandra’s comment, “Hmmm, you have a point.” Perhaps if he focused on solving the Ancient issue, he’d be able to regain some semblance of control.

The pensive mood was broken when the door burst open, and all eyes turned to the new arrivals. From the doorway, Jacob smiled. “Sorry for the delay. There were some pack issues that needed to be dealt with.”

Behind him, Elis nodded silently, his face blank as usual. Keenan’s eyesight detected a newly formed bruise on the panther’s neck. He arched a brow at Jacob’s blatant lie. Whom did these two think they were kidding? They smelled like sex a mile away. “Right, pack issues.” Giovanni grinned. “So are these...issues resolved?”

Jacob stole a nervous glance at the quiet werepanther. “Yes, yes, definitely.”

Keenan suppressed an irritated sigh. This behavior was becoming an increasingly common occurrence. He knew that if they continued this way, they would be eventually detected. The members of the Council could keep their secret well enough, but this secrecy could only hold for so long when they were being so indiscreet. And the last thing Keenan needed now was instability on the were front. Not to mention that having the successful love life of the idiot shifters rubbed in his face didn't help his temper when he'd made such a mess of his own. He rubbed his forehead, trying to concentrate. "Gabriel's DNA results just came in, and they turned out positive. There is indeed a match between Patrice Nelson and Gabriel. Therefore we—"

"So we didn't miss much," Elis interrupted. "Why should we care about the little alien's DNA anyhow?"

"Actually, it is an important issue," Cassandra chastised. "Since Patrice is indeed Gabriel's mother, a whole new issue appears. And if you stopped skipping the meetings, you would know that, at this time, we have to speak to her and reveal our existence, a fact which is always a delicate issue."

Jacob raised a hand, stopping the female vampire's angry rant. "Wait just a minute. You lost me. Why exactly do we have to tell the human woman anything?"

The sound of the phone interrupted either of them from giving the werewolf a response. "I'll get it," Lucca said, already picking up the receiver.

*"Pronto?"*

Keenan remained silent throughout the conversation. Lucca was talking in Italian, and his countenance changed from pleased to pale in seconds. That didn't bode well for them. Keenan considered straining his hearing in an effort to hear what the other party was saying but decided against it. He suspected he already knew, and anyhow, Lucca would tell them.

The conversation ended abruptly, with Lucca thanking his interlocutor. *"Grazie. Ciao, cugino!"*

The incubus looked troubled when he hung up the phone. “Well, that was our cousin, Giorgio, calling from Italy. It seems there have been some disturbances all over Europe, especially in the East, in Russia. However, it does concern the community, since last time these disturbances occurred...”

“The Ancients were here,” Keenan finished. “It’s already starting. We’re running out of time.”

“What do we do, Keenan?” Cassandra asked, a little hysteria tinting her voice.

“Well, for now, I’m calling Aidan. He needs to know about this, if he hasn’t heard already.” He considered calling his parents, as well, but decided against it. The von Kleins were surely up to date with everything going on in Europe. Besides, Keenan wasn’t on good terms with them at this particular moment. “We have to deal with this issue carefully. The Ancients are targeting just demon covens, right?”

Lucca nodded, obviously not understanding where Keenan was going with this trail of thought. “Where do we have demon contacts that would be willing to help us relay a message?”

“I suppose our cousins in Italy and the people in Asia. In Korea, I think.”

“Aidan would know,” Keenan said. “What we need to do is tell the Ancients that we have what they’re looking for. Of course, we can’t go out looking for them. The chances of finding them are slim to none. So what we’ll do is talk with the demons that can be trusted with such sensitive information.”

“There’s another point here.” Elis spoke for the first time. “How do we know that these are the Ancients and if they are really looking for your Gabriel?”

The werepanther had a point. “If I caught on right, the little alien was running from something, so maybe these Ancients coming from Russia aren’t even the good guys. Are you willing to sacrifice him like a lamb to the slaughter?”

“Of course not!” Cassandra said, outraged. She’d taken a liking to the young Kaldorian in the past week, and, as expected, she would defend him to the death.

“And you would sacrifice us all for—”

“We are not talking about sacrificing anyone for anything!” Keenan snapped at the werewolf. He took a deep breath and ordered himself to be calm.

“Jacob, be reasonable!” Cassandra said. “Gabriel is one of us now. Think of it like this. Would you give up someone you care for, say—” Cassandra paused for effect and gave Elis a brief look. “—your mate?” Keenan admired the way she’d gotten her point across.

“I didn’t know you held the little alien in such great esteem,” Jacob spat.

“Enough! Regardless of our personal sentiments toward Gabriel, the fact remains that he has to be protected,” Keenan said coldly. With the threat of the Ancients looming, they couldn’t afford to not help the little whore. Otherwise, Keenan would have already cast him out on the street. “But Elis has a point. Gabriel has not told us as of yet why exactly he is here on Earth, and that is one piece of information we need. We also have to deal with the issue of Patrice. We need any advantage we can get.”

Elis arched a brow at Keenan’s long speech. “So basically, what you’re saying is that we’re going to use your little Gabriel to stop the Ancients from massacring us all.”

Keenan didn’t reply. By now, he’d made his feelings toward the Kaldorian more than clear. No one could say he hadn’t been fair in his treatment of Gabriel, not on a professional level, at least. “I’m going to have a little chat with Gabriel,” he said, turning from the rest of the paranormals and heading toward the door. Gabriel had hidden from them long enough. It was time that the young Kaldorian come clean with what he knew, for all their sakes.



## **Chapter Five**

Eric leaned against Gabriel, eyes closed, oblivious to all else around him. As was his habit, he petted Gabriel's stomach. He could feel the life thrumming under his fingertips, a miracle that didn't cease to amaze Eric. Beautiful, magical, so amazing. And yet, Gabriel's light could no longer reach him, and the fire stemming from Gabriel's child couldn't warm him. Keenan had abandoned him.

Hysteria started to crowd his mind again, his own hurts translating into suspicions and terrible dreams. He had trouble making himself believe the love between him and Keenan had ever existed at all, on Keenan's part, at least. It was only by miracle that he'd not lost his mind completely by now. Without Keenan, he felt lost, unanchored. Cassandra's presence helped, and Gabriel's, too, but Keenan was his own, his life, his heart. He didn't think he would be able to take it much longer.

It was all his fault. He'd taken Keenan's love for granted, and he'd pushed Keenan away with his stupidity. If only he'd given Keenan what he needed. If only he'd kept things clear, out in the open between them. Perhaps he shouldn't have befriended Gabriel in the first place. Would that have worked, even? If it hadn't been Gabriel, it would've been someone or something else.

His mind hurt, and every cell of his body ached. Both Gabriel and Cassandra tried to get him to feed, but they registered limited success, and it showed. He felt so weak, so very tired. He wondered what would happen if he just stopped feeding altogether. Would he die like humans did? Where did vampires go when they died?

Gabriel sometimes spoke to him in a soft, almost inaudible tone. On occasion, he even used his Kaldorian native tongue, but Eric didn't mind. It helped tone down the voices that seemed to get louder, familiar voices out of his past, snickers and howls of laughter that stabbed him with icy daggers.

All of a sudden, he became aware that one of the voices belonged to neither his parents, nor to his killer, Pierre D'Argent. Instead, the new voice signaled the presence of the man he loved.

Eric scrambled off Gabriel's lap, fighting against the dizziness that threatened to overcome him. He met Keenan's eyes, hoping his lover had somehow reconsidered, but he didn't need their connection to understand that the situation hadn't changed at all. If anything, Keenan seemed even angrier. Why? Why did it have to be like this?

Taking a deep breath, Eric looked away. If Keenan hadn't come looking for him, then his lover wished to talk to Gabriel. Perhaps Gabriel's mate finally made an appearance. At least Gabriel could be happy, if Eric could not.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan gritted his teeth, forcing himself not to snatch Eric away from the couch. How could his pet betray him like this? They'd sworn their lives and hearts to each other, and when someone else appeared, Eric threw everything out the window.

His thoughts must have been more than a little transparent, as Eric looked away from him. Was it shame that made his lover unable to meet his eyes? Did Eric really prefer Gabriel over Keenan? The thought made Keenan's blood boil in his veins, and he considered pushing down his mental barriers for a second, just to see what Eric was thinking. But no! Eric had made his choice, and he didn't deserve the intimacy of that connection.

Gabriel chose that particular moment to get up from the couch and glare at Keenan. His black eyes burned like blazing embers, for once

no longer looking gentle and sweet. “Keenan, stop this! He loves you so, and you are hurting him.”

“It’s none of your business,” Keenan snarled. “Stay out of it.”

“It is my business. Eric is my friend,” Gabriel insisted.

Gabriel’s words were too much for Keenan. “Your friend?” he repeated in disbelief. “Your friend? The way you were seated seemed more than friendly to me.” The fury and possessiveness urged him to attack, to eliminate the threat and the intruder who wanted to claim what was his. But did he even have the right now, after what he’d done? Perhaps Eric had made a mistake in befriending the little whore, but Keenan had been so much crueler. Damn it!

Obviously, Eric felt Keenan’s anger, because he turned to glance at him again. “Keenan, please, why must we fight? Gabriel is my friend. Why can’t you understand that?”

Keenan didn’t respond. The sorrow in Eric’s green eyes almost made him reconsider. How could he doubt that honest emerald gaze? But then a flash of Eric’s body entwined with Gabriel’s passed through his mind, effectively squashing those thoughts. No. He couldn’t fix their mind link. If he did and he discovered Eric did indeed love Gabriel, Keenan didn’t know what he’d do.

“Perhaps it is better that I leave,” Gabriel said with a sigh.

“What?” Eric gasped, giving him a horrified look. “You can’t leave! Where will you go? And in your state? No! Absolutely not!”

Keenan barely contained his fury at Eric’s reaction. He took a deep breath, counting to ten in his head. He needed to keep a clear head. He’d already done enough damage to his relationship with Eric. Insisting on Gabriel’s departure would just make things worse.

“Eric, I’m not talking about running away here,” Gabriel said. “I was thinking of moving from the Tower, maybe to the club, or someplace else, with Cassandra. I don’t know. Right, Keenan? I could do that, right?”

Keenan couldn’t agree more. He wanted Gabriel out of his life, but until the Ancients came, he needed to protect the little Eric-thief.

With the new information they'd received, though, they had to come up with a good solution before he could get rid of the little whore.

Before Keenan could reply, Gabriel took Eric's hand and smiled comfortingly. "It's all right, Eric. It's not like I'm going to move out right now."

Keenan nodded, telling himself to focus on the reason for which he'd looked for Gabriel in the first place. "Besides, there are more urgent issues we need to discuss."

Eric gave Keenan an earnest look. "Did you—"

"Shush, Eric," Keenan said sternly. "Let me talk to Gabriel."

Keenan gestured Gabriel to sit again and joined them, choosing a place on the leather armchair in front of the couch. He shut down his feelings and fury, hiding them behind a cool, unreadable mask. "First, I want to say that this discussion has no connection whatsoever with my personal feelings regarding you and Eric. That is an issue for another day."

Eric's eyes widened at the professional tone, but Keenan didn't pay that any heed. "You've been here a week now, Gabriel," he continued, "and you have yet to tell us how and why you got here. Upon Eric and Cassandra's request, I gave you some time to adjust, but I'm afraid I don't have the liberty to do that any longer."

"Why, Keenan? What's happened?" Eric asked.

Keenan gave Eric a look, and his lover promptly shut his mouth. Gabriel worried his lip and looked down. "I...You're right, of course. I apologize for taking so long."

He swallowed, obviously trying to calm down. Keenan allowed Gabriel a few moments. Gabriel's ability with the human language was already poor, and nervousness made it worse. As he waited, the rest of the Council slipped into the room silently. When Gabriel caught sight of their presence, he paled.

Keenan went into professional mode. He stopped being the scorned lover and focused on his duty. The other occupants of the room decided against taking such an approach. Cassandra moved by

Gabriel's side, squeezing his shoulder. At the same time, Eric took his hand and held it. Gabriel smiled, looking thankful for the silent support of his friends.

"It's not much to hear, really," he began. "I grew up in a convent. My father was the king of Alaria, and he wanted me away from the court and his other two sons. I didn't have a happy childhood, but I thought that after I came of age I would be free of it. Then I found out that my father had arranged my marriage with Lothar, the superintendent at the monastery. I thought everything was lost." Gabriel paused, as if considering something, and Keenan knew there was more to the story than just that. He didn't ask, suspecting that, in the end, it held no importance to the current situation.

"Then I met Luce," Gabriel finished simply.

"Your mate?" Cassandra inquired.

"Yes." Gabriel looked down and sniffed discreetly, hiding his eyes from sight. "He came on official business to my father's court. We fell in love."

Gabriel wiped his cheeks, and Keenan couldn't help but feel just a little guilty for the whole thing. As much as he hated Gabriel's presence, he couldn't be happy for the Kaldorian's misery.

Gabriel took a deep breath and continued to speak. "He, his brother Cade, his friend Zeli, and my own brothers helped me out of the arranged mating. And we left. We went to Xeetha, where Luce lived. His parents didn't agree with us mating in the beginning, but then they got used to the idea. But then..."

Gabriel's voice turned almost fierce. "Then they found out I was half human," he practically spat. "They hated humans, so they imprisoned Luce, Cade, and my brothers, and threw me out here on Earth. I think they would have killed me if not for the baby."

A pained sound echoed in the room. Its source wasn't Gabriel, but Eric. Eric's eyes rolled in his head, and his body started seizing violently. Gabriel jumped to his feet, but Keenan snarled at him, "Stay away, you. Stay away or else."

Clearly enough, Gabriel's memories must have caused some sort of negative reaction in Eric's mind. Keenan felt torn between agony and terror at the sight of his lover in such a state. He couldn't even summon enough strength to be angry with Gabriel. His world centered on Eric and on the notion that Eric might die.

Gabriel took a step back, and Keenan hugged his lover to his chest and held him tightly. "Shh, pet, shh. It's fine. You're fine, I'm here."

But it wasn't fine. Eric's fit got worse by the second, his body shaking so furiously that Keenan had trouble restraining him. His fangs somehow emerged, and his lips became crimson red with his own blood. He seemed to be struggling, stuck in some sort of nightmare he could not escape, bound by ties that he could not break.

"Let's take him to get some rest, Keenan," Cassandra said softly.

Keenan nodded. "We'll finish this later." He took his lover's shaking body in his arms, carrying him out of the room. Cassandra followed behind him, concern radiating off her in waves.

"What's going on?" she asked, sounding panicked and very young.

As he hastened toward their bedroom, Keenan fought to calm down his lover, no longer caring about whatever feelings Eric had for Gabriel. He whispered words of love in Eric's ear but got no response. Desperate, he sat them both down on the bed, hugging Eric tightly to his chest. He allowed the walls he'd erected to fall and was immediately assaulted by a shower of erratic emotions, fear, horror, pain. Flashes of images clashed in his mind's eye, Gabriel's past attacking them with the force of a hurricane. Blood, torture, fire, hatred, all combined in confusing memories of strangers hurting them, wielding whips, or forcing them into unspeakable acts. Pain, weakness, death, and so much guilt. Gabriel's memories, all invading Eric's mind and, through him, Keenan's as well. He could see it now. Gabriel's stay at the convent had been more than unpleasant. He'd suffered through rape and torture and nearly killed himself trying to get out of that life.

Keenan tried to pull Eric away, pushing the darkness back with images from their own past, flashbacks of their love. *“Pet, calm down. I’m here. Come back to me. Remember me. See just me.”*

Slowly, Eric responded, clinging to Keenan’s mind, his pain starting to fade into the background. He cracked his eyes open and opened his mouth to speak. His lips were bloody and torn, and he seemed to have trouble focusing on the words. His hand reached out to cup Keenan’s cheek but went limp before he could make contact. “Keenan, I...”

Before he could finish his phrase, his eyes unfocused, and he lost consciousness. Keenan kissed Eric’s forehead, heart aching for his lover, but relieved that he’d managed to snap Eric out of the fit. He hoped Eric would be strong enough to fight the memories he’d unwillingly stolen from Gabriel. He slipped into Eric’s mind, doing his best to soothe the hurt and induce a healing sleep. He wasn’t a healer, but at least he could make Eric rest for a while.

When he finished, he opened his eyes and reluctantly broke away from Eric. Cassandra waited at the door, obviously frightened for her fledgling.

“He’s fallen asleep, for now.”

Cassandra walked into the room and joined them by the bed. “What happened, Keenan?”

“When he touched Gabriel, he saw the Kaldorian’s memories. I knew Gabriel was hiding something, and Eric caught on to it.”

“You know what Eric saw,” Cassandra said. It wasn’t a question, but a statement of fact.

“I do. It makes no difference. I care little about Gabriel’s past, but I know that we have to keep Eric from touching him.”

Cassandra nodded. “Go ahead and finish the talk with them. I’ll watch over Eric for a while and notify you.”

Keenan glared at her. He didn’t care about conferring with the Council on the issue of Gabriel’s past. He wanted to be with Eric, to hold him tightly until those bad images faded from his mind.

Still, he knew Cassandra had a point. Eric would be sleeping for a while now, and as much as he hated it, he had responsibilities he couldn't neglect. The sooner he dealt with this, the faster he could get back at his lover's side.

"It will be done. Do not move from his side, Cassandra, until I am here, and do not allow any harm to come to him, or else."

Cassandra looked taken aback, so much so that she actually bowed her head in submissiveness. It wasn't often that Keenan acted his age. Perhaps, he thought, he should have done it more, instead of letting everyone lead their own lives so arrogantly. Had he been stronger and certain of his actions, he could have kept Eric from getting hurt.

Then again, the last time Eric had been at the receiving end of Keenan's forcefulness, things hadn't gone so well. Keenan didn't want to go back to that. He didn't even want to think about what he'd nearly done just a few days ago. He'd find another way to protect Eric. Keeping Eric in a cage was not a solution. Transforming Eric into his pet in the truest sense of the word, not merely as an endearment, would break everything they'd worked so hard to build. They'd fallen in love independently of all manipulation and coercion. From the very beginning, Keenan hadn't been able to keep Eric as a toy or a prisoner. To change that now would be a perversion of their relationship.

Shaking his head, Keenan left Eric on the bed and made his way out of the room and into the hallway. He walked back to the study, where everyone waited in tense silence.

As he entered the room, Gabriel pounced on him, recklessly clinging to his arm. "Is Eric all right? What happened?"

Keenan snatched his arm from Gabriel's grip. "What happened is that he saw your memories. He has certain abilities, as I'm sure you know, and his psychic powers made it possible for him to see your mind when he touched you."



Gabriel paled visibly, stuttering as he replied. “H—He never reacted like that when he touched me before.”

“It must have depended on your mood at the time and on what you were thinking. After all, on this particular occasion, your memories weren’t exactly nice.”

Objectively, Keenan realized it wasn’t Gabriel’s fault for what he’d been through. But beyond his reasoning, the knowledge of his pet’s pain made him ache. Even if Keenan acknowledged Gabriel’s traumatic past, he could not help but resent Gabriel for transferring those memories to Eric. The primal part of him returned, demanding vengeance. Therefore, the words came out snappish, nearly insulting. Gabriel’s eyes widened, and he took a step back, as if he’d been slapped.

Keenan regretted them even as spoke. Gabriel couldn’t have known what would happen, and Keenan had no right to shove it in his face. How could Eric love a creature like Keenan?

The mood turned even more awkward as they just stood there, staring at each other. Surprisingly, it was Elis who broke the silence. “I know that it may seem insensitive of me, but we need to know more than that about your past.”

Given what had just happened with Eric, Keenan found himself somewhat frustrated by the nonchalance of the other man. Elis didn’t seem to care much about Keenan, about Eric, or anyone else for that matter. Maybe he cared about Jacob. They’d seemed at odds lately, but judging by their late arrival, they must have solved their problems. Keenan would have liked a bit more consideration, if not for Gabriel’s sake, for Eric’s. After all, Keenan had helped the panther out when Jacob had been injured.

But Elis was right about one thing, the fact that Gabriel still had some explaining to do. Thankfully, Gabriel didn’t require any further persuasion.

“What exactly do you need to know?” he asked.

“Appearance, a full name perhaps,” Giovanni replied. “Anything you can think of about them.”

Gabriel stared, wide-eyed, at the demon. “Why do you need to know that? Why do you care?” he asked almost hysterically.

“Calm down, Gabriel, please!” Keenan said sternly. “Eric is going to be fine. I will take care of it.”

“But didn’t you see him? He looked like he was going to die! Oh, light above, I’ve killed my friend!”

Keenan growled in annoyance, Gabriel’s words ripping inside him to expose his worst fears. “He’ll be fine,” Giovanni soothed. “Besides, he’s done this before.”

“It wasn’t quite this bad before,” Lucca murmured, almost inaudibly. Keenan still heard him, and he felt increasing dread and depression settling over the room.

“We need to know because we think that he may come get you,” Elis insisted. “Since we don’t know anything about him, there’s no way we can identify him if he does.”

“Oh, he’ll come,” Gabriel replied. “I’m sure of it. I’ve seen it.”

Keenan blinked in surprise, already anticipating an even more absurd and frustrating development. For once, Jacob seemed to agree with Keenan. The werewolf arched a brow at Gabriel. “Say again?” he asked, his voice dripping sarcasm. “Seen it?”

Gabriel nodded. “I have visions. I see the future,” he said simply.

“You see the future?” Elis snorted. “Then how come you couldn’t prevent being attacked?”

“It doesn’t work like that. I’m still very young. The visions are sometimes confusing. They come and go, and I have no real control over them. I’ve gotten better at it lately, but it’s still pretty much the same.” Gabriel sighed and rubbed his eyes. He seemed to have trouble explaining things, the words coming out stilted and barely understandable. “You’re right, though. I did see myself coming here on Earth. I just didn’t want to acknowledge it.”

“And you’re telling us about this now?” Jacob snapped at the Kaldorian.

“Why would I have told you before?” Gabriel said, glaring. “With the exception of Cassandra and Eric, I know nothing about you people!”

“If not for us, you’d probably be dead now!” the werewolf shot back.

Gabriel’s anger seemed to die down at that. “I know,” he replied, deflating. “I’m thankful for it. I apologize. I just...” Shaking his head, he took a deep breath and started to speak once more. “My mate’s name is Lucien, second son of King Seyran and Lyan of Xeetha. He’s blond and has blue eyes and white wings. His older brother Cade is also blond and has violet eyes. My brothers are called Kalin and Orin, and they are sons of King Karon and Queen Leyra of Alaria. Cade and Kalin are mated, and Orin is mated with Zeli, Luce, and Cade’s best friend.”

Elis gave him a blank look, obviously having difficulty in registering the info dump. Keenan made a mental note of the names and descriptions, an easier feat for him due to the images he’d caught from the memories in Eric’s mind. “It’s okay, for now. Now we have something to tell you.”

Gabriel looked taken aback and a little frightened. “Tell me? Tell me what?”

“Gabriel, we found your mother.”

\* \* \* \*

Keenan walked back into his bedroom, tired and worried. The conversation had taken longer than expected—well, not the conversation per se, but its aftermath. After Gabriel had been told about his mother, he’d suffered from such a shock that he’d needed medical treatment. Keenan surmised the events of the day had been too much for the Kaldorian to bear. The Tower held the necessary

supplies, but Keenan had been forced to stay with the members of the Councils and organize the entire operation. After all, it was his Tower and his staff.

The only thing that kept him going was the knowledge that Cassandra would have notified him if Eric went into one of his fits again. He decided to keep his mental barriers up, knowing that when Eric woke, he would have too many thoughts in his head to deal with Keenan's, too. Now, a few hours later, after Gabriel had been sedated and all the members of the Council had left, he could finally be by Eric's side.

Just like when he'd left, Cassandra sat by the bed, watching over Eric. She spoke softly, caressing Eric's hand, and Keenan realized Eric must have woken up. He frowned when he realized that the palm Cassandra held was enveloped in a black leather glove.

The sight of Eric gave him pause. Once, Eric had been full of energy, always bouncing around the Tower, teasing guards, hunting for Keenan and seducing him out of business dealings. Once, Keenan had been able to feel his lover's happiness, see it in everything Eric did or said. That glow was gone now, and Eric just lay there, subdued.

Cassandra looked up toward Keenan and gestured him forward. "He's still a bit out of it," she murmured as he approached. "He's having trouble sorting the memories."

Keenan nodded glumly. "The gloves?"

"To keep him from touching others until he feels better," Cassandra confirmed.

She turned to Eric once more and spoke to him in a kind voice. "Hey, Eric. Look who's here."

Eric looked around with dazed eyes. "What? Who? Luce? No, that's not right. Keenan?"

Eric seemed to be struggling between identities, between Gabriel's desires and his own, and Keenan wanted to scream. It hurt so much to acknowledge what they'd had and lost, all because of this stranger, this intruder. This was Earth, not Kaldor, and Eric belonged

to Keenan, not Gabriel. Or did he really? At this point, maybe Keenan had lost Eric altogether. After all, he'd been so busy being jealous that he'd shoved Eric into Gabriel's arms. Moreover, he'd abandoned his emotionally fragile lover. With Eric's history of mental illness, Keenan's anger and abuse during the past few days, and the weight of Gabriel's memories, the situation seemed glum. Would Eric even manage to stay sane?

The thought turned Keenan's blood to ice and his anger into panic. He took a step forward toward Eric, mentally wincing when Eric jumped, startled by his approach. "Keenan?"

Keenan knelt by Eric's side and took his lover's gloved hand. The leather felt cool and uncomfortable, and Keenan resented Gabriel for forcing Eric to wear the gloves. Then again, something like this would have happened eventually, and it was Keenan's own fault that he hadn't taken care of Eric like he'd promised.

Grasping Eric's palm in his own, Keenan kissed each individual finger then lingered slightly over his wrist. He'd not fed from Eric in what seemed like ages. He knew Cassandra was force-feeding his lover, but Keenan resorted to bagged blood. He could have chosen out of hundreds of willing humans, but it felt like he'd be betraying his bond with Eric if he went out hunting alone.

Eric seemed to gain a bit more focus while they stood there in silence. His eyes lost the glazed look, and he managed to smile at Keenan. "Keenan, you came."

"Of course I did, pet," Keenan replied, his heart breaking.

Eric retreated his hand from Keenan's grasp, removed his gloves, and undid his shirt. He beamed at Keenan, eyes so full of love, Keenan was struck speechless. He only managed to react when Eric tilted his neck, offering himself to Keenan. "Go ahead. You haven't been taking care of yourself lately."

Keenan's eyes widened. How could Eric think Keenan would use him like that? Then again, if he judged his own behavior, in all honesty, he couldn't blame Eric for thinking just that. He'd created

this abyss between them, an abyss that couldn't be mended with just an "I'm sorry." Gabriel had been right. Keenan had hurt his lover terribly. How had he been so blind?

"That's all right, pet. Thank you, but we'll see to that later. Actually, I had something different in mind."

Eric's face fell, and it occurred to Keenan that he'd taken his refusal for blood sharing as rejection. He gripped his lover's chin and forced their eyes to meet, then dropped his shield. Eric gasped but didn't move away, and they remained like that, staring at each other, while Keenan allowed Eric to see into his heart.

"Would you like to go away for a few days with me?" he said. "A small getaway, to the country, see some mountains, or the sea if you'd like. You can choose the destination. Just say the word and it's done. What do you say?"

A short pause followed, and then Eric burst into tears. "Keenan, I missed you so much. Don't ever leave me again."

"I won't, pet. I won't."

## Chapter Six

Deciding on a destination proved to be more difficult than expected. They wanted to stay reasonably close to New York, just in case something happened. They needed a few days alone, but at the same time, Keenan had responsibilities he couldn't neglect. If the Ancients were found—something he suspected would happen sooner rather than later—he needed to be around. Even if Eric didn't actually say so, Keenan also knew his lover worried about his friend.

God, he couldn't wait for Gabriel's husband to show up and take him off their hands. Even if Eric cared about Gabriel like a brother, it still irked Keenan to have to share his lover. Particularly now, when Eric suffered from nightmares and bouts of depression. The jealousy aside, Keenan couldn't help but resent Gabriel for the entire thing. Eric already had too much on his plate to deal with Gabriel's baggage, too.

But Keenan's priorities suffered a dramatic shift with the scare he'd been through, and Gabriel would have to stay behind for a change. In the end, his responsibilities as a Council member could wait. Everything could wait. No one was more important than Eric.

There were many locations a vampire could choose for a holiday, even in the case of a young one like Eric. Keenan wanted to show his pet the world, to give him anything and everything. He hadn't done such a good job so far. Still, Eric didn't need the hustle and bustle of Las Vegas or the lavish partying of Paris. He needed peace and quiet to sort his thoughts.

The plane took them to Vancouver and from there to Whitehorse, Yukon. They would be staying at the best hotel in the city and

spending some days at a relaxing hot springs in the area. Keenan intended to take Eric dog mushing, but more importantly, he wanted to show him the beauty of the night lights. He just knew his lover would be able to find peace in the play of colors of the aurora borealis. This small break from New York and the people in the Tower would hopefully help them fix the problems in their relationship and heal Eric's wounded mind.

Two days into their voyage, Keenan and Eric rented a snowmobile, left the city, and lost themselves in the forest, alone, with just nature to guide them and watch them. Keenan had visited the area many times before, but it was a first for Eric. Keenan took them to the most beautiful spots he knew, wanting to give Eric an unforgettable experience. For a while, Eric just took in the sights in silence, holding on to Keenan as the snowmobile swallowed miles and miles of white.

Finally, Keenan stopped the vehicle and got off. Eric followed, and his eyes shone with excitement and wonder. Up above them, the aurora borealis sent splays of color over the sky, creating a surreal picture over the landscape.

The mountains loomed ahead, humbling and calming. The snow glittered in the night light, crunching under their feet in the cold. Eric took a breath of chilly air and turned to smile at Keenan. "It's beautiful here, Keenan. Thank you for bringing me along."

Keenan cupped Eric's cheek, his heart overwhelmed with conflicting emotions. "I didn't bring you along, pet. We came here together, as a couple. I've acted like such an asshole lately, and I pushed you away. I want you back."

Eric's eyes filled with tears. "Really?" he murmured. "I just...I love you so much it hurts."

Keenan hastily wiped Eric's tears, suspecting that, with the cold, they could even freeze on Eric's cheeks. "I know, pet. I know. I love you, too."



He pressed his lips to Eric's in a ghost of a kiss, careful not to startle his lover. Eric sighed and opened to him, yielding to his exploration. Their tongues dueled leisurely, and Keenan noted with glee that the tinge of panic that polluted Eric's sweet taste in the past few days was starting to fade.

They sat together in the quiet of the Yukon, leaning against the snowmobile and watching the night sky. From time to time, they would steal kisses from each other. Even with the cold, Keenan thought this was the most beautiful night of his life.

They only left the forest behind when the night light started to disappear, announcing the imminent arrival of the morning sun. Even its rays submitted to the long and chilly Yukon winter, and they didn't have much trouble during their trip. Eric hid his face in Keenan's back as they drove to the city, humming in contentment.

The hotel room waited for them with a large, luxurious four-poster bed and a cozy fire. Keenan placed Eric on the mattress, petting his lover's cheek. Eric sighed contentedly and nuzzled into the caress. "Come to bed, Keenan."

"In a minute," Keenan replied.

He walked into the bathroom and to the lavish tub. In a few seconds, he had the water running, preparing a hot bath for them. The chill from outside still permeated his bones, and a hot soak together would be just the thing.

As the tub filled, Keenan walked back to the bedroom. He froze in the doorway at the sight Eric presented. His lover had taken advantage of Keenan's absence to get naked. He lay spread on the bed like an offering to a pagan god. Keenan unconsciously licked his lips. "You do know how to make a vampire feel wanted, pet."

Eric smiled wickedly. "Well, I have to do something to get you to come to me."

Keenan crossed his arms across his chest. "Oh? You think I can't resist you?"

Eric didn't reply, not in words, at least. He leaned against the pillows and closed his eyes. The beautiful hand that could create wonders with a painter's brush snaked down Eric's body, reaching the hard shaft between Eric's legs.

Keenan watched in fascination as his lover masturbated. Eric swept his thumb over the head of his dick, gathering the pre-cum already starting to form, and Keenan's mouth watered to taste it. "You're right," he said. "I can't resist."

He stalked to the bed, grinning when Eric's gaze followed him. The hand on Eric's dick increased its strokes. "Come here, pet." Keenan growled playfully. He stopped Eric's seductive activities and grabbed his lover's body off the bed, draping Eric over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

Eric let out an outraged gasp. "What are you doing?"

Keenan slapped Eric's naked ass. "Be still. You'll see."

He could feel Eric's desire to protest, but he didn't allow Eric to fight him. He left the bedroom and returned to the bathroom, now pleasantly filled with steam.

Smirking to himself, he unceremoniously dumped Eric in the tub. Eric let out a yelp as his body made contact with the hot water. "Keenan, what the hell?"

Keenan just smiled. He reached into the water and tested it with his finger. "Does it feel too hot, pet?" he purred.

Eric glared and huffed at him, muttering soft curses under his breath. The hot water mellowed his temper, and his angry, green eyes closed as Eric melted into the tub. Keenan chuckled. "Ah, ah, ah. Don't fall asleep on me."

Eric cracked his eyes open, watching him in silence. Keenan lovingly brushed a wet lock from Eric's face and pressed a kiss to his lover's lips. Eric's hot arms left the water to engulf him in an embrace.

Keenan didn't allow Eric to pull him into the water. "I'm still dressed, pet."

“What are you waiting for, then?” Eric pouted. “By the time you decide to join me, the water will be cold.”

Keenan smiled at his lover’s words. “How can I resist such an invitation?”

Slowly, he started taking off his clothes. His boots and socks came off first, then his sweater. He undid the zipper of his jeans and pushed them off in leisurely motions. He wasn’t in a hurry. He put on a display for Eric, always aware of his lover’s gaze sweeping over his body. The sheer eroticism of stripping for Eric’s pleasure made Keenan’s dick throb.

“Keenan,” Eric began in a choked voice.

Keenan understood Eric’s plea. He discarded the underwear and joined Eric in the tub. As he lowered his body next to his lover’s, the hot water surrounded him. Keenan allowed it to flow over him, to push away everything except the presence by his side.

Eric leaned against Keenan’s chest and wrapped his legs around Keenan’s waist. Keenan held his lover tightly, groaning when Eric lifted himself up to climb on top of him. As they shifted positions, Keenan’s dick nudged at Eric’s hole. “Go on, Keenan,” Eric said. “Do it. Fuck me.”

Keenan knew he shouldn’t even consider taking Eric without appropriate preparation. After all, he’d just been reminded how precious, and yet, how fragile love could be. His connection with Eric was one of the strongest bonds that could ever exist, and still they’d been so close to losing it. And yet, that very same bond told him it was okay. They both needed to let go, to drown their tension and sorrows in the water and come out cleansed.

Without a word, Keenan pushed up, and Eric’s answering motions had their bodies come together in mere instants. The feel of Eric’s tight channel around him almost drove Keenan mad. He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to go slowly so as not to hurt his lover. He could feel the slight pain in Eric, the burn of being invaded without

preparation. Eric desired it, but Keenan would have to be careful to give him not only what he wanted, but what he needed as well.

As Eric's body relaxed, Keenan pushed deeper inside his lover in a series of slow, shallow thrusts. Eric responded to his motions, keeping their lovemaking gentle. Keenan reveled in the simple fact of being united in the most intimate way two men could.

Eric's small gasps of pleasure encouraged Keenan, and he found he could no longer control himself. His hands went to Eric's hips, and he guided Eric's body up and down his dick with a strength born of passion and desperation. Eric's gentle movements turned savage. He rode Keenan, head thrown back, skin shining in the pale light. The water sloshed around them, moving, crashing to the floor. The sound almost reminded him of waves clashing against rocks, strong, raw, and primal. It was probably just his own emotions making him feel like this, like he was in the eye of a hurricane that threatened to consume him with every passing second.

