

Tainted Soul

by chivalric

This is the first chapter of my (now published) novel Tainted Soul, sequel to Tainted Blood ([Click here to read](#)).

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: As I posted the first chapter of the prequel here, I thought I'd do the same with this story. And like last time, everyone who leaves a review has a chance of winning a complete copy of the book (PDF file or other.) Enjoy!

A/N2: My apologies for the spam reviews! I cannot delete them myself, the admins are too busy doing it, and they bug me tremendously. Sorry. Just ignore them.



I'M GOING to die.

The thought emerged from the deep recesses of his three-quarters sleeping brain. Crystal clear, it felt much more real than, for example, the dream that was already fleeing his mind or the bed he was lying in.

I'm going to die. Soon.

It was late on a nice, sunny October afternoon. Exhausted after a long night, Gabriel hadn't managed to keep his eyes open after lunch, so Aleksei had sent him to bed for a nap.

But he hadn't slept well. He'd been dreaming of nameless fears and a voice calling him. Again.

Motionless, Gabriel lay on his back, partly covered by the blanket he'd pulled over himself some hours before. Sunlight painted patterns on the bed and floor, rearranged constantly by the gently moving branches outside the window.

Staring at the ceiling, Gabriel tried to remember the words from his dream but failed.

He took a shaky breath and sat up. "Damn naps. I always feel worse afterwards instead of refreshed."

It was hard to keep his eyes open. He was still sleepy; the bed was calling, the dream, too, in a weird, scary kind of way, and what would be the harm of going back to sleep for another half an hour? He was home, wasn't he? He could take a nap if he wanted to, even a long one lasting until dinner. Today, he didn't have much else to do. And maybe Aleksei would join him. Maybe a bit of sex would chase those strange dreams from his mind for good.

But....

Lately, there was always a *but*. A but standing in the way of sex, in fact. *But* it was too late. *But* he was too tired. *But* he had to work. *So sorry, love, I won't make it home before morning. Another time, surely.*

Another month, more likely.

Anger welled up. He should feel great, not worse than ever. He should be fully awake, and he shouldn't be trying to find yet another reason not to have sex with Aleksei!

A quick glance at the clock confirmed he'd slept for about two hours. Aleksei was somewhere in the house, waiting for him to get up. They'd make plans for the evening. One of them would think of something for dinner. Nothing special. Normal life happening.

So why did he feel so out of sorts?

"Easy answer to that one. I'm feeling out of sorts because something is wrong. If only I knew what."

With a sigh, he got up and pulled on his jeans. Lately, he felt uncomfortable walking around the house naked, as if someone was watching him.

"Should take a shower," he murmured, already pulling on a shirt. "But I won't."

Aleksei had often joined him in the shower. Until recently, Gabriel had craved it. The fae was a skillful lover, always aware of Gabriel's moods and wishes.

But not anymore, and not because Aleksei didn't try. It was because Gabriel didn't want him to.

Why don't I want him near me?

With shaking legs, Gabriel sat back down on the bed. To keep his hands occupied, he fished for the leather string in the front pocket of his jeans, braided his long hair, and bound it with the string. "I love him," he said.

He didn't sound as if he believed it.

"It's Aleksei! I love him, for fuck's sake!"

Nope, still didn't sound right. Just desperate.

His heart pounded. He felt pale, weak, and for a moment, he believed his thoughts and fears were the result of an empty stomach and maybe the sort of strange, half-forgotten nightmares an afternoon nap sometimes brought. He had been having more nightmares recently, hadn't he? Occasionally, he would wake up bathed in sweat, his eyes wide open, his mouth dry with fear. He never remembered any of the dreams, but surely they could trigger some false emotions?

He almost had himself convinced. But then his gaze fell onto his hands and he blushed.

He loved Aleksei and had never betrayed him. Well, not really. Not completely.

Gritting his teeth, Gabriel faced the memories flaring up in his mind. It had been a week ago. He'd visited Gray Oak's world, and he'd run into one of the tree nymphs guarding Sweet Rain's sleeping soul. Nothing special, really. He'd seen tree nymphs before, had talked to them, and once had found one of their lost children. Never had he felt even remotely attracted to one of them. They were wiry people, dark-skinned and with long, tangled hair. Their clothes were made of grass, and often, butterflies or small birds followed their every movement.