All too soon, Keenan felt his orgasm approach. He didn't want to come before Eric, but his lover didn't give him the option. Impaling himself on Keenan's dick, Eric buried his fangs in Keenan's neck. Keenan's vision went white, but he did have the presence of mind to scramble for Eric's hand in the water. He gripped it hard, brought Eric's wrist to his mouth, and sunk his own fangs in the soft flesh.

Eric cried out against Keenan's neck. His ass tightened around Keenan's dick, drawing every bit of pleasure from Keenan's body. Keenan came, all the while feeling Eric's climax echo through him as well. It was so powerful, so mind-numbing, that it took every ounce of strength he had left to support them both in the tub and not fall under water.

They lay there, breathing hard, not speaking, until the temperature in the bath started to fall. Keenan got up, took Eric in his arms, and stepped out of the tub. Eric gave him a sleepy smile as Keenan towed them both dry. That gorgeous expression stayed in place even as Keenan carried Eric back to the bedroom, placed him down, and

tucked him in. Eric looked so beautiful and innocent, Keenan couldn't help but steal another kiss from his lover's lips.

With a sigh, he returned to the bathroom and pulled the plug to empty the tub. Water still covered the floor, but the service would clean it tomorrow. He just wanted to stay with Eric tonight. It was almost as if just being by Eric's side made him real, and he lost a bit of himself every second he spent away from his lover.

Shaking his head at his own musings, Keenan went back to the bedroom and to his lover's warm body. That night, Eric didn't have any nightmares, and Keenan knew without a doubt that he had his lover back. As their bodies came together once more, he vowed to never let anything like this happen again and never let jealousy push him away from Eric.

## Chapter Seven

Eric looked at his watch and tapped his foot impatiently against the tarmac. *“How much longer until you get here?”* he asked Keenan through their connection.

*“A few minutes, pet,”* Keenan replied. *“You go on ahead to Pat’s. She likes you better anyway, and I’ll be right behind.”*

After their return from the Yukon, Eric had been met with a very distraught Gabriel. Shortly after Eric’s little episode, Keenan had told Gabriel they’d located his mother. In Eric’s absence, Gabriel apparently worried himself to death over both Eric’s state of health and this newly acquired information, not to mention his concerns from before.

Eric couldn’t begrudge Keenan’s decision of taking him away from New York, though. He’d needed it after his unpleasant clash with Gabriel’s memories. It had hurt so much that Eric nearly lost himself, no longer able to discern his own demons from Gabriel’s. But Keenan saved him. Keenan once again brought him back from the darkness and gave him the most beautiful gift Eric had ever received. Eric’s fingers now itched to paint again, to put down all the beauty of nature and of his man. Unfortunately, that would have to wait until Gabriel also found his way.

Who could have guessed that Gabriel’s past hid so much darkness and pain? Now more than ever, Eric wanted to help his friend. The first step was introducing Gabriel to Patrice Nelson. The young aunt of Eric’s former teacher, Matthew, Patrice had become, in a very short period of time, a dear friend for Eric. Having felt her pain on more than one occasion, he’d been pleased when he’d realized they’d

accidentally found her son. He now wondered, though, how she would react upon meeting Gabriel for the first time. God, he wished Keenan was there, at least for emotional support.

Gabriel swallowed nervously and stole another furtive glance at the sign of the shop. "Are you sure about this? What if she doesn't like me?"

Eric smiled gently and patted the Kaldorian's hand with his own gloved palm. It pained him that he'd been forced to wear gloves and long sleeves in Gabriel's presence so that their skin would not make contact. He knew Gabriel suffered because of it as well, so Eric always laughed and tried to shrug it off. Sometimes, he joked about Rogue and the X-Men, much to Gabriel's confusion. He couldn't come up with anything comical to say now, but he did his best to hide his misgivings and calm Gabriel down. "Don't worry, Gabriel," he said. "Patrice is a wonderful woman. And besides, what's not to like?"

As he spoke, Eric knew things weren't exactly like he presented them. Even if Patrice received Gabriel with open arms, some issues still existed that could destroy the whole thing. Eric didn't say it, but they all knew that Gabriel's son was a problem. There was a high possibility that his mother would be uncomfortable with the idea of a pregnant male. Still, Patrice was a good, kind woman, and she'd missed her son enormously. Perhaps this would work after all.

"I know you're frightened, Gabriel, but it's best like this. She'll love you no matter what, you'll see."

Gabriel looked skeptical, so Eric decided not to give his friend time to change his mind. With a smile he didn't feel, Eric started to pull Gabriel inside. "Come on. She's inside."

Patrice appeared from the back, and Gabriel hesitated, remaining behind Eric. Even without skin-to-skin contact, Eric could feel the fear and nervousness flowing off his friend in waves. He hoped Patrice would like her son because he didn't think Gabriel would be able to bear it if she didn't.

“Oh, Eric, hi!” Patrice greeted cheerfully. “So nice to see you. Would you like some tea?”

Eric shook his head. He loved Patrice’s eccentric teas, but he couldn’t think about that now. “Hi, Pat. No, not today. We’re just visiting.”

“Visiting? I see. And who did you bring with you?”

Eric broke out of Gabriel’s hold and pulled Gabriel to stand in front of him. He watched as twin sets of black eyes met, suppressing his wince when Gabriel clutched his gloved hand even tighter. “Hi,” Gabriel croaked out. “I’m Gabriel.”

Patrice said nothing, her smile frozen on her face and twisting into an expression of shock. “Eric? W-What’s going on?”

Mother and son stared at each other for the longest time, until the awkward silence became too much to withstand. Eric found the courage to reply to Patrice’s question, although he knew he could have done so in a slightly more tactful manner. “This is Gabriel, your son.”

Gabriel’s palm trembled in Eric’s. The young Kaldorian looked down, as if unable to meet his mother’s gaze any longer. “My son? My son,” Patrice murmured.

Eric almost thought the whole thing had been a terrible idea, and then Patrice shot forward with surprising speed. Tears sprouted in Eric’s eyes as she wrapped her arms around Gabriel tightly. “Oh, God, my son,” she repeated. “My little Gabriel.”

At first, Gabriel just stood there, seemingly astounded by the sudden display of affection. But that changed in an instant, and with a sob of his own, he hugged his mother back.

Patrice wiped her eyes and let out a little laugh. “Look at that, you’re all covered in lipstick.” There was a little pause, and their eyes met again. This time, Gabriel smiled, no longer uncertain. When Gabriel’s voice came out shaky, Eric knew it wasn’t because of fear or nervousness, but because of an overwhelming feeling of relief and warmth.



“That’s all right, Mother,” he answered. “Everything’s all right.”

All the excitement of the day must have gotten to Gabriel, and the young Kaldorian swayed, nearly falling over. Eric caught him just in time, wincing as a wave of dizziness swept over him as well. With Gabriel being so emotional, he didn’t know how he’d be able to maintain his normal behavior toward his friend. Being close to Gabriel implied absorbing the young Kaldorian’s emotions, as well as feeling the physical effects of Gabriel’s pregnancy. Even being in Gabriel’s proximity was enough, but a direct touch made it even more intense.

Thankfully, Patrice joined them. “Gabriel? Gabriel? What’s wrong?” she asked, sounding alarmed.

“It’s okay, Pat.” Eric tried to soothe her. “He’s fine. It’s just nerves.”

Eric wondered if she could see through his lie. In truth, the symptoms of Gabriel’s pregnancy seemed to be getting stronger lately, and none of them knew how to deal with it. Eric did his best to support his friend, but he couldn’t help but remember that Gabriel had been through a lot before he’d been found by them. He hoped nothing had gone wrong and Gabriel’s son was all right in spite of everything that had happened.

Patrice was not convinced by Eric’s reply. “Don’t lie to me! Come on, come sit, both of you.”

Still supporting Gabriel, Eric found himself being ushered through a back door and into a smaller room, one that seemed to be an office of sorts. Patrice indicated the little couch, and Eric gladly obeyed, pulling Gabriel along as he went. As he sat down on the couch, he closed his eyes for a bit, allowing the flowery scent that surrounded him to comfort his senses. He heard Patrice move around in the room, and then the distinguishing aroma of an herbal brew started to permeate the air. One of Pat’s teas. It would perhaps help calm Gabriel down.

Unsurprisingly, Pat soon joined them, carrying a mug of steaming liquid. “Here, honey,” she said to Gabriel. “Drink this. It should make you feel better.”

Gabriel nodded, taking the cup from his mother. “Thank you.”

“No problem, sweetheart. Just stay here for a minute. I need to talk to your friend.”

Eric didn’t miss the strain that appeared in Pat’s voice. He schooled his expression into neutrality, wondering what she thought about the whole thing. She had seemingly accepted Gabriel, yes, but she still didn’t know anything about the rest of the confusing Kaldorian story, Gabriel’s mate and his son.

She gestured him out of the room and closed the door with a soft click. Eric suspected the illusion of privacy wouldn’t matter much. Gabriel wasn’t human. Taking into account the supernatural speed he’d once used to escape the group of Council members, he probably heard better than the average individual, as well. Besides, Eric was pretty sure most paranormals, including Sidhe, had enhanced senses. It made sense that Gabriel would’ve inherited this from his Alarian father.

Patrice didn’t know this, of course, and Eric didn’t bother to try to explain. Instead, he focused on finding an answer for her question. “What’s going on?” she said in a whisper. “Where has Gabriel been all these years? I hired detectives, looked for Aaron all over the place, but he was nowhere to be found. And how do you even know he is my son? I mean, God knows I practically feel him as mine, but still...”

“We did a DNA test. He’s your son, no doubt about it,” Eric said.

Behind him, he felt Keenan approach, the other man’s presence sending goose bumps of pleasure down his spine. *Focus on Patrice and Gabriel, Eric! You’ll have time to be aroused later.*

Taking a deep breath, Eric did his best to pay attention to Pat’s words. “DNA test?” she repeated, shocked. “How? And without my approval? Eric, what is going on?”

“All your questions will be answered,” Keenan said sternly from behind them. “Just calm down.”

Looking in Patrice’s eyes and taking in her emotions, Eric realized in that moment, there was no point in keeping Gabriel out of the conversation. Even if Patrice rejected his friend, Gabriel would know it and hear it anyway. At least Eric could be by Gabriel’s side and support him when Pat communicated her decision.

“Gabriel has the right to hear this,” he said. Patrice looked torn, but Keenan nodded. Not allowing Pat to back down, Eric pushed her gently in the direction of the office. He opened the door and, followed by Keenan, stepped into the room.

Gabriel waited on the small couch, dark eyes wide. His tight smile confirmed Eric’s first guess. Gabriel had indeed overheard them speaking.

Patrice joined Gabriel on the couch and took her son’s hand. “Are you feeling any better, Gabriel?”

“Yes. I heard you wanted to know what was going on, where I’ve been all these years.”

Patrice seemed to be surprised at Gabriel’s reply. “Yes. You have to understand, I’ve looked for you for so long. I’m almost afraid to believe it’s you.”

Gabriel sighed and looked down. Eric’s heart hurt for his friend. He’d seen Gabriel’s past, and he knew what Gabriel had been through. His friend deserved a family, not to be rejected because of something he couldn’t help. Yes, Gabriel’s story would be unbelievable, almost cruel for Patrice, but it needed to be told regardless.

“He lived in Alaria, his father’s home country,” he said in a voice that turned out cooler than he’d intended.

“Alaria?” Gabriel’s mother repeated, confused. “I’ve never heard of such a country existing.”

Gabriel seemed to draw courage from Eric’s words. “That’s because it isn’t here on Earth. Alaria is on another world.”

Patrice stared at them, frozen in shock. “Is this some sort of joke?” she said, once she recovered enough to speak. “Eric, what in the world are you trying to do here? If Gabriel is indeed my son—”

Gabriel’s eyes filled with tears, and Eric interrupted Patrice before she could do any more damage. “Stop it,” he said. “I think we should discuss this another day. Keenan?”

Keenan just nodded silently. Eric smiled at Gabriel and took his hand. “Come on, Gabriel. We’re going home for now. Let Keenan deal with the rest, okay?”

Gabriel looked at his mother’s still-shocked face, at Keenan’s stern features, and then at Eric. “All right,” he said.

“No, wait,” Patrice pleaded. “Don’t go. We can just forget about it for now. Just stay here for a bit. Oh, God. Please don’t go! I meant no offense.”

Eric appreciated Pat’s words, but at this point he really did think that Keenan would be the best person to deal with this. The entire situation was very tricky, since divulging their existence to the outside world wasn’t something the paranormals liked to do. It would be for the best to give Keenan a little time and space to do his own thing. Eric would have liked to help, but he trusted Keenan could take care of things here.

In the end, Eric had his own task, looking after his friend. He watched as Gabriel leaned over to deposit a kiss on his mother’s cheek. “It’s okay. I’ll be back later.”

“No,” Patrice cried again. “No, don’t go. I can’t lose you again.” She pulled Gabriel tightly against her, refusing to let go. “I won’t let you take him, Eric.”

Eric sighed. They should have done things differently. Perhaps they should have explained things first and then introduced Gabriel to Patrice. But Keenan was reluctant to explain everything to Pat, and they didn’t have time to judge how much she needed to know. Limiting Pat’s knowledge of the paranormals was essential, and

Gabriel's presence ensured that Pat would focus on her son, rather than on asking questions.

Eric wished they had more time, but Gabriel needed his mother. The continuing absence of Gabriel's mate hurt the young Kaldorian, and Eric felt worried for his friend. In a way, it made Eric happy to see her so protective of Gabriel, like a lioness defending her cub.

"It's fine, Mother," Gabriel murmured. "I won't vanish again. I promise."

Tears flowed down Pat's cheeks. "But, Gabriel, you can't just leave, not now, after all this time."

Gabriel winced. "Keenan needs a moment with you, but I suppose we can stay for a while longer."

He gave Eric a pleading look, and Eric sighed. Gabriel ached for a mother, just like Eric once did. Pat's doubts hurt him. Keenan nodded, and Gabriel smiled at his mother. "Let's finish that tea, and then I'll be off."

Pat nodded, most likely realizing her mistake had torn into Gabriel's fragile heart. "Sure. Wait here. I'll bring some cookies."

Eric left the two alone to talk in private. He walked back to the main area of the florist's shop, Keenan by his side. "What do you think?"

"She'll get used to the thought," Keenan replied. "She loves Gabriel. It will be a bit hard to explain the child, but I'll keep everything on a need-to-know basis and blame everything on the Kaldorians."

Eric grinned at his lover. "You're sneaky, you know that?"

Keenan just shrugged. "No need for her to know we're vampires."

They waited together, not even making an effort to eavesdrop on Gabriel and Pat. As the minutes passed, Eric retrieved his sketchpad and asked Keenan to pose for him. Keenan laughed but complied.

By the time Gabriel came out of the back room, Eric was wrapping up his new sketch. "Ready to go?" he asked.

Gabriel nodded. He kissed his mother on the cheek. “Good-bye, Mother.”

“Bye, sweetheart,” Patrice replied, still looking torn. “I’ll see you soon, right?”

With a final silent nod, Gabriel allowed Eric to lead him out of the flower shop. Eric could only hope Keenan would manage what they hadn’t. He wanted to give Gabriel the chance to have a mother, the second chance he’d himself received with Cassandra. Gabriel certainly needed it.

\* \* \* \*

When the door to the florist’s shop closed behind Eric and Gabriel, Keenan turned toward Patrice. “All right. Now you and me are going to talk.”

At first, the human woman seemed surprised by the sudden shift in attitude. Her eyes flashed with anger, and she almost snarled at Keenan.

“Mr. von Klein, I don’t understand. What is so important that you couldn’t say it with Gabriel here? You first say he has the right to hear, and then you send him away. He is my son. You can’t separate me from him. And what’s this business about another world? Do you mean Africa? Was he a slave of some sort?”

Keenan raised a hand to stop the sudden outpour of questions. Disclosing information on the paranormal world to the human woman was forbidden. At the same time, he needed to prepare the field for when the Ancients showed up. If such a thing happened, Gabriel would be the only person to stand between New York and a bloodbath. Things were already in motion, and Keenan needed to get Gabriel on their side. If push came to shove, Keenan could always erase Patrice’s memories and do some damage control. As it was, Gabriel hadn’t received a very warm welcome in New York, not even from Keenan. Jealousy always got the better of him. He would have

to fix things and hope for the best. He'd just keep his own paranormal nature secret, though, and give her a few answers, strictly on Gabriel's past.

"No, Ms. Nelson, not Africa," he replied calmly. "Another world as in a different planet," he said calmly.

Patrice stared at him, a blank expression on her face. Keenan waited for any type of reaction from her. When it came, he could barely contain his shock.

The human woman collapsed on the chair, burying her face in her hands. "It can't be. It can't be right," she whispered brokenly. "All those dreams...God!"

Keenan arched a brow at her, remembering Gabriel's claim of being able to see the future. Apparently, Gabriel inherited more from his mother than Keenan had expected.

Tears flowed on Patrice's face as she rambled on, more to herself than to Keenan. "I saw him, so many times, I saw him. Just a shadow in my dreams. He was in so much pain, and everything looked so different that I just couldn't accept it. But it was real. All of it was real. How? How is it possible? I don't understand."

For once, Keenan didn't know what to say. Providing comfort wasn't his strong point, especially to people that weren't his pet. He'd expected to deal with disbelief, not this painful certainty.

"*Is everything all right, Keenan?*" Eric's voice whispered in Keenan's mind.

"*Not sure,*" Keenan replied. "*She seems to have known something about it already.*"

For a second, Eric didn't reply. "*I hope things turn out for the best,*" he finally said, "*and not because of the Ancients.*"

Keenan almost sighed. He knew his lover didn't agree with using Gabriel as a tool to keep the Ancients' anger at bay. Keenan couldn't help it, though. He wasn't kind and gentle-hearted like Eric. He did what he had to do. His actions would not hurt Gabriel, so in the end, it would be for the best, for everyone.

Shaking himself, Keenan focused on the human woman again. “Gabriel is staying with me at the moment,” he told Patrice, hoping to snap her out of her trance. “There are many issues to explain, but the most important thing is that he needs you.”

Patrice’s eyes snapped back to him, and she seemed to become more focused. “I want to go see him. Please! I reacted badly, and I hurt his feelings. Even if he put on a brave front, I could feel it. Please, let me see him!”

Keenan congratulated himself for choosing the perfect card to play. As long as Patrice focused on Gabriel, she wouldn’t even think about the paranormals here on Earth. Perhaps she would be told later, but only after Keenan made sure she was trustworthy.

“*Pet? Can Gabriel see his mother now?*”

Eric’s reply didn’t delay in coming. “*He seems a bit tired. Maybe in a few hours.*”

“I will send a car for you in a few hours,” Keenan told Patrice. She opened her mouth to protest, but in the end, just nodded. Keenan could tell that the time Gabriel needed to rest would be useful for Patrice herself, so that the woman could get accustomed to the idea of seeing her son again. He wasn’t exactly certain what she had seen that could make her sob like that. If it represented a tenth of what Keenan knew of Gabriel’s past, though, he couldn’t say he found her grief surprising.

Either way, his task was done here. Nodding toward Patrice, he exited the florist’s shop, his mind already on the things to come. He needed to be prepared for when the Ancients showed up. A disaster like in Europe wasn’t acceptable. Keenan had fucked many things up in the past few months, but this time, he would do his duty to his world. New York would stay safe, no matter what.



## **Chapter Eight**

Keenan looked at the pictures in his hands, electronic portraits created after drawings made by Eric. They showed people from Gabriel's life—his brothers, his mate, and his extended family. The memories Eric had taken gave them this advantage, at least. They could tell the good guys from the bad guys. Gabriel's in-laws in particular were a force to be reckoned with, and it paid to be prepared.

Keenan had already sent the images to Aidan and to some demon covens in Italy that could help them out. Leba also received copies, even if she probably wouldn't bother looking over them anytime soon. It was imperative to keep the High Mother informed, particularly in such a delicate situation. Either way, Keenan had a feeling they'd soon meet the famous Ancients. He hoped they would appreciate his efforts in keeping Gabriel safe. God only knew the Kaldorian had caused him enough trouble.

At least lately, Gabriel had taken to spending more time with Patrice Nelson. After the initial shock, the human woman proved to be quite open-minded. She'd even accepted Gabriel's pregnancy, even if that particular announcement had involved some fainting and hyperventilating. Now, she seemed quite happy knowing she would be a grandmother, and she dragged Gabriel out to shop for his unborn son.

As long as it kept Gabriel out of his hair, Keenan was all for it. He'd even provided them with a limo and armed guards to protect them during their shopping trips.

Nevertheless, those trips started to grow shorter and shorter as the days passed and Gabriel's pregnancy became more advanced. Pat

now came to the Tower to visit Gabriel instead of the other way around. Keenan counted himself lucky that she kept Gabriel busy and he could have some private time with his pet.

But then, Keenan had become so busy trying to wrap up all the loose ends of the demon activity in New York. He also needed to keep an eye on suspicious activity in Europe. He couldn't exactly send a summoning message to the Ancients through the demon covens, so he had to wait for them to come to him. Until that happened, he was stuck, preparing himself for yet another disaster of nuclear proportions. So it sometimes happened that Keenan had to go to a thousand different meetings and discuss a million issues instead of spending a few quiet hours with Eric.

Keenan felt Eric walk inside the penthouse, as if summoned by his thoughts. His lover walked by the study and peeked inside. "Hi."

"Hey, pet. Did you have a good time with Gabriel?"

Eric shrugged. "I suppose." His lips twisted in an enigmatic smile. "What about you? Very busy?"

"Just looking over some final stuff. Go rest, pet. I'll join you in a few minutes."

Eric nodded and blew him a kiss. "I'll be waiting."

He didn't give Keenan enough time to offer a reply and took off down the hallway. Not that Keenan needed Eric's physical presence to talk to him, but a face-to-face conversation would have been nice. Oh, well. Eric was obviously tired, so conversation—and anything else Keenan might want to indulge in—would have to wait until the evening. Eric and Gabriel had chosen a poor time to stay up late, and it was already early morning.

Keenan put the pictures aside and went to scan some of the remaining paperwork. Reports of demon activity were coming in at an alarming rate, and they seemed to get bloodier and bloodier. It was only a matter of time now before the bloodbath reached New York.

As he thought this, Keenan felt Eric approaching again. He looked up to see his lover enter the study, wearing a smile and nothing else.

Keenan nearly swallowed his tongue at the sight. “Pet?” he croaked out.

Eric sauntered to the desk and straddled his lap. “It occurred to me, Keenan,” he purred, “that we haven’t really spent much time together since coming back from the Yukon.”

“I thought you were tired after the outing with Gabriel,” Keenan replied. What the hell was wrong with him? Here he had his pet naked in his arms and he decided to mention Gabriel? Idiot!

Eric chuckled. “Nothing and no one is more important than you.”

Eric rubbed his rump against Keenan’s crotch, and Keenan groaned. “If you keep going, pet, I won’t be able to stop myself, and I’ll fuck you right here on my desk.”

Eric shuddered in his arms, but Keenan could tell it wasn’t because of fear. Their connection overflowed with desire and arousal. “That was kind of the point, Keenan,” Eric replied, somehow still managing to be cheeky. “You’re so sexy, sitting here behind your desk, looking so focused.” He fluttered his eyelashes flirtatiously. “Mr. von Klein, I’ve been really naughty. Don’t I deserve to be punished?”

Keenan swallowed around the knot in his throat. If Eric wanted to role-play, then Keenan would give him the ride of his life. Literally. “Yeah? What did you do?”

He snuck a hand between them, palming Keenan’s hard dick. “I had dirty thoughts,” he whispered in Keenan’s ear. He nipped and licked across the lobe as that wayward hand unzipped Keenan’s fly. “When Gabriel and I went for hot chocolate, I thought, I want to swallow Keenan’s cum instead of this. When it started sleeting, I thought, what I wouldn’t give to have Keenan here, to warm me, inside and out. All the time today.”

Keenan tsked. “Naughty indeed. And didn’t Gabriel mind that you were thinking about me when you were with him?”

“Nah. I’m pretty sure it happens to him, too, only with his mate.”

As they spoke, Eric's hand snaked through the undone zipper and into Keenan's briefs. Keenan gasped as his lover's warm hand engulfed his erection and slowly massaged it. "So what do you think, Mr. von Klein?" Eric murmured. "Am I right? Do I deserve to be punished?"

Eric's words broke a dam inside Keenan. He'd been holding back, keeping himself from taking Eric like he used to. He'd hurt his lover so badly, and Eric was still recovering from it. Keenan just wanted to give Eric everything he wanted and needed, and he'd thought that stopping their violent sex sessions was a good idea. Apparently, he'd been wrong.

He could feel it in Eric's mind and body. His lover liked their slow, beautiful lovemaking, but a part of him ached for that unrestrained possession, the passion the blood frenzy unleashed inside of them.

"Yes, Keenan," Eric whispered, no longer in the game. "I want everything. Don't hold back. I'm not made of china."

Keenan's hands went to Eric's waist, and he effortlessly lifted his lover off his lap. Eric didn't protest as Keenan cleared the desk and placed him face down on the wood. A jolt of desire swept through Keenan as he realized Eric had prepared himself already.

"You're right, pet," Keenan said. "You are naughty. How did you keep me from knowing this?"

"You were busy, and I did my best to mute my thoughts down," Eric replied sheepishly. "I wasn't sure it would work."

Keenan arched a brow. "Constructing a barrier against me, pet? That's not very nice."

Eric tried to turn to look at him, but Keenan held him down. "That's not it," Eric protested. "I just wanted it to be a surprise."

Keenan felt Eric's panic and suppressed a sigh. His pet was so fragile, and a large part of it was Keenan's own fault. Perhaps his lover had forgiven him for being a jealous asshole, but the consequences of his mistake still showed. Keenan's heart was torn

between guilt and determination. Yes, it was his fault, and he'd spoil and worship Eric until his lover forgot all about the pain and insecurities.

Keenan didn't mind that Eric had created a barrier. In fact, it was a good thing. Keenan tried training Eric's mind, but his lover's psychic power had grown since becoming a vampire, and it proved to be a difficult task. Apparently, all Eric needed was a little sexual incentive. Good to know.

Keenan allowed Eric to see into his mind, and Eric quieted down, sheepishly murmuring, "I did it again, didn't I? I panicked for no reason."

"It's all right, pet. It wasn't your fault," Keenan said, petting Eric's hair gently. "I'll take care of you. I'll never disappoint you again."

He reached for Eric's dick, unsurprised when he found it limp. It took but a few strokes for Eric to relax and start to harden again. God, Keenan loved Eric's responsiveness. "That's it, pet. No more worries. No more fears. I have you. You're fine."

As he spoke, Keenan inserted a finger in Eric's passage, testing its readiness. Eric had done a good and thorough job, but that didn't mean Keenan couldn't take a few moments for some sensual torture.

Eric gasped as Keenan stroked his prostate, clutching the desk tightly. "Keenan..."

"Patience, Eric. You'll have what you want."

Keenan slowly worked two more fingers inside Eric's body, all the while keeping his lover down with his own weight. Soon, Eric's pleas had turned into whimpers, and Keenan's dick was so hard it hurt. He couldn't wait any longer. He needed to be inside Eric.

Keenan positioned himself at Eric's hole and pushed inside in one powerful thrust. Eric arched his back and cried out, but it was a cry of pleasure, not pain. Keenan would have loved to take some time to explore Eric's body more, to worship every bit of that beautiful skin, but the sexual energy between them demanded release.

Eric clutched the edge of the desk as Keenan fucked him. With every thrust, Keenan aimed for Eric's special spot, and possessive satisfaction swelled inside him at each of Eric's cries. Eric's body enveloped his cock in a tight grip, their bodies fitting together perfectly. Hard and fast, Keenan took his lover. Shocks of pleasure pulsed through him, and he distantly wondered how he could have ever doubted Eric. They'd been born to be together. All those long, lonely years, Keenan had unknowingly waited for Eric. He was sure of it now.

With every thrust, the pleasure increased, and Keenan felt Eric's own love and ecstasy. The desk creaked under their combined weight, and the floor started to screech as the table moved in line with Keenan's motions. It was primal and raw, their vampiric natures coming out in the most sensual and natural experience in existence. Keenan's fangs lowered, the desire to feed on his lover so powerful he couldn't hold it back.

"Yes, Keenan, yes! Feed from me! Do it now," Eric cried.

Keenan's already-fragile resistance broke. He pulled out of Eric's passage and slammed back in. He buried his fangs in Eric's throat. Eric screamed, and his ass tightened around Keenan's cock. Keenan tried to keep from coming, but it was a losing battle from the start. Tasting the rush of endorphins of Eric's sweet blood in his mouth and feeling the way Eric's body held him brought Keenan to the highest peaks of pleasure. He exploded, filling Eric's body with his seed and flooding their connection with every emotion in his heart.

Exhausted, he released his hold on Eric's neck and licked the wound as Eric lay under him, panting. Keenan hugged his lover, the little human-turned-vampire who'd succeeded where everyone in five hundred years had failed. He'd stolen Keenan's heart and given his own in exchange. Keenan would never cease to be amazed how that was possible.

Finally, as much as he regretted doing so, Keenan separated their bodies. He shifted Eric in his arms and sat back down on his chair,

holding his lover in his lap. Eric's green eyes looked dazed, but this time not because of the overwhelming memories of another. Only pleasure, love, and satisfaction passed through their connection.

Eric straddled Keenan once more and sank his fangs in Keenan's neck. Keenan's cock hardened again as Eric drank, and he knew their time together was far from being over.

As Eric stopped his small feeding session, Keenan smiled. "What say we take this to the bedroom?"

The dazed look on Eric's face vanished, replaced by renewed arousal. "I think I like that idea very much."

\* \* \* \*

A shrill noise woke Keenan, screeching in the silence of the penthouse like nails on a blackboard. Keenan groaned, at first confused at the source of the sound. Then he realized it was his cell phone and identified the shrill noise as the ringtone he'd chosen for his brother. Why would Aidan be calling him?

With a grumble, he got up from the bed, found his abandoned pants, and rummaged through his pockets. "This better be good, Aidan," he said when he took the call. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"If I had to calculate right now, I'd say around seven in the evening!" Aidan replied biting. Keenan rubbed his eyes and looked outside. Indeed, night had fallen. The sex fest with his pet had drained him. Damn, was he getting old?

"And yeah, it is important," Aidan said. "I have someone here, someone that our little friend might want to talk to."

Keenan paused as his brother's words permeated his consciousness. The remaining sleepiness vanished, and he shook Eric awake. Eric's eyes cracked opened, and he glared at Keenan, obviously intending to say something. Keenan stopped him by placing a finger on his lips.

“Is this what I think it is?” he asked Aidan. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious. And he’s not being pleasant.”

Eric shook Keenan off, no longer pleased to just listen. “What? Say that again?”

“Pet, go get Gabriel,” Keenan told Eric. His lover’s eyes widened as realization struck. He jumped off the bed and headed toward the door, remembering only in passing to grab a shirt as he left. Keenan shook his head. At least Eric wouldn’t be completely nude.

At the other side of the receiver, an unfamiliar voice inquired, “What’s going on? Who are you?” Keenan realized his brother had the phone on speaker. He wondered how many people were present for this very important conversation and wished he’d been given some sort of warning.

“My name is Keenan von Klein. I’m Aidan’s brother and leader of the Paranormal Council of New York. I expect that you are either Cade, Kalin, or Lucien, right?”

“How do you know those names?” the other man asked, sounding shocked.

“My cousin told us,” Matthew Nelson replied to the stranger’s question. He’d been Eric’s modern art teacher for a short period of time and had accidentally gotten involved with the paranormal world when the hunters attacked Eric. As luck would have it, he’d turned out to be Aidan’s secret love. They’d reunited, and now, Matthew had moved to Japan with Keenan’s brother.

“Your cousin?” the unknown man repeated. Keenan wished that his brother’s guest would introduce himself already. It was common courtesy to do so, particularly since Keenan and Aidan had done him a big favor in taking care of Gabriel.

“Yes,” Matthew answered. “Gabriel. He’s my cousin, through his mother’s side.”

“Did he find his mother, then?” The man’s voice took a tight, weird tone, and Keenan wondered how the stranger would react when meeting Patrice. He didn’t seem to like humans very much.



Matthew didn't get the chance to reply to the stranger's question. Rushed steps signaled Eric's arrival, and he burst into the bedroom, followed by an excited Gabriel.

The Kaldorian snatched the phone from Keenan and started speaking quickly. Keenan watched the play of emotions on Gabriel's face and identified disappointment and relief. He guessed the stranger he'd spoken with wasn't Gabriel's mate, but he still belonged to the "good guys" category.

Judging by the behavior of the man on the phone, Keenan didn't think he'd like meeting them too much. On the bright side, he'd at least get the whole thing over with and get Gabriel out. Keenan smiled, feeling much better about the whole thing. Things were finally looking up.

## Chapter Nine

Eric watched as Gabriel paced through the living room. They'd been notified that Gabriel's mate, Lucien, and his brother, Kalin, would be arriving shortly in New York. They didn't know much else, and that made Gabriel more agitated than ever. He kept muttering under his breath, chewing on his fingernails. Eric suspected that if Keenan had a fondness for plants, they would be all over the place by now. As it were, Gabriel's power had no effect on the ornaments in the penthouse.

Thankfully, both Cassandra and Pat had joined him to keep Gabriel calm. It was getting harder and harder, though, and after Keenan left for the airport, each passing second increased Gabriel's nervousness. Eric could practically feel the tension in his friend, and it made his mind hurt.

"Stop pacing, Gabriel," he told Gabriel. "You know you'll see your mate very soon."

"But what if they don't arrive safely?" Gabriel cried. "What if something happens? What if they can't get here? I should have gone with Keenan to the airport."

"Calm down, Gabriel. I told you, Keenan said he'd met them there, and they're heading this way."

"Yes, darling," Pat said, as she hugged her son. "They should be here any moment."

"Besides," Cassandra coaxed, "wouldn't you like to see your mate here, where you can be alone?"

"I know, I know. I can't help it."

Suddenly, the door burst open, and Eric gaped as a tall platinum blond appeared in the room. Gabriel let out a cry of relief and jumped in the other man's arms. It was like in those stupid romance movies, the two people in love desperately rushing for each other. Eric had thought the imagery cheesy before, but somehow, in this situation, it seemed so natural and touching, he could barely contain his tears.

Under his astonished eyes, huge white wings enveloped Gabriel in a leathery shield. Gabriel had finally found his mate. Thank God. The love between them was practically palpable, and Eric's psychic senses became overwhelmed with the intensity. Eric had been making progress with his barrier-making, but their feelings were too powerful for him not to catch.

Eric allowed Gabriel and Lucien's emotions to wash over him, smiling as a sense of peace and security slipped into his own mind. He shook his head, berating himself for intruding in a private moment, and tried to find something else to do.

He realized someone else had entered the room while he was focused on Gabriel and Lucien. Another man, a handsome brunet, stood there, analyzing them with the eyes of a warrior. Cassandra took it upon herself to greet the new arrival and stepped forward. The man bowed and kissed her hand.

"Greetings," he said, his voice tinged with the same accent Gabriel had. "I'm Prince Kalin of Alaria. It's a pleasure to be here in your fair city."

With a soft laugh, Cassandra introduced herself as well. "Cassandra van der Bilt." Eric watched with a smile as she sized Kalin up. "So you're Gabriel's brother. Come in and make yourself comfortable."

Eric scanned Kalin's looks and recalled the images from Gabriel's mind. Kalin, Gabriel's eldest brother. He had a different hair color and eye color than in Gabriel's memories, but the warrior stance and the aura of power were the same.

“We’ve heard so much about you,” Eric told Kalin. “I’m Eric, by the way.”

Wiping her eyes, Pat joined them as well. “Patrice Nelson,” she said in introduction.

As the two of them spoke, Eric realized he had a new issue to deal with. Apparently, Kalin was the son of Patrice’s former husband. For Kalin, Patrice was basically “the other woman.” Damn, this would be awkward.

Thankfully, Gabriel interrupted them before the conversation could turn too tense. He pounced on his brother and wrapped his arms around Kalin, whispering soft, unintelligible words against Kalin’s chest.