This guy, though....

In the safety of his bedroom, Gabriel hugged himself in despair. He loved Aleksei! From the moment he'd set eyes on the fae, there had been a mutual attraction neither of them had been able to deny. They'd been drawn to each other and eventually landed in bed together.

"Three years," Gabriel muttered. "I am risking his love and a three-year relationship for a quick fuck with a damn tree nymph."

Okay, he hadn't fucked the guy. Not really. But he had kissed him. And he had allowed him to undress him. They'd landed in the grass together, and the reason Gabriel was staring at his hand with a mixture of hate and confusion was because he so clearly remembered the contrast of his white hand on the man's dark ass.

A cold shiver ran through him upon thinking about the tree nymph. He'd been so hot! Young and direct and greedy and so very different from any human he knew, and equally different from Aleksei. His kiss had been demanding, his tongue eager, his cock impressive.

Gabriel tried to convince himself he hadn't stood a chance against the man, but he failed. He had wanted the kiss. He had wanted more.

When the tree nymph had opened his shirt, Gabriel had kissed his throat. When he'd dropped his loincloth, Gabriel had swallowed dryly, leaned in for another kiss, and cupped his balls.

The tree nymph's skin had smelled of earth and leaves. His hands, long and strong, had wrapped around Gabriel's cock, stroking him slowly into hardness. All the time, the tree nymph had smiled, and when Gabriel had slipped two fingers into his tight hole, he'd pushed against him repeatedly until he'd spilled before leaning over, taking Gabriel's length between his sharp little teeth, and sucking him off.

Gabriel absently wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He'd felt ashamed the moment he came and had dressed without a word. He'd never even asked the tree nymph's name.

"But I love him," he said helplessly to his hands, which were resting like dead little animals on his knees. "I love Aleksei. I am nothing without him, I don't want to lose him, and why the hell have I been so stupid?"

Two days ago, he'd kissed Conchita.

The thought alone made him shudder. Conchita was generous with the charms of her large-breasted, big-hipped body, and before he'd met Aleksei, they'd shared a bed every now and then. He liked her, always had and always would.

He'd never kissed her, though; he would have sworn an oath he never would.

And yet, two days ago he *had* kissed her. And it had been disgusting, not because of her or anything she'd done or said, but because he didn't want to be with her. He knew it would be awful the moment she'd smiled at him, but he had still kissed her.

Throat tight with fear, Gabriel wondered if he was going mad. Maybe he'd gone through the portals a few times too often...after all, he'd never really been trained to do so, and Aleksei still didn't understand how he did it. Going through the portals, crossing the bridge into another world, was fatal for anyone who didn't know how to do it properly. But Gabriel had done it instinctively from the first moment on. So it was unlikely the portals had caused his condition.

"I just need some rest," Gabriel muttered. "Yeah. Been a long week. And I'm hungry. Everything will be okay once I've eaten."

Determined, he got up, straightened the bedcovers, and went to find Aleksei.

Of course he knew he was fooling himself. He didn't need rest. The past weeks and months had been relatively quiet, with few crossings to other worlds. There'd been enough sleep, enough to eat, and definitely enough leisure time to recharge his energy tanks. He had no reason to betray his lover. He had no reason to feel so lost and restless, as if somewhere else a better life awaited him.

"My life is here."

Strangely enough, saying it aloud seemed to help. The feeling of being pulled away ceased, and the first smile of the afternoon appeared on his face.

"Aleksei?" Gabriel called. "Where are you? I'm starving here!"

There was no answer. The house was silent, which was unusual. When Aleksei was home, there was usually some sort of music in the background, small noises from the kitchen when he felt like cooking, or at least the soft steps of bare feet on the light wooden planks. Gabriel's ears could pick up even the smallest sound...one of the positive side effects of having shapeshifter blood running through his veins.

"Aleksei?"

The living room was empty. Only the small scarred cat that had moved in with them a while back lay curled up on the sofa. He opened one alert eye when Gabriel walked in; when he saw there was no danger, he went back to sleep.

Aleksei wasn't in the kitchen. A lone cup of tea sat on the table, already cool.

Which meant his lover could only be in his workroom.

A deeper smile spread over Gabriel's face, chasing away his fears and guilt as well as the strange thoughts concerning his imminent death.