The two brothers’ reunion was almost as touching as that of the two mates. Eric sighed, suddenly feeling the overwhelming need to be at Keenan’s side. “*So I’m a side thought, am I, pet?*” Keenan chuckled in his mind. The slight amusement was there, but Eric could sense an annoyance and anger that overwhelmed it. In that exact moment, Keenan stepped into the room, frowning fiercely.

“*Why didn’t you come in with Kalin and Lucien?*” Eric asked, concerned.

Keenan sighed. “*Damn it, pet, they’re even more irritating than Gabriel.*”

Eric would have said something in his friend’s defense, but Keenan was obviously in a bad mood. He chose to ignore that statement, but Keenan felt his frustration regardless. “*Sorry, Eric. I know Gabriel is your friend, but I can’t help how I feel.*”

At this point, Eric accepted that, just as he accepted that Keenan’s jealousy was only a sign of his love. Of course, Eric still wanted his friend and his lover to get along. In fact, things were much better now than when they’d first met Gabriel, and Keenan made a significant effort to include Gabriel in their activities and be polite. Perhaps with Lucien’s arrival, the situation would improve and Keenan could relax.

Eric's attention snapped back to Kalin when the man addressed Keenan in English. "Is there a place where they can be alone?" he asked. Kalin was, of course, correct. Eric could have kicked himself for not realizing Lucien and Gabriel would want some time alone.

"He has his own room," Keenan replied. Eric caught the words that remained unsaid. *His own room in my home, stealing my lover away from me.*

*"Keenan, I'm yours. You know that."*

When Keenan didn't reply, Eric prodded more. *"Stop pouting. I'll prove it to you as soon as we get rid of all the guests."*

He sent a mental image of himself on his knees, sucking Keenan's dick, and his lover's arousal flooded the connection. *"You have me wrapped around your little finger, pet."* Keenan growled. *"I'll be waiting."*

Eric smiled to himself and tuned in to the conversation going on out loud. "Eric, can you deal with things here?" Gabriel asked.

Eric smirked at his friend, knowing Gabriel would soon be enjoying the same thing Eric had planned for his own day. "Sure, don't worry about it. Go and enjoy your reunion."

They said their good-byes, and Gabriel didn't waste any time in taking off with his mate. With Gabriel gone, Kalin's attitude seemed to shift, turning almost hostile. "Can anyone explain to me what's going on? Everyone here is so welcoming, whereas von Klein seems to loathe us."

Eric couldn't help his sigh. Even if he now understood Keenan's jealousy, it still hurt him to recall the days of their separation. "Keenan doesn't like Gabriel. You see, Keenan's my lover. When Gabriel and I became close, he began to suspect me of cheating on him."

At Kalin's expression of shock, Eric hurried to make things clear. "We're just friends, of course, but Keenan can't get over his own possessiveness to see that."

In truth, things had gotten much better than they'd been in the beginning, but Kalin didn't need to know the true extent of Keenan's jealousy.

Cassandra made an attempt to calm Kalin down, and in the process, Eric as well. "Keenan will come around," she said with a small smile.

Eric didn't reply. He doubted Keenan would come around more than he already had. Getting Keenan to act civilly toward Gabriel had been hard enough. He knew that his lover would never like his friend. Perhaps in time, that would change...in a long, long time.

Kalin looked confused and frustrated, and Eric could feel a whirlpool of emotions coming from the other man. They didn't flood him like Gabriel's and Lucian's, and Eric suspected Kalin had some sort of barrier of his own. Still, Eric could still sense them, as if through a thick veil, muted, but yet calling out to him. Kalin's desire to reach out, loneliness, and longing bombarded Eric. Eric couldn't actually tell what the other man was thinking, but he did catch one word. Cade.

Eric remembered that Cade was Lucien's brother and Kalin's mate. According to Gabriel, he'd been the one to find Aidan in Japan, and through Aidan, Gabriel's location. Apparently, Cade and Kalin had gone two separate ways at some point during the quest. Eric could recall how much he'd suffered while being separated from Keenan, and that had only lasted for a few days. He admired Kalin and Cade for their determination to help their brothers, even to the detriment of their own relationship.

Therefore, Eric wasn't surprised when Kalin made his excuses to go call someone, most likely Cade.

"So, what do you think?" Cassandra asked him as soon as Kalin was out of earshot.

"They love Gabriel," Eric replied. "That's the most important thing."

“True,” Cassandra mused. “We’ll find a way to get along with them, I guess.”

“Yes, pet,” Keenan whispered in Eric’s mind. *“I promise I’ll do my best as long as I have a good incentive.”*

Eric couldn’t help but chuckle. *“Now you’re copying me, huh?”*

*“I suppose I am.”* Keenan laughed. He seemed to be in a better mood. Eric was happy for that much.

*“Do you think I’m going to have to make an appearance with the princes again?”* his lover asked.

*“You might. I don’t know. Kalin’s gone to talk to his mate, and Lucien is off with Gabriel.”*

Keenan hummed thoughtfully. *“I expect Lucien will spend quite some time with his little Gabriel.”* He sighed. *“Still, it’s quite impolite of me to just run off.”*

*“I’m glad you’ve noticed.”* Eric didn’t mean to scold his lover, but the words came out like that nevertheless.

*“I’m just wrapping up some work and will be right back, all right, pet?”*

Eric could feel the grin in Keenan’s tone. *“Excuses, excuses. You’re lucky I love you so much.”*

Keenan’s flirty playfulness turned into pure emotion. *“I love you, too, pet. I promise I’ll stop being such an ass to Gabriel.”*

A cleared throat stopped Eric from continuing the conversation. Cassandra glared at him, crossing her arms over her chest. “You know, I really don’t appreciate you having all these mental chats with Keenan and ignoring me.”

Eric gave his sire a sheepish look. “Can’t help it. Sorry, Cassandra.”

Cassandra’s gaze softened. As bitchy as she’d been with him in the beginning—and she continued to be with others—she never managed to stay upset at him. Eric was happy for that. He couldn’t bear the thought of arguing with the only mother he’d ever known.

Suddenly, Eric felt a powerful presence approaching and turned just as Kalin entered the room. His emotions had grown even more erratic, anger surrounding him like a dark cloud.

“Is everything all right?” Eric couldn’t help but ask.

“Yes,” Kalin replied curtly. “I just found out something I did not expect.”

“Oh? Is there a problem?” Cassandra inquired.

Kalin gave them a strained smile. “Actually, I kind of need your help again.”

As Kalin began to speak, Eric sent a mental message to Keenan. *“Keenan, you better get your ass over here. And while you’re at it, call the Council members, as well. I have a feeling we’re going to need their presence.”*

Keenan’s mental groan echoed Eric’s own feelings. *“I’m not going to like this, am I?”*

Given that Kalin and Cassandra were just starting to mention Chernobyl, Eric would have bet money that, no, Keenan wouldn’t like this. Keenan cursed. *“I’m coming, pet. I knew this was going to be a bad day.”*

Eric hoped that whatever Kalin intended to ask of them wouldn’t be as bad as Keenan presumed. He’d really enjoyed his stay in the Yukon, and he kind of wanted to spend some time of his own with his lover. It looked like that wouldn’t happen anytime soon.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan sighed as he sat down at his desk. All the members of the Council had just left, and Kalin had received a room as well, a floor down from his penthouse. Even with his home empty of intruders, Keenan knew his work wasn’t done. His mind whirled with the information he’d just received. Kalin wanted them to aid him in a mad quest of finding Cade and Lucien’s long lost brother, Cain. Cade thought his brother was somewhere in France. Keenan now needed to



request a meeting with the High Mother to bring her up to date with things and, perhaps, request aid.

He didn't want to ask his parents for help, as their relationship had significantly deteriorated since he'd informed them of his decision to make Eric his permanent life partner. Eric had been right about one thing that night when they'd argued. Keenan did feel jealous of Cassandra, but at the same time, he was thankful to her as well. Keenan's connection to Eric went beyond that of sire and fledgling, and Keenan had been considering asking Eric to marry him before this whole mess with Gabriel started.

Naturally, his parents didn't understand his love for Eric. In these conditions, Keenan doubted they'd provide assistance, even if their mission involved the Ancients. Sometimes, vampires could be very selfish. Keenan himself was living proof of that.

As he considered his options, he realized the best and only solution would be to contact the High Mother as soon as possible. He didn't know her exact location, so he would have to go through the vampire elders to get to her. That would take some effort, as Leba and the elders always arranged meetings on their own terms. Sending photographs wasn't the same as a face-to-face discussion. Damn it, this would be difficult.

Taking into account the last elder meeting, Keenan decided to contact Rebecca. She'd seemed less inclined to kill Eric on the spot just for existing. She might be willing to help, or at least agree to speak to him. In fact, it didn't work quite like that. Keenan would contact Rebecca's assistants, then she would call back, in her time, or wouldn't call at all. Naturally, Keenan hoped the former would happen.

Eric walked into the office just as Keenan was dialing the number for Rebecca's compound. "Who are you calling?"

"Rebecca," Keenan replied. "You probably remember her from the elders' meeting. You wanted to draw her."

Eric nodded and made his way to Keenan. “The beautiful woman with blue eyes. Yes, I remember. What are you calling her for?”

“I need to arrange a meeting with the High Mother, and I can’t do it on my own. Rebecca is the most likely to accept talking to me.”

Eric winced. “They didn’t like me at all, did they?”

Keenan gestured Eric closer and, when his lover obeyed, pulled him in his lap. “I like you,” he murmured against Eric’s neck. “That’s what matters.”

Eric let out a soft sigh, and Keenan wondered if they could manage a repeat performance of their little sex session in the office. Before he could set that thought into practice, the call connected. “Her Ladyship Rebecca’s compound. This is Greta speaking. How may I help you?”

Keenan kept his voice as polite and neutral as possible. “Greetings, Greta. I am Keenan von Klein. I’d like to speak to Her Ladyship regarding a very important issue.”

Greta snorted. “Everyone who wants to speak to Her Ladyship says the same. What does this issue concern? Perhaps she will deign to reply.”

The arrogance of the words irritated Keenan beyond measure, but he couldn’t do anything about it. “It concerns the Ancients,” he replied. “She should already be informed about the issue. There have been some developments that require her assistance.”

“I see,” Greta said. “Is that all?”

Keenan thought that she didn’t see at all, but didn’t comment. “Yes, that would be all. Thank you.”

“I will convey your message to Her Ladyship. Good day, Mr. von Klein.”

The dial tone cut off any response Keenan intended. “Well, that was rude,” Eric said.

“Very. It’s always like this with the elders. Sometimes, their assistants think they deserve the same benefits the elders do.”

Eric laughed. "Sounds like almost every human secretary I've come in contact with."

"I suppose some things never change," Keenan said with a smile. He took Eric in his arms and started walking to the bedroom. "It'll take a while until she calls back, so we might as well make use of the time."

Eric licked his lips. "Do you have anything in particular in mind?"

"Oh, yes, pet. It involves you, me, nakedness, and a lot of lube. What do you think?"

"I think I agree."

Keenan didn't even have the patience to take Eric to their bedroom. He dumped his lover on the couch and proceeded to remove every garment that shielded Eric from his touch. He started with those blasted gloves he loathed so much then went to the black turtleneck and finally the jeans. He was pleased when he realized Eric had gone commando.

He had Eric naked in mere seconds. Keenan's mouth watered at the sight of his lover's hard dick. He'd seen into Eric's mind, and he knew that Eric wanted their bodies to come together in every way possible. More specifically, he wanted Keenan's ass. Perhaps this would be a good moment to do it. Keenan would welcome a change. He was so tired, and he ached for a few moments when he didn't need to be in control, when he could just trust that his lover would take care of both of them.

"I'm not sure I can give you all that," Eric said, concern in his tone. Keenan realized some of his lover's arousal had faded. Yes, they needed to do this, if only to get rid of all of Eric's insecurities.

"I trust you, pet," he said as he rubbed his face against Eric's naked leg. "I trust you with my life, with my heart, with my body."

Eric let out a choked sound and pulled Keenan up for a kiss. Their mouths met, and this time, Eric took control of the kiss. Keenan lost himself in his lover's taste, in Eric's touch and scent. Eric's fangs descended, biting at Keenan's lip, breaking the skin. Keenan mirrored

his lover's action, scratching at Eric's tongue. Their blood mingled in their kiss, a vampire's kiss that had become as natural to them as breathing.

"We need to find a different spot," Eric whispered as the kiss broke. "This will be uncomfortable for you."

Keenan arched a brow. "Why would it be uncomfortable for me if it was good enough for you?"

Eric blushed. "It's different. I expect it's been a while since you...well, since you bottomed."

Keenan couldn't help a laugh at that. "I would say so, pet. I think it was during the American Revolution."

Eric gaped at him. "I sometimes forget how old you are. Damn it, are you sure about this?"

"Very sure. I want you inside me. Here. Now."

This time, Eric didn't hesitate. He took Keenan's mouth in a devastating kiss, moaning as he pushed Keenan back down on the couch. The weight of Eric's body over his own felt incredible. Eric had ridden him before, but this somehow felt different. Eric's own possessiveness came out, released from its confines, and Keenan could feel Eric's desire in every touch, every breath. Eric's hands hastily worked Keenan's clothes, ripping them apart when the buttons and zippers didn't obey. Fire swept through Keenan's body as Eric placed kisses down his neck, tonguing his Adam's apple. He lingered in the hollow of Keenan's throat, just tasting his skin, giving him a hint of fang and driving him wild.

Keenan's forceful nature threatened to come out, but he squashed it, deciding to just let everything flow naturally. He buried his hands in Eric's blond hair and pulled his lover's head from his throat. "Don't tease, pet. If you're going to bite me, bite me. I want it. I want you."

Eric grinned at him and released himself from Keenan's hold. "All in due time, Keenan," he purred. Keenan had a feeling he'd said the

same thing many times and Eric was paying him back. He'd created a monster.

And yet, as Eric descended over him again and licked down to his nipples, Keenan found he very much enjoyed this side of Eric. How could he not? Eric took complete control, freeing Keenan from all the pressure of the day. So much had been happening. Keenan could feel the tension flow out of his body at Eric's every touch. Eric went slowly, drawing out every motion, torturing Keenan's body with nips and licks. That beautiful mouth worked his nipples until Keenan thought he would go mad. All the while, Eric's hand went to massage Keenan's hard dick, and Keenan gritted his teeth, forcing himself not to come at the combined sensation. Going with the flow was all right, but he refused to come the very instant his pet touched him.

Then his lover went lower, kissing, licking, tracking his treasure trail with his tongue. Keenan's dick throbbed with need at the sight of Eric's blond head between his legs. Anticipation swelled inside of him, and he couldn't help but order Eric again. "Suck me, pet. Take it now."

"You're so bossy," Eric said with a small laugh. "I thought I was in control."

He didn't seem upset about it, though, and Keenan knew Eric enjoyed the way they fit together, just right. Keenan would never change his possessive, dominant ways, and Eric's need to be protected and loved fit him perfectly. Even now, as they shifted from their usual roles in the bedroom, they adapted to each other. Eric held the reins, yes, and Keenan would allow his pet to do anything Eric wanted and would revel in his possession.

"You are, pet," Keenan replied. "You're always in control."

*"You own me, heart and mind,"* he finished mentally.

Eric smiled at him, and then those beautiful lips wrapped around Keenan's cock. As heavenly heat enveloped him, Keenan croaked out his lover's name. God, Eric was good at that.

Eric hummed a little, and the vibrations sent waves of pleasure through Keenan's body. He took Keenan all the way into his mouth, no longer teasing, giving Keenan the pleasure only he could offer. Pulling back, Eric scratched at Keenan's slit with a fang. Keenan could no longer contain himself. Without even getting the chance to warn his lover, he exploded.

Eric's eyes widened, and he gave Keenan a comical look. "*Well, that was surprising.*"

"Sorry, pet," Keenan said with a grin. "I did try."

Eric licked his dick clean of cum, lingering over his testicles to tease the wrinkled sac. "*I'm sure you won't have any trouble with getting hard again.*" He actually laughed when Keenan's cock gladly obeyed, responding to the stimulation.

Keenan groaned. "Pet, you're evil."

Eric finally removed his mouth from Keenan's genitals. "No. I'm in love and in lust."

A grin on his lips, Eric rummaged through the pillows on the couch. He let out a pleased "aha" and Keenan knew he'd found the bottle of lube stashed there. He smirked at Keenan. "We're going to get shit from the staff again. You know how frustrating cum stains are on leather."

Keenan just shrugged. "So I'll buy another couch. Or hire someone else. Who cares? Now fuck me!"

The look Eric gave Keenan was pure sin. "You got it."

Eric uncapped the lube bottle and squirted some of the lotion on his fingers. Heart thundering, Keenan spread his legs and lifted them up to give Eric access. Butterflies fluttered in his stomach. How could Eric always awaken new sensations inside him? By his age, nothing should have made Keenan nervous. He'd experienced most everything from a sexual point of view. And yet, here he was, as excited and anxious as a virgin on prom night.

One of Eric's hands went to Keenan's foot and massaged it gently. "You're my virgin. This can be our prom night, if you want."

Keenan rolled his eyes. "You're getting corny, pet."

The touch of Eric's finger at his opening shut his mind down, dissipating any chance of sarcastic comebacks. "That may well be, Keenan," Eric said as he rubbed Keenan's hole. "But I enjoy the thought of taking your virgin ass."

Eric's finger pushed inside Keenan's ass, and Keenan admitted Eric was at least half right. After so many years without having a cock up his ass, he was practically a virgin all over again. Even Eric's one slender finger burned a little. Keenan had forgotten how good that felt. Then again, had it ever been quite like this? Keenan doubted it.

Eric took his time in preparing Keenan's opening, carefully, lovingly. He supported Keenan's legs on his own shoulders, kissing the arch of Keenan's foot. Another finger followed the first, and Eric scissored them with care. Those artist's fingers delved inside Keenan's body, and lightning bolts shot down Keenan's spine when they rubbed against his prostate.

Every cell of Keenan's body was alight with the fire of desire. He could feel Eric's echoing need, and he reached out to his lover, no longer interested in orders or words of domination. The heat and the passion between them outgrew it all.

A moan of protest escaped Keenan when Eric's fingers retreated from his body, but Keenan couldn't even bring himself to care. He felt empty without Eric there, empty and cold.

Thankfully, Eric didn't force him to wait too long. His dick pushed inside Keenan, so wonderfully hot and hard, melting every lingering doubt and frustration. Eric studied his face as he penetrated his passage, and Keenan wanted to tell his lover he didn't need to worry. Everything Eric did felt incredible. Eric was incredible, and Keenan loved him so much it hurt.

He didn't have any words to express his emotions, but he didn't need them. In moments like these, their connection was strongest. They couldn't stay in each other's heads and hearts at all times. They would lose their minds if they tried. In their time together, though, all

these limitations vanished, and Keenan could honestly say he felt one with Eric.

*"I love you, Keenan."* Eric's voice fled into his mind. His lover's lips crushed against his as Eric started thrusting in and out of his body. Their bodies met in a perfect rhythm, a leisurely symphony of entwined flesh and spirit.

It seemed to go on forever, yet it was over too fast. With Eric's dick rubbing against his prostate, Keenan found that he couldn't keep himself in check any longer. The bloodlust started to emerge, stronger than ever, and his vision clouded, almost like when he went a long time without feeding. "Pet, bite me. Do it now."

It should have been an order, but it came out as a plea. As always, Eric understood what he needed. Their mouths met one more time, and then, the moment the kiss broke, Eric sunk his fangs in Keenan's throat with surprising violence.

The edge of pain complimented the slow lovemaking perfectly. Keenan's world exploded in bright lights as he found his climax in his lover's arms. The feel of Eric emptying his own seed inside Keenan's body drew out the pleasure.

Eric slipped out of Keenan and collapsed next to him, panting hard. It was a tight fit, since the couch didn't provide them with that much space, but they made it work. They remained like that, embracing, yin and yang, recovering and enjoying the pleasant buzz of afterglow.

Unfortunately, as the cum cooled, Keenan knew they had to get up, lest they stick to each other in a very unpleasant way. Keenan pecked Eric on the lips then got up off the couch. Eric moaned in protest and reached for his hand to keep him from going. "Keenan..."

Keenan shook his head at his lover's antics. "Be right back, pet. Just bringing something to clean us up."

He padded naked to the bathroom and retrieved a washcloth. When he returned to the study, he found Eric grimacing at a visible



spot on the leather couch. "I think you really will have to buy another one."

Keenan shrugged. "Doesn't matter. It's only furniture."

Eric looked up at him and smiled. "And it was worth it. That felt amazing."

Keenan sat next to Eric on the couch and wiped them both clean. "I can't say I'm surprised. Anything is amazing with you."

Eric cuddled against his chest, sighing happily. "It was my first time, you know."

Keenan's heart did a little flip in his chest. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Eric lifted his head and grinned flirtatiously at Keenan, flipping his sweaty hair out of his face. "But I still love having your cock in my ass."

It took but those words to get Keenan's dick hard again. Thank God for paranormal stamina. "Why, you little imp. Come here."

Eric obliged, laughing happily as he jumped in Keenan's arms. Keenan pushed Eric down on all fours and retrieved the tube of lubricant. Pouring a generous amount in his palm, Keenan then proceeded to prepare Eric's hole. "Don't tease." Eric groaned. "Just fuck me now. I can take it."

Keenan tsked as he crooked his fingers inside Eric's body. "You teased me, pet. It's only fair." Keenan slicked his cock and readied himself to impale his lover.

Just as his cock nudged at Eric's opening, the phone rang.

Eric jumped, startled by the shrill sound. Keenan looked in the direction of the phone, considering the pros and cons of picking up. "It could be Rebecca," Eric said.

"The odds of that being the case are slim to none." Keenan sighed and wiped his hand on his leg. A call from Rebecca was more than improbable, but Keenan couldn't risk it. He had to answer.

He picked up the phone and did his best not to growl at the person on the other side of the receiver. "Hello?"

"Keenan, my darling, how are you?"

Keenan gaped. It was, indeed, Rebecca. He hid his surprise and focused on giving the elder vampire a reply.

“Your Ladyship. Greetings. I’m quite all right, thank you. I take it you received my message?”

Rebecca chuckled. “Straight to business. I’ve always liked that about you.” Her tone turned serious. “Indeed, Keenan. And yes, I am aware of this business with the Ancients. I understand you have important news.”

“They arrived just a few hours ago in New York,” Keenan replied. “They’re peaceful enough, but they requested our aid in a matter of great importance.”

Rebecca paused, as if considering his words. “Speak plainly, Keenan. What is it that they want? Why did you even call me?”

Keenan held his breath and mentally crossed his fingers. “I need to see the High Mother.”

Rebecca laughed. “Do you think it’s that easy? You don’t order her around. Neither of us have that power. I would have thought you knew this by now, Keenan.”

She sounded disappointed, and Keenan gritted his teeth as frustration swelled inside him. “I’m well aware of that, Your Ladyship. However, the Ancients require some information on their brother who was lost during the Chernobyl incident. I believe no one could help them like the High Mother.”

“I take it you believe we should indeed provide them with assistance,” Rebecca replied. Well, at least she hadn’t hung up on him yet.

“I believe so, yes. Even if the Ancients have not initiated a conflict yet, one of them seemed inclined toward becoming hostile. I would prefer it if our dealings with them continued to be peaceful.”

“I see,” Rebecca answered. “Very well, Keenan. I will contact the High Mother regarding this issue and request a meeting on your behalf. Of course, I do not know whether she will agree to it or not.”

Keenan breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Your Ladyship. I appreciate it a lot."

"Oh, Keenan, I'm not doing it for free," Rebecca said slyly.

Keenan froze. What could Rebecca possibly ask of him? If he judged by her tone, it couldn't be good. "Oh?"

"Tell me, how is your little turned human?"

Keenan's blood froze in his veins. "Eric is just fine, Your Ladyship. Thank you for asking."

"Hmmm...Well, I'm glad to hear that. I've been meaning to take him up on his offer."

"Offer?" Keenan repeated numbly. "What offer?"

From the couch, Eric gave him a confused and frightened look. "What's wrong, Keenan?"

From the other side of the receiver, Rebecca laughed. "He's there, isn't he? Put the phone on speaker."

Keenan wordlessly complied, and Rebecca's next words echoed through the room. "Eric? Can you hear me?"

Eric's eyes widened at being addressed. His eyes pleaded with Keenan for an explanation. Keenan desperately wished to help his lover, but he didn't understand himself. "Yes, Rebecca. I mean, Your Ladyship. Greetings."

"Hello, Eric. As I was saying to Keenan, I will agree to your request for aid, but on one condition." She paused for effect. "Do you recall the offer you made me back when we first met?"

"I'm afraid I don't," Eric replied.

"Ah. Well, let me refresh your memory. You said you wanted to paint me. Does that ring a bell?"

Eric let out a choked sound. "Yes, of course. I thought you were very beautiful."

Rebecca's tinkling laughter made Keenan want to throw the phone out the window. "Quite right. Does the offer still stand?"

What could they say? Eric had not meant that one errant thought as an offer of any kind. Keenan knew this. Taking into account the

circumstances, though, they could do nothing but agree. “Yes,” Eric replied in a barely audible voice. “Of course.”

“I’m glad to hear that. If you want my help, you will visit me in my compound and paint a portrait of me.”

Keenan dug his nails into his palms until he drew blood. He could see what she was playing at. For whatever reason, the damn woman wanted to steal Eric away from him. Keenan suspected it had something to do with the High Mother Leba’s reprimand of the elders during their visit to Sydney. At that time, Leba had taken a liking to Eric and humiliated the elder vampires in front of Eric, Cassandra, and Keenan. Rebecca must want revenge.

Keenan regretted contacting Rebecca, but at this point, there was no going back. After all, it would just be a painting. But before that, he needed to ensure something very important. “It will be very nice to see you, Your Ladyship,” he said. He didn’t have any intention of leaving Eric alone with Rebecca. She could have even worse plans than seduction in her mind. With his youth, Eric had no chance of defeating her if she attacked him.

Rebecca paused. “I didn’t know he needed a babysitter,” she replied scathingly.

“Not a babysitter,” Keenan said. “An observer. I love to watch my Eric paint.”

If she didn’t agree, then the deal was off. He’d find some other way to contact Leba, even if, in the process, he burned every bridge with Rebecca.

“I see,” Rebecca said. “I suppose your concern is understandable given Eric’s age. Very well, Keenan. I will be waiting for both of you. Once you arrive, I will contact the High Mother.”

“Thank you again, Your Ladyship,” Keenan said. “We will see you soon.”

“Agreed. Good-bye, Keenan, Eric.”

“Good-bye,” Eric replied. “And thank you.”

As Rebecca broke the connection, Keenan placed the phone down and rubbed his eyes. Eric hastened to his side and started speaking so fast it was barely understandable. “Oh God, Keenan. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean anything like that when I thought I wanted to paint her.”

“I know, pet. I know. She’s just using that pretext to get you to come there. If not for that random idea of yours, she’d have come up with something else.”

“But Keenan...”

Keenan shook his head. “The fault lies with me. I should have known she wouldn’t let things rest, not after what Leba said to them. God knows what happened after we left.”

Eric shuddered, obviously remembering his own experience with Leba. Keenan suppressed a shudder of his own. He’d never forget the terror he’d experienced when he’d seen Eric in the High Mother’s grip, blood pouring down his beautiful face. The sight ranked high up on the list of the most horrible moments of his life, next to that of Eric’s still and lifeless body after the battle with Pierre.

Eric placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “So what now?”

“Now we pack our bags. The sooner we finish with this, the faster we can get through to Leba. Let’s hope she’ll agree to talk to us and this whole thing isn’t for nothing.”

## Chapter Ten

*Somewhere in the Pacific*

*A few days later*

Eric wiped the sweat from his brow with a dirty cloth and focused on the vision in front of him. The falsely angelic Rebecca lay nude on a beautiful blue sofa that matched her eyes. The only item that provided some sort of modesty was a turquoise silk sheet placed over the juncture of her thighs. Eric didn't feel aroused in the slightest, but from a strictly artistic point of view, he admired the harmony in her features, the sensual lines of her body, the way her eyes seemed to shine with an ethereal light.

In the past few days, he'd gotten used to being in Rebecca's presence. As overwhelming as she'd been in Sydney, his painting now provided a source of focus, and he could grasp her beauty as that of a model, the model every artist ached for in his or her lifetime. Well, most every artist. He'd already found his muse, and said muse now waited for him, pouting at being excluded.

In spite of Keenan's frustration, the painting was coming along quite nicely. Eric felt inspired, and he'd managed to convey that on the canvas. Just a few touch-ups remained. Hopefully, by the time the High Mother contacted them, Eric would be finished, and they could leave Rebecca's compound.

Rebecca lived on a private island in the middle of the Pacific. They'd arrived three days back after a flight in Keenan's private jet. All the while, Keenan had been fuming over Rebecca's arrogant request, while Eric wondered whether they would even come back

alive. She clearly wanted revenge for the humiliation Eric had brought upon her through a mere twist of fate. As Keenan pointed out, vengeful elders were dangerous to deal with. Now, though, it seemed to Eric that Rebecca didn't intend to hurt them, just to separate them.

She spent half the time trying to seduce him, the other half doing the same thing with Keenan. So far, the only thing she'd managed to obtain was a beautiful half-finished portrait.

As much as he loved painting, Eric wanted to finish this particular one already. But she kept shifting and twisting on the damn couch, sabotaging his efforts, trying to draw his attention toward her naked body. Not that he could have missed it. By this point, he'd seen every inch of her body, including the part she'd now covered.

"Please, stay still in that position," he indicated, as Rebecca moved again. The pointy tips of her nipples beaded in his direction. She rubbed herself against the sofa and slipped one marble-white hand under the sheet. Eric could guess with ease where that hand had gone.

"But I'm tired," she whined. "Won't you come have a break with me?"

Eric sighed, knowing better than to contradict her. "I suppose a breather wouldn't hurt."

Rebecca smiled, and for a moment, Eric saw the truth behind that angelic façade. It should have scared him, but it didn't. He understood the vampires' world now. It was cruel, brutal, and deadly. If a vampire other than Keenan had found him that day in the park, Eric knew he'd be six feet under.

So, he just smiled back and put his pallet and brush aside. "Be right back. I'll just wash up a bit and get some water."

Rebecca got off the recliner, the sheet pooling down her legs to the floor. Before Eric could make his escape, she joined him next to the canvas and wrapped a slim arm around his waist.

"It's almost finished," she said as she analyzed the portrait. "I have to say, it turned out quite beautifully."

Eric nodded. "I expect we'll finish today. Tomorrow at the latest."

"Well, no point in rushing," Rebecca purred. "Leba hasn't yet arrived anyway."

Eric frowned. He would have wondered if she'd even contacted the High Mother at all if he hadn't seen her make the call. "Let's hope she does soon. I'm not sure the Ancients are very patient people."

Rebecca shrugged. "They'll wait." She pulled his hand and drew him toward the couch. Eric reluctantly went, half because he couldn't cross her in such a situation and half because he had no real way to stop her. Her superior strength overwhelmed him.

They sat down on the sofa, or rather, Eric sat, and Rebecca climbed on top of him to nibble on his neck. "Mmm... You taste well. Still a bit of lingering humanity. I could eat you up."

Eric didn't like that thought very much. Thankfully, he didn't have to find out whether Rebecca intended to eat him or not. A cleared throat interrupted her and literally saved Eric's neck. Over Rebecca's shoulder, Eric offered Keenan a thankful smile. His lover smiled back, although his expression became cool as Rebecca turned toward him. "Ah, Keenan," she said. "How nice of you to visit. Won't you join us? I'm sure you'd love to have a little fun between the three of us."

Keenan sauntered to the sofa, completely disregarding Rebecca's position on top of Eric. He pecked Eric on the cheek and replied, "Thank you. I'm honored, but I don't think we have the time. I believe Leba should be here any minute now."

"Did she call?" Rebecca asked with a frown.

"Her assistant did. She said her flight would get here in a few hours."

Rebecca got off Eric, and Eric suppressed a sigh of relief. "I suppose we have to finish the painting then," Eric said.

Rebecca waved a hand, disregarding his words. "Later." She sat back on the sofa and retrieved a small golden bell. She rang it, and a



few seconds later, a tall, Latin man entered the room. “You called, Your Ladyship?”

Rebecca nodded, looking bored. She spread her legs, revealing the wet labia of her pussy. “Come on. You know what to do.”

The man approached, watching his mistress with fascinated, awestruck eyes. He knelt at Rebecca’s feet, and he reached to the apex of her thighs. He went slowly and carefully, almost as if he was afraid he would break her if he moved too fast. Or perhaps, he feared she would break him.

Neither of the two happened. The man penetrated her with one thick finger, and Rebecca sighed softly. Her white hand reached to tease her nipples, and she relaxed against the sofa, exposing the white column of her neck.

The man buried his face between her legs, and Rebecca gasped, biting her lip with her now-showing fangs. Her other hand went to the man’s hair, and she gripped it hard, pushing his face into her pussy. The man moaned, obviously not bothered in the slightest.

Eric couldn’t help but think that she looked beautiful in her pleasure. Even with the edge of wickedness she still exuded, something about the carnality of the act seemed to purify her. For once, she didn’t enter his mind or try to manipulate. Perhaps he should have painted her like this.

In Eric’s mind, Keenan chuckled. “*You never learn, pet. Come on. You’ve seen enough. You’ll finish the painting later.*”

Eric nodded and took the hand Keenan offered. Together, they exited the studio, leaving Rebecca and her willing slave behind. Eric thought he heard a cry behind them, then something hard hit the floor, but he didn’t even consider going back to watch. Rebecca’s manipulations aside, they needed to prepare for meeting the High Mother. Perhaps they’d even manage to steal a few moments of their own beforehand. They certainly needed it.

\* \* \* \*

Kneeling on the cool tarmac, Keenan kept his head down in a deep bow as the High Mother approached. Her steps were silent, almost inaudible, but they all felt the aura of power around her. Keenan hoped she would understand why they'd dared to summon her. She didn't take lightly to being messed with.

"You're quite right, my dear Keenan," Leba said in that kind, matronly tone she used so often. "But I trust you wouldn't have requested a meeting if the need weren't dire."

"Indeed, High Mother. Your help is of utmost importance."

Instead of a reply, Leba came even closer and softly caressed his hair. The caress turned into a tight grip as she squeezed his scalp with a strength that belied her kind appearance. Keenan didn't move a muscle, knowing she was reading his mind and she could destroy him if she so desired.

Keenan did his best to ignore the discomfort of being so thoroughly analyzed. To his relief, Leba kept her invasion in Keenan's mind short. "I see," she murmured as she let go of Keenan's hair. She stepped away from him. Keenan guessed that she now knew why they'd called her here. Hopefully, her neutral response meant she agreed to Keenan's assessment of the situation.

"Children, rise," she urged them all. Keenan obeyed, all the while aware of all the vampires who did the same around him. Other than him, Eric, and Rebecca, three of the vampires belonging to Rebecca's household had come to welcome the High Mother to the island: Greta, the woman who'd taken their call; Luis, the man they'd met in such a unique way in the studio; and Jenna, whom Keenan had learned provided the island with everything necessary for Rebecca's lavish life.

Leba swept her gaze over them, and Keenan felt the weight of her scrutiny as if it were a palpable thing. He didn't falter, though, knowing Leba would not appreciate weakness. She knew his mind

and his character. Keenan had nothing to fear as long as he showed proper respect.

Leba's lips twisted in a barely visible smile. "Come. Let us discuss this Ancient issue, Keenan."

On cue, Rebecca gestured them to the car that would lead them to her obscenely huge mansion. "Right this way, High Mother."

Leba followed, and the six of them entered a luxurious limousine. Leba didn't even spare a word for Rebecca and her two companions. Instead, she turned to Eric. "Eric van der Bilt. How is your new life as a vampire?"

"It's quite interesting, High Mother. Thank you."

Keenan suspected she knew exactly what Eric's life as a vampire was like, and couldn't help a small wince. He'd neglected taking care of Eric lately. Perhaps it was a good thing Cassandra sired Eric. With his jealous nature, he could have pushed Eric into something tragic. Cassandra had basically force-fed Eric during the time he and Keenan had been apart. Without her, who knew what might have happened?

*"You're being too dramatic, Keenan."* Leba's voice sounded in his head, making him jump. *"Vampires are by nature passionate creatures, and passion transforms into jealousy. Eric understands, and he loves you."*

Eric squeezed Keenan's hand and leaned against him. Ignoring Rebecca's scowl, Keenan smiled at Leba. *"Thank you, High Mother."*

He had no idea why someone like her would be remotely interested in his love life, but it did mean a lot to him. Perhaps she just wanted to be nice. No one understood the High Mother. Keenan didn't even want to try.

Leba smiled mysteriously at him, but said nothing else. *"Do you think she will help, Keenan?"* Eric said through their connection.

*"Maybe. Let's hope so."*

They refrained from speaking again, knowing that most likely, Leba could hear them as well. The limousine reached Rebecca's house, and they all exited the car. Rebecca's staff waited outside,

dressed in fine black livery, bowing low. Human and vampire, they all understood the importance of a visit from the High Mother.

Leba paid them no heed and simply walked past them. “Rebecca, dear,” she said pleasantly, as if she hadn’t ignored Rebecca during the entire drive. “Could you arrange for a room where I can chat with Eric and Keenan?”

Rebecca lowered her head in respect. “Certainly, High Mother. My house is at your disposal.” She gestured toward one of the servants. “Klaus, is everything prepared?”

“Yes, mistress,” the man said.

Rebecca nodded. “Good.” Turning toward them, she told Leba, “If you’ll follow me, I’ve made some arrangements for your arrival.”

Leba didn’t say anything else as they all walked down a long corridor and up a winding staircase. Keenan suppressed a sigh. Compared to this place, his penthouse in the Tower was a homeless man’s shelter. He understood the point of it, though. The needs of a person grew directly proportional to his or her age, or at least, it happened like that for vampires. The more they lived, the more power, money, and luxury they needed.

Truth be told, there were a couple who’d grown tired even of this type of existence. In Keenan’s case, just being on this island turned tiresome, not because of the decoration, but due to its owner.

Thankfully, they reached their destination quite quickly. “This is my office,” Rebecca said as she opened the large wooden door. “You are welcome to use it for as long as you like.”

They entered a large room furnished with tasteful antiques that probably cost as much as the limo outside, if not more. Leba looked around, nodded, and gave Rebecca a telling look. Rebecca understood the dismissal and bowed again. “Again, it is an honor to have you here. Whatever you need is, as always, at your disposal.”

Rebecca closed the door behind her. Leba sat down and wiped a nonexistent piece of lint off her sedate gray skirt. Keenan and Eric both remained standing, waiting for her to speak.

“Let’s get right to business. I see that you believe we should help the Ancients find their brother. I have to agree that they do indeed seem dangerous. But why should we have to bother with giving them aid? Why not eliminate them altogether?”

Eric gave Keenan a panicked look, but remained silent. Keenan licked his dry lips, knowing these moments were of utmost importance for them all. If something happened to Lucien, Gabriel would not survive it. And as much as Keenan disliked the young Kaldorian, Eric cared about Gabriel. Keenan wanted to avoid his pet’s suffering at all cost.

Leba arched a brow. “Let me clarify that. Other than personal reasons, why not eliminate the Ancients off the face of the planet?”

Keenan took a deep breath and forced himself to think objectively. “We would be losing an important ally. Not only that, but we don’t know whether more Ancients will show up and how we’ll be able to deal with that,” he replied. “The situation with the demon covens is unstable as it is, but with the Ancients involved it could escalate to war.”

Leba nodded. “I could just refuse to help you.” Her gray gaze softened, and she actually smiled at them. “Let’s say you convinced me. I’ll help you just this once. Let’s take it as a welcome gift for Eric in the vampire world.”

Eric gaped at her words. “High Mother, I am honored. I—”

Leba lifted a hand, stopping him from uttering another word. “Be silent, fledgling, and accept the generosity of your elders. Now...Keenan, if we’re talking about France, you know the Sidhe are most powerful there. Go to the court of the Sidhe royals and ask about this brother of theirs. They will probably refuse to help you, but you have to try regardless.”

Keenan agreed with her opinion on the Sidhe. At this point, they probably didn’t like him very much.

“Now, do you have a piece of paper and a pen?”

Eric hastily retrieved the desired items off Rebecca's desk and offered them to Leba. The High Mother took them and scribbled a number and a name on the paper. "As soon as you get to Paris, you call this number and say I sent you. They will help you hack into the Sidhe database after the royals refuse you."

Keenan took the paper and put it away in his jacket. If the High Mother said these people would help, he didn't doubt it would be exactly so. "Thank you, High Mother. You are most generous."

"One more thing, Keenan. I have not forgotten about the issue with Ulrike's death and the attack on Aidan, you, and Eric. You are all my children, and I dislike the fact that the person responsible has not been punished."

Keenan felt himself flush. Back in New York, Pierre D'Argent, the traitor who'd been behind the attacks, had been defeated by his own brother, Jean Luc. At that time, Keenan captured Pierre, but he'd been forced by Jean Luc's guard, Michel, to let the traitor go. In exchange, Michel saved Jacob's life, after the werewolf had been attacked by hunters.

"I know you had good reason to act as you did," Leba said. "However, the fact remains that, one way or another, Pierre D'Argent must pay for his crimes."

"I will find him, High Mother," Keenan replied. "Him and Jean Luc."

"Very good, Keenan. I know I can count on you." With another smile, she got up. "Eric, come here. I still need to give you your present."

Eric's eyes widened, and he stepped forward obediently. Keenan almost stopped his lover from doing so. He wasn't sure he wanted Leba close to Eric, not after the terror he'd experienced last time.

Leba laughed. "Don't worry, Keenan," she said as she took Eric's hand. "I won't hurt him. Much."

Keenan gasped as Leba sunk her teeth into Eric's neck. For a second, Eric tried to struggle, but then he went limp. Keenan himself couldn't move a muscle, frozen by the power of the High Mother.

*"Oh, God, please don't hurt him,"* he mentally begged, knowing she would hear him. *"This was my idea. If I showed disrespect in summoning you here, kill me."*

Leba didn't answer, but she did let go of her hold on Eric's throat. She licked the wound on his neck clean, and it immediately closed. Eric stood there, like a beautiful porcelain doll, the only sign he was alive the motion of his chest as he breathed. Leba tore into her own wrist with her fangs then brought it to Eric's mouth. "Go on, fledgling. Take what I'm offering."

Eric snapped out of his frozen daze and stared at Leba's wrist in awe. "You can say no, if you so desire, but I won't offer again."

Keenan could tell Eric felt uncomfortable with taking blood from someone other than him or Cassandra. But then, he looked into Leba's eyes and his stance relaxed. Their connection overflowed with warmth, a deep affection Keenan couldn't understand. *"I don't understand it myself, Keenan,"* Eric said softly in his mind.

Keenan gaped at the sight of the High Mother sharing her blood with Eric. Why? Why would she do something like that? To his knowledge, she'd never even shared blood with the elders.

"I'm honored," he replied. He took hold of the High Mother's wrist gently, as if he were afraid he'd break her, and pressed his mouth to the wound.

Leba's eyes turned to Keenan, and she gestured him forward. "Come, Keenan. Don't be afraid."

Keenan realized that he could again move. The rational part of him didn't know what she wanted him to do, but his instincts did. As Eric sucked at Leba's wrist, Keenan walked to his lover. Holding an arm against Eric's waist, he buried his fangs into his lover's throat.

The experience felt powerful, sensual, yet so different than anything Keenan had ever experienced. Through Eric's body, Keenan

could sense and taste Leba's power. She was giving the both of them an amazing gift, and Keenan felt guilty for ever doubting her.

Images and feelings flooded both their minds. Sunshine, laughter of children, a little boy with green eyes growing into a handsome young man. The warmth of a family, then blood, so much blood, mixing with the cold, dead earth. Anger and vengeance. The swish of a blade. Then darkness.

Keenan couldn't make any sense out of the erratic slideshow, and he didn't have time to see more. A small sign from Leba's hand stopped them both. Eric echoed her motion from earlier and swept his tongue over the bite mark. They were both buzzing with the rush of Leba's blood, as if they'd been drugged with a powerful potion. Keenan hugged Eric against his chest tight, his entire body thrumming with energy. Embarrassment flooded him as he realized he was hard, with Leba right there.

The High Mother gave them both a quizzical look. "You're both more powerful than I expected." She paused, as if considering her words. "Now come. I am an old woman, and I need my rest."

In spite of everything, Keenan almost laughed at that. She was much stronger and more agile than any one of them. He kept a straight face, though, and opened the door for her. "Certainly, High Mother. I'm sure Rebecca has prepared you a room."

Leba sighed thoughtfully. "Ah, yes, Rebecca. I have to do something about that girl. She's grown so..."

She shook her head, obviously not willing to implicate Keenan in elder issues. "Go, Keenan. Find the Ancient's brother and the Sidhe. Report back to me."

A servant appeared around the corner of the hallway, and Leba called her closer. "You there, I'd like to go to my room now."

"Certainly, High Mother," the woman said. "Right this way."

Leba turned to follow the servant, but as she started walking away, she spoke again. "I expect swift and successful results, Keenan. Good luck."



Keenan and Eric both bowed. "It will be done," Keenan said.

Leba disappeared down the corridor, and Keenan let out a sigh of relief. As soon as she was out of sight, he pulled Eric to him and growled. "Pet, I want you."

Eric came to him willingly, wrapping his arms around Keenan's neck. Keenan didn't waste any time and took his lover into his arms. Eric shifted into his hold, and Keenan started running in the direction opposite Leba's.

Their room seemed farther away than Keenan remembered. He passed by confused servants, pushing them aside in an attempt to clear his way. He distantly acknowledged that he went so fast the humans couldn't even see him, but he couldn't care less about them.

They burst inside the guest bedroom with such violence, Keenan thought the door cracked. He dumped Eric on the bed and made quick work of their clothes. "I'm sorry, pet," he said. "This will be hard and fast."

"Oh, God, Keenan... Yes, please, yes!"

Keenan spat in his hand and used the saliva to slick up his hard-as-nails dick. He flipped Eric onto his stomach and spread the enticing cheeks of Eric's ass to reveal that sweet hole he was so addicted to.

Eric trembled as Keenan rubbed his thumb across his opening. A sweet sound escaped his lips, making Keenan's dick throb. His desire for Eric swirled out of control. It was bloodlust and terror, passion and love at the same time, the most powerful emotions that anyone could ever experience. Keenan thought that if he didn't make Eric his in that very moment, he would explode.

Keenan pushed one finger inside Eric's body, testing his pet's passage. God, Eric was tight. The very thought of that velvet warmth squeezing his dick drove Keenan crazy. Where the fuck was the lube? Damn it, he couldn't remember. Did they even have any left?

"It's okay, Keenan," Eric said, panting. "You won't hurt me. I want you now."

Keenan shook his head, more to himself than to Eric. That sweet opening wanted something else. Eric's body ached for more, for being thoroughly fucked and possessed. Keenan could see it in the way the tiny hole twitched, in the strain of Eric's muscle, in the thin thread of sweat weaving its way across Eric's body.

Smiling to himself, Keenan licked it off, kissing down Eric's back with greed. He finally reached to Eric's ass and exposed the hole. He licked his lips and swept a fang over a butt cheek. Eric whimpered, pushing his ass up, silently pleading for more. Keenan was happy to oblige. Without giving his pet any warning, he buried his face between those delectable buttocks and feasted on his lover's hole.

His lover's sinful taste exploded over his taste buds, almost like when they fed off each other, but not quite. Keenan thrust his tongue deep into his lover's passage, mimicking a fucking motion and massaging the inside walls with everything he had. He wanted to give Eric the most extreme of pleasures, the most dangerous and intense sensations. With Eric, he could go beyond the limits of common sexuality into the raw carnality of the blood-bonded. He could take both of their souls, their essences, mingle them and taste them in his mouth. And through their mental connection, Eric could feel them, as well.

Eric arched his back and howled. He fucked Keenan's face with abandon, begging and pleading for more. Keenan lost himself in Eric's voice, in Eric's taste, and almost came right there, on the spot. He barely managed to stop himself from exploding all over the covers. As much as he appreciated paranormal stamina, this time, his dick wanted to pour everything it had into Eric's ass.

Keenan held Eric down and slid his tongue from Eric's body. He shifted Eric on the bed, keeping his lover still on all fours. In a single thrust, he embedded his cock in Eric's channel. Both of them groaned in unison at the flood of sensation, the sensual intensity of the moment overwhelming their senses. Even the colors seemed brighter, stronger.

Over and over, Keenan buried himself inside his lover, hard and fast, just like he'd promised. Eric thrust back against him, trembling and gasping. "God, Keenan," his lover begged, "yes, there! More! Harder!"

With every word that escaped Eric's beautiful mouth, Keenan felt his reason falter. He fell more and more into instinct, the desire to possess so strong it took hold of every cell in his body. Faster and faster he went, until the heat between them turned almost unbearable. He burned with a flame that could only be compared to the fire of the sun, bursting into his flesh at dawn. But somehow, it didn't hurt. This blaze that engulfed his entire body in molten lava made him feel all powerful, a god on Earth. Eric. Keenan's lover, his sun, his stars, his everything.

Even if he'd just tasted Eric's blood only minutes ago, it suddenly felt like hours. He wanted to feel his pet's essence in his mouth, just like he'd tasted Eric's body. His fangs, already lowered in the heat of passion, dove into Eric's throat. The pain and the pleasure exploded in Keenan's body, through his connection with Eric. Eric's channel tightened around his dick, and they came together, their orgasms sweeping them in a whirlpool of pleasure.

Keenan filled Eric's ass with his seed, retracted his fangs, and licked the wound. His dick slipped out of his lover's body, now spent. Exhausted, he collapsed on top of Eric. Not wanting to squash Eric with his larger bulk, he rolled off his lover onto the bed. Eric cuddled at his side, breathing hard.

Keenan's heart overflowed with emotion. "God, pet, I love you." He knew that many spoke these words after the heat of sex and didn't mean it. Keenan, however, meant it fully and every time. He was so in love with Eric it should've scared him. He knew, though, that Eric loved him back.

"You're right about that," Eric said with a smile. "I love you, too."

They remained like that, embracing, recovering from the orgasm, reluctant to go back to the real world. As the afterglow started to fade, the affection and love remained, keeping them in bed, next to each other. But the events of the day encroached on Keenan's mind, and he knew Eric realized their importance as well.

"That went better than I expected," he began.

Eric let out a pretty laugh. "What? The two of us making love?"

"You know what I mean. The meeting with Leba."

Eric let out a sigh. "I don't know, Keenan. What happens when we find Jean Luc? He's not a bad man. And Pierre...He's done so many things, but he's sick. You said it yourself. It's that DSS thing."

Jean Luc had explained to them that Pierre suffered from a disease that affected many Sidhe, the Dark Side Syndrome. At that time, Keenan believed Jean Luc. The Pierre he'd first known years back would have never even thought of killing someone. Yet the fact remained that Pierre had killed and hurt many vampires, and Jean Luc covered for his brother. Quite honestly, he didn't know what to tell Eric. "Leba knows about the DSS. She will be fair in her judgment."

Eric shook his head. "It's not that I don't trust the High Mother. Of course I do, especially after today, but it's just that I've been thinking. I remember what being sick is like. I'm still not over it. I'm not sure other people understand." Eric frowned. "I don't like Pierre. He nearly killed me and you. But I don't want him to die either."

Keenan wrapped an arm around Eric and drew his lover closer. "You're too kind for our world, Eric. No wonder Leba likes you so much."

Eric cuddled closer into Keenan's embrace. "I think I remind her of someone, of that boy in her memories."

Keenan nodded. "Could be. I wonder who she was back then, what really happened."

"I don't suppose we'll ever know," Eric replied. "It's her secret. It means a lot that she even cared enough to share that with us."

Keenan pecked Eric's forehead in a gentle kiss. "We'll keep it to ourselves. Now come. We have to pack our bags and talk to Rebecca. You need to finish that damn painting, too, so that she can't call us back here."

Eric moaned in protest and clung to Keenan, trying to keep him down when Keenan attempted to move off the bed. "I want to stay here and sleep."

Keenan chuckled. "Remember, pet. We have a task to do."

Eric's expression sobered. He sighed and released Keenan from his hold. "At least we have that phone number. Gabriel and his family need some help after all they've been through."

Keenan smiled at Eric's words. He couldn't help it. His lover's warm heart had been one of the reasons he'd fallen for Eric in the first place. "They do indeed, pet. They do, indeed."

## Chapter Eleven

They arrived in New York one week after their departure. Rebecca tried to stall them some more, but Eric managed to finish the painting in record time, regardless. He was quite proud of how it turned out. Too bad the model would never appreciate it.

They didn't see the High Mother again. Eric still wondered what the implications of the honor she'd bestowed upon him would be. He would never understand the High Mother fully, but he did know that her welcome would have lasting effects on his future.

When they finally reached the Tower, they didn't get much rest before they needed to leave once more. Kalin seemed even more restless than during their first meeting, and Eric guessed the time apart from Cade wore on Gabriel's brother. He'd insisted on departing at once, and none of them protested.

This time, the destination was Paris, France. Together with Kalin, Giovanni, and Lucca, they would be meeting Cade at the airport in Paris, then plan their next move. They'd have to call the number they'd received from the High Mother and make arrangements on that front as well.

The flight to the French capital was, for the most part, tense, ripe with uncertainties and frustration. Eric tried to make things better for everyone, all the while fearing he'd just be making it worse. Thankfully, Kalin appreciated his attempt at conversation in a platonic way, and Keenan kept his jealousy in check. By the time they'd landed in the Charles de Gaulle airport, Eric felt somewhat better about the whole thing.

Airports still made him feel uncomfortable because of the number of minds engulfing him in a sea of erratic thoughts. Even so, he had Keenan by his side, and their connection focused him and helped him block out the mental assault.

He wasn't surprised at all when he felt a powerful presence nearby. Kalin continued to chat with him amiably, but Eric knew the Kaldorian couldn't have missed it either. Why didn't the Kaldorian welcome his lover? What was the reason for the hidden pain Eric felt before?

Before Eric could even try to find an answer to these questions, a tall blond man made his way toward them. Like Lucien, Cade exuded a presence that was larger than life, and he seemed to be just as possessive and protective as Keenan. It felt weird to compare his own lover with Kalin's, but he found so many common points it almost scared him. Maybe Keenan had been an Ancient in a different life. Or maybe people in love weren't all that different.

Cade greeted his lover with a branding kiss, very much like the ones Keenan liked to bestow on Eric.

"Hello, love," Cade whispered, but Eric still heard him. Perhaps Kalin's concerns—whatever they were—had been unjustified.

"Hi," Kalin murmured right back, his face flushed. It surprised Eric to see Kalin look so dazed. Even in the short time he'd known the Kaldorian, Eric noticed Kalin always seemed on guard, always informed, never allowing anything to keep him from tasks. The only one who'd come close to distracting him had been Gabriel, but even in the presence of his young sibling, Kalin still kept the same aloof mask. Eric knew a soldier when he saw one. Yet now, with just a kiss, Cade somehow managed to demolish all that. The desire and the passion weren't one-sided, either. Even through his barriers and among so many people, Eric caught Cade's desperate need for his mate, his happiness at being reunited, tinged with a healthy dose of concern. It made Eric smile and want to cry at the same time. Damn,

reunions always made him so emotional, and this particular one had so many layers it made his head hurt.

Kalin recovered quickly, though, and went on to introduce everyone there to Cade. “This is Eric, a good friend of Gabriel’s. This is Keenan von Klein, Aidan von Klein’s brother. He was very helpful in finding Gabriel. The two gentlemen here are Lucca and Giovanni di Moretti. They’re...They’re contacts that might be useful in our search.”

Kalin paused as he spoke of Lucca and Giovanni, and Eric wondered if the Kaldorian had a problem with the two incubi. “It’s just that the demons here on Earth were largely responsible for this situation in the first place,” Keenan explained. “From what I understand, the covens in Europe weren’t very helpful in their search for Gabriel either. It’s natural that Kalin and Cade are a bit reluctant to trust.”

Eric agreed with Keenan. He’d seen with his own eyes how bad the demons on Earth could be when they’d first found Gabriel. Lucca and Giovanni were different, though, and in time, they would prove it to the two Kaldorians.

“Everyone, this is my mate, Cade, first son of Kings Seyran and Lyan of Xeetha,” Kalin finished.

“Pleased to meet you,” Cade said pleasantly as he extended his hand.

Much to his dismay, Eric couldn’t help but be a little too enthusiastic in his greeting. “I’m very happy to meet you,” he said as he took hold of Cade’s hand. Thankfully, his own palm was protected by leather, because he had a feeling he couldn’t have taken the assault of Cade’s intense emotions. “I’ve heard a lot about you from Gabriel.”

Cade didn’t comment on his eagerness. In truth, Eric felt more than a little curious about Kalin and Cade. He wanted to know why the two of them seemed to dance around each other so much. Did the physical distance during their quest affect them so much, or was it



something else? What could turn such an intense love so strained? Eric wanted, no, he needed, to find out, so that he could avoid it happening to him and Keenan.

Keenan gave him a chastising look, and Eric winced. "Settle down, pet. We've come here to help, remember?" his lover said. "*And stop worrying,*" Keenan mentally continued. "*Never again. I promise you. Never again.*"

As the demons—both earthling and Kaldorian—talked, Eric pressed a small kiss to Keenan's cheek. "*When do we tell them about plan B?*"

"*Soon,*" Keenan replied. "*Just wanted to meet Cade before we discussed it.*"

"*Let's hope everything will turn out all right. I really want to help them.*"

"*I know, pet,*" Keenan said, a smile in his mental voice. "*You want to help everyone.*"

Once the session of pleasantries ended, Keenan pointed out the necessity of getting down to business. "Now, maybe we should take this someplace else and discuss it more elaborately?"

Everyone seemed just as willing to start on their quest. The only dilemma turned out to be their means of transportation and their accommodations during the stay in Paris. In the end, Cade agreed to allow Keenan to deal with this aspect, given that his car couldn't hold all of them. Eric mentally thanked whoever watched over them that Cade seemed to be quite open and cooperative. He didn't want more conflict between Keenan and the Kaldorians.

Once the decision was made and the bags retrieved, they all shuffled out of the airport to the already waiting limousine. The chauffeur greeted them with excessive politeness, bowing almost as low as they themselves had bowed in front of Leba. "Welcome to Paris, *Monsieur von Klein, Messieurs*. I am André, and I will be your driver for today."

The man opened the car door for them, politely gesturing them inside. “Thank you, André,” Keenan said, acknowledging the chauffeur’s gesture with a regal nod.

Unsurprised by this development, Eric seated himself in the back of the car, inhaling the now familiar smell of leather. Eric thought he could even smell the money used to pay for this car—an exorbitant amount, no doubt—but it was probably just his impression.

His companions followed his example, with Keenan seated at his side and Giovanni next to Keenan. Kalin, Cade, and Lucca sat across them.

“Take us to *Hotel de Crillon*,” Keenan told André when the man sat in the driver’s seat.

“*Oui, Monsieur.*”

The separator between the passengers’ seats and the driver side closed, giving them the privacy they would need for a delicate discussion. As the car started, Cade arched a brow. “You really do like to travel in style. This whole thing feels very familiar.”

Keenan chuckled. “I assume you’re referring to your brief visit in Japan.”

Cade nodded. “The same thing—chauffeur, limousine, five-star hotel.”

“It’s vampire protocol for important guests,” Keenan replied.

Eric thought the idea of “vampire protocol” sounded very pompous and was an excuse for being unnecessarily lavish. Then again, when people had as much money as Keenan did, they either spent a lot or not at all.

“Either way,” Keenan continued, “now that we’re in a more appropriate location, we can discuss the issue we’re here for.”

Cade gave Keenan a thoughtful look. “What about the driver?”

“He’s human,” Eric replied. “He won’t hear a thing.”

Eric could vouch for the safety measures vampires used in all their endeavors. By now, he’d ridden in more limousines than he could count, and he knew that each and every one had bulletproof windows

and enforced glass separators. Their staff was handpicked and tested through the most thorough of methods. They took their safety and the secrecy of their existence very seriously. If Keenan arranged for this vehicle, it meant there could be no better location to discuss the matter at hand.

Their visitors didn't contradict them, and without further ado, Cade started speaking. "I believe my mate explained the basics of the problem to you."

"Yes, your brother was presumed dead, but now you realize he is actually still alive here in France," Keenan replied.

"That's true. We, that is, Lucien and I, first felt his presence in Siberia, where the portal from Kaldor left us. At first, we believed it to be because of Gabriel."

"That couldn't have been it," Eric replied. "Gabriel wasn't even remotely close to that area."

Cade nodded. "Something didn't feel right to me. Then, during our quest and all throughout Europe, Lucien started to have strong headaches. They increased exponentially as Lucien and Kalin advanced westward. When I found out Gabriel's location, my suspicions were confirmed. I know Cain has to be alive. Somehow, his trail led from Siberia into France."

"How do you know your brother hasn't gone even farther west?" Keenan asked.

"While I waited for you to arrive, I scouted around. The trail is starting to feel weaker in Paris, but as I left the city and went in the direction of the mountains, it strengthened once again. I believe he advanced that way."

As Cade spoke, Eric wondered why the Kaldorian even needed their help. Cade seemed to know his brother was in France and what general direction to take to find him.

"I don't get it," he couldn't help but say. "If all that you claim is true, then you could very well detect your brother on your own."

Cade shook his head. "It doesn't work like that. It's not a compass or a beacon. It's more like a migraine that doesn't leave me be. I can't keep running around with headaches as an only guide. Cain won't stay in one place either, so the chances of finding him without serious help are slim to none."

"I suppose you are correct," Keenan replied. "Well, we've managed to enlist the assistance of a very powerful vampire. She suggested we go talk to the Sidhe here, then, if they refuse to assist us, hack into their mainframe. Anything moves in France, and they know about it. They'd have it documented in their main systems, as well."

"I see," Cade replied. "Why do I get the feeling there's more to it than just helping us out with this?"

Eric admired Cade's ability to discern the fact that they did indeed have another goal in mind. He himself wasn't fond of that goal, but the mission needed to be done regardless.

"Our reasons are our own," Keenan replied. The words could have seemed standoffish, but they came out friendly, to the extent Keenan could be friendly to an Ancient he'd just met. "Now, as we see to arrange dealing with the Sidhe, Giovanni and Lucca will look into some sources in the demon covens."

"Do you think it'll help?" Kalin asked. "When Lucien and I came here to Paris, we weren't exactly discreet or nice in our query."

"We know," Lucca replied. "Not to worry. We have our ways."

"We'll talk more when we get to the hotel," Keenan decided. "Now let me call these people so we'll get this out of the way and know what to do next."

Eric waited as Keenan retrieved his cell phone, brought up the contacts list, and selected the right one. "Who is he calling again?" Kalin asked.

Keenan gave him a barely perceivable nod, and Eric took it as permission to detail their plan B a little. "A man named Flèche," he replied.

“Flesh?” Cade repeated. “What does he do when he’s not hacking computers, deal in prostitution?”

“Not flesh as in body,” Keenan clarified. “Flèche, the French for arrow.”

Cade made an “ah” sound, and Eric continued to explain. “We don’t know much about him, but since we did receive his name from a very reliable source...”

Cade looked like he wanted to say something, but the call connected before the conversation could continue. Through his keen senses, Eric heard an unknown male voice answer. “This better be good. *Ouais? Que diable voulez-vous?*”

Eric gave Keenan a confused look. The man at the other side of the receiver sounded pissed off and hungover. Had they gotten the number wrong or what?

Keenan looked completely unaffected. “Hello, my name is Keenan von Klein,” he replied in his most “don’t-fuck-with-me” tone. “I am looking for someone named Flèche.”

A pause and a low curse signaled the fact that their “contact” realized his mistake. Another voice appeared in the background, and then a different person greeted them. “*Bonjour, Monsieur,*” a soft female voice said. “My apologies for my vulgar companion. I understand a common acquaintance has mentioned our name as a possible aid in a certain problem.”

Eric wondered if this was the famous Flèche. The man appeared to know that Leba directed them here as well, only he’d been too drunk to care. Then again, the woman said “our name.” What did that mean?

“Quite so,” Keenan replied. “You are probably aware of the delicacy and importance of the issue.”

“Yes, we’ve been told. Have you landed in Paris already? We did not expect you so soon.”

“We are in Paris, yes. Where can you meet us?”

"Tomorrow, at dusk. There's a small coffee shop on Saint Germain, *Moineau en Vol*." The woman paused. "I'm afraid that we only meet people of your kind and mine, if you understand what I mean."

"That's all right, for our first meeting. Afterwards, you'll have to meet our companions, too."

"Very well," the woman replied, although she now sounded a bit irritated. "Until tomorrow, *Monsieur von Klein*."

"*Au revoir*. Whoever you are."

Keenan snapped his phone shut with a frustrated sigh. "*I hate this kind of people*," he mentally told Eric. "*They think that being a vampire means they don't have to obey orders*."

"*They were very rude*," Eric replied. "*Let's say the first man was drunk, but the woman didn't even introduce herself*."

Shaking his head, Keenan turned to the other people in the car. "You heard, right?"

"Not very promising," Cade muttered.

"Don't worry about it," Keenan said, clutching the phone in his fist so hard Eric was surprised it didn't break. "I don't appreciate being disrespected. These people will help us, or else."

Cade nodded, looking a bit appeased. "We'll call our contact in the covens once we get to the hotel," Lucca piped in.

Eric threw a glance through the car, at all the men intent on solving this mystery. Each for their own reasons, they had all become involved in this thing. Perhaps together, they'd actually succeed.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan looked around the small coffee shop in search of the people he was supposed to meet. By his side, Eric scouted the room as well, biting his lip in thought.

"How are we even supposed to recognize these people?"

"Trust me," Keenan said. "We'll know."

And he did indeed know. Vampires could discern their kind from any other type of paranormal, but Keenan didn't count on that particular aspect to help him. After all, their mysterious helpers may intend to throw him off and fill the café with a hundred different vampires. It pissed him off that the woman on the phone hadn't even bothered to give him a description, but in the end, it didn't matter. Even if the woman did intend to childishly sabotage him, Keenan had an eye for suspicious-looking individuals. Eric's psychic powers and his own would do the rest.

The café was filled to capacity when they arrived, but Keenan noticed with surprise that most of the customers were human. He did detect a vampiric presence somewhere around the back, so he started in that direction. He cloaked himself just enough so that the gaze of the humans would slide off them, but their contacts wouldn't have the same problem.

As he progressed through the crowd, he saw two people, a man and a woman, sitting at a small table, two seemingly untouched cups in front of them. They analyzed Keenan and Eric, not even trying to be inconspicuous about their observation. The woman nodded toward them in a silent greeting, and Keenan wondered if she was the person he'd talked with on the phone. Not that they had much choice. No one else in the café emanated paranormal energies. If these people intended to double-cross him, Keenan would find out.

Together with Eric, Keenan made his way to the table. He sat down wordlessly, and Eric followed his example. Keenan admired the way his lover was dealing with this. Even if he could feel Eric's nervousness, none of it came out in his movements or expression. He seemed as calm and collected as Keenan himself.

"Mr. von Klein, I presume?" the woman began, looking toward Keenan. Keenan recognized her voice as belonging to the woman he'd spoken with before. When he nodded, she threw a look toward Eric. "And your companion is..."

"I'd rather know who you are first," Keenan said coolly. "You didn't bother to introduce yourself on the phone."

"Don't get snappish with me, Mr. von Klein," she said. "I can very well get up and leave."

Eric snorted and gave her an amused look. "Can you?"

Keenan mentally chuckled at his pet's comeback. Eric had a point, though. Being that they'd been sent by Leba, no vampire would dare refuse them. She was bluffing, and being stupid about it.

The man put a hand on the woman's arm. "Please, no sense in starting a fight. Alicia is quite adamant on security measures, and she is upset about working with people different than us."

"I understood that from the phone," Keenan replied, seeing the man as the more reasonable one in this duo. "However, the nature of this mission requires the close cooperation of all parties, and that includes our companions of various races."

The woman now identified as Alicia sighed and nodded. She didn't bother to seem happy about it, and Keenan found her attitude refreshing. At least if she didn't like something, she wouldn't pretend she did just for appearances' sake. "I see. Well, then, you have my apologies, Mr. von Klein." She didn't sound apologetic, but neither did she seem as hostile as before. "Perhaps we've started out on the wrong foot. I am Alicia Leveque, and this is Remi Dupont."

"Keenan von Klein, as you already know. And this is Eric van der Bilt."

Alicia's eyebrows shot up. "Oh? You're the famous Eric?"

Eric stared at the woman in silence. Keenan shared his pet's confusion. "Since when am I famous?" Eric asked.

Remi chuckled softly. "You can't expect to be considered likable by *her* and not have your name publicized all over the place. She didn't tell us you'd be coming as well, though."

"This changes things." Alicia smiled pleasantly. "Come, let's discuss this in a more private environment."



*“How does my presence here change anything, Keenan?”* Eric mentally asked Keenan.

Keenan wished he had a reply. If he wanted to be completely honest, he didn't care for this sudden shift in Alicia's attitude. It seemed to be genuine, but if so, what reasons would they have to welcome Eric like this? Obviously, Leba hadn't told them to be nice to Eric. It didn't make any sense.

The man lifted his hand to ask for the check. A waiter came, took their money, and thanked them for visiting. Keenan ignored everything in favor of taking hold of Eric's hand and pulling his lover close for a kiss. He didn't care they were in public. The humans wouldn't pay attention to them, and their vampire guides didn't matter. Did he want to point out Eric was under his protection? Maybe. Either way, he felt the acute need to touch his lover, to feel him close.

Neither Alicia nor Remi commented upon Keenan's display of affection. It couldn't have surprised them. If they knew about Eric, they must have found out that Keenan was his lover.

They walked out of the café, and Remi started walking down the boulevard. “It's not far,” he explained. “No need to take a car or anything.”

It turned out to be farther than Remi's words suggested, but the night was pleasantly cool and the Parisian lights beautiful around them. Keenan wrapped his arm around Eric's waist, and Eric leaned against him, his head against Keenan's shoulder. Remi and Alicia didn't intrude or speak again. For a few minutes, Keenan managed to ignore their guides and just revel in the romanticism of the moment.

“This is nice,” Eric murmured against his shoulder.

Keenan nodded. “We have to visit another time, just the two of us. The traditional romantic trip to Paris.”

They walked maybe half an hour, slowly leaving behind the bustle of the boulevard. Even with the hundreds of people around them,

Keenan still felt alone with Eric, as if the romantic magic of Paris created a protective bubble around them.

As Remi veered off to another street, though, the illusion of intimacy faded. “It’s here,” he said, pointing to a small building straight ahead. It had nothing special, just what one would’ve expected in a Parisian neighborhood in the sixth arrondissement. Classically pretty, to the point of quaint. In the distance, Keenan could even see the Jardin de Luxembourg. It made for an interesting location as a headquarters for vampiric hackers, and Keenan wondered what determined the duo to choose a place of meeting so close to their hiding spot.

They entered the building, and even from the doorway, Keenan was struck by the haunting notes of a guitar melody. “He’s at it again,” Alicia grumbled under her breath.

Remi tensed visibly. “He loves his music, and he’s good at it. Why do you persist in demeaning everything he does?”

“Not now, Remi, please,” Alicia snapped back.

Remi didn’t say anything else, but Keenan could tell Alicia’s words annoyed the other vampire. As they went up a flight of stairs, the music died out. “We have the whole building to ourselves,” Alicia explained. “Our equipment is in the studio on the top floor, but when we’re not working, we stay here, on the first floor.”

“What’s on the second floor?” Eric asked.

“The second floor is for our sire,” another male voice replied as the third door on the corridor opened. Keenan recognized him as the man who’d first replied to his call. He ignored the ugly look Alicia gave him and greeted them politely. “Hello, *Messieurs*. I’m Yves.”