Not worrying felt good. Thinking about Aleksei... well. It might feel a bit awkward, but it definitely felt good too.

He was too fed up with riddles to ponder his problems right now. Later, maybe. Or never.

"Aleksei? What are you up to this time?" Pushing open the door to the workroom, Gabriel experienced a sudden rush of heat at the sight of his lover. Aleksei sat bent over his microscope, black hair curled wetly on his neck. He must have had a shower not too long ago.

Alone. Without waking him, and without waiting for him.

Gabriel sighed. Only some minutes ago he'd worried Aleksei would join him in the shower. Now that he'd found out his partner had showered without him, he wasn't happy, either.

This was not good.

Think about it later.

Gabriel closed his eyes for a moment and breathed in the faint scent of Aleksei's freshly scrubbed skin. To a human...one without werewolf ancestors, anyway...the scent would have been imperceptible. To Gabriel, it was but another facet of Aleksei's complex and complicated nature.

His uneasiness lessened with every step he took, until he completely forgot about it.

"Hey, love." Gabriel was already next to the fae when Aleksei finally looked up.

"Hmm?"

"I've been calling for five minutes now. Thought you'd gone out or something."

Aleksei raised an eyebrow, a small gesture that still made Gabriel's heart flip. It was such an insignificant habit; for Gabriel, it summoned up the fae's nature perfectly. Slightly arrogant and dominant without needing words; curious, judging, and exceptionally sexy.

His encounter with the tree nymph was pushed into a dark corner of his mind. The kiss he'd shared with Conchita vanished completely. "Love you," Gabriel said, meaning it with all his heart and mind.

Aleksei smiled. "Good to know. Did you enjoy your nap?" He picked up a pen, peeked through the ocular of the microscope, and quickly scribbled something onto a scrap of paper in that cryptic handwriting Gabriel had never managed to decipher properly.

"Must've been tired. Can't imagine why." Gabriel moved closer to Aleksei and placed a light kiss on his exposed neck. "What are you doing there, Doc? Not trying to unravel the mystery of my ancestors again, are you?"

Aleksei absently reached out and patted Gabriel's hip, simply because it came into range of his hand first. "I decided that since I cannot figure out where the strange stripe in your genes comes from, I could at least try and rule out which races played no part in your creation. Easy, really. There are only about sixty known races. Once I am through with my list, I will have figured out what exactly you are not. What is left must be the correct answer." He looked up, frowning. "Did you just wonder why you were tired? I thought that to be obvious. You went running this morning. For hours, if I remember correctly. And last night, you went to bed late. Both reasons explain your fatigue, as well as the fact you had a nap." He smiled. "I even thought about joining you in bed. If you hadn't been asleep already, I might have done it."

Gabriel had to force a grin onto his face. Apparently, his uneasiness had been lurking behind the next corner, waiting to jump at him at the first possible moment. "Hoping for a cuddle?"

Aleksei's smile vanished. "Hoping against hope, yes. Lately, we have both been too busy for cuddles, it seems. Although you are, as you know, an exceptionally arousing

sight, especially when your legs are spread and you're gasping for breath." He sounded casual; he turned back to his microscope, his mind clearly on the blood sample he was examining.

Something in his voice made it obvious he knew something was wrong between them.

Gabriel shuddered. There it was again, that sudden, overwhelming chill. As if someone was walking over his grave. As if he were dead already.

To keep Aleksei from talking about cuddling or spread legs, Gabriel leaned over and had a look at the list on the counter. "I know the first few races," he said. "Yours can be ruled out because it doesn't produce redheads, true?"

"True. Fae tend to be dark-haired with the occasional blond in between. I have never seen anyone with ginger hair, even, never mind the dark red of your strands." Curling one of said strands...escaped from the string...around his fingers, Aleksei unexpectedly pulled Gabriel down for a kiss.

Gabriel's initial reaction was to pull away, but the thought vanished as quickly as it had flared up. *This is Aleksei!* Warmth and love flooded him, along with the overwhelming relief the kiss brought. He wanted this! He needed this, and how had he survived so long without physical contact with his lover?

Their tongues touched. Gabriel's plait slipped over his shoulder, brushing his lover's cheek. Aleksei caught it; he deepened the kiss, then broke it right before Gabriel began to seriously consider using the workbench for a quick afternoon fuck.