“Yves. I take it you’re the gentleman with whom I spoke yesterday.”

Yves’ face flushed. “I had a bit too much to drink the night before.”

Keenan wondered how much a vampire needed to drink to get intoxicated, or even tipsy, but didn’t say anything. Eric, however,

gave Yves a friendly smile. "That's all right. Since you played such a beautiful song, we'll forget about that. It was you playing, right?"

Yves looked shocked at Eric's reply, and Keenan suppressed a groan. Typical of his pet to latch on to the artistic part of their quest. "Yes, it was me," Yves replied. "Thank you for the compliment."

Remi kissed Yves' cheek briefly. "See? What did I tell you?"

Alicia shook her head in exasperation. "Great, now he has someone else to encourage him."

"He does have talent," Keenan said. They all followed behind Alicia as she walked to another room, opened the door, and stepped inside. "But either way, we didn't come here to discuss this."

"Indeed," Yves replied, now sounding all-business. "While you were meeting with Alicia and Remi, I looked into what we're dealing with some more. We have an *exquis* task ahead of us."

"He means it'll be hard," Remi clarified.

Alicia snorted. "When exactly did you even look? While you were wasting time on your stupid music?"

"*Ma soeur*, enough, *s'il te plait*. There will be another time for this." Looking away from Alicia, Yves cleared his throat. "As I was saying, hacking into the Sidhe mainframe will not be easy, but it is doable. I take it you'll try it the easy, boring way first, right?"

"Yes," Keenan said with a nod. "I suspect that if things turn out the way the High Mother believes, we will be clashing with the Sidhe anyway. Their refusal to help will give us a standing point in case of conflict."

"I agree that it'll help, but not because of that," Remi answered. "Your presence will distract them, and we'll manage to sneak in with more ease. The point is getting in and out without being seen or felt."

"Still, I don't know if we'll have enough time to get all the data," Alicia said glumly.

Remi nodded. "We need someone to stall. The more time we have, the better the information. But I'm not sure how we could do that without giving away we're here."

Keenan could see the little wheels whirling in his lover's head. "A fire," Eric proposed. "Giovanni and Lucca can summon a fire."

"They'd realize it was demon-caused," Yves replied. "It would be suspicious."

"Not if I convince them it's a short circuit or something like that. If there aren't too many of them, it might work."

"It might, if you can do it," Alicia said, her voice skeptical. She probably knew Eric was a fledgling and didn't trust Eric to pull off something like that.

Eric hesitated. "In truth, I've only ever tried it with Keenan. I project images in the minds of the people I want to affect. It could fail abysmally, though, if I don't manage to create a link with them."

Keenan squeezed Eric's hand in encouragement. "It can work, pet. I'll help you out. We can do it together."

Keenan was good with astral projection, and Eric a powerful psychic in his own right. They could defeat the Sidhe guards if need be.

"Sounds good," Yves said. "Better than just having five minutes for getting in, getting the data, and getting out."

"We can do it," Remi said in an enthusiastic tone. "I have no doubt about it."

Alicia clapped her hands together. "Okay, then. Let's get to work."

\* \* \* \*

When they returned to their own hotel, Eric felt tired, but pleased. He'd actually taken a liking to the three hackers. They had interesting, unique personalities, and each in his own way had welcomed Eric in their home.

They'd basically established the rough sketch of their plan. Now they needed to consult their demon companions and they'd be all set.

Keenan retrieved his phone as they walked inside the lavish establishment. It rang for a few moments, then a familiar voice replied, “*Pronto?*”

“Lucca, we’re back. Can you pick up the Kaldorians and meet us in our room?”

“Sure.” Lucca sounded excited. “We have to talk, indeed.”

“You managed to get something out of your contacts?”

“Yes,” Lucca replied. “Come on up. We’ll discuss everything there.”

Keenan said good-bye and snapped the phone shut. “Seems things are looking up, pet,” he said to Eric.

Eric shared Keenan’s opinion. His stomach fluttered with nervousness and excitement. This was his first actual mission, second if he considered the attack on the demons of New York. They’d never planned to include him then, though, like a true part of the team. It was different now, and he didn’t want to let anyone down.

They used the elevator and went up to the fifth floor. Their rooms were furnished almost as beautifully as Rebecca’s island mansion, and Eric missed the familiar feel of Keenan’s loft. Still, they were large and allowed them to organize meetings such as this one without encroaching on each other’s space.

The demons waited in the hallway when Eric and Keenan left the elevator. Eric waved and greeted his friends with an enthusiastic “hello,” receiving several smiles and warm replies in answer. Keenan’s greeting was briefer. He acknowledged their companions with a nod and directed everyone to their room. They all scuttled to Keenan and Eric’s suite in silence. As soon as they entered and the door shut behind the last person of their group, Keenan went straight to the point. “We met up with Leba’s people. They seem to be on the level, and we’ve come up with the rough idea of a plan. We need to have a meeting with everyone so that we can smooth out the details. What about you?”

"We talked with an old friend of ours," Lucca replied. "He told us there has been indeed some unrest in both the Sidhe and the demon communities."

"That could be caused by the thing in New York," Eric replied, feeling disappointed. Kalin nodded. "As for the demons, they're probably still reeling from Lucien's attack."

"That's what we thought. It could have been anything. As it turns out, though, that wasn't the case."

The excitement in Lucca's voice made Eric perk up a bit. "How so?"

"Information leaked from the Sidhe compound that a demon somehow broke into a Sidhe facility, somewhere in the mountains. The covens were contacted shortly after, but no one knew of any demon that fit the man's description. Not until a week or so ago, that is, until a certain demon prince came asking about his lost mate."

"Lucien," Cade said. Turning to Kalin, he said, "Love, do you remember anything at all from your meetings in Paris?"

Kalin shook his head. "Nothing relevant. Lucien wasn't very reasonable at that time and the people we met not very friendly. We didn't get to scour all Paris, though, since you called us with the info on Gabriel."

"It gets better. Apparently, a few days ago, another demon came around, asking questions about a mysterious long lost brother."

Cade nodded, not looking surprised. "Me."

"Quite right," Giovanni said. "With what happened the first time, they didn't even receive this second demon, let alone tell him anything about the situation."

"You were right, Cade," Kalin concluded. "Your brother is somewhere in France, and the Sidhe are the key to finding out his location."

Cade didn't say anything for a brief moment. Eric guessed Cade had to be very affected by the confirmation of his suspicion.

“We should have never left,” Cade murmured. “We should have stayed and looked for him more. I let him down.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Cade,” Kalin said softly. “You couldn’t have known he lived through the blast.”

Eric signaled for everyone to give the Kaldorian couple a few moments alone. They left the suite and went out back into the hallway. “Do you think Cade will be all right?” Eric asked.

Keenan sighed as he looked toward the door. “He’s hurting now. I can tell he’s very close to his brothers. I can only imagine what it’d be like to have something like this happen to Aidan.” He paused and leaned against the wall. “But he is a warrior. He will do what he needs to in the end.”

“I agree,” Lucca said. “I suppose a part of him didn’t expect to find something here.”

Eric bit his lip and stole a look toward the door. He suddenly felt very uncomfortable in discussing this. In the end, his friendship with Gabriel didn’t extend to Cade and Kalin. Besides, the two Kaldorians wouldn’t want their pity or anything like that. Whatever Cade and Kalin felt was none of Eric, Keenan, or Lucca’s business.

“Let’s just leave things be,” he said. “The best thing we can do right now is help to find Cain.”

“That’s true, pet,” Keenan replied. “Tomorrow we have to see the hackers and wrap things up.”

The two demons nodded, and Eric considered whether or not to begin debriefing them in the absence of the Kaldorian couple. There really was no sense doing so, since they’d just have to go through the whole discussion all over again when Cade and Kalin came.

Thankfully, the door opened before they even got the chance to consider other options. “So,” Cade said from the doorway, “you were saying you have a plan?”

## Chapter Twelve

*Two days later*

A huge wrought iron gate shielded the Sidhe compound from the rest of Paris. Through the tinted glass of the limousine window, Keenan took in the impressive structure and sighed. He'd never liked this place much, and all his life, he'd actively done his best to avoid it. Of course, he'd not been completely successful. The current situation was the best example. Who'd have thought that one day he would need to get inside so much?

He'd tried to contact the Sidhe royals, with no success. So, following the previously made plans, he'd arranged for the limousine to come and take him to talk to Queen Jacquelyn and King Laurent. Not that Keenan expected to receive any support from the couple. That's what their eccentric new acquaintances had been hired for.

Other than his driver, the ever helpful André, the only person accompanying him in his quest was Cade. They'd decided to leave the rest of their group behind since, most likely, this endeavor would yield no results anyway. Kalin and Eric would help out the hackers once they activated plan B.

Cade looked as reluctant to enter the Sidhe stronghold as Keenan felt. He scanned the surrounding environment with an expression of unease. "I don't like this place, Keenan. It seems so cold."

Keenan nodded. "In that, I agree with you. I can't wait to get this visit over and done with."



He tapped the separator, indicating that they'd reached their destination. He wouldn't be dragging the human driver into the Sidhe fortress, not that they would be allowed a car inside.

The car slowed down and stopped. As André parked, Keenan opened the door and gestured for Cade to follow. "From here we walk."

The driver's window wheezed open. "Monsieur von Klein? Is anything wrong?" André asked.

"Nothing at all," Keenan replied. "Go on back to the hotel. We'll call you when we need you to pick us up."

André respectfully nodded. "As you wish, *Monsieur von Klein. Au revoir.*"

The car rolled off on the street, and Keenan started walking toward the gate, Cade behind him. In front of the stronghold, guards dressed in suits kept watch over the iron structure. Upon first impression, they looked like run-of-the-mill bodyguards, keeping an eye over the mansion of a human millionaire. It wasn't the case, though. Keenan knew them to be Sidhe born and bred for the single purpose of dedicating their lives to their kingdom.

In spite of their training, though, these same soldiers didn't have the coolness and rigidity of Jean Luc D'Argent or his Imperials. Now, Keenan realized the difference was due to the illness that plagued many of the older Sidhe.

It didn't take them long to get to the gate, and, sure enough, they were stopped by one of the efficient Sidhe soldiers.

"Please state your name and business," the man said in an official tone.

Keenan tilted his head inquiringly. He didn't remember this guard from a previous visit. Granted, he'd last visited the Sidhe compound ten years back, but that wasn't so much from the point of view of an immortal.

"Keenan von Klein," he replied. "Coming to visit King Laurent and Queen Jacquelyn D'Argent."

The guard snorted. He seemed very young, and Keenan guessed an older guard had just been replaced with this greenhorn. “An audience with our rulers cannot be obtained so easily and by just anyone.”

The soldier’s arrogant tone irritated Keenan, more so since the words bordered on insulting. “I don’t have to explain myself to a mere soldier. Let me pass.”

The guard’s eyes flashed in displeasure, and Keenan could tell the Sidhe was moments away from attacking. Thankfully, another soldier appeared. Keenan remembered seeing him during his previous visit. Perhaps this guard wouldn’t be so idiotic.

“That won’t be necessary,” the new guard said. “Mr. von Klein is a very important man. Go back to the gate. I’ll deal with this.”

The younger Sidhe bowed at his superior, but grumbled under his breath as he returned to his post. Shaking his head, the second guard gestured them toward the gate. “Right this way, Sir, and my apologies for his behavior.”

“Not to worry,” Keenan replied. “I’m guessing he is new to the job and doesn’t yet know everyone.”

“That’s true.” The man hesitated briefly. “I do have to say, Sir, that the king and queen have declared they would not attend any meetings or audiences. With all due respect, I can’t let you in without their approval.”

Keenan nodded. “Contact the compound and ask. It’s a very important matter, I assure you.”

The guard retrieved a small device from his belt. It looked like a cross between a cell phone and a walkie-talkie. As the guard spoke in the phone, Keenan turned to Cade. “Seems like we won’t have much luck here,” Cade said with a sigh. He didn’t sound angry, but rather resigned. Keenan knew that it was all a mask, however. After all, Cade had so much at stake today. His mate would go with the hackers deep into the Sidhe compound. Kalin had been chosen to escort the two since he was the only one who could blend in. As an Alarian, he

actually looked like the Sidhe. If necessary, he could pretend to be a Sidhe guard or something like that.

“We shall see,” Keenan told Cade. “The king and queen are reasonable people. I’m sure that if they’re able to help, they will.”

Naturally, Keenan said this just for the benefit of the guards who were listening. He didn’t think the Sidhe royals would help. In fact, they were all convinced of the contrary. They needed to be careful, though, so that the Sidhe wouldn’t believe them to be involved in the sudden blackout or, if their little team of hackers was discovered, in the break-in.

With half an ear, Keenan took in the conversation between the guard and the person on the other side of the little phone. After a few minutes, the guard shut down the phone and smiled at them. “You can go in now. The king and queen will see you.”

Keenan did his best to smile back. Now for the hard part—talking to the Sidhe royals. He watched as the gates opened with an almost ominous sound. “Enjoy your visit,” the guard said. “And good luck.”

Keenan let out a small laugh. “Thank you. “

In truth, amusement couldn’t be further from his mind. He was surprised and slightly unsettled that no one asked about Cade’s identity. Had the Sidhe already found out about the Ancients’ presence? If so, what did they intend to do about it?

A small vehicle came to pick them up and take them from the gate to the actual compound. The man at the wheel directed a few curious glances their way, but other than a short greeting, made no comments on their presence. They remained silent throughout the short trip. Keenan took in the greenery and ornaments that surrounded the perimeter of the structures. So much beauty surrounded something so putrid, much like the Sidhe themselves. It seemed fitting somehow.

Finally, they arrived in front of the lavish house that hid so many secrets. The Sidhe royals lived in a palace with many subsidiary structures. The visitors saw just the glitter of the residence and forgot about the auxiliary buildings altogether. It was there that the Sidhe

gathered all the military supplies and all the equipment. Keenan had snuck in there once, scouting through the house on one of his past visits. Back then, the vampires and Sidhe had been civil to each other, but Keenan had known peace never lasts. Now, he knew those would be the buildings that they needed to target in their quest.

Keenan himself wouldn't get to go back in those warehouses today. He'd stay within the main building, hoping his team would succeed in their mission.

As they entered the palace, they were greeted by over ten people who rushed to take their coats and make them as comfortable as possible. Keenan fell into habit and allowed them to do their jobs. He was used to this sort of thing. Apparently, Cade had a similar experience, since he took everything in stride, as well. It didn't surprise Keenan. After all, the man was a prince, and some things never changed, not even with people from another world.

A tall butler led them deeper into the palace, through winding staircases cut in marble and decorated with the finest of brocades, into corridors holding priceless statues, paintings, and vases.

"This seems very familiar," Cade muttered in a barely audible voice.

"Oh?" Keenan whispered just as softly.

"It reminds me of the time we went to visit Gabriel's homeland."

Keenan grinned, noting the fact that Cade avoided mentioning the name of the country. "I suppose the decorations would be a bit similar."

"Has the same feel, too," Cade replied. "It's eerie."

Keenan suspected the similarities between the Sidhe and their Kaldorian ancestors didn't stop at the furniture. Gabriel's distant memories suggested the same characteristics—the kindness, the openness, then the path toward DSS, the Dark Side Syndrome that was their worst nightmare. Funny thing was that neither Gabriel nor Kalin had given any indication of knowing about the syndrome.

Eric's mental voice fled into his mind. *"Do you think there could be a connection between the evil Gabriel experienced on his world and the DSS?"*

*"It could be, pet. We can't know for sure, since Kalin and Gabriel are the only Alarians we know, and they seem unaffected."*

*"We'll have to ask after this whole thing ends. Keenan, maybe they can help! Maybe they can find a cure."*

*"I sometimes don't understand you, pet. Pierre almost killed you and me. Jean Luc was responsible for covering his brother's tracks. Why would you want to help them?"* All right, so Eric empathized with the two Sidhe. That didn't explain all the excessive enthusiasm. How could Eric forgive so easily and want to help people who'd hurt them so much?

*"I don't know, Keenan,"* Eric sent. *"I just have this feeling. Back then when I saw into Jean Luc's memories, I didn't understand what they meant. I'm piecing things together now. I think they are suffering a lot for what happened, and at the hand of their own kind."*

Keenan recalled Jean Luc's words back in New York. At that time, Keenan had asked Jean Luc about the treatment of DSS. Keenan could hear Jean Luc's reply in 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.*

Keenan made a mental note to discuss this with Gabriel and Kalin. Perhaps Eric was right. Hopefully, they would find out more about what had happened to the two Sidhe princes today. Now, if only this stupid long-ass walk would end already and they'd get to their meeting. Keenan suspected the damn butler was leading them in circles, just to annoy them.

As if urged by Keenan's thoughts, the butler veered off to the right on the corridor. A few moments later, he pointed to a closed door ahead. "The queen's office."

He knocked on the door, and a female voice replied from inside.  
“Yes?”

“My Queen, Mr. von Klein is here to see you.”

“Very well,” the queen replied. “Allow him inside.”

The butler opened the door and gestured them inside. Keenan didn’t wait to be told twice and walked into the office. It held the same sense of style as Rebecca’s office on her island. Although the decorations seemed more classical in nature, the choice of furniture was similar. Two expensive-looking recliners, handcrafted chairs, a small bar that looked as old as Keenan, superb carpeting that seemed to have woven gold in the thread. An antique desk dominated the far end of the room, and at the desk sat a beautiful blonde woman. Jacquelyn didn’t look like a queen, but rather like a businesswoman. Her long, blonde hair was tied in a tight bun, and black wire-rim glasses shielded her blue eyes from the world. Keenan knew without a doubt that she didn’t need them, since the Sidhe could heal most anything. Anything except the DSS. Keenan wondered how much it had affected the woman in front of him. He was too old to judge by appearances, and he knew what the cool exterior of a Sidhe could hide.

As manners requested, Keenan gave a short bow and waited. She had to initiate the conversation before he could speak.

“It’s been a long time since we’ve seen each other, Keenan,” Jacquelyn finally said.

“Too long, My Lady,” Keenan replied courteously, as he lifted his head. “It’s a pleasure to see you are well, and as beautiful as ever.”

Jacquelyn snorted. “Let’s get the pleasantries over with. You know as well as I do that our races are not exactly on peaceful terms, and for good reason.”

“Unfortunately, you are correct. I assure you, the events in New York upset me as well.”

The woman's voice turned stony and expressionless. "I'm well aware of the intricacies of that particular issue. I would have appreciated your discretion," she said, glaring toward Cade.

Keenan ignored the reprimand and took advantage of the occasion to introduce the Kaldorian. "That's right. Where are my manners? I forgot to introduce my companion. This is Cade, first son of Kings Seyran and Lyan of Xeetha."

He hoped he'd remembered the title correctly because, God, it was a mouthful. Couldn't those Kaldorians have last names like normal people?

She tried to disguise her surprise but failed. "Xeetha? You mean the Ancients?"

So they didn't know about the Ancients? Well, that was interesting. Of course, she could be faking her surprise. Keenan would just have to wait and see.

"Yes, that's quite right," Cade replied. "We are honored to be here, Queen Jacquelyn."

The queen looked like she wanted to say something, but the sound of the door opening stopped her. A tall, silver-haired man walked in, and Keenan couldn't suppress a sigh. He'd forgotten how much the Sidhe king looked like Jean Luc. His concern regarding his friend and rival started to increase with every second that passed.

"What's the meaning of this?" King Laurent asked. "I was told von Klein arrived and has been received in my absence."

Jacquelyn's eyes flashed in displeasure, but when she spoke, her tone showed nothing other than genuine and polite deference. "Greetings, my King. Yes, Mr. von Klein is here. I have received him due to his claim that he had something very important to discuss with us regarding the Ancients. As I see now, this claim is genuine."

Laurent scowled, visibly frustrated. He took a deep breath, and just like that, the anger drained out of his stance and expression. "I see," he said with a smile. He walked forward and kissed the queen's hand, then took it in his own. Turning toward them, he nodded his

head in a small bow supposedly meant to acknowledge and welcome their presence. "Let me extend a formal greeting, then. It's been too long, Keenan. Welcome."

Keenan almost chuckled at the two Sidhe's ability to mask their emotions. They'd seemingly changed their minds about their presence in Paris in mere seconds. Of course, none of their politeness was genuine. Even if the Sidhe royals had powerful mental shields, Keenan could still feel their hostility.

In his mind, Keenan felt Eric stir, unsettled. *"Are you sure this was such a good idea, Keenan?"*

*"Don't worry, pet,"* Keenan replied through their bond. *"We anticipated this, and you know as well as I that we can handle ourselves if need be."*

He took in the unreadable appearance of the two Sidhe and recalled the queen's initial reaction. *"They know something. Too bad we couldn't leave Cade out of this. We would've had a tactical advantage."*

*"I don't know about that, Keenan, but I'm glad you're not alone in there. And anyway, it's too late now."*

Confirming Eric's words, Cade stepped forward and introduced himself again. "Greetings, King Laurent, Queen Jacquelyn. It is truly a pleasure to be in your fair country. I am Cade, first son of Kings Seyran and Lyan of Xeetha."

Technically speaking, France wasn't the Sidhe king's country, but perhaps it would be for the best to get on the man's good side. Then again, Keenan knew how royal etiquette worked, and he doubted it would help in this case.

"It's an honor to meet you. I understand you required our assistance for something?"

Behind the curtain of politeness, Keenan could still detect the same cool resentment. The man never liked him, particularly since his short affair with Pierre. Keenan didn't doubt the two Sidhe blamed him for their son's proverbial fall from grace. If he had to be honest,



Keenan admitted he'd unwillingly pushed Pierre into succumbing to the DSS.

*"It wasn't your fault, Keenan. Pierre knew what he was getting into. Besides, it couldn't have been something you caused. No offense, but the way I see it, such a huge thing needs a more solid basis."*

*"I don't know about that, pet. A broken heart can bring down the strongest of men."*

Eric didn't reply. They both knew Keenan was correct, more so because of their past experience with each other. Keenan never thought Pierre loved him, but at this point, no one but Pierre could know that.

As he spoke with Eric, Keenan kept an ear on the ongoing conversation. "We were wondering if you could help us with some information," Cade said. "I'm sure you are aware of our involvement in the accident twenty years back."

The king nodded. "It didn't really affect the Sidhe, since not many of us live in that area, but yes, we know of it."

"In that accident, my brother vanished. It has come to our attention that he may actually still be alive. In fact, we are quite sure he is here, in France. Since you have your main headquarters here, we come to ask whether you've heard some information on something like this."

The king hummed thoughtfully, as if considering the issue, and then, unsurprisingly, shook his head. "Alas, we cannot help you. We haven't heard anything of the sort."

"Are you certain?" Cade insisted. "Even the smallest thing could be useful."

"That may well be," the queen replied, "but I'm afraid we cannot provide this information. Of course, it's entirely possible that your original sources are correct and your brother is, indeed, in our country. Our control over France doesn't extend to the smallest individual."

The way she phrased her response turned everything into a veiled insult, and Keenan knew staying would be a waste of time. He hated the thought of his pet in danger, but there was no other choice if they wanted the information from the Sidhe. He wished he could have at least been by Eric's side. Damn the High Mother for making them try the nice way first!

Seemingly understanding the situation as well, Cade nodded to the royal Sidhe couple. "I see. Thank you for your time. We will take our search elsewhere."

The Sidhe queen looked like she wanted to say something else to Cade, but in the end, turned toward Keenan. "It's very regrettable that we couldn't aid you. Please let us know of the results of your quest."

"Certainly," Keenan replied. Like hell he would! "We'll take our leave now. Perhaps we will see each other at my parents' next reception." Whenever that was. Keenan hadn't talked to them in three months.

"We'll do our best to attend," the king said stiffly.

Just as they said their good-byes, the lights flickered and went out. Keenan knew Yves, Eric, Giovanni, and Lucca would be taking care of the generators, keeping the energy from feeding the alarms and video cameras to give Alicia, Remi, and Kalin some time to sneak into the control room. He hoped their search wasn't in vain and the Sidhe database really did hold some sort of information. They were risking a lot to find out.

## Chapter Thirteen

Eric watched as Yves worked the generator, grumbling something in French under his breath. It was quite difficult to break the energy connections, making it so it would seem like a true short circuit. According to their plan, the Sidhe needed to believe the short circuit caused the fire. Doing so and managing to sabotage the entire French compound was even harder, but necessary. If they just targeted the part where their three friends would sneak in, the Sidhe would get very suspicious, and the guards would be dispensed to that smaller area. As long as the entire base suffered from this blackout, things would be a little easier. Or so Yves claimed.

In Eric's opinion, nothing about this whole endeavor could be considered easy. Three people, sneaking in a base crawling with enemies to get some information that would most likely be encrypted or hidden under the heaviest of passwords and codes. The Sidhe were bound to come and check on the faulty generators, so they wouldn't have much time either. Eric, Yves, and the demons would stall using the arson plan, but how long would they be able to maintain the illusion? All the while, Keenan and Cade were alone and in the proverbial den of the lion. What would they do if the Sidhe royals accused them of having a hand in the sudden blackout?

"Stop worrying so much, Eric," Lucca said. "Keenan can handle himself. It'll be fine."

"Don't you know, *mon ch r* Luc, it's normal to worry when a loved one is in danger?" Yves replied in Eric's stead.

Eric didn't know how the Frenchman could focus both on his complicated task and on their conversation, but he appreciated the

comment. He half wanted to say that Lucca wouldn't be so unconcerned if Giovanni were in there, but kept his mouth shut. The demon didn't mean any harm by his words. No point in starting an argument.

"We're in danger, too," Giovanni pointed out. "Once the Sidhe guards show up, we're in trouble."

"I'm not scared for myself," Eric replied softly. Shaking his head, he forced himself to think about something else. He wasn't being of any use panicking. "Can you just go outside and watch, please, guys?"

Giovanni and Lucca shrugged in unison. Eric hoped he hadn't pissed off the demons, but he couldn't deal with them right now. Even if he was a virtual stranger, Yves at least understood his point of view.

"So, how did Keenan and you meet?" Yves asked, still fiddling with the generator.

Eric chuckled as he recalled that fateful day in the park. "He kidnapped me in Central Park. Can you believe it was only a few months ago?"

"Really?" Yves sounded surprised. "I couldn't tell. I mean, I knew you were just a fledgling, but judging by the way he looks at you, I thought Keenan and you were lovers from way back."

"Why?" Eric replied, now curious. "How does he look at me?"

Yves let out a laugh. "Like he wants to eat you up, but at the same time, like you're his heart and soul."

Eric felt himself flush in embarrassment. "We're very close." Clearing his throat, he steered the subject away from himself. "What about you? You guys never explained who or what this Flèche really is."

"Oh...It's a name we use for all of us, from way back."

"Why Flèche?" Eric prodded further. For some reason, he knew there was a story there.

"Well, Remi and I were archers once, or rather crossbowmen. Mind you, this happened way back, in the Middle Ages."

Eric nodded, at this point not surprised about the mind-boggling age of vampires.

“After the Hundred Years’ War ended and the dust started to settle, we wanted to go home, have a life of our own, families.” Yves paused, and for a while, the only sound in the room was the click and clack of Yves’ tools against the generator. “Why am I even telling you this?”

Eric shrugged, even if Yves couldn’t see him. “I don’t know. You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“I guess.” Yves hesitated. “Anyway, we’d been best friends since childhood. We went back to our village, got married and everything. As it turns out, we didn’t like sleeping with our wives as much as we liked sleeping with each other.”

Eric swallowed his snicker. He had a feeling the ending of this story wouldn’t be as happy as Yves’ funny tone suggested. “So what happened?”

“We weren’t as careful as we thought. One night, his wife’s father caught us in the barn. We didn’t even try to deny it. How could we, when he’d seen me on my knees sucking Remi’s dick?”

Eric’s palms started to sweat. Right now, he didn’t think he even wanted to hear how the story ended. “Maybe we shouldn’t be talking about this.”

“It’s okay,” Yves said. “It actually helps me focus. Unless you don’t want to hear it.”

“That’s not it,” Eric said hastily. “Just wouldn’t like you to stir up painful memories because of my curiosity.”

“It’s no longer painful,” Yves said. “I didn’t realize it at the time, but it was all for the best.” He paused and then continued telling the story. “He said we were sinners and we deserved to die for what we’d done.

“At this point, we were both sick of pretending, so we basically told him to go fuck himself. We decided to leave everything behind,

just pack up and start anew. After all, so what if we were married? We didn't have children, and we owed those women nothing."

"Guess you didn't get along with them well, huh?"

Yves chuckled mirthlessly. "We didn't. So anyway, we decided to leave. We packed our stuff in a hurry, but we didn't count on the old man being fast. When we exited the village, we realized there was a mob waiting for us."

"A mob?" Eric repeated. Now he was almost afraid of what he would hear next.

"*Oui*," Yves said. "There were so many of them. We tried to fight them back, and we made our escape into the forest. In the end, we couldn't run away. Remi's father-in-law took my sister prisoner. It was her screams that forced us to come back. When we heard her pain and despair, we simply could not leave."

"Oh, my God..."

"Yeah. They beat us and stabbed us until we lay there, half dead. Alicia cried and begged them to let us go, to understand. She shouldn't have said anything, because that made them turn on her as well."

"Alicia? She's your sister, for real?"

"Yes," Yves said. "We don't really look alike, and we fight a lot, but we're quite close. Anyway, when we thought it was all over, she appeared."

"Your sire."

"Yes. She saved our lives, turned the three of us into vampires, and punished the ones who'd hurt us. I don't remember that part quite so well, but she told us once that she'd also turned Remi's father-in-law and the ones that hurt us most and left them out into the sun."

Eric shuddered. What a horrible death to have, burned alive like that. "I know, terrible, right?" Yves said. "But by now, we understand that this is the way of the vampires. Punishments are swift and terrible. Leba made them that way, just like she did that day, with us."

Eric gaped. "The High Mother is your sire?"

"Yes," Yves said after a moment of hesitation. "She is an amazing woman. Also, I'm only telling you about this because I have a feeling that if Leba had found you before Cassandra, you'd be living here with us."

Eric smiled, the compliment warming him inside. Knowing that the High Mother cared for him meant a lot. He loved Cassandra, of course, but every vampire, be they pure-blood or artificial, felt a connection to the High Mother. Besides, she'd just given him and Keenan the gift of her blood. In a way, Eric and Yves were related, blood brothers.

Lucca entered the generator room and gave Eric a frustrated look. Eric arched a brow, wondering how much the demon had heard. "Come on, Yves. Can't you hurry things up?" Lucca said.

Yves tsked. "You Americans. Always in a hurry."

"I'm Italian," Lucca muttered.

"Right, sorry," Yves said, a smile in his voice. "*Voila. Et l'obscurité fut.*"

Indeed, seconds later, the lights that illuminated the hallway outside and the generator room itself went out with a whirling sound. "I would estimate around five minutes until that hallway fills with guards," Giovanni replied.

Eric didn't like that estimation. They'd managed to sneak into the building easily enough, but Eric didn't think their job would be as easy once the Sidhe guards got there. Well, it could be much worse. At least he had the demons and Yves to cover his back, and Keenan would support him through their mind link. So much depended on him, though. Uncertainty gripped him, the knowledge that so many relied on him making him shiver.

Eric licked his suddenly dry lips and nodded. He'd tried to stay out of Keenan's head during the conversation with the Sidhe royals, allowing just a few thoughts to seep through their connection. Now,

though, he ached to feel Keenan close, even if only through their mental connection. “*Keenan? How are things with you?*”

“*Pet...*” Keenan sounded relieved to hear him. “*The royals are suspicious already. Be careful.*”

“*Any idea how many guards to expect?*”

“*Up to ten, I would think,*” Keenan replied glumly.

Ten? Eric couldn’t take ten individual minds at once! They’d practiced a bit, yes, but nothing could have prepared him for this. He could barely control his own emotions when so many people were present. God, they were all going to die.

“*Don’t panic, pet,*” Keenan said softly. “*Remember I’m here with you. I trust you. We can do this together.*”

Keenan’s voice dissipated the fog of anxiety starting to crowd his mind. Buying their team of hackers time was more important than his insecurities. He’d lost to Pierre as a human, but this time, he would win.

He took a deep breath and turned to the demons. “Keenan says around ten guards will be coming around to check the generators. Be ready.”

“Maybe I can help, too,” Yves suggested. “Come on, *petit frère*. Together now.”

They waited maybe a few more minutes until the sound of footsteps closing in signaled the approach of their adversaries. Eric took a deep breath as the demons summoned their flame and set fire to the carpet on the hallway.

In no time, the fire increased to a reasonably sized blaze, and smoke filled the entire corridor. Eric covered his face with a piece of cloth, and his friends followed his example. His eyes watered, but somehow, the knowledge of what needed to be done gave him strength.

As Eric opened his mind, he isolated the seven approaching entities from the people standing by his side. He felt Yves take his hand, and, through their connection, Keenan sent threads of power.



Psychic energy started to accumulate inside him, and he let it come, let it build up until its intensity resembled the blaze itself.

As the Sidhe guards entered the corridor, Eric focused everything inside of him toward his purpose. Astral projection was quite difficult and dangerous, and manipulating thoughts even more so. He needed to unravel the threads that bound the rational processes of the mind together and arrange them in a different pattern.

It should have been very hard, especially with more than one person at the same time. These were Sidhe, after all, not easily manipulated. But Leba's strength flowed inside him, Keenan's love supported him, and his blood brother was by his side. With all his psychic strength, Eric attacked.

*"It's a fire! The generators must have circuited. There could be hazardous material down there. Back away. Back away."*

Over and over, he sent the same thought into the minds of his targets. The Sidhe stopped, as if physically struck by an unseen projectile. Panicked voices started speaking rapidly in French. *"C'est le feu! Les générateurs doivent avoir circuité. Il pourrait y avoir des matières dangereuses, là-bas. Éloignez-vous. Éloignez-vous."*

Eric increased the intensity of the attack, making the fire look even brighter and stronger than in reality. He poured terror into the hearts and minds of the Sidhe guards. He needed to make everything seem real, but doing so remained a tricky business. Traces could exist not only in the physical, but also in the mental, and he couldn't afford to make the fear of the Sidhe soldiers suspicious.

Everything worked like a charm. Under Eric's assault, the Sidhe retreated, probably intending to find a method to put out the fire. Either way, they'd bought Alicia, Remi, and Kalin enough time to finish their own task.

Eric fell back against Yves, feeling drained, but satisfied. *"Nice job, pet,"* Keenan said in his mind.

*"Thanks,"* Eric replied. *"What's going on with the royals?"*

*“They’re not sure what’s happening. People are very confused. This is actually working out better than I expected.”*

*“That’s great,” Eric said through their connection. “Do you think they suspect you?”*

*“They might,” Keenan answered. “The Sidhe aren’t stupid. I half think Leba did this on purpose, to make them suspect us.”*

*“What, you think she intends to start a war?”*

*“Who knows? Either way, they can’t keep us. Retreat to Flèche’s base. We’ll join you ASAP.”*

Eric felt reluctant to leave with Keenan and their four friends inside, but he could no longer help. Sighing, he turned to his own teammates. “Come on. We have to go before more guards show up.”

Just as silently as they’d entered, they made their way out of the compound, unseen and unheard. They took a long route to Saint Germain, and an hour or so later, they finally reached the hideout. Eric collapsed on the first couch he could find.

Yves smiled at him and covered him with a blanket. “Sleep, *petit frère*. We’ll wake you when the others get here.”

Eric murmured a thank-you to Yves. He really was exhausted. Using the psychic energy to attack the Sidhe guards had worn out both his mind and his body. He closed his eyes and fell asleep almost instantly.

Soft voices woke him from his slumber. “We managed to get plenty of information,” Alicia said, “but we didn’t have the time to even see if any of it would be of use.”

“We’ll check now,” Keenan replied. “We have all night.”

His lover’s voice chased away all the remnants of sleep. Eric opened his eyes and looked around. Everyone seemed to be gathering in the studio where the French hackers kept their equipment. “Wait for me,” he called out. “Coming.”