He couldn't believe he'd ever thought about another man, never mind kissing one.

He couldn't believe a moment ago he'd felt disgust at the thought of kissing Aleksei.

And he couldn't believe there was still that feeling of being watched, or hearing that faint, insistent call.

Called to go where? Called by whom? He didn't know. All he knew was that a part of his soul wasn't into this.

Part of his soul, part of *him*, was being held hostage elsewhere.

I'm going to die.

The very thought that had ripped him out of his sleep made him flinch when it popped up in his mind like a New Year's rocket. This time it was even clearer, less a thought and more like a prediction.

If I die, at least I cannot betray him.

Equally clear, only this was an answer, a challenge to the one who was calling, if it was a someone at all and not simply a product of his crazy mind.

Torn between his fears, his longings, and his doubts, Gabriel took another look at the list. "So I'm not a fae and not a vampire. And not a...what's that word?"

Aleksei snatched the paper out of his hand, took a pen, and crossed out another name. "Not a riverghost, not a merman, and not a tree nymph. Also, I checked your blood against mine. I now have proof you are definitely not fae. Oh, and you're not troll, either."

Gabriel, who'd been about to take a sip of water from Aleksei's glass, spilled it on his shirt. "A...what? Troll? There are ~~are~~ trolls out there?"

Once more, Aleksei raised an eyebrow. "I thought you made yourself familiar with the races living in the worlds you visit? It appears I was wrong." With precise movements, he changed the thin piece of glass under the microscope. "Yes, there are trolls. Large creatures who tend to keep to themselves. They prefer cold weather; you would find them in Pandora's world, high up north. I assume you remember Pandora?" He tilted his head mockingly.

Gabriel took in Aleksei's naturally pale skin and the dark, strange patterns decorating it. When he'd first seen them, he'd thought them to be tattoos. Later, he'd learned them to be part of the fae physiognomy, skin patterns that changed with age, health, and emotional state. A woman would have different patterns than a man, a sane fae different than a mad one. Not that there were many mad fae. The only one Gabriel had met had been Aleksei's brother Petresh, who had had hardly any skin patterns at all.

Just underneath his lover's shirt, Gabriel could see the necklace he wore. A rune pendant hid the patterns as well as his true looks. To the casual observer, Aleksei appeared as a shortish, slightly overweight man with mousy brown hair and equally mousy eyes. No one would spare him a second glance. No one would bother to challenge him, attack him, or ask him out for a drink. Although politics concerning the hidden worlds had changed in recent years, members of other races were still not widely welcomed. Aleksei knew this and had taken measures. He always wore the necklace. In addition, he was still trying to figure out why Gabriel was immune to its powers.

With a pang, Gabriel realized Aleksei was waiting for an answer. "Pandora... um... just a second. Tall, dark-haired, gorgeous?"

"Small, four-legged, vicious. She's a gorgon, and we met her last year. Say, beloved, is there something wrong with you?" Putting the pen down, Aleksei suddenly focused his attention fully on Gabriel. His ice-blue eyes showed nothing but concern and maybe slight curiosity.

To Gabriel, it seemed as if Aleksei was able to look right into his soul, see all his sins, even see the stolen kisses as well as the guilty orgasm he'd had with the tree nymph. He paled and looked away.

"Just a bit tired still," he bit out. "The gorgon. Pandora. Yep, now I remember her. Strange creature. And there are trolls living in her world?"

"Trolls and dwarfs, as you would call them, although if you did so to their faces, they'd chop your head off. Or your knees, rather. They are a small and light-boned race, living in symbiosis with the trolls. However, neither race has played a part in your heritage."

Once more, Gabriel took the list, scanning through the names. "It will take you weeks to rule each race out," he said. "Always assuming you can get blood samples from all of them and compare them with mine. You sure you want to bother?"

"Absolutely. You might not like to talk about it, but something's wrong, Gabriel. While sleeping, you often suffer from nightmares, yet in the morning, you don't seem to remember any of them. During the day, you are absentminded. I would say you are hiding something, only I tend to believe otherwise. Something is bothering you. It might have to do with one of your ancestors."

"That's a fairly long shot."

Gabriel hadn't intended that to come out so harshly. To take the edge off his words, he desperately tried to find something else to talk about...and found it on the list.

He grinned. "You've forgotten some races," he said. "Tsk, tsk, Doc, I've never known you to lack thoroughness in your research."

Aleksei frowned. "I have forgotten no one. The list contains every race I am aware of."

"Apart from dragons." Deep down, he felt like he was on an emotional roller coaster, needing to flee Aleksei one moment and wanting to kiss him the next. On the outside, he managed to behave. More or less. "When you were fighting with your lovely brother, you called him a stupid idiot and said if you were to go back far enough, you might even find dragon blood in your genes. So. Where are the dragons on your list?"

It was a rare thing to see Aleksei off balance. The fae knew everything, had seen everything, and was always well informed about any given event. He read more in a day than Gabriel did in a month, had visited every known world, and when he didn't know something, he vanished into his workroom or library until he'd learned what there was to learn about the question. Nothing surprised him.

Now, a look of deep sadness showed in his eyes, as if Gabriel's question had opened an old wound.

"Dragons? There is no use adding dragons to the list, beloved. They once existed, but since they've last been seen, centuries have passed. And although we still keep a seat for them at the fae council, not many dare to say they believe in their return for fear of getting called foolish. Nowadays, most of us believe that they are creatures of legends, Gabriel. And even if dragon blood happened to get mingled with yours, there is no way I could prove it, given I have no dragon blood sample to crosscheck your blood with."

Dropping the list onto the table, Gabriel crossed his arms over his chest. There had been something in Aleksei's voice that told him the fae grieved the absence of dragons, and he wondered why that would be. "You'd wish huge flying reptiles to soar across the sky?" he asked. "Sorry, Doc, but that sounds like a bit much, even for me. They'd eat people, burn the harvest, terrorize mankind, wouldn't they?"

Aleksei snorted, then gently touched Gabriel's face. "Truly, I tend to forget the silly stories humans came up with to explain everything they were too frightened to accept. No, dragons wouldn't terrorize anyone. They were intelligent creatures, even wise, as the tales say. The fae council always listened to their advice. Actually, we are bound to obey their orders should they decide to show up ever again."

"Well. I could have read a bit more, I guess." Grumbling, Gabriel leaned into Aleksei's touch. "Any other creatures you ought to tell me about? Do unicorns exist?"

"Of course."

"Aha. And they truly like virgins?"

"If they can get them. Basically, they eat anything they can hunt down."

At Gabriel's stunned expression, Aleksei had to laugh. "I have the strong feeling you need some lessons, Gabriel. You clearly do not spend enough time in the library, or you would know unicorns are even more vicious than gorgons, worse than centaurs, and much more deadly than harpies."

Gabriel pinched his nose in mock exasperation. "You're making my head hurt with all this info, Doc. Give me a break, okay? How about something to eat instead? And maybe we can go out tonight? I have to deliver a file to one of my clients."

With a sigh, Aleksei put the cover over his microscope, but not before he'd stored away all blood samples. "I won't get any work done as long as you are peeking over my shoulder anyway. Dinner, then. And a visit to your client afterwards. As you wish, beloved." But his lips twitched as he said it. Gabriel knew he liked to accompany him when delivering files, always taking the opportunity to meet new people.

And Aleksei was in for a surprise tonight. Gabriel had had something in mind for months now, but he'd never dared to do it. Tonight would be perfect, and hopefully, his strange aversion to getting too close to his lover would vanish for good.

As they ate, the strange feeling of being watched lessened until it was totally gone. Gabriel began to wonder if he'd only imagined it, and when they did the washing up together, he was certain of it. Nothing was wrong. Nothing had ever been wrong.

And the tree nymph.... Well. With a bit of an effort, he could surely forget about him too.

IT WAS a quiet autumn night, a bit too warm for October but neither as wet nor as foggy as would be normal for this time of year. Aleksei wore a long gray coat...the man just didn't know how to feel comfortable in common clothes...and Gabriel had the file on his client's mother in his knapsack. The same old knapsack he'd had when he first met the fae. Thoroughly washed and cleaned, of course, but as it once had been the only personal thing belonging to him, he'd kept it when he moved in with Aleksei.

Gabriel casually looked over his shoulder, checking the street behind them. It had become a habit, not only because he needed to prevent any bystanders from seeing him opening a portal...whenever he opened a portal...but also because the hidden worlds weren't safe places. There were hardly any cities, aside from one built by the elves. And even that one was in the middle of the woods and high up in the trees. Danger lurked everywhere, so a careful survey of his surroundings had become a habit that had saved his life more than once.