He met Keenan in the hallway and couldn’t resist giving his lover a tight hug. “Thank God you’re safe.”

Keenan hugged him back, buried his face in Eric's hair and inhaled, as if he wanted to imprint Eric's scent in his memory. "We're together again, pet. Don't be afraid."

Eric smiled, reveling in his lover's hold, wanting to stay in Keenan's embrace forever. Keenan broke away far too quickly. "Come on. We've got to check out the team's findings."

They walked together to the superior floor of the Flèche safe house. Everyone was gathered in front of the monitors as the hackers avidly worked.

"Is the data encrypted?" Eric asked.

"Some of it, particularly the video records," Alicia replied. "We had some difficulty breaking through the multilevel passwords and the self-destructing coding around them, too. I think there has to be something there to help us out."

Eric liked how Alicia included them all in the same group. Us, not just you. It felt nice to be included. Just a year back, he'd been all alone. Then, he'd been taken in by Keenan and Cassandra. Now, he had Leba and her three fledglings as well.

Keenan wrapped his arm around his waist, and Eric leaned against him as they waited. The three hackers concentrated on dealing with the encrypted information. It seemed to take forever, but no one left the studio. They all acknowledged the importance of what they would find in those files.

A victorious sound let them know the hackers succeeded in breaking the codes. By this time, those not involved in the informatics task had scattered around the studio, on chairs, recliners, sofas. Kalin and Cade sat together on one couch, while Eric had taken possession of another for himself and Keenan. Giovanni and Lucca sat at a table, speaking quietly in Italian. They all got up in unison and hastened to the screens once more.

"Check this out, guys," Remi said proudly. Hundreds of video records were listed on the screen, arranged by incomprehensible

categories. Some of the files were labeled PR, followed by a series of numbers. Others had the tag PY, LV, AT, and many others.

Eric gaped. When would they have the time to go through everything?

Remi clicked on one of the first logs, labeled as AT. The Arc de Triomphe appeared on the screen, with a date in the corner. "The label is the location, and the numbers, the date," Alicia said.

Keenan arched a brow. "So they have surveillance videos for most of Paris? I'm not sure I like that thought."

Eric didn't like it much either. What if they'd been seen or followed here? What if they were discovered?

"Never fear, *petit frère*," Remi said. "We have signal scramblers in this area, and no one could have installed cameras without us knowing. It's one of the reasons why we chose a place so close to our hideout to meet you."

"Besides, they can't watch the whole of Paris," Alicia offered. "It's physically impossible. I'm guessing there's something of importance in that area if they chose to place cameras there."

"Could be," Yves said. "I suggest we each take a part of the logs and go through them. We'll see what we find and decide then."

Keenan nodded. "Anything out of the ordinary you see, call us." After all, they needed to find out what had happened to Pierre and Jean Luc as well.

They proceeded to do just that. They sorted the files, taking only the most recent ones to go through. Eric was seated at one of the screens and given ten of the categories in the video logs. He went through them carefully, but found nothing of interest for their quest. Most of them were recordings taken at various landmarks in Paris, or even in random streets which seemed to have nothing special. Other recordings weren't even in Paris, or in France, for that matter. Still, Eric caught the movements of groups of Sidhe and put down the addresses he could distinguish from the recordings. Perhaps they would be useful one day.

As he went through the logs, Eric became increasingly frustrated. He hoped his companions had better luck. If he judged by the silence and occasional sighs in the studio, though, he guessed that it wasn't the case.

Kalin's voice interrupted his brooding. "Hey, I think I found something."

Eric shot to his feet, giving mental thanks he could finally break away from the boring logs. "What? What is it?"

"Seems to be some sort of facility," Kalin replied.

"The place my friend told us about," Lucca said excitedly.

"Seems like it," Kalin answered. They gathered around the Kaldorian and watched as the computer played a video log. They did indeed seem taken from a prison of sorts. There were guards dragging around subdued-looking prisoners, dark cell blocks, and men in white suits that gave Eric the creeps. He had a very bad feeling about what they were about to see.

The fifth video Kalin clicked on proved to be the one to confirm Eric's fears. It opened onto a screen so black, Eric thought at first the computer had broken down. Then a dim light appeared, probably meant to facilitate the recording of the video log.

As the light tore through the darkness on the screen, Eric caught sight of a slim, motionless figure, curled into a ball on the floor. Chains held the prisoner down, and they looked so heavy Eric wondered why they were actually necessary. After all, whomever lay there didn't seem very dangerous.

He got his response when a thread of light fell over the prisoner's face. Even through all the grime, Eric distinguished the beautiful face of his almost-murderer, Pierre D'Argent. "Oh, my God."

"I take it you know this man," Kalin said.

"Yeah, we know him," Keenan said roughly. "He's one of the men we're supposed to find."

Cade let out a victorious laugh. "I knew you had something else up your sleeve."

“Hey, guys, look,” Alicia said. “Something’s happening.”

Indeed, Eric watched as one of the weird men from before came in view of the camera. “*Sujet Pierre D’Argent*,” the man said. “*Jusqu’à présent, la réponse au traitement a été mitigée. Dans la séance d’aujourd’hui, nous allons augmenter l’intensité de la procédure à échelle de cinq.*”

The man talked so quickly, Eric didn’t catch everything. “The response to the treatment has been mixed,” Yves translated for their benefit. “In today’s session, we will be increasing the intensity of the procedure to scale five.”

“What does that mean?” Eric asked.

“I think we’re about to find out,” Cade replied.

Eric watched in horrified fascination as the man retrieved a set of wicked-looking instruments. Scalpels? Knives? Eric couldn’t tell. Not that it mattered much. Their purpose there couldn’t be more clear.

With every step the man took toward Pierre, Eric clung to Keenan tighter and tighter. Keenan held him against his chest, but never said a word. When the light illuminated Pierre’s eyes, Eric saw they no longer held the insanity that he remembered from his confrontation with the Sidhe. It had been replaced with pure terror, impotence, and pain. On the screen, Pierre let out a whimper and tried to scuttle back, to shield himself from the man’s approach. His eyes flashed briefly with an outburst of power, and the chains rattled. For a moment, Eric thought Pierre would manage to escape. But the chains held, and Pierre gasped, reaching to the collar around his throat in obvious agony.

Pierre’s emotions were so intense, they actually seemed to transcend the screen. Fear bubbled inside Eric, so intensely he almost wanted to run out of the room. He kept on watching, though. The peculiar man—who Eric identified as some sort of doctor—completely immobilized Pierre against the wall. Then he took one of the instruments, a simple enough knife. In the man’s

hand, it started shining with an eerie glow. At first subdued, the light increased to such an intensity it hurt Eric's eyes.

The doctor started drawing patterns on Pierre's skin with the knife, and harsh screams began echoing from the speakers. Frozen in horror, Eric saw the blood seeping out of the cuts, and the wounds cauterized in mere instants, only to open again moments later. A soft sob echoed in the studio, and Eric distantly realized it came from Alicia.

"I think Pierre got his punishment all right," Keenan murmured.

Eric should have been pissed at his lover for the callous remark, but he felt Keenan's honest horror at what they were both seeing on the screen. All the blood and the pain...It was almost too much to bear. The video ended with Pierre falling unconscious and the man leaving the room.

Impossibly keeping his head, Kalin clicked on the next one. The following videos turned out to be similar, starring Pierre or other Sidhe. When the sixth or seventh log finished, Kalin turned toward them, giving them an angry look. "Can anyone please explain to me, what is it that we are seeing? If I understand correctly, these men and women are sick, and this is supposed to be their treatment."

Eric threw Keenan a look, not knowing what to say or do. Did they reveal Jean Luc's secret to Kalin? "*We don't have much choice, pet,*" Keenan mentally said. "*Besides, I wanted to discuss this with him anyway. It seems to be something he needs to know. And like you said, maybe they can help.*"

Out loud, Keenan replied to Kalin, "That's true. The Sidhe suffer from a disease they call the Dark Side Syndrome. It basically turns them evil, makes them give in to their darkest emotions and impulses." He pointed toward the screen, where the last image of Pierre's motionless body still appeared. "That's Pierre D'Argent, the second son of the royal couple of the Sidhe. When I met him, he was a sweet young man, with a kind heart and a smile for everyone."

Eric frowned, not liking Keenan's depiction of Pierre. "You also had an affair with him," he muttered angrily. A glance toward the screen dissipated his jealousy, though. How could he begrudge someone in such a pitiful situation?

Keenan cleared his throat, and Eric flushed, realizing he'd said that bit out loud and flaunted their dirty laundry in front of their companions. "Anyway, a few months back, he killed one of the most powerful vampires in New York and tried to do the same thing with me and Eric. His brother Jean Luc covered for him, so we didn't realize it until it was almost too late."

Cade frowned. "Couldn't you have been mistaken all this time? Maybe he was evil to begin with."

That was a difficult question to answer. Eric knew that Keenan still doubted much of what happened in New York, and he didn't trust Jean Luc to have told him the truth. For his part, though, Eric was convinced that the DSS did indeed exist, and it affected both brothers. He couldn't find any other explanation to what had happened.

He opened his mouth to say just that, but Kalin stopped him before he could reply. "I don't think it's a mistake. The Sidhe come from my people, and I've seen this happen to some of my own kind as well. We just didn't realize it was a disease."

"Your mother?" Cade asked.

Kalin nodded. "She treated us with great cruelty during our childhood and even plotted to assassinate my father," he explained. "Before my brothers and I fled Alaria with our mates, she attacked me and almost killed me."

He bit his lip, seemingly in thought. "I'm concerned. If this can happen to anyone, then Orin is very vulnerable to it."

"Orin?" Eric repeated.

"Orin is my other brother. He stayed behind when we came to look for Gabriel. He'd just suffered a near-spontaneous abortion, and he was in a very delicate condition."



Cade wrapped his arms around Kalin. "I'm sorry, love. I've drawn you into this other quest when your own brother needs you."

Kalin shook his head and smiled sadly. "Your family is mine as well, Cade. Orin is not alone. As soon as we find Cain, we'll go after him."

Silence stretched between them for a few instants. The situation confused and frightened Eric. He didn't know what to say, and he feared that if he tried to speak, he'd mess things up.

"Ummm, can we go back to the files now?" Remi asked hesitantly, breaking the awkward moment.

Eric realized he'd forgotten about the presence of his blood brothers. He mentally thanked Remi for his intervention. "Sure," Cade replied.

Kalin clicked on another video, and Eric recognized the star of the show with ease. It was Jean Luc. Unlike his brother, he didn't look broken or afraid. Instead, he seemed as cold and aloof as back when they'd first met. As the doctor approached him, he sneered and actually spat in the other man's face. Eric didn't think he could watch Jean Luc suffer from the same treatment Pierre and the others had. The man had brought him out of his deepest, darkest nightmares once. He couldn't forget that. He couldn't forget touching Jean Luc's mind.

"Stop," Keenan said. "Scroll through it and see if there's anything of interest. We don't have to watch every video of torture. This isn't a horror movie marathon."

Nodding, Kalin paused the video just as the doctor retrieved his utensils. "Thanks, Keenan," Eric said. He knew he was being weak, but he couldn't help the way he felt. "Thanks, guys."

"No problem, Eric," Kalin said as he quickly swept through the two-hour-long video. "To be honest, I don't particularly enjoy these kinds of spectacles either."

They waited a few minutes until Kalin declared the video safe to be skipped. Several of the following clips received the same treatment. In the meantime, Alicia and Yves returned to work on the

rest of the files. Aside from the video logs, the hackers had also managed to obtain text information, references, and reports. According to Alicia, the inscription on those wouldn't take too long to hack, but sorting through them was another story entirely.

They progressed through the videos in the PY category, the one that labeled the torture facility of the Sidhe. Most of them were records of various people being tortured. There were some useless recordings of comings and goings on hallways. More useful ones showed doctors talking about the supposed treatment and about the disease itself. Kalin marked those as to be reviewed again in the future. Obviously, he intended to do everything in his power to protect his brother from suffering the same fate as Pierre and Jean Luc.

Eric was half glad to discover them, since they proved that Jean Luc had indeed told the truth. Time passed, and the same video seemed to replay over and over, only with different characters. Three-quarters through, Eric started to wonder if they'd find a trace of Cade's lost brother.

He could feel similar doubts starting to appear in his companions as well. Keenan didn't even try to keep them from their connection, and the Kaldorians' emotions were also all over the place, bombarding him. He didn't want to give up, though. Already, his companions had been exceedingly supportive with him.

When Eric thought he would surely fall over because of exhaustion, another video popped up. It seemed to be one of those hallways surveillance logs. Resigned to a few more wasted minutes of his life, Eric sighed. He was surprised when he saw absolutely no motion. Keenan nudged him with his shoulder. "Look closer, pet."

Two shadows sneaked through the corridor, visible only to the trained eye. It was more like a trick of the light, there for one second, then invisible again. "Someone's there," Cade said. "Cloaked."

Footsteps behind them signaled the approach of Yves and Alicia. "What's going on?"

“We’re not sure,” Eric replied.

Just as he spoke, a powerful explosion shook the camera that recorded the video. They watched as one of the doors burst open, splitting into a million pieces. Eric guessed that whoever infiltrated the facility was looking for something in the room behind that door. An alarm screeched, and Eric guessed any moment now the area would be flooded with guards.

Mere instants later, a tall brunet came out of the room, holding another man in his arms, clearly a rescued prisoner. The prisoner struggled to get out of his rescuer’s hold. After a few seconds, the brunet seemed to agree to release his charge. As the man placed the former prisoner on the floor, Eric realized he recognized the Sidhe. It was Jean Luc D’Argent.

Who could the brunet be? What interest did he have in freeing Jean Luc? Tons of questions whirled inside of Eric’s head. A couple of them were answered when Jean Luc leaned against his rescuer and placed a brief peck on his lips.

Before Eric could even compute what he was seeing, shouts echoed through the speakers, a clear signal the Sidhe guards had found out about the intruders in their facility. A blast of magic interrupted the tender moment between the two lovers on the screen. They jumped, startled, and the brunet told Jean Luc something neither of them could hear. Then, a blond man ran toward them, gesturing wildly. Eric identified the blond as the second shadow they’d observed. As the angry shouts started sounding louder, the second intruder turned, and the camera managed to catch his face. Eric gasped. There was no doubt regarding the man’s identity. He had Lucien’s platinum blond hair and Cade’s violet eyes, the same handsome features and strong build as his brothers.

“Cain,” Cade said, sounding completely unaffected.

On the screen, Jean Luc started pointing toward several locations around them. The blond now identified as Cade’s brother nodded and

summoned a ball of flame. He hurled it toward the camera, and seconds later, the screen turned black.

“Where and when was this video registered, love?” Cade asked.

“The tag says PY,” Kalin answered. “I’m not sure what it means. As for the date, it’s the fifteenth of November.”

“That’s more than two weeks back,” Keenan said. “We’re not too behind, but we need to hurry. Any luck with the records?”

“Actually, yes,” Alicia replied. “The tag means Pyrenees. In the mountains.”

“I think I found some reports around that date,” Yves said.

Eric pulled Keenan to the Frenchman. “What do they say?”

“Impatient, aren’t you?” Yves chuckled. “Well, for now, I haven’t run into the report we need.”

“Look for someone named Michel Valois. He’s the leader of Jean Luc’s Imperials. He’d be the one to write a report on something like this.”

“Now he’s telling me,” Yves grumbled under his breath. “I think I saw that name on one of these files. Let me check.”

A tense few minutes followed as Yves browsed through the reports. Finally, they came up with the right one, an entry dated just the day after the video.

“It says *Report regarding the escape of Jean Luc D’Argent and Pierre D’Argent*. Hey, the other one got away, too.”

Keenan rolled his eyes at the light tone of the comment and starting reading the rest. “On the date of November fifteenth, the above mentioned princes, Jean Luc D’Argent and Pierre D’Argent, escaped Facility no. 03. They were aided by Min Yu Francois Le Ciel and the demon known as X.”

“X?” Cade growled. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? That’s Cain.”

Keenan shrugged. “I don’t know. There must be another report on this. We’ll look.” He cleared his throat and continued translating the text in the report. “The two are thought to have sneaked in through

section A of the facility. They incapacitated five guards along the way. Blah blah. Here he explains how they did the whole thing. Apparently, they busted Jean Luc out and then Pierre.”

“What happened after?” Cade asked, sounding impatient.

“Getting there. It says escape was made with a stolen helicopter. Imperials are in pursuit. Time of capture unknown due to weather factors.”

“We have to follow their trails into the mountains,” Kalin said. “They’d probably be gone by now, but anything would help.”

Cade nodded. “We’ll make preparations. Meanwhile, I need a favor from Yves, Alicia, and Remi.”

“Sure,” Alicia said. “If we can help.”

“I’d like to know why Michel referred to my brother as X. It obviously wasn’t the first time he’d run into Cain. You’d have to go through the rest of the reports, though.”

“Not all the way back,” Keenan piped in. “Three months ago, Jean Luc and the Imperials were still in New York. He must have run into your brother after they left.”

“I see,” Alicia replied. “Well, *bien sûr*. We’ll look through them and report anything we find.”

Cade beamed at her. “Thanks a lot.” Alicia blushed at his smile, but Cade seemed to completely miss her reaction. He turned to Kalin and took his mate’s hand. “Come, love. We have to pack. We leave for the Pyrenees in a few hours.”

The way Cade said that made Eric think the Kaldorians intended to leave without them. “Hey, wait up. We’re coming, too.”

Cade looked startled for a second, but then his eyes lit up with realization. “Ah, you want to find the Sidhe.”

Keenan snorted. “Well, yeah, but we wouldn’t have left you alone anyway.”

Eric didn’t even give the Kaldorian time to reply. “Keenan, we have to convince Leba to give Jean Luc and Pierre a break,” he told his lover.

“We’ll talk to the High Mother,” Yves said. “She’s hard, but fair. She’ll see that the Sidhe have already been punished. No one’s better for the task than us.”

Eric bit his lip thoughtfully. He remembered Yves telling him how much Leba cared for him. He remembered the High Mother smiling at him, that weird, enigmatic, half-smile of hers, and then giving him the gift of her blood. “Maybe I should stay, too,” he said.

Keenan gave him a startled look. “Pet, we can’t linger here for that long.”

Eric looked away from his lover’s face. No, they couldn’t. But he had to.

“Oh,” Keenan said as realization struck. “Not us. You.”

Eric nodded, feeling small and frightened again. For some reason, this was important for him. He wanted to give the D’Argent brothers the chance to be healed, to be accepted. Eric had lived through similar horrors during his childhood, and he could only guess how much harder it had been for Jean Luc. The torture the stupid Sidhe called a treatment would just break Pierre altogether. He needed to make Leba see, so that the High Mother would back them up once Jean Luc and Pierre were found. At this point, he had no doubt that their quest would succeed.

At the same time, though, the very thought of leaving Keenan’s side, of hurting his lover, drove an icy dagger through his chest. The last thing he wanted was to be separated from Keenan again. The mere memory of Keenan rejecting him still made him shiver in fright. Something worse could happen now. Keenan would be heading into danger, to fight God only knew how many foes. Eric didn’t know what to do.

Keenan’s arms wrapped around him, holding him in a tight embrace. “Don’t worry, pet. I understand you have to do this. You’re right. It would be disrespectful to leave without talking to her. And I can take care of myself. I’m not all that helpless, you know.”

Eric buried his face in Keenan's chest. "I'm sorry, Keenan, but someone has to stand up for them."

"Eric's right," Remi said. "We can talk to the High Mother, but Eric's presence would help tremendously. And if we don't manage to change her mind about this..."

Remi trailed off, but Eric understood exactly what the Frenchman meant. It was also in his mind. He'd seen the decision in Leba's eyes and mind back on Rebecca's island. If he didn't at least try to help out, he'd have Pierre and Jean Luc's blood on his hands.

"Okay, then," Alicia said, getting up from her workspace. "We'll keep working here while you do the exciting adventure thing."

Eric smiled at Alicia's words. "You probably just want to get close to Cade," he teased.

Alicia flushed, but didn't look offended. "You're right. Damn. Why is he married, and gay on top of that?"

Yves patted his sister comfortingly on the shoulder. "Hey, don't be sad. Maybe you have a chance with the missing brother."

Alicia snorted. "With my luck, that one will turn out to be gay, too."

Eric gave Keenan a look. He wouldn't be surprised if Alicia's words ended up true. Gabriel hadn't told them much, but so far, Eric had just heard of or seen men paired up with men. Given that Gabriel was pregnant, God only knew what customs and peculiarities the Ancients had.

"I suppose we'll have to wait and see," Keenan said. He sounded a bit sad and far off. Eric knew that, even if he had Keenan's support in staying behind, they would both suffer from being apart.

"*We won't be apart, pet,*" Keenan mentally whispered. "*Whatever happens, we'll still have this. It won't ever fade.*"

Eric smiled, feeling a bit better. With luck, Leba would arrive soon, and Eric could join Keenan on their quest. And then, once the whole thing was over, they could maybe have another little escapade in the Yukon. Eric certainly hoped so.

## Chapter Fourteen

*A few days later, somewhere in the Pyrenees*

Keenan threw a look over the snowy mountains and felt the urge to sneeze. White surrounded them from every direction. This time, he didn't have the incentive of taking Eric to see the northern lights, either. Instead, they were all heading into the unknown, to an illusory purpose and a target they didn't even know was there.

After a few hours of struggling with the files, the hackers had retrieved several sets of coordinates, all in the mountains. Their first attempts yielded no satisfying results, since they'd found only a couple of empty supply rooms and safe houses spread across the mountain. No sign of the actual facility where the sick Sidhe were kept.

It made no sense, and Keenan was close to giving up. His companions at least had someone to warm them, but his own lover stayed behind in Paris. Not that he blamed Eric for this choice, but it brought about some consequences he'd originally missed. He'd taken blood bags to feed, but it wasn't the same as taking his sustenance from a person. His companions graciously offered their own blood, but Keenan vowed to keep away from incubi. He didn't feel comfortable enough with Cade and Kalin to try it with them. In truth, it wouldn't have been the same. Hunting for Eric, sharing his blood with his lover, feeding while they made love...Nothing could compare to that.



“Sorry, Keenan,” Eric said sheepishly in his mind. *“You know I’d love to be by your side right now. I’m beginning to think I made a mistake.”*

Eric’s voice sent waves of pleasant heat through Keenan. He remembered once again that many people depended on him and that complaining and being ill-humored wasn’t becoming of someone of his age and experience. *“No, Eric. You were right. After all, this isn’t about us. We have each other and many people who love us. But Jean Luc and Pierre don’t, and Cade needs our help.”*

It seemed amazing that Keenan could think this without finding it unnatural. Mere months ago, he’d have thrown up at the sheer suggestion that he could be compassionate and generous. Then again, he’d never been truly happy or in love, and he was starting to believe that generosity could only stem from genuine love and contentment.

They worked their way up the mountain, and Keenan clung on to Eric’s voice just as much as he clung to the rocky outcroppings. He would have loved to just fly up, but the danger of being seen by a Sidhe patrol was high, and the weather horrible. Neither of them could fight off the powerful winds and still be able to navigate through the icy air. Keenan had tried and ended up with a face full of snow and some very uncomfortable bruises. He was lucky it hadn’t been worse. Not even paranormal beings could fight the onslaught of nature. The Sidhe had chosen a good spot to hide their shameful secrets.

*“Do you think they are still alive?”* Eric asked. *“Jean Luc and Pierre, I mean.”*

*“I know Jean Luc, pet,”* Keenan replied. *“He is a soldier. He won’t go down that easily. Besides, even if Pierre is wounded, he has those two by his side. They’re alive.”*

A soft shout stopped Keenan’s mental conversation with Eric and his progress on the mountain. “I see something up ahead,” Kalin said from above him.

They scuttled up in silence until they reached the edge of the cliff. Keenan's heart fell as he realized it was yet another safe house. "Let's get inside," he said with a sigh. "At least we'll have some shelter."

"We can wait the storm out," Cade suggested. "Perhaps we'll find some supplies, if we're lucky."

Keenan very much doubted both of Cade's ideas. Once this storm ended, another would begin, and he didn't know what supplies from the Sidhe they could possibly use.

But as they came closer to the door, Keenan realized something wasn't right. He'd been through many Sidhe safe houses already, and for some reason, this one felt different.

"Be careful," Kalin said before Keenan could whisper his own warning. "Something feels off."

Everyone nodded, and Keenan realized they all sensed the danger ahead of them. Shrugging to himself, he urged his companions forward. "Well, we can't exactly wait here and stare, can we?"

Cade and Kalin nodded. The incubi looked a bit reluctant but didn't comment. They sneaked up toward the safe house, and Keenan scented the air, frowning. "Blood," he said.

He didn't know how he'd missed it before, but the distinctive smell filled the air. Keenan could almost sense the coppery taste in his mouth. Damn, and he hadn't eaten right in quite a while.

Even beyond the trace of blood in the air, Keenan could sense tension, a lingering taint of violence. As they approached, he focused his senses, trying to figure out if there were any people inside. His vampiric hearing caught several heartbeats, maybe up to ten. This could get ugly. "There's still someone inside," he warned. "Several someones."

Cade just shrugged, but Keenan knew that, despite his cool demeanor, the Kaldorian was on the lookout for any hostile element as well. Kalin and Cade shared a look, and Kalin nodded toward the building. The two moved together as one, and when Cade entered the

Sidhe safe house, Kalin immediately followed, backing his mate up. Keenan didn't delay in following their example.

The safe house was a mess, broken pieces of furniture, shards of glass, and tableware scattered all over the place. Keenan paid no heed to the destruction, too busy taking in the unconscious people lying amidst it all. Several Sidhe lay on the floor, motionless, but still alive. If Keenan judged by the state of their wounds, he'd have to say whatever battle caused this had occurred recently, maybe even the day before.

A ragged moan drew his attention, and he gestured his companions toward the source of the sound. To the right, one of the Sidhe stirred, trying to get up, but failing. It didn't surprise Keenan. Blood covered the man's body from head to toe, and even on first sight, Keenan could detect several severe wounds.

Still the Sidhe struggled, and as the man wiped his face with his hand, Keenan recognized him. It was Michel Valois, captain of Jean Luc's Imperials. Keenan couldn't help a smirk. He'd been right about Jean Luc. The man was too resilient and cunning to let his own guards take him.

"You know him?" Cade asked.

Keenan nodded. "It's Michel. The one who wrote the report."

He walked to the wounded Sidhe and "helped" him get up, roughly lifting him off the floor and holding him captive. The last time he'd seen Michel, the man pushed him to release Pierre. Keenan had mixed feelings about the outcome of that particular event, but he did know he didn't like to be manipulated. He would enjoy screwing with Michel's head. "Well, well, look what we have here. I'm betting you didn't expect our next meeting to be in such a situation."

Michel blinked, vision hazy with obvious pain. "Von Klein? *Qu'est-ce qui se passe?*" He shook his head, trying to pull away from Keenan's hold. Keenan held him tighter, lifting him so high Michel's feet didn't even reach the floor.

"No, you don't." He growled. He should have felt guilty for hitting an injured man, but he'd never claimed to be perfect.

Giovanni patted him on the shoulder, distracting him from the pleasant sight of Michel turning just a bit blue. "Keenan, I know you're enjoying yourself, but we might need him."

Keenan snorted. He could look into Michel's memories easily enough. Still, he loosened his hold. Perhaps it would be easier if Michel cooperated. It was doubtful, but Keenan didn't look forward to tearing into the mind of the Sidhe. Since he'd found Eric, he'd started to appreciate the pain a damaged psyche could inflict on a person. Truth be told, he didn't hate Michel enough to drive the man insane or cause him a cerebral aneurysm.

Sighing to himself, Keenan handed Michel into Giovanni's hold. "Let's see what you can get out of him."

Giovanni gave him a disgruntled look and muttered something undecipherable under his breath. Keenan couldn't blame his friend for it. Being ordered around like that must feel insulting. He mentally groaned at his mishap. The last thing he wanted was to alienate his friends because of his ill mood.

*"You and your temper, Keenan,"* Eric's voice said in Keenan's mind. *"Don't worry. Giovanni will understand. It's just the situation that has everybody nervous."*

*"Thanks, Eric,"* Keenan replied, all the while following Giovanni's progress with the Sidhe. The incubus placed Michel on the one chair that had miraculously survived the battle in the safe house. He started whispering in Michel's ear, but Keenan could still hear the words being said. "Listen to me, Michel. It's very important that you help us out. Jean Luc is dangerous and on the loose."

Surprisingly, Michel found the strength to shake his head and push Giovanni away. "In your dreams. I'm not that stupid."

Lucca attempted to aid his stepbrother, but with no luck. Cade crossed his arms against his chest and tapped his foot on the floor.

“Can’t we move along with this? He clearly won’t cooperate. We have to force it out of him.”

Kalin grimaced, obviously displeased at the prospect. “*They’re upset about what they saw in the recordings,*” Eric whispered.

“*Entirely understandable.*” Keenan sighed. He felt grateful he had his connection with Eric to temper him. It made Keenan able to walk to Kalin and squeeze the Kaldorian’s shoulder in silent understanding. He then turned to his incubus friends. “It’s okay. I’ll take it from here. I promise I’ll be gentle.” He found with surprise that he actually meant it. It must have shown on his face, and the two Italians backed off, leaving Michel to Keenan.

There was no fear in Michel’s eyes. In fact, the man’s gaze had already started to become alert. While it had lost a significant part of the chill so typical to the Imperials, it still held the cool contempt Keenan could recall from their meetings in New York.

“Listen up, Michel,” he said in a soft voice. “I’m not going to ask nicely, but just so you know, it’ll hurt less if you don’t fight me.”

Without another word, Keenan sank his fangs in the Sidhe’s throat. It had been a while since he’d bitten someone just for manipulative purposes. He kept everything as clinical and clean as possible. Even when Michel tried to put up mental barriers against him, Keenan tore through them with mathematical precision, no longer seeking his enemy’s pain. He could have tried to look into Michel’s thoughts without the blood transfer, but he doubted the efficiency of such a method.

Michel’s fractured thoughts finally started forming a clear picture in Keenan’s head. He felt Eric support him, smoothing his way, helping him deal with the shadows of the Sidhe’s mind. With his lover’s help, he managed to keep the entire process relatively painless for Michel.

He saw Jean Luc’s Imperials, assembling in a military formation around their leader. Sharp blades shone at their waists, their glow almost eerie in the darkness of Michel’s memories. Snow, blinding

white and cold, blocked his vision, numbing his senses. At first, Keenan thought he was in the Pyrenees, just before the battle in the safe house. Then he caught a glimpse of Jean Luc's calm face. "It's that way," Jean Luc said.

Keenan realized he'd gone too far back, but at this point, he needed to let the memory flow. Michel nodded at his prince's words and followed behind Jean Luc. Keenan watched as the group of Imperials trailed after them and headed toward a large, dark building. Jean Luc vanished from Keenan's sight, and suddenly, the memories turned erratic. Explosions surrounded him, desperate screams sounding in the distance. Michel fought, and Keenan could catch the Sidhe's feelings at that moment. *I have to get to the prince. Have to keep him safe.*

Michel shouldn't have worried. Through the deep smoke, Jean Luc emerged, carrying a tall, Asian man. It was easy enough to recognize him as Jean Luc's rescuer from the Sidhe facility, Min Yu. "Let's go," Jean Luc said to Michel.

"Wait," Min Yu murmured. "There's someone else, another man. I remember seeing him here. *Mon ange...*"

Jean Luc nodded. "Michel, check the rooms. I'll get Minu out and come back."

Jean Luc disappeared toward the exit, and Michel began his search. Keenan watched as the Sidhe efficiently swept through several rooms, registering little success in his search. Another explosion shook the building, shattering glass, splitting wood, and crumbling walls. Keenan thought Michel would give up on his quest, but then, through the Sidhe's ears, he heard a loud, masculine groan. Michel hastened in the direction of the sound and burst into another chamber. There, on the floor, among shards of broken glass, lay a blond, unconscious man. A pool of viscous liquid surrounded him, the obvious source a broken receptacle to his right. Wires hung out of the construction like torn veins, and some electrodes still clung to the blond's skin. Michel dodged the destroyed equipment and went to

retrieve the fallen man. Keenan realized the identity of the other prisoner with ease. Cain, Lucien and Cade's brother. By some twist of fate, he and Min Yu had been imprisoned together.

Keenan scanned through Michel's memories, searching for the more recent ones. He caught that the building holding Cain and Min Yu had been located somewhere in Siberia, a stronghold of human hunters. Jean Luc had found out its location from his brother, Pierre. Shortly after retrieving Cain and the enigmatic Min Yu, the Sidhe prince had gone berserk. They'd been forced to imprison him in the Pyrenees base as well, right next to his brother. Keenan mentally noted the location of the facility and continued to look for the information they needed.

It wasn't easy. Michel's strength seemed to be returning, and the barriers appeared once more, making it harder for Keenan to progress. He found himself forced to stop the feeding session, a fact which further weighed on him and broke his concentration. With a sigh, Keenan pushed harder, effectively shattering the other man's resistance. He'd have liked to keep the process gentle, but he couldn't risk losing whatever input Michel could give them.

A flash of images passed through his mental vision. Keenan sorted through the memories and finally found what he was looking for, the Imperials' meeting with Jean Luc and the others. At first, the only thing he could discern was the shape of the safe house. As the Sidhe burst inside, though, a fierce battle began. Even vastly outnumbered, the four fugitives fought back, making Michel's efforts to capture them futile. Sidhe magic mingled and clashed, and demon magic surrounded them. The Sidhe soldiers fell, defeated by their opponents' superior strength. A blast of powerful magic hit Michel, immobilizing his body. Through the Sidhe's memories, Keenan found himself facing Jean Luc. "Stop following us," Jean Luc sneered. Keenan felt a lingering trace of remembered pain as Jean Luc's power swept through Michel's flesh. He couldn't help but wonder how intense it had been during the actual fight. Judging by the now-hazy images,

he'd bet on very powerful and just as agonizing. Michel tried to fight his prince, but he didn't have a chance. As Keenan expected, Michel ended up in a bloody heap on the floor.

"I'll spare your lives today, but next time, I won't be so merciful," Jean Luc said. With that, the memory ended, and Keenan guessed Michel had lost consciousness. It was clear enough, though, that Michel had no knowledge of the fugitives' current location. He released the exhausted Sidhe from his thrall and turned to his companions.

Cade gave him an eager look. "Well?"

"Apparently, Jean Luc's lover Min Yu was imprisoned at a human base in Siberia. As luck would have it, when Jean Luc released him, he also busted Cain out. He'd been held in a machine of sorts, but I can't be sure as to its nature." Keenan suspected the broken receptacle had formed part of a suspended animation device, but he lacked the necessary data to be one hundred percent certain. It wouldn't be impossible. Human science evolved with startling rapidity when power and money were involved. Taking control over an Ancient would give any organization tremendous advantages.

"I see," Cade said. "Anything else?"

"I'm afraid nothing too helpful. When Jean Luc and the others escaped, the Imperials followed. They caught up with the fugitives here. There was a fight, and the Imperials lost. Beyond that, Michel has no idea of what could have happened to those four."

Keenan took a deep breath and arranged the stolen images in his head. "Still, we should be just a day or so behind. We can still catch up."

The loud howling of the wind interrupted the conversation. The door burst open, sending a flurry of snowflakes inside. Lucca cursed and went to close it. "I would say, Keenan, that we're not going anywhere anytime soon."

Keenan walked to the window and threw a gaze outside. He frowned as he realized the storm had worsened considerably while



he'd been lost in Michel's head. "True," he said, trying to stay optimistic, "but Jean Luc and his group won't be making any progress either."

"We should take a look around," Kalin suggested. "Maybe we'll find some sort of clue as to where they could have gone."

Keenan strongly doubted that, but they did indeed need to check. First, they had to immobilize the Imperials. Even wounded, the Sidhe could still become a danger for their quest. "Let's gather these guys and tie them up. By the look of things, we'll have plenty of time to scour this place."

\* \* \* \*

Eric absently chewed on his fingernails while he kept a mental eye on his lover's progress. So far, they'd had little luck in their tasks. Leba had yet to arrive. Hell, they didn't even know if she would do so anytime soon. According to Yves, she came and went as she pleased, never letting them know of her decisions. It was her way, and her fledglings had grown accustomed to it. They could, of course, contact her, but they never did so unless it was absolutely necessary. Eric didn't want to do so now, since, most importantly, they needed her goodwill. Keenan had already summoned her on Rebecca's island, and to call on her again would be more than a little disrespectful.

So here Eric waited. All the while, Keenan was stuck on the mountain, with little provisions and no real leads. Yves and the other still busied themselves with the stolen files. Eric wanted to do something, anything, but he was helpless.

Sighing, Eric left his room and headed toward the studio. He'd tell his friends about Keenan's findings. Maybe they'd manage to cross the data with something else and come up with a solution. God, Eric hated this.

As he entered the studio, Alicia lifted her eyes from the screen in front of her and smiled. Yves and Remi nodded and muttered a greeting. “What’s up, Eric?” Alicia asked. “Any news from Keenan?”

“They found Michel Valois. It seems the man caught up with Jean Luc’s group and fought them. Michel and his men lost. After that, Keenan doesn’t know what happened.”

Remi sighed. “So what now?”

Eric arched a brow. “That’s exactly what I was wondering. Any chance you can give us a little help here?”

“Actually, yes,” Yves replied. “First off, we cross-referenced the image of Min Yu Le Ciel in several databases. Alas, we didn’t come up with anything that wasn’t already in the Sidhe files.”

“Who is he really? You never said.”

“From what we gathered, years ago he was a hunter working for a human organization. His parentage is a mystery, although there is a general consensus that he is a half-breed, Korean-French, perhaps Chinese, and has some paranormal blood. At one point, he met Jean Luc and nearly killed him. It’s very brief, and we’ve had no luck finding him someplace else either. He’s a ghost. We’re still looking, though.”

Eric would have liked to know more about the story behind Jean Luc and Min Yu’s relationship. Another day, maybe. For now, he had to focus on locating them. “I see. Anything else?”

“Well, we did place a spyware program inside the Sidhe systems to notify us of future developments.”

Eric gaped. “And you’re only now telling me this?” Anger flowed through him. Perhaps if he’d known, he could have avoided being separated from Keenan.

“No, *pet*,” Keenan said in his mind. “*Leaving Paris was necessary, and you know it.*”

Eric took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. Yves gave him a sheepish look. “Sorry, *petit frère*, but saying anything

would have been pointless. We didn't know if it would help. Hell, we still don't."

Eric's heart fell. "No leads from there either, then?"

Remi shook his head. "Nothing certain. With the files being so numerous, it's like looking for a needle in a haystack. As for the spyware, it hasn't caught anything relevant yet."

Eric rubbed his eyes tiredly. He couldn't blame his French friends for their failure. If not for Flèche, they wouldn't even know Cain was alive. He had to be patient. They'd make a breakthrough soon.

A soft melody startled Eric from his glum thoughts. He retrieved his cell phone and glanced at the display, already knowing the identity of the caller. Cassandra.

He should have contacted his sire more often, but he'd been too concerned and lost in his thoughts. Cassandra would see right through him, and he didn't want to worry her. Since the attack on the Sidhe compound, Eric had spoken with Cassandra only once. He'd told her about Leba's gift to them, and she'd been very excited. Eric originally thought she would feel threatened, but as it turned out, Cassandra didn't see things like that. She truly felt happy for Eric and honored by Leba's affection toward him. Perhaps talking to her now would help. She always had a knack of knowing when he needed her.

Stepping out of the studio, Eric flipped his cell phone open. "Hey, Cassandra."

"Hello, fledgling," she said. "I don't suppose you've heard anything new about Cain and the others."

Eric frowned. Her voice sounded a little too anxious for his taste. "Keenan lost their trace in the mountains," he replied, wary of giving explanations.

"Well, don't despair. You'd never believe what just happened."

Eric was almost afraid to ask. "What?"

"Gabriel had a vision. Patrice and Lucien didn't think much of it, but he got very worked up. When he described the people he'd seen, I

recognized Jean Luc and Pierre with ease. Cain was with them, of course.”

For a second, Eric lost the power of speech. “A-Are you serious?” he stammered. “What did he see? Where do we have to go?”

“Well, here’s where it gets tricky. With him being Kaldorian and all, he couldn’t tell where they were. Given his condition, I can’t risk reading his mind.”

Eric agreed with her. Vampires were indeed more brutal in their mental probes. Even when they didn’t take blood, they could seriously harm the intended subject. With Gabriel about to have a child, having a vampire read his mind was out of the question.

“There’s more,” Cassandra continued. “Lucien figured out something wasn’t right. He got angry when I refused to explain, so in the end, I couldn’t avoid telling him about his brother.”

Eric cursed. “I’m betting he’s not very happy with Cade right now.”

“Quite right,” Cassandra replied. “Gabriel calmed him down, but some blood will fly when those two meet.”

Eric winced. He understood Lucien’s frustration, but he hoped the situation wouldn’t escalate to violence. Things were already difficult enough. “So what now?” he asked his sire.

“Well, it depends. I can’t do much here, but I think it’s information we can’t disregard.”

She sighed, and Eric knew what she was thinking. “I have to do it. I have to look into Gabriel’s memories.”

“No, pet,” Keenan growled through their connection. “*I refuse. You can’t touch Gabriel ever again, not after what happened last time.*”

“*I’m stronger now,*” Eric replied, “*not so fragile. I have you to ground me.*”

A wave of guilt swept over their mind link, and Eric knew exactly what Keenan thought. “*I don’t blame you for what happened,*” he

rushed to say. *"If anything, it was necessary. We're closer, stronger now. I'm convinced we can get through this."*

He felt Keenan's reluctance and regretted he couldn't be by his lover's side to physically comfort him. Out of the blue, strong arms wrapped around him in an invisible embrace. Incredibly, his nostrils filled with Keenan's masculine scent. Soft, yet powerful lips took his own in a devastating kiss. Eric collapsed on an armchair in the hallway and moaned. He felt a powerful presence above him and a heavy weight pressing him down. *"Should you even be here?"* he asked. Even as these words escaped his lips, Eric berated himself for his stupidity. What the hell was he doing, trying to change Keenan's mind?

Thankfully, Keenan seemed to have no intention to stop. A wicked tongue swept from Eric's lips to his neck. Eric's body turned to flame as his lover nibbled on his throat. *"Yes, pet,"* Keenan said. *"I should be with you, all the time. For now, this will have to do."*

A frightened voice startled Eric, breaking through the haze of passion. "Eric? Eric? Are you there?"

Eric's face flamed as he realized he'd completely forgotten about the conversation with Cassandra. A soft kiss brushed over his lips, then Keenan's astral presence faded, leaving just their connection in place. Eric suppressed a groan and got up, his shaky legs barely keeping him upright. He tried to push back his sexual frustration, but it wasn't easy. When he picked up the abandoned phone, his voice sounded choked even to his own ears. "Yes, I'm here. Sorry about that."

"What happened?" Cassandra asked in an alarmed tone. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," he replied. He considered the virtues of inventing an excuse, but the truth spilled from his lips just the same. "I was with Keenan."

Cassandra let out a laugh. "I should have known. All right, all right. I get it. I don't need the details." Her voice sobered. "But seriously, what are we going to do about the Kaldorians?"

"Whatever's best for everyone, of course," Eric answered, feeling strangely calm. "I'll come to New York and talk to Gabriel. It'll have to wait, though, until Keenan gets here."

Just as he finished speaking, Eric realized the issue with Leba still remained. He couldn't leave Paris. "Wait! God, Cassandra, I can't come. I have to stay here to wait for the High Mother."

A masculine voice replied in Cassandra's stead. "No problem. We'll come there."

Eric blanched. "Gabriel? Is that you?"

"Hi, Eric. Yes, it's me. Get Keenan, and we'll see you soon."

"But, Gabriel, should you be travelling in your condition?"

"I'll be just fine," Gabriel said. "I talked to Luce. He needs to know what happened to his brother. We both need to know."

Eric bit his lip in concern. He knew Gabriel wouldn't risk the life of his unborn son, but he couldn't but worry. "Can you pass Cassandra again?"

"Sure."

A shuffle at the other side of the receiver signaled Gabriel had done as asked. Cassandra's voice sounded over the connection. "Fledgling, I'll talk to Lucien. I'll make sure Gabriel is taken care of."

*"It's just a plane trip,"* Keenan whispered in Eric's mind. *"Gabriel has been through so much more, and he'll have the best of care. There's absolutely no risk."*

Eric sighed. *"I still wish I could go to New York instead, more so since he's suffered a lot in the past. The last thing I want is to make things harder for him."*

*"I know, pet, but there really isn't another way. Besides, this is about them, as well. Lucien wants to see his brother."* Keenan paused, and waves of comforting affection swept through their link. *"We'll*

*get back to Paris as soon as the storm stops. No sense blindly trying to find our way on the mountain anyway."*

"What if this doesn't work out?" Eric asked.

*"I'll discuss it with the others, and we'll see what they think. But, pet, I don't want you doing anything without me there, all right?"*

Eric nodded. "Got it." He then returned to his conversation with his sire. "Make the arrangements. Keenan will talk to the others and see if they can come back."

"Okay, fledgling. Don't worry about a thing. And do try to call more often."

Eric couldn't help a small chuckle. "I know, I'm an ingrate. Bye, Cassandra."

"Bye."

As he ended his conversation with Cassandra, the door opened with a creaking sound. Eric turned, startled, and his eyes widened when he saw the person standing before him. The High Mother slowly made her way toward him, a small smile on her lips. "Well, well, Eric. We meet again."

## Chapter Fifteen

Eric fluttered about nervously, shifting from foot to foot. The walls of the room seemed to crowd in on him, and a strong feeling of déjà vu plagued him. Hadn't he done this already? Hysterical laughter bubbled inside Eric. Was his life set on repeat, or what? He clearly remembered fretting in New York, at Gabriel's side, until Keenan brought Lucien there.

"Sit, fledgling," Leba said as she sipped her tea. Eric wondered why she even had the ability to drink it. Could she taste it, or was it just a random thing to pass the time? Seemingly oblivious to his thoughts, she continued, "They'll be here any minute now."

"They sure are slow," Cade muttered.

Leba gently stirred the liquid in her cup. "It's the weather. Be patient. Oh, and when they arrive, do try to keep the bloodshed to a minimum."

Leba had arranged a special flight for Gabriel and Lucien, providing them with a private jet that would take them to a vampire-owned airport outside Paris. Eric hadn't even known private vamp airports existed in this area, but taking into account Leba's power, he couldn't say he was surprised.

Eric leaned against Keenan's chest and sighed. They'd arrived at the airport around half an hour earlier. Due to poor weather, the flight seemed to be taking longer than expected. Leba showed no sign of impatience, but Cade grumbled and cursed, obviously pissed off by the entire situation. Kalin hugged Cade's back, and silence fell between them.



The waiting room of the airport looked like an aristocrat's salon, complete with hardwood floors, soft carpets, and sparkling chandeliers. Delicate cups of china filled with aromatic tea waited on ebony coffee tables. Eric had gotten used to the discrete luxury, but when he acknowledged the task ahead of him, it all became superfluous and annoying. Thankfully, no one offered any words of encouragement. Each of those present had too many concerns for that.

A tall woman entered the room and bowed. "*Madame*, we've received notice the plane is within sight of the airport."

Leba placed her cup down on the table and nodded. "Thank you."

As the woman left the room, Cade got up. "I'll be waiting on the runway."

With a brief greeting, he took Kalin's arm and made his way out, his mate by his side. Eric would have liked to follow, but respect and duty kept him at Leba's side. She'd been very helpful and understanding regarding all this. She'd actually acquiesced to his request and agreed to forgive the Sidhe, just as long as the two men were kept from hurting other vampires. If Jean Luc or Pierre lifted a finger against one of her children, all bets were off.

Now, they just needed to find the group of fugitives. Gabriel was the key, and Eric thrummed with anxiety as the minutes seemed to stretch into hours.

"Go on, fledgling," Leba finally said. "Take Keenan and wait outside. Giovanni and Lucca will keep me company."

The incubi looked toward the High Mother, eyes wide. They'd been silent so far, and Eric felt kind of bad for them. They're carrying the weight of what their kin did, Keenan had once told him. How would Lucien deal with meeting them? Back in New York, they'd narrowly escaped it. The reunion with Gabriel kept the demon prince too busy, and then, they'd left to look for Cain. Now, old wounds had been torn open, and everyone would feel the effect.

As much as he empathized with Giovanni and Lucca, Eric felt thankful for the reprieve. He offered Leba a warm smile and, on

impulse, kissed her cheek. It was daring of him, but for some reason, he knew she'd welcome it. Indeed, her arms went around his waist as she hugged him. "*You make an old woman happy again,*" she said in his mind.

As she released him, Eric grabbed Keenan's hand and took off after Cade. Outside, heavy clouds covered the sky, shielding Eric from sunlight. The cold winds had quieted, but the chill still bit at Eric's skin. Eric squeezed Keenan's hand as he ran. He could see the runway straight ahead and Cade pacing agitatedly. The sound of an approaching aircraft wheezed through the air, and Eric's eyes flew up. A small plane approached. Eric stumbled as he tried to hasten the pace and keep his eyes on the plane at the same time. Keenan saved him from falling and chuckled. "You know, I think I should get angry that you're so excited to see Gabriel."

Eric turned against Keenan until they ended up embracing. The smoldering heat of Keenan's eyes no longer held the furious jealousy they once had. Eric forgot all about his worries as the freezing temperature yielded to the fire of passion.

"Pet, we shouldn't be doing this here." Keenan growled.

In spite of Keenan's words, their mouths met in a sweet kiss, drawn to each other as if of their own volition. Eric felt his anxiety melt under the heady rush of emotion. He just needed to trust himself, Keenan, and all of their friends. They'd pull through.

When their lips separated, Eric was out of breath, panting, but at peace. Keenan smiled at him. "Come, Eric. The plane's landing."

Eric reluctantly turned from Keenan's embrace. They walked hand in hand to the runway, no longer rushing. Eric greeted Kalin and Cade with a nod and a brief "hey," earning himself a curious look. "I thought you couldn't leave the boss lady." Cade shouted to make himself heard over the noise of the approaching plane.

Eric should have bristled at the sarcastic words, but he knew Cade understood and respected Leba's power. "She gave us leave to come here," he replied.

A few minutes after their arrival, the plane started its descent. Eric leaned into Keenan's warmth as he watched the aircraft wheels hit the tarmac. The runway had been carefully prepared for Gabriel and Lucien's arrival so that, in spite of the poor weather, it wouldn't be covered with ice or snow. For this reason, the jet had little trouble landing. Even so, Eric found his previous anxiety returning. He wasn't even sure why. Were they even his own fears or something else entirely?

Keenan's presence by his side grounded him, and he managed to maintain the appearance of calm. The wheels of the plane stopped, and a flurry of activity surrounded the aircraft as the staff prepared a stairway for the passengers to use. Finally, the hatch opened, and a stone-faced Lucien appeared, holding a very pregnant Gabriel in his arms.

In their absence, Gabriel's pregnancy had advanced significantly. Even with the thick clothing he wore, Eric could see the swell of Gabriel's belly. Excitement bubbled inside him. He already cared about the unborn child as if baby Cain were his nephew. He'd missed talking to Gabriel, even saying hi or teaching Gabriel a few things about their world. He'd have liked their reunion to be in less tense circumstances, but he would enjoy it regardless.

Lucien came down the stairway, with Gabriel cuddled against his chest. "*Let's welcome them, pet,*" Keenan mentally said.

The two of them met Lucien and Gabriel halfway. "Greetings, Prince Lucien, Prince Gabriel," Keenan began. "It is a pleasure to see you again."

Lucien gave Keenan a dark look, but visibly relaxed when he saw Keenan's friendly stance. "And you, Mr. von Klein, Eric."

Eric smiled at the demon prince. They seemed to be off to a promising start. At least Keenan and Lucien wouldn't be at each other's throats. Eric was happy for that. It would probably be up to Keenan and their friends to diffuse the situation between Lucien and Cade.

He kept his concerns from showing and let only the glee flow over him. “Hello, Prince Lucien, Gabriel,” he greeted enthusiastically, bouncing to the Kaldorian’s side. “How have you been? How’s the baby?”

Gabriel beamed at Eric. “As you can see, I’m coddled and fat. Cain is growing and kicking me at the most inappropriate moments, and Luce is half the time busy bringing me more pillows.”

Eric couldn’t help but giggle. A snort of amusement escaped Keenan, and grim-faced Lucien turned a loving smile to his mate. In a low voice, he said something Eric couldn’t understand. It made Gabriel blush, and Eric could easily imagine what Lucien whispered to his mate.

The mood turned tenser when Cade and Kalin decided to join them. Eric could swear Lucien’s eyes flashed red at the first sight of Cade.

“Brother,” Cade greeted, “I’m glad to see you are well.”

Eric mentally thanked Cade for choosing to speak in English. As much as he hated all this, he couldn’t bear the thought of being kept in the dark.

Lucien shot Cade a glare so sharp, it could have speared Cade in two. “I would say likewise, but you know as well as I do, I’m not in the mood for pleasantries.”

Gabriel placed a comforting hand on Lucien’s bicep. “Luce, it’s okay. We’re not here to fight, remember?”

Lucien took a deep breath and nodded. “Gabriel’s right.” He turned away from his brother. “The flight was quite tiresome. Mr. von Klein, is there somewhere he can rest? Later, we can proceed with the reading.”

“Certainly,” Keenan said. “Come. No sense in staying here in the cold. There’s someone we’d like you to meet, and then we have arranged transportation to take us to the city.”

“If you’d rather, Gabriel can even rest here,” Eric said. “I swear, this place has its own hotel and everything.”

His attempt to lighten the mood failed, but Gabriel's presence kept the hostility between Cade and Lucien in check. They walked back from the runway in tense silence. Eric wished he could find something to cast away the awkward atmosphere, but he didn't think any joke or comment could make a difference.

Thankfully, they made good time and soon reached the main building. In the doorway, Leba, Giovanni, and Lucca waited. Eric and Keenan bowed, then turned to Lucien and Gabriel. "Lucien, Gabriel, this is Leba, High Mother of all vampires," Keenan said. "You might remember Lucca and Giovanni di Moretti from New York."

Gabriel gently petted Lucien's hand, and, after a slight hesitation, Lucien placed his mate down. Together, they followed Keenan and Eric's example and greeted Leba with a respectful bow. "Greetings, Your Highness," Lucien said. "I am Prince Lucien of Xeetha, and this is my mate, Prince Gabriel of Alaria. Thank you for your hospitality." He nodded toward Giovanni and Lucca. "I don't think I've had the opportunity to meet you, but I appreciate your kindness toward my mate."

Eric didn't miss the fact that Lucien didn't mention his and Gabriel's full titles. Taking into account the involvement of Lucien's parents in Gabriel's appearance on Earth, he couldn't say he didn't understand it. It was kind of weird, if he thought about it. Perhaps if the demon kings of Xeetha hadn't sent Gabriel away, Lucien and Cade would have never known their brother was still alive.

He didn't think Lucien would welcome this reminder, though. So far, Lucien had taken things quite well, and Eric wanted to keep it that way, thank you very much. Leba seemed surprisingly warm, and she echoed Lucien and Gabriel's greeting with a smaller bow of her own. "Please, call me Leba. It's a pleasure to have you here."

She gestured them inside and toward the salon waiting room. "I've ordered some refreshments and had rooms prepared for you."

"You have our warmest thanks, Your...Leba," Lucien said with a slight slip into formality. "I understand you've been quite

instrumental in my brother's quest." His voice turned tenser at the mere mentioning of Cade. Eric prayed Lucien wouldn't break down and attack his sibling.

"Quite so," Leba replied, ignoring Lucien's tone. "I understand the importance of the issue, particularly since it coincides with my own interests."

"You mean, regarding the Sidhe," Gabriel blurted out. As Leba turned to him, he flushed bright red and started stammering. "I mean...What I wanted to say..."

Leba laughed. "That's quite all right, little one," she said. "You've seen and known many things, some of which I have no notion of." Her eyes met Gabriel's, and Gabriel remained frozen in place. Eric wanted to reach for his friend, to do something to stop Leba, but at the same time, he trusted she would not harm Gabriel. What was going on?

Lucien immediately felt the change in his mate. "What are you doing?" he snarled. "Stop! Leave him alone!"

The words turned into a growl, and Eric let out a frightened yelp when he saw Lucien spouting horns, claws, and even a tail. "Don't!" Cade cried out in panic. "He'll go over the Edge!"

Before Lucien could lunge, Leba's gaze fell on him, freezing him in his tracks. "Don't worry," she said softly. Gabriel snapped out of his daze as she spoke, not looking any the worse for wear. He tilted his head and looked at Leba with confused, but warm eyes. "I don't understand."

Leba's smile turned into a barely-there twist of lips. Eric recognized it as being genuine, and he wasn't surprised when she kissed Gabriel on the cheek. "You are a special, special child. No wonder Eric cares for you so deeply."

Gabriel looked torn between embarrassment and concern. "M-My mate?"

"Is quite all right. I just stopped him from doing anything stupid."

Indeed, mere seconds later, Lucien groaned, signaling he'd regained the ability to move. His horns and tail receded, but threatened to reappear when he looked from Gabriel to Leba. "What is the meaning of this?" He growled, placing his body protectively in front of Gabriel.

"No worries, Prince Lucien. I just attempted to look into your mate's mind and catch whatever images he received from his vision. It would have been easier, preventing Eric's involvement in this." She offered Eric a warm look, and he realized she'd meant to save him from the pain of Gabriel's memories. "Unfortunately," she said, "for some reason, Gabriel's mind resists me, and I cannot risk pushing him."

Gabriel's eyes widened at her reply, and to Eric's shock, he realized unshed tears shone in his friend's black eyes. "Thank you," Gabriel said. "Thank you for taking care of Eric."

"You're both very unique young men," Leba said. "My congratulations to your soul mates."

Keenan thanked her with a low bow, whereas Lucien looked confused and suspicious. Gabriel nudged his mate with his shoulder, making Lucien force a smile. "And you have my thanks, as well," Lucien said. A muttered word from Gabriel made the demon prince continue. "Apologies for overreacting."

Leba chuckled. "It's actually good to know Gabriel and Eric have people to protect them." They once again headed toward the salon as Leba spoke. "Your arrival signals a beginning and an ending, Prince Lucien. Mysteries are being unraveled, and a time will come when the world will acknowledge different issues, different leaders and ways of thinking."

Lucien's brow shot up at the sudden shift. "I take it you believe this to be part of a larger thing."

Leba opened the doors to the waiting room. "I don't believe in coincidences. But not to worry, I don't intend to draw Gabriel into any of my wicked ploys."

Eric snickered, realizing Leba had somehow read Lucien's mind. Lucien looked uncomfortable and glowered at Eric, but when Gabriel leaned against him, his expression softened. In the end, the demon prince didn't comment on Leba's little joke and chose to lead Gabriel to the couch Eric occupied just ten minutes before. He fiddled around Gabriel, arranging pillows and quilts and making Gabriel roll his eyes in exasperation. Eric met his friend's gaze and smiled. He hadn't seen much of Lucien and Gabriel as a couple, but he could easily tell the two loved each other as much as Keenan and Eric did.

Shaking his head, Gabriel pulled Lucien to sit by his side. "I think maybe we should get this over with. If Eric wants to, of course."

Eric arched a brow. "Sure, Gabriel, but don't you want to rest?"

"I can't," his friend replied. "I'm too tense. This is the first time I've ever seen something not directly connected to my person. My visions always had Luce or me in them. I think I've seen this for a reason, and it's very important to find out if it can help."

Eric wordlessly joined Lucien and Gabriel on the couch. Keenan followed and sat behind him, as always offering silent support. Eric licked his lips in nervousness and removed his gloves. He'd gotten better at controlling his psychic abilities, but he still wore the leather protection, just in case. Now, the extent of his control would again be tested. Eric hoped he wouldn't disappoint. "Just think about what you saw. Concentrate on that."

He wanted to say something more helpful, but he didn't know how this would work. When Gabriel closed his eyes and nodded, Eric took his friend's hand, stomach fluttering with anxiety.

Almost instantly, he found himself propelled forward in something that felt like a black hole vacuuming his very mind in the void. It didn't hurt, but it did feel scary and more than a little confusing. Eric forced himself to open his mind. As soon as he stopped fighting the flow of psychic energy, the darkness around him started to clear. He emerged in what looked like a shop, and his eyes immediately went to the familiar figures of Jean Luc and Pierre



D'Argent and their companions. "I take it you know them," Gabriel said. He stood right in front of the two, his eyes blazing with quiet magic.

Eric gave the men a reluctant look before he realized the two Sidhe and their rescuers were motionless, not even breathing. "It's okay. They can't see you," Gabriel explained. "It's like a movie. I was just waiting for you so that I can play it."

*"And we're off to a promising start,"* Keenan's voice said in Eric's mind. Gabriel's eyes widened in surprise, and for a brief moment, the image of the shop flickered. Eric tried to reach for his friend, to tell Gabriel everything was all right. The disturbance subsided, though, and Eric found himself standing at Keenan's side.

"Sorry about that," Gabriel said. "I didn't expect another presence. When we last touched minds, I didn't feel your link to Keenan."

Keenan bristled at Gabriel's comment. "We'd had a fight at the time."

Gabriel cleared his throat, and his discomfort with the whole situation swept through Eric, no longer filtered by any mental barriers. "It's fine now," Eric told his friend. "Keenan understands."

Keenan wrapped his arm around Eric's shoulders. "Yeah. I get it now."

After all, how could he not? Gabriel's feelings were open to them both, just like their own minds and emotions spoke to the young Kaldorian. It couldn't have been any other way, but Eric didn't mind. He only hoped Gabriel could withstand the assault of having two different people in his head.

"Okay, then," Gabriel said, visibly relaxing. "Ready?"

Keenan and Eric nodded and focused on the scene in front of them. Eric caught the sight of Gabriel closing his eyes in deep concentration, and then, he and his lover molded with the images of Gabriel's vision.

“Minu, are you sure this person can be trusted?” Jean Luc said to his lover.

“I’ve known him all my life,” Min Yu replied. “He’ll help.”

Pierre snorted. “And tell me again why we’re supposed to listen to you? You’re just a dick to fuck Jean Luc’s ass.”

Eric winced at the venom in Pierre’s tone. “It’s the DSS again,” Keenan said.

Confirming Keenan’s guess, Cain took Pierre in his arms and started to gently caress him. “It’s okay, babe. Calm down. It’s going to be fine.”

In Cain’s embrace, Pierre relaxed, seemingly forgetting all about Jean Luc and Min Yu. Eric groaned. “Oh, shit. They’re lovers.”

This was a complication they hadn’t expected. Still, it seemed Cain could control Pierre’s disease, or rather, temporarily push it back. Maybe it would turn out to be an advantage.

Jean Luc looked just as angry as Pierre, but Min Yu kept him in check, just like Cain had done with Pierre. “*Mon ange*, why don’t we go make the arrangements?”

Cain met Min Yu’s eyes. “I’ll take Pierre back to the hotel and meet you there.”

“Sure,” Min Yu replied.

While Cain disappeared with Pierre out the door, Min Yu gestured Jean Luc to the back of the shop. “Feng?” he called out. “You in there, old man?”

A small Chinese man emerged from the depths of the store, arranging his glasses. “Min? Oh, my God, is it really you?”

“It’s me. Hello, Feng.”

Feng shuffled closer and hugged Min Yu tightly. The other man laughed and hugged Feng back. As they separated, Min Yu nodded toward Jean Luc. “This is Jean Luc D’Argent, my better half.”

Feng looked startled but didn’t make any derogatory comments. “A lot of women will be very disappointed,” he said instead. His cheeky expression shifted as his dark eyes swept over the two of

them. “Where have you been, Min? Last I heard you were somewhere in Paris, then poof! You suddenly vanished.”

“I was taken prisoner. Jean Luc recently managed to release me, but we are on the run.”

Eric expected Feng to be surprised or, at least, frightened. Instead, the man’s lips twisted into a grin. “Ah, I see what you’re getting at. You need false papers.”

Jean Luc nodded. “For us and our two companions.”

“Consider it done!” Feng said. “I’ll need photographs of everyone, of course, so your friends will have to visit me, too. But by the time I’m done, you’ll have the best identity cards around. You haven’t come to Feng Yo Pin for nothing.”

“I know, Feng,” Min Yu said, smiling. “I know.”

The vision started to fade, and Gabriel’s figure appeared again. “Well?”

“It’s a good lead, that’s for sure,” Eric said.

Keenan hummed thoughtfully. “Gabriel, can you work with this image as you would with a camera? I mean zoom, rotate the vision?”

Gabriel tilted his head, obviously uncertain as to what Keenan meant. As Keenan’s thoughts flowed through Eric and over Gabriel, Gabriel’s eyes lit up in understanding. “To find the location. Yes, I can try.”

As Gabriel spoke, the image started to twist around them. “Go on. Take a look around.”

Eric went to the door Pierre and Cain had left through and tried it. To his surprise, the knob turned, and he managed to push it open. He ended up in a corridor filled with stalls. A throng of people filled the hallway, both Asian and white, all frozen in time. Eric looked a bit further, hoping Gabriel’s abilities extended enough to give them a clearer picture of where they were. Ahead, he could see a green sign marked “exit.”

“Maybe we’ll find something there,” Keenan said from behind him.

Eric nodded and hastened through the eerily quiet crowd. They reached the end of the corridor and stepped outside. It was daytime, but dark clouds shielded the sun from sight. Thick layers of snow crunched under Eric's feet. Disappointingly, they didn't see much that could give them a clue about their location. A parking lot with frost-covered cars, a couple of nondescript buildings, and, in the distance, a highway that led into what looked like a big city. It could have been any place in the world, well, any place that had snow in winter and parking lots, at least. That narrowed things down to half a planet.

"Look closer, pet," Keenan said.

Eric arched a brow, not understanding. Keenan walked to the cars and swept his hand over the snowy license plate. Eric gaped, desperately hoping this interactivity wouldn't strain Gabriel.

"I'll be fine, Eric," Gabriel said, suddenly appearing by his side. "This is my world and my mind. I know when to stop."

"How far could you take us?" Eric asked curiously.

"Just up to the end of the parking lot. From there, I wouldn't be able to push further."

"It's not necessary anyway," Keenan said. Eric turned his attention to his lover, or rather, to the license plate Keenan studied.

"What does it mean?" Gabriel asked.

The plate read RO B 11 DID. "It's a Romanian number," Keenan replied.

"That doesn't mean anything," Eric said. "It's just a license plate."

"True, pet, but *that* does." Keenan nodded toward the shop they'd just come from. His eyes flew up, and he took in the front of the store, seeing what Keenan was talking about. Not that it was hard. A large red dragon loomed over the entryway of the shopping center. It read *Dragonul Roșu*.

"Bucharest," Keenan said. "We have them, Gabriel. We have them."

## **Chapter Sixteen**

“Well?” Cade asked as soon as Keenan opened his eyes. “Did it work?”

Keenan suppressed his irritation at the man’s impatience. “I’d say it did. We have a name and a location. Their contact is a Feng Yo Pin in Bucharest, Romania. He owns a stall in The Red Dragon, a shopping center outside the Romanian capital. He’ll be procuring them false documents.”

Keenan found himself impressed with Gabriel’s skill and helpfulness. He hadn’t been sure this would work out, but Gabriel had kept control and focus at all times and given them invaluable data. Keenan didn’t usually thank people, but for some reason, he felt he needed to do it this time. Perhaps a part of him wanted to make up for their past conflicts in New York, or simply to acknowledge Gabriel’s effort. Whatever the reason, Keenan didn’t hesitate to smile at the young Kaldorian. “Thank you, Gabriel. We couldn’t have done any of this without you.”

Gabriel blushed, and Keenan surprisingly found it endearing. “I wanted to help,” Gabriel replied. “For everyone.”

Lucien’s hands swept over Gabriel’s body, his concerned gaze checking for injuries. “I’m okay, Luce,” Gabriel said, smiling. “Really. In fact, it was easier than I expected.”

Keenan agreed. He’d also expected something nasty to happen, but thankfully, they’d managed to keep everything in check. “Good job, everyone,” he said. “Now, how about you get some rest? Tomorrow we’ll want to leave for Bucharest, and we have a long day ahead of us.”

As it turned out, the Kaldorians proved far too impatient to wait another day. Under Keenan's supervision, they formed a task force of sorts. Lucien would be joining them, with Kalin staying behind to keep Gabriel company. The French vampires also offered to help, selecting Remi for the job. Giovanni and Lucca would come, as well, as reinforcements.

Keenan hoped these preparations would turn out to be just overzealousness on his part. Judging by Pierre and Jean Luc's behavior in the vision, though, he doubted it. The Sidhe's disease still affected them, and they wouldn't go down without a fight.

They left Paris just hours after Lucien and Gabriel's arrival. Much to Keenan's frustration, they almost crashed when Lucien and Cade finally decided to set things straight and even the score between them. Thankfully, he managed to diffuse the conflict, and the only casualties resulting from the conflict turned out to be a few scorched seats.

They chose to be discreet in their approach and landed at the Otopeni airport, just another plane of rich tourists visiting the city. By the time they left the airport for The Red Dragon, it was near morning. They didn't even bother to stop and change in the hotel rooms Keenan had managed to book. After all, Keenan knew that the trip to the shopping center would take forever. Like most big cities, Bucharest was hell to drive through, particularly in the mornings.

It didn't help that the stormy weather seemed to be defeating all attempts from Romanian authorities to clear the streets and lighten up traffic. There was too much snow and ice, and more than once, Keenan wanted to say "fuck it" and fly.

It probably took them more time to drive through the Romanian capital than it had taken to fly from Paris. Keenan wondered why was it that, after so many years spent in a metropolis like New York, he still couldn't bear the mess of people and vehicles that formed part of the daily routine in big cities. He cursed his own decision to drive one of their cars. It would have been much easier to lounge in the backseat of a limo and maybe make out with Eric.

When they left the main streets behind, the traffic became a bit more bearable, or at least not so hellish. A few hours after landing, they finally pulled in the parking lot of The Red Dragon, the very same one they'd seen in Gabriel's vision.

"Well, at least we weren't mistaken about this," Eric said in a tired voice.

Keenan looked outside, analyzing the sky. For all the snow on the streets, the sun shone brightly, pushing back the clouds. Keenan frowned. "Perhaps you should stay in the car, pet," he told his lover. Under no circumstances did he want to risk exposing Eric to the deadly rays of the sun.

Eric shook his head. "Nonsense. It's just a few feet to the store, and besides, you might need me."

Keenan sighed, knowing there was no point in arguing with Eric when he got stubborn. They would just have to make haste and take cover. If something happened, they'd return to the vehicle and have Eric and Remi stay inside the car.

Keenan opened the door to the rented car and stepped out. Eric followed his example, while Lucien and Remi shuffled out from the backseat. Meanwhile, Giovanni, Lucca, and Cade left the second car and joined them. "Come on," he urged his companions. "The sun's too bright."

They hurried toward the shopping center, fighting their way through the crowd. Thankfully, neither Eric nor Remi seemed affected by the sunlight. Other than occasionally shielding their eyes, they gave no sign of being in pain. Keenan couldn't feel any discomfort coming from his lover. The rays didn't hurt Keenan, either. He sent out a mental thanks to the High Mother. Her blood must be protecting Eric from the sun even on days such as these.

They entered The Red Dragon and looked around, searching for Feng's stall. Eric was the one who detected the man, and they spread out around the area to make sure the human wouldn't escape,

Giovanni and Lucca in the corridor, Lucien and Remi outside the door of the stall, and Keenan, Eric, and Cade inside Feng's store.

As they entered, the shop owner greeted them with a smile. Keenan considered smiling back but decided against it. After all, they had things covered, and there was no need for such hypocrisy. Soon, they'd have what they'd come for, whether Feng wanted to give it to them or not.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as they entered the stall, Keenan started to interrogate the Chinese shop owner. "Feng Yo Pin?"