"No one is following us," Aleksei said, and Gabriel cringed. He was good at his job; he was good at hiding. And it bothered him that Aleksei had seen him checking the streets behind them, although he couldn't have said why.

"I know," he replied. "It's just... I don't know. Better safe than sorry. The last job wasn't easy. I was threatened by more people than I care to remember, and I always fear one will be angry enough to follow me back home and finish me off on my own doorstep."

Not a lie. But not exactly the truth, either. He had been threatened. He felt a slight fear of someone following him home. But he was checking the streets because he felt as if he was under surveillance again.

Probably the security camera at the corner. Nothing to worry about. Security cameras were everywhere nowadays.

To his surprise, Aleksei put a hand on his arm. "You didn't tell me you've been scared." There was concern in his voice. "There are runes that can hide your tracks. You should be able to use them without any problems. Had I known about your worries, I would already have shown them to you. I thought I had. I must have been mistaken."

The hand on his arm felt warm, even through the leather of his jacket. As a fae, Aleksei had a higher body temperature than a human, and it was always a pleasure to get into bed with him, especially on a cold night.

Or used to be. Tonight, like so many nights before, the thought of sharing a bed was highly unwelcome. Tonight, the heat the fae radiated burned him. Gabriel had a sudden urge to turn and find a portal, run away from his home world, his job and his duties, and most of all, away from his lover.

Aleksei watched him silently. He seemed to sense his inner turmoil; taking his hand off Gabriel's arm, he waited until Gabriel swallowed hard and got his trembling muscles under control.

"You need to tell me what's wrong with you," Aleksei said calmly. "Whether this is about us or if something else is bothering you."

His cool words hurt. *He knows*, Gabriel thought, anger welling up. *He's not supposed to bloody know anything about me!*

Then his heart clenched, and the anger was drowned by panic. If Aleksei knew about his strange fears, and more importantly, about his problems with their relationship, he would surely leave him.

The simple thought of losing Aleksei was too dreadful to bear.

He felt his muscles trembling. Keep calm, he told himself, and he forced a smile upon his lips. *Just keep calm and all will be well.*

He didn't believe it. This was getting out of hand; if he didn't do something about it, the evening would end a lot earlier than planned, and a lot worse than he could possibly have imagined.

Gabriel had chosen his usual outfit: jeans and leather jacket. Although he earned enough money with his business *Lost and Found*, he rarely bothered to spend it, and his lack of interest showed in his casual clothing. Sometimes he got a present for Aleksei, though even then, he tended to bring him rarities from the hidden worlds he visited rather than buying something fancy and useless. For himself, it was always stuff he needed anyway. A new pair of running shoes. Food. A book every now and then. Clothes were unimportant. His jeans he bought secondhand; his shirts were often stolen from Aleksei's wardrobe. And most of all, he just didn't feel comfortable dressing up. He'd probably lived on the streets for too long to have much use for money, and he knew that, in some ways, he hadn't changed all that much since he'd moved in with Aleksei.

Gabriel took a deep breath and halted his steps. They were running late for meeting his client, but what the hell. This was more important. Aleksei was more important!

"Nothing's wrong," he said, and he took Aleksei's face between his hands.

Though he was an impulsive man, Gabriel rarely showed his affection in public. For one thing, the need to act unseen and unobserved was built into his genetic code. No shapeshifter, not even one whose genes had been tangled up with human blood for generations, liked to be watched. The second reason lay in his past: although the rune on his neck hid him from curious eyes, he had grown up as a runaway and a thief, always avoiding the police. Showing affection in public meant drawing attention, and that took some courage for him.

Now was a good time to bite the bullet as well as fight the irrational feelings about Aleksei that tormented him.

Gabriel kissed him, and he could sense Aleksei's surprise as well as his joy. Since they'd been together, he'd developed a deep insight into the fae's thoughts, hopes, and wishes, and he knew with certainty Aleksei was as worried about his behavior as he was himself. This kiss was meant to prove all was well.

Although it wasn't. And although they both knew the "nothing is wrong" part was a huge lie.

His hands on his lover's hips, Gabriel moved as close as possible without taking their clothes off, and he let his hands wander downward. "It's been a while since I've taken you real hard," he whispered into Aleksei's ear. "When did we last use the handcuffs?"

Aleksei's breath quickened. "Months ago," he murmured. "As you know."

And once more the feeling of being watched vanished. The world around him seemed to shift back into normal mode: nothing was wrong, really nothing; no one was on his trail, and there were no nightmares and no uneasy feelings. Maybe this was it. Maybe all he needed to do was to make love to Aleksei to come back to his senses.

Gabriel's cock was straining against his jeans. Through the fabric of Aleksei's trousers, he traced the outline of his lover's length.

"Let's deliver the file," Gabriel murmured, stroking along Aleksei's thigh and wishing they were at home, naked in their bed. Sex with Aleksei was still the best sex he'd ever had, not only because the fae had grown into an exceptional lover once he'd shed his self-chosen virginity, but mainly because there was so much emotion with every stroke, each push, each kiss. With him, Gabriel could shed his fears and his doubts.

"It's the house on the corner," Gabriel said. "My client likes to sleep in, so he asked me to drop by his club after sunset. Another few steps, half an hour of business chat at the most, and then we'll be able to play. All night, if you like."

Aleksei relaxed in his embrace. "In other words, you suggest dropping the subject of whatever is wrong with you until my lust is sated?"

Gabriel grinned. So typical for Aleksei never to let go. "Yep. Let's talk in the morning. Although I doubt you will be awake enough by then."

Side by side, they walked to the tall red house Gabriel had pointed out. There was no bell, only a rusty old knocker. It creaked when Gabriel used it. A moment later, a narrow slot opened and a pair of dark eyes looked them up and down.

"What d'you want? Members only," a voice snarled.

Gabriel, having foreseen something like this, handed the person behind the door his business card. "I'm Gabriel Jordan. Your boss is awaiting my report."

The silence behind the door and the absence of the eyes indicated that the card was being closely examined.

Two years ago, that wouldn't have worked, at least not this smoothly. For one, back then he didn't have a business card. Second, he probably would have lacked the courage to get face to face with the security guard. He would have sneaked in, avoiding being seen even if he'd had an appointment, and it would have worked. He was good at sneaking, and he was really good at not being seen.

Back then, he would have expected the security guard to take a look at him and call the cops.

Back then, not many people had heard of *Lost and Found*, the firm Gabriel had taken over from Luis Mallfrick shortly after Aleksei's mad brother had killed the vampire. He'd changed the firm's reputation and had set out to find people connected to the hidden worlds: daughters chased away by their parents because they'd become pregnant by riverghosts. Children left for dead and saved by the hidden races. Brothers and uncles, nieces and mothers and fathers...Gabriel had told the world he'd find them, not expecting much response.

At first, few had sought him out. At first, he survived only because he lived with Aleksei, who made sure he ate and slept on a regular basis.

But then, Senator Dubaku had ordered him to find his one and only daughter. And Gabriel, without even knowing where to start searching, had found her. And her husband. And her children.

The senator had been beside himself with delight and relief. He'd thought his daughter dead for the better part of twenty years, since she'd fled his house and his hard hand at the tender age of sixteen. Getting her back...and finding himself to be a grandfather...had meant enough to him that he had carefully but persistently worked on changing the laws. Nowadays, the hidden races could live in the human world unchallenged. Children of mixed race weren't called abominations any longer, at least not openly.

No one had the right to call the cops just because a neighbor looked slightly ghoulish.

Not all was settled yet, but Dubaku was working on it. Once he was president, things would become even easier.

In addition, he'd made public who'd found his daughter. Overnight, *Lost and Found* became famous. Policemen had rushed into Gabriel's office, demanding that he reveal his sources, which he'd refused to do. Journalists had tried to interview him, greedy for details about his past, which he'd refused to give as well. No one needed to know his mother was a drug addict. No one needed to know his grandmother was a wolf.

Eventually, the police accepted...with pressure from the senator...that Gabriel was off-limits. The occasional journalist still turned up, and every now and then, a blurry picture of him appeared in the newspapers. But his relationship with Aleksei was still a secret, and his shapeshifter blood was unknown to the press, so he didn't mind too much.

The security guard opened the door, admitting entrance. "Second floor, second door on the right," he said.

The staircase was dark, lit only by candles, the walls covered