The old man gave them a suspicious look. "Depends. Who's asking?"

"A friend looking for some information," Keenan replied.

Feng nodded, even if he obviously didn't believe a word. Eric could feel the discomfort and doubt flowing off him. "Go ahead and ask."

"We're supposed to meet a friend, someone you know, as well. Min Yu Le Ciel. I understand we can contact him through you."

Feng's face turned stony and expressionless. "I haven't seen Min in years. I can't help you."

The Chinese man turned to his wares, dismissing them. Eric sighed, knowing Feng's resistance would just make things harder. Feng would tell them everything in the end. The only uncertain thing was whether the process would be slow and painful or fast and smooth. With the corner of his eye, Eric could see Remi and Lucien blocking the door and Cade turning the shop sign from open to closed.

Feng gasped in shock. "Hey, what are you doing?"

Eric placed a hand on Feng's shoulder. "Please. There's nothing to worry about."



He embedded a deep hypnotic suggestion in the words, just like he had with the soldiers in the Parisian Sidhe compound. "We're all friends here."

"Friends," Feng repeated, his eyes glazing over.

"That's right. You're safe with us."

Feng nodded, his previous hostility gone under Eric's assault. "Safe."

Eric smiled in satisfaction and sent threads from his mind to ensnare Feng's will. The man was human, so he couldn't do much to resist Eric's power. As Eric worked, Cade approached them and stared at Feng. "All right, friend. Where did Min Yu and his companions go?"

Cade's abrupt question snapped the doors to Feng's mind shut. Feng violently pushed Eric away and glared. "Get out of here, people. I'm not going to tell you anything."

Eric took a deep breath and forced back his annoyance. Couldn't Cade just stay out of this and let Eric do his job? And when the hell had hypnotizing people become a task appointed to Eric?

Keenan trapped Feng before the man could make his escape or try anything else. "Stay back, please," he told Cade. "Come on, pet. We'll try this again."

Eric nodded and, without another word, unleashed his power over the human. He encountered a surprisingly strong resistance this time. Feng was fiercely loyal to Min Yu, and that gave him a mental power he wouldn't have had otherwise.

Still, Eric broke into Feng's mind without too much effort. He had more trouble keeping his touch light than in actually doing his task. In the end, he managed to get Feng pliant again and steered him away from Cade and the others.

Feng's memories were a jumble of random images Eric didn't have the experience or time to sort through. He felt Keenan guide him, and once he found his path, he realized it wasn't as hard as he'd originally thought. The man tried his best to steer Eric away from the

information on Min Yu, but in the process, he gave away exactly what he wanted to keep secret. The images Eric was looking for popped into Feng's mind just because Feng desperately desired to hide them, push them away. Eric smiled as he examined the information Feng unwillingly provided. He could see the human draft up papers and give them to Min Yu, along with the key to an automobile and directions to a safe destination. Eric pushed a little harder, trying to overhear the remembered conversation.

"I contacted an acquaintance," Feng told Min Yu. "He's arranged a small villa in Borşa for you and your friends."

"Borşa?" Min Yu repeated.

"It's in the Carpathians. Reasonably touristic so that no one will be surprised when strangers pop up, but not quite as busy as other resorts. I'm told the villa is built away from the town, so you'll be able to protect yourself if need be."

Eric noted the address and then checked a bit further. He wanted to know when exactly Min Yu had left. What he found surprised him. The four fugitives departed just the day before. Min Yu even called Feng that evening to tell him they'd been unable to reach Borşa because of a health problem of one of his companions. Eric guessed Pierre, Jean Luc, or both had lost it again. The four would be staying in Sibiu for a few days, in a small rented house. Feng was to send them supplies, both medicine and food products.

"They're being careless," Keenan said as Eric left Feng's mind.

"Careless or desperate," Eric replied. "Things must be really bad with the Sidhe."

Keenan nodded. "We have to hurry." He pressed a hand to Feng's forehead, and the man went limp.

"What did you do?" Cade asked.

"Wiped his memory," Keenan replied. "That way he won't be able to warn Min Yu we're coming."

Cade came closer, eyes shining with excitement. "So you found out where they went?"

“Yes. Five Silversmiths Street. We can get there by tonight if we make haste.”

“What are we waiting for, then?” Cade said. “Onward!”

\* \* \* \*

Eric’s estimation proved to be right on the nose. They reached the Romanian city of Sibiu a little after nightfall. They’d left Remi in Bucharest to watch Feng, just in case, while the rest of them left to finish their quest.

As he drove, Keenan wondered if they would truly find Cain and the other this day. Somehow, it seemed improbable. After everything that had happened, a part of him doubted that it would all come to an end today. Finding Gabriel, meeting Kalin, going to see Rebecca, then asking for Leba’s help. When he looked back, Keenan couldn’t believe he’d done all that in less than a month. He almost regretted losing the excitement of this chase.

And yet, as the car rolled on the dark streets, Keenan felt a certainty he’d not had in a long time. The city seemed to welcome him, so how could they possibly fail?

He smiled to himself. He remembered a time when this place was truly a medieval burg, not just looked like one. It pleased him to visit cities that preserved this feel. In a strange way, it made him feel younger, less world-weary.

Beside him, Eric took in the sights of the city with wide eyes. Keenan often visited lands all over the world and was used to them by now, to the particular feel each country possessed. Eric had never left the USA before meeting Keenan. Even if they’d travelled a lot during their quest, it didn’t count as touristic. Keenan made a mental note to go with Eric on a real extended voyage. Maybe it would even be their honeymoon.

Cade snapped him out of his pleasant reverie. “Remember, we’re not here for sightseeing.”

Keenan turned to glare at the demon. He hated it when Cade took it upon himself to scold them, treating them like unruly children. “I know very well why we’re here, and it’s to do you a favor. So get off your high horse and let me focus.”

“Focus on what?” Lucien snapped. “Cain is close. I can feel him, and yet we’re lost.”

Keenan snorted. In truth, he preferred it when Lucien and Cade were at each other’s throats. At least they didn’t team up on him. “This is a town with a total of two hundred thousand inhabitants. We couldn’t get lost if we tried.”

Eric’s panicked voice drew him away from his glaring match with Lucien. “Keenan, be careful. Watch the road.”

Keenan instantly abandoned his feud with the two demon princes and cursed. He didn’t have a problem with driving on the other side of the road. Even so, he hated it when humans took it upon themselves to reorganize their highways and change all the traffic signs. Sibiu looked like a maze of small streets, quite confusing for the regular tourist. Keenan loved the feel of it but had noticed with annoyance that he was running into signs that hadn’t been there a few years back. God! He hoped Cade wouldn’t realize this little issue or else he’d never hear the end of it.

Thankfully, Lucien drew everyone’s attention from his little predicament. “I think it’s here,” he said in excitement.

Keenan pressed on the brakes so fast Eric yelped. “You sure, brother?” Cade asked.

“He’s right,” Eric replied in Lucien’s stead. “It’s the same number Keenan and I got from Feng.”

Keenan nodded, frustrated with himself for not paying attention. He couldn’t wait for this whole thing to be over. Then he’d be able to take some time for himself, maybe a real vacation with his pet. That thought brought back images of their short holiday just a few weeks back, and a wave of arousal swept over him, echoing in his mind from Eric’s.

Unfortunately, personal time would have to wait. Cade and Lucien got out of the car, and Keenan reluctantly followed. The address Feng unwillingly gave them corresponded to an old, almost run-down house. It even had a historical monument marker, and it amused Keenan to remember a time when it hadn't even been built.

As dilapidated as it seemed, the house held an air of antiquity only creatures as old as Keenan could appreciate. He could practically feel the history in the air, taste the ages that had swept over the building in his mouth.

Even as he thought this, Keenan scanned the darkness for any sign of movement. If this was indeed the hideout they were looking for, they needed to be on their guard. He kept them cloaked at all times, but he suspected that even with his precautions, Jean Luc would still sense them. The Ancient in Jean Luc's group most likely had power, as well, so things could get messy.

"Come on!" Cade said impatiently. "If they feel us, who knows how long it'll take for us to catch up."

Keenan nodded in the direction of the windows, knowing the old doors would squeak so loudly, the sound would give away their presence even to humans. Giovanni and Lucca joined them from their car. "We'll cover the exits, just in case," said Giovanni.

Keenan wrapped his arms around Eric and flew them both up to the window, while Cade and Lucien followed. They landed in a dark hallway and made haste through the building, up a flight of stairs. Both Cade and Lucien seemed to know exactly where they were going. Keenan guessed they must really be able to feel their brother's presence. A door loomed ahead, threads of light seeping from the room beyond onto the stairs. Cade didn't even bother to knock. Keenan cursed to himself as the Xeetahns burst through the door, hoping their skill in battle would keep them from getting killed. He immediately joined the two in the room, Eric behind him, and found himself facing a peculiar sight and, to a certain extent, a blast from the past. Four men stood waiting in the room, as if waiting for them.

Keenan couldn't help but feel a bit shaken by the sight of Pierre and Jean Luc. Last time they'd seen each other, Pierre had been an insane traitor on the loose. Keenan could still feel his pet's emotions threatening to overcome him. After all, Pierre nearly killed Eric, and it was only Cassandra's help that saved Eric's life. Keenan had to force himself to stand still and not attack the other man. Jean Luc's presence helped somewhat, as Keenan many times wondered what had become of the Sidhe. But more than anything, he acknowledged the other two men present, a tall, well-built Asian man and a platinum blond with violet eyes.

Jean Luc greeted them in the cool, sarcastic tone Keenan knew so well. "Well, well, Keenan. I didn't expect to see you here."

For once, Keenan didn't allow Jean Luc to bait him. "Jean Luc. I'm glad to see you are well."

The Sidhe snorted. "Please, let's leave aside the polite platitudes. What is it that you want?"

*"Il est venu pour moi,"* a soft voice said from the corner. Pierre looked pale, small, and subdued as he spoke. He stepped away from the blond, and Keenan realized they had actually been embracing. It was confirmed. Cain and Pierre were lovers.

Before Keenan could reply to Pierre's assessment of the situation, Lucien stepped forward toward his sibling. He let out a choked sound and started speaking in the same language that made Keenan's head ache.

Cain just gave Cade a look of frustrated confusion, while Lucien leaned against Cade to whisper something in his ear.

"What is this, Keenan?" Jean Luc asked. "What's going on?"

"Cade and Lucien here asked me to help them find their brother."

"Their brother?" Jean Luc repeated.

"I think he means you, X," Min Yu said as he wrapped his arms around Jean Luc. Keenan couldn't help but wonder how the hunter who'd nearly killed Jean Luc had become the Sidhe's lover.

He waited for the two demons to get their heads out of their asses and finally have their reunion. Other discussions could wait. This moment belonged to Cade, Lucien, and Cain. And yet, Cade remained silent, as if lost for words, and in the end, it was Cain who spoke. "You're my brothers? I seem to understand you, and we do look a bit alike," he admitted hesitantly. "But I don't remember you. I don't remember anything."

Cade and Lucien looked crushed. They gaped at their brother, while Jean Luc just arched a brow. "Taking this into account, I believe it is safe to assume that you have no connection to our other pursuers."

Keenan crossed his arms over his chest. "As if I'd ever do your parents' dirty work for them. We only intended to do Lucien and Cade a favor. Anyway, it's a long and complicated story."

That wasn't exactly true, but they'd managed to get the High Mother to give the Sidhe a break. Still, Keenan remained on his guard. Jean Luc had obviously felt them, and Keenan found it suspicious that the Sidhe had chosen to greet them instead of starting a fight.

"Alas, we must depart, since our location is compromised," Jean Luc said.

"Come to New York," Keenan offered on impulse. "No one would look for you there."

Cain shook his head. "From what I understand, Pierre has some history there. I won't risk him."

Keenan nodded, silently agreeing with the Kaldorian. "Perhaps Japan then?"

Jean Luc snorted. "You have to be kidding, *mon ami*. You know as well as I do your brother will not be happy to see us either."

"Korea," Cade said decisively. "I met some interesting people there while I was looking for Gabriel, and they respect the Xeetah. We won't be found."

Jean Luc seemed to consider the suggestion for a moment, meeting his own lover's eyes in a silent debate. Keenan guessed that the hunter had some history of his own, only not in New York, but in Korea. But where else could they go? Finding refuge with Leba was out of the question, and he didn't know how trustworthy Giovanni and Lucca's family would be.

"All right," Jean Luc's lover said in the end. "It's fine with me if everyone else agrees."

"Still," Cade said to his newfound brother, "we have to contact Gabriel and Kalin, ask them to meet us."

Cain just stared at Cade blankly. "Gabriel and Kalin?"

Cade winced and rubbed his eyes. "Our mates. Gabriel's condition didn't allow them to join us in looking for you."

"Condition?" Cain repeated again. He looked more confused than ever, and Keenan's mind hurt at the thought of how much Cain would have to process.

Jean Luc interrupted them before the conversation could evolve. "We go to Korea then," he said simply. "We'll see about meeting these two gentlemen. And, Keenan, you have to explain this whole mess on the way."

Keenan suppressed a groan. A mess indeed. How would they ever get out of it?

Before he could even come up with an answer, Pierre took a step forward. "Why are we even discussing this?" he snarled. "Jean Luc, you know as well as I do we can't go on like this. We'll break eventually."

"And what do you suggest?" Jean Luc shot back. "I'm not going back to the facility. I'd rather die."

Eric lifted his hands in a peaceful gesture. "No one's going to die. We're going to try to help."

Pierre glared at him, eyes full of malice. "What do you know, little whore? And what are you even doing here? You should be dead."



Keenan's control snapped at the reminder. "You bastard. I'm going to tear you apart."

Before Keenan could make good on his words, Eric placed himself between them, holding him back. "*Calm down, Keenan,*" he mentally sent. "*He's not himself. You know this.*"

Keenan took a deep breath and looked away from Pierre. Jean Luc retrieved a cigarette and threw a glance toward his brother. "X, keep your lover on a leash, will you?" he said placidly. Pierre glared, but seemed to mellow down when Cain led him away from them.

"In spite of his less than delicate words, Pierre is right in one respect. We aren't getting any better." Jean Luc actually offered Eric a small smile. "I know that, for whatever reason, you mean well, but there's nothing you can do."

"There might be," Cade piped in. "Our mates are Alarian. They might know something helpful."

Jean Luc turned to Cade, and for a brief second, something that looked like hope shone in his eyes. It rapidly vanished, hidden under Jean Luc's cool mask. "You can't possibly believe that. We've tried everything."

"It's worth a shot," Eric said. Keenan felt bad for the Sidhe. He knew Kalin and Gabriel had no clue about what could heal the DSS. Even so, perhaps if they got together and studied the problem for a different perspective, it would lead them to some interesting results.

Time seemed to slow as Jean Luc contemplated their words. Keenan hoped the Sidhe would agree, because otherwise, they would be forced to fight.

Much to Keenan's relief, Jean Luc nodded. "Fine," the Sidhe said. "But if it doesn't work, I don't take responsibility for my actions or Pierre's."

Keenan sighed. It would seem that even if they'd found Cain, their job was far from being over.

## Epilogue

*One week later*

*Seoul, Korea*

Eric stood at the gate of the Buddhist shrine and watched Gabriel disappear into the silent temple. He wasn't surprised his friend felt right at home in Manwolam. After all, Gabriel had the same light and kind heart the monks valued, a soulful fortitude the Buddhists strove to achieve.

Pierre and Jean Luc didn't have it so easy, though. Once they'd realized the Alarians didn't know how to cure their disease, they'd exiled themselves inside the temple. The Buddhists graciously agreed to help them out. Somehow, they'd seen the war taking place inside the two and wanted to help. Now, only Cain and Min Yu were allowed to see them from time to time. Other visits had to be carefully planned and arranged.

In secret, Gabriel had told Eric that he didn't believe in incurable diseases. Once his baby was born, he wanted to try to cure the Sidhe, as well. Eric kept this piece of information to himself, since he didn't think suppositions and hopes could help too much right now.

He smiled as his friend reemerged and rushed to give him one last hug. "Take care of yourself, Eric!" Gabriel said.

Eric squeezed Gabriel gently, careful not to hurt the unborn child. "You, too, Gabriel. You, too."

"You'll be here when I have my baby, right?"

He smiled as he broke away from Gabriel's embrace. "Of course. I'm a phone call away."

Eric would have liked to stay in Seoul. Not that he particularly liked the city, but he hated the thought of leaving so many people behind. It would take him quite a long time to get used to the idea that he wouldn't be seeing Gabriel or the others on a daily basis.

Unfortunately, they could no longer delay their return to New York. Keenan had responsibilities there, as well. Jean Luc and Pierre were now off the streets and hidden where they couldn't hurt themselves and others. Keenan had arranged for vampire guards to watch the temple, just in case. It was time for Eric and Keenan to return to their own lives and problems. They'd helped as much as they'd been able to. From here, the Kaldorians needed to deal with the issue themselves.

"I'll miss you," Gabriel replied, eyes swimming in tears.

"Don't worry. We'll see each other soon."

Lucien appeared from the corridor and joined them. "Come on, baby. You have to get some rest."

Gabriel rolled his eyes, and Eric laughed, wiping at his eyes. "Good-bye for real this time," he told his friend. "Your mate will kill me if I keep you for much longer."

"Very unlikely," Keenan muttered from behind them, making both Gabriel and Eric snicker.

"What can we do?" Gabriel said with a soft smile. "They're so protective." After a small hesitation, he hugged Eric once more. "Good-bye, Eric. Keep in touch, all right?"

"Sure."

This time, when Gabriel left, he didn't turn back. Eric prayed to God, Buddha, and the Light Gabriel worshipped that they watch over his friend. He had a feeling it would take a while for Gabriel's family to find peace.

\* \* \* \*

Soon after the heartbreaking separation between Gabriel and Eric, Keenan arranged for a plane to take them home. If he wanted to be honest, he'd gotten so used to the young Kaldorian's presence that he'd miss Gabriel, too. Who'd have thought it? Certainly not Keenan. Just a few weeks back, he'd hated Gabriel with a passion. Now, he regretted the younger man's absence. Amazing.

He remembered Eric's words from a while back. Perhaps they had indeed needed this. It certainly strengthened their bond and made Keenan appreciate Eric more. The connection between them seemed to be getting stronger every day, going beyond the feelings they'd had for each other from the very beginning. It all depended on trust, on seeing Eric not only as his lover, but as his equal. Keenan had learned so much about Eric in the past month. His lover's determination and courage humbled him.

It was for this reason that Keenan allowed Eric a few private moments to brood over their departure from Seoul. When their plane took off, Eric seated himself at the window, concentrating, almost as if thinking that with enough effort, he'd be able to spot the shrine and Gabriel from up above. Keenan should have begrudged it, but too much had happened, and he'd long ago stopped being so blind. He sat down two seats away from Eric and waited.

It didn't take long for his lover to turn away from the window. "What are you doing all the way there?" he asked with a sad smile.

"Sometimes, everyone needs a moment alone," Keenan replied.

Eric gave him a sheepish look. "You're not upset? I know. It's stupid. It's not like I'm never going to see them again."

Keenan abandoned his seat and went to his lover's side. "It's not stupid. Gabriel is your friend. You'll miss him. It's normal."

Eric cuddled in his embrace. "Thanks. I just feel strange, like they're not safe down there."

Keenan sighed. He understood what Eric meant, but they couldn't stay in Seoul to babysit the Kaldorians forever. "They'll notify us if they need anything."

Eric nodded against his chest and then remained silent. Keenan stared out the hatch and into the clouds. He really had travelled far too much in the past month. Perhaps they both needed a break.

Eric shifted on his seat and climbed in Keenan's lap. "We have been straining ourselves, haven't we?"

Keenan knew Eric was just looking for comfort, but that didn't stop him from responding to Eric's proximity. It felt like they hadn't been together forever. With so many things going on, they'd been unable to find time for anything beyond a few kisses, let alone for making love.

"You know what, Keenan?" Eric whispered in Keenan's ear. "It suddenly occurred to me that I'm worrying for nothing. Gabriel is with his mate, and I'm with you. Like we should be. Like we're meant to be."

Keenan groaned as Eric moved even closer, rubbing his ass against Keenan's crotch. "Pet, if you don't stop that right this minute..."

Eric chuckled, the shift in mood staggering. Keenan was used to this sort of thing, but he didn't want Eric to bury his heartache of leaving Gabriel behind in sex. Eric tensed, and Keenan knew his lover had caught on to the thought. He wrapped his arms tightly around Eric, trapping the other man in his hold. "You don't have to compensate, pet. You don't have to be afraid. You can cry if you want to."

"I don't get it," Eric cried out. "Why are you suddenly being so understanding? I shouldn't even be making such a big deal out of this."

"Pet, Gabriel is part of your family, just like I am, just like Cassandra is. I didn't see it at first, but I do now." He pressed a kiss to Eric's nose, sending waves of comfort through their connection. "Don't worry. Family can be separated by miles and miles of earth and water, but the affection will stay the same. Now get some sleep. Once we get to New York, you can call your friend."

Eric didn't reply, but Keenan felt him relax. With his arms still around Eric, he closed his eyes, as well. Some rest wouldn't hurt him either. He'd just take a short nap while Eric slept, then check on the many work-related issues he had on hold. As sleep took him, he found himself in a different place and a different time.

\* \* \* \*

Eric swayed on the dance floor, his body completely in tune to the music. Seductive, sinful, decadent. Keenan's mouth watered at the sight of his lover's graceful motions. He growled as he realized he wasn't the only one admiring Eric's dance. Several men watched his pet move, their gazes full of lustful intent.

Some even stepped forward, drawn to Eric like a moth to the flame. Eric allowed two of the men to come closer, to pull him close and sandwich him between their bodies. Keenan wanted to tear the idiots to pieces and show everyone who Eric belonged to.

By his side, Cassandra held him down and glared. "You know this must be done. You can't hunt for him forever!"

Keenan snarled at her. "But he's just a fledgling!"

"I know he's just a fledgling, Keenan," Cassandra shot back. "I sired him, remember?"

Cassandra's arrogance irritated him, contributing to his frustration with the whole situation. He fell into an argument with Cassandra, but in the end, it broke before they could inflict any injuries on each other. Cassandra even laughed at him. "You're just jealous of whichever lucky person our little fledgling will bite tonight."

Yes, he was, but that didn't mean Cassandra had to rub it in his face. He gritted his teeth as he watched Eric finish his dance and draw his two partners to their table. The men followed him like two lovesick puppies, unable to resist.

Once Eric reached the table, Cassandra discreetly made her escape, leaving them to their own little party. Keenan nodded to the

humans, carefully keeping his expression blank. “Would you like a drink, gentlemen?”

The men agreed, and Keenan called the waiter, all the while carefully analyzing his pet’s catch. They were young and handsome. Nothing special, but they would do nicely for this night’s dinner.

Eric leaned against him, his warmth and his scent driving Keenan wild and stirring the animalistic instincts inside of him. It must have shown in his expression because the humans flushed and stammered at his questions. It made Eric more daring, and he rubbed his body against Keenan’s as he mentally whispered. *“Give the man a break, Keenan. Besides, it’s not his fault I’m so hot.”*

Keenan suppressed the urge to chuckle at his lover’s antics. *“Looks like you’re getting a little spoiled, pet. Maybe I should cut the evening short and teach you some manners?”*

Eric wasn’t intimidated in the slightest. If anything, he flirted even more shamelessly with Keenan, his mental voice a purr that swept over Keenan in waves of heat.

Keenan wanted to throw Eric down and fuck him right then and there. Instead, he chose a different tactic. Smirking to himself, he allowed his astral powers to engulf Eric’s body. At first, Eric tried to protest, but Keenan just laughed his efforts away.

He targeted all of Eric’s sensitive spots, making his lover gasp in pleasure. A thought from Keenan had ghost fingers penetrate Eric from behind. Eric clung to him, moaning breathlessly. *“Keenan, please!”*

In his desire, Eric looked more beautiful than ever. Keenan distantly wondered how such perfection could exist outside the realm of the gods. Perhaps Eric should have been called an incubus, not Lucca or Giovanni. Without any spells or trickery, he was temptation incarnate.

As Keenan played with Eric’s body, the two humans watched in confused lust. They obviously didn’t understand why Eric writhed against Keenan like a man possessed. Keenan didn’t have any

problem with them believing Eric was some sort of nymphomaniac. He could use them to drive Eric insane with pleasure.

Just as Keenan planned his next move, the phone rang. The sound of the ringtone broke Keenan's concentration, making him falter in his astral projection. Keenan cursed to himself. He recognized the song as the one he'd jokingly chosen for Jacob. What could the werewolf want this time?

Keenan considered picking up for about a second but decided against it. The man could deal with whatever came up by himself. The Council would survive for the next few hours even if Keenan didn't show up. Perhaps it was irresponsible, but who the hell cared?

Satisfied with his decision, Keenan rejected the call and closed his cell phone. Eric gaped at him. "*Keenan, what if it was something important?*"

Keenan gently caressed Eric's cheek, touched by his lover's concern. "*Never mind. I'll call Jacob later.*"

"*But Keenan...*" Eric protested.

"*It doesn't matter, pet. Nothing matters but us.*"

At that, Eric didn't say anything else. Keenan took Eric in his arms and got up from the table, making a mental note to pay the bill later. He beckoned the humans closer with a seductive grin. "I suppose it's safe to say you'd be interested in continuing this encounter in a more private setting."

The humans nodded eagerly, and Keenan led them out of the main area of the club into the VIP lounge. Even if he mostly lurked around *Extase*, Keenan liked to keep his hunting grounds varied. For this reason, he had VIP memberships to most of the clubs in the city. He easily tired of them, but they served their purpose when he needed to feed.

He'd already arranged for a private room upstairs, knowing that if his pet's hunt succeeded, they would need it. Eric was very young, and his first independent feeding sessions would require privacy. Keenan would, of course, be there to watch over his lover, but a room



away from prying eyes would better suit his purposes. Besides, he didn't exactly intend to remain an inactive voyeur.

In his arms, Eric trembled with want, and Keenan couldn't help but answer to Eric's quiet demand. Without paying any heed to the humans following behind them, he once again sent his astral presence over Eric. Ethereal hands swept under Eric's impossibly tight clothes, where a physical touch could have never reached. He tweaked Eric's nipples, at the same time reaching down to toy with his lover's dick. Eric pressed himself closer to him and bit down into Keenan's chest, almost drawing blood, but not quite.

Keenan hastened his steps, rushing the humans with a mental command. He needed to be inside Eric so bad it hurt. Thankfully, the reserved room wasn't all that far, and they reached it in no time. He barely managed to keep his strength in check and not burst the door open. Somehow, with each step, his urgency increased, the burning desire threatening to consume him.

Inside, the room didn't look like anything special. It did have a massive bed, however, perfectly suited for Keenan's purposes. As soon as he entered, Keenan dumped Eric on the bed. "Clothes. Off."

Eric nodded, his green eyes shining like emerald gems. As Eric started to work on his tight clothing, Keenan turned to the humans. "You two, what are your names?"

The taller of the two, a bulky blond with a goatee, stepped forward. "I'm Pete."

"On the bed. No touching until I say so."

Pete hastily complied, while Keenan directed his attention to the other human. He was a slimmer redhead with a trace of freckles over his nose and pink lips that seemed to be made for sucking dick. "I'm Steve," the man said.

"Great," Keenan replied. "I'm Keenan, and you already know Eric."

He gestured the other man to the bed, and Steve followed his instructions. Keenan watched in silence as the two humans fought to

undress themselves, hands trembling. Eric had already divested himself of his clothes and now lay naked and waiting on the bed. He threw a gaze toward the lucky humans chosen as their partners for the night. He then gazed at Keenan, wariness, confusion, arousal warring in his eyes. “Now what?”

Keenan slowly undid the buttons of his own black shirt and discarded it on the ground. He removed his boots and then lowered the zipper of his slacks. “Now, we fuck.”

He abandoned his trousers and joined the other men on the bed. “You two,” he said to the humans. “First rule—no one touches Eric without my permission, and no one gets to fuck his ass.”

The two men nodded, although Keenan could see their regret. “Not to worry,” he purred, “we’re going to have lots of fun together.”

“Pete, you get to fuck Steve while Eric fucks you.”

“And what will you be doing?” Steve asked curiously.

“I’ll be fucking Eric, of course.”

The humans shuddered, obviously liking the idea. Keenan grinned at them. “For now, one of you, come here and suck me.”

Steve eagerly proceeded to do just that, while Pete hesitated. “Can I do the same for Eric?” he asked.

A smile fled on Keenan’s lips. “Go ahead.”

As Steve’s mouth engulfed him, Keenan could see Pete doing the same thing for Eric. His gaze met Eric’s over the bodies of the two humans. Eric bit his lip, and his fangs descended, drawing blood. Through their bond, Keenan felt the pleasure of having his dick sucked multiply.

Then suddenly, Eric’s eyes widened, and shock swept through Keenan. The images of Pete and Steve flickered and faded. “What? What’s going on?” Eric asked.

For a second, Eric’s question didn’t compute. Keenan tried to reach for his pet, but he found he could not. He blinked and rubbed his eyes, uncertain. The room at the club started to vanish around

them, and instead of it, the neutral decorations of the private plane appeared.

\* \* \* \*

Eric had at some point left Keenan's embrace and collapsed on the floor. "What just happened?" he asked.

"I think we had a taste of what we'd have done if I hadn't taken that call from Jacob."

At first, Eric looked at him as if he were crazy. Keenan just grinned, and it made Eric erupt in hysterical laughter. "I don't think so, Keenan. Those guys I picked up...I don't think their names were Steve and Pete. I'm not even sure they looked like that."

At Eric's reply, Keenan burst out laughing as well. "I suppose it doesn't really matter what their names were."

Eric wiped a tear of mirth from the corner of his eye. "You're right." He shifted on the floor and gave Keenan a coy look. "I can only wonder, though, why you're dreaming about other men."

Keenan opened his mouth to reply, but his words died in his throat when his lover started rubbing his dick through his jeans. "I think I've neglected you."

Eric lowered Keenan's zipper with his teeth and then pushed Keenan's boxers down. Keenan forced himself to stand still and let Eric go at his own pace, but his control was slipping. Released from its confines, his dick throbbed, reminding him it really had been neglected.

Eric swept his tongue over the head of Keenan's dick and licked his lips. "You taste good, Keenan."

The sight sent sparks of arousal through Keenan, and he clung to the edge of his seat. He was seconds away from forcing his dick down Eric's throat. Eric just smirked at him. He smoothed his palm over Keenan's erection, massaging it softly while his tongue played with the slit.

“Stop teasing, pet,” Keenan growled.

Eric’s smile widened, but he obeyed. Those pretty pink lips wrapped around Keenan’s dick, slowly working their way downwards, engulfing Keenan in wet heat. Keenan tried to find anything unappealing to keep him from coming on the spot. It wasn’t even all that hard. He had an amazing number of unpleasant things in his life. He just needed to remember one of the videos stolen from the Sidhe compound and his arousal started to fade.

But then, Eric moaned around Keenan’s cock and started sucking in earnest. As the vibrations and motions swept over him, Keenan was reminded that, even with all the shit around him, he still had one gem in his life. Eric, the priceless jewel he didn’t deserve and the man who had him wrapped around his little finger. It was pointless to fight it.

Keenan dared a look down and at once knew he didn’t have a chance to resist. Eric looked so amazingly beautiful, lips swollen as they earnestly toyed with Keenan’s hard dick. Keenan couldn’t bear it any longer. He started fucking Eric’s mouth, thrusting his dick in and out of the wet cavern. Eric took it all in stride, allowing Keenan to use him. There was no fear or even discomfort coming from him, just pleasure and passion. Keenan let his mind link with Eric guide him. He was distantly aware of his own voice spouting obscenities, but he couldn’t care less. How could he, when the fire between them burned through him with such intensity?

It was over far too soon. In a motion worthy of an experienced courtesan, Eric took Keenan down his throat and swallowed. Keenan’s vision went white, and he exploded, sending his release down Eric’s throat. At the last moment, Eric retreated, and some of the streams of cum ended up hitting him in his face.

Keenan wanted to apologize, but his synapses seemed to have short-circuited. He couldn’t form a single word, and he was too busy trying to learn how to breathe again. Eric grinned at him, the perfect picture of the cat that ate the cream, and got up. He started taking off

his clothes, exposing his lithe body to Keenan's greedy gaze. Keenan leaned against the seat, watching as his pet stripped for him.

With each patch of creamy skin exposed, Keenan felt the desire and all-consuming need surge once more. Every cell in his body called out to Eric. His dick hardened once again, prepared and eager for a second round.

Eric didn't delay too much in getting rid of his clothes. Before Keenan even knew what was going on, his pet got on all fours. He passed his hand over the strands of cum over his face, wet his fingers with the white substance, and reached back to his own ass.

Keenan couldn't see behind Eric, but it didn't take a genius to realize what his pet was up to. Knowing he could not miss this for the world, he left his seat and went to stand behind Eric.

It was certainly worth it. The erotic sight of his pet fucking himself on his own fingers, using Keenan's cum as lubricant, nearly drove Keenan insane. This time, he didn't even bother to hold back. He pounced his lover, slapping Eric's hands away and pushing his lover on the floor. Eric didn't fight him and allowed Keenan to position him facedown, ass thrust obscenely in the air.

In one single motion, Keenan embedded his dick inside Eric's ass. Eric cried out, arching his back toward Keenan. The pale curve of Eric's neck beckoned Keenan forward, and his fangs ached, the bloodlust awakening inside him. Even so, Keenan resisted. The feel of being one with his lover made the urgency fade, and Keenan gathered Eric to his chest, shifting them until they were both on their knees. He started to slowly thrust inside, all the while pressing kisses down the side of Eric's neck.

Eric pressed back against him, pushing his ass into Keenan's dick. They moved in unison, both aiming for each other's pleasure, or rather, for the ecstasy that belonged to them both.

Eric's passage squeezed Keenan tightly, as if his lover's body didn't want to let him go. The raw sensuality of two bodies coming

together as one, the friction and passion between them drove Keenan ever higher on the peak of pleasure.

With each thrust, he felt for Eric's prostate, knowing exactly when he hit the right spot. Eric's gasps punctuated the shocks of pleasure that went through Keenan's spine. It was like their bodies were one, Eric reacting to Keenan's feelings and the other way around.

Keenan's orgasm came out of the blue, with no warning, washing over him like a tidal wave. Born from both the carnal and the emotional, it brought with it the release of fears and pressures held back for too long. Eric followed him, exploding mere seconds after Keenan. His ass tightened around Keenan's dick, squeezing every drop of cum out of him. In the intensity of the moment, Keenan forgot about everything else but his pet. He ached with primal desire, and he didn't even consider holding it back. Even as he emptied himself inside Eric's body, he sank his fangs in his lover's throat, feasting on Eric's blood.

The exquisite taste in his mouth and the feel of the warm life-giving liquid over his tongue prolonged their orgasms, the pleasure too much to be contained in one rush. Keenan didn't know how long it lasted. Even after he released his hold on Eric's throat, the sensations still bombarded them, holding them in a cocoon of bliss. He didn't even realize it was over until they collapsed, exhausted, on the floor.

Only then did Keenan realize that they were still on the plane and they'd probably given the pilot quite an earful.

Eric cuddled by his side and laughed. "Well, what does it matter?" he said with a contended sigh.

"It doesn't, pet," Keenan replied. "Nothing matters but us."

At least in that, his dream had gotten things right. Eric and he were the only ones who counted. Everyone else could wait. They were beginning a new life, together. Perhaps Eric was right and their friends would need them in the future. For the moment, though, Keenan would enjoy what he had. He'd almost lost Eric, once to

death and once to his own stupidity. He didn't know what destiny had in store for them, but Eric had cast away the darkness in Keenan's heart, and Keenan would spend an eternity thanking him.

**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 book 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*

Siren Classic: Kaldor Saga 3: *Destinies in Darkness, Part 1*

Ménage Amour: *The Three Horsemen of the Black Forest*

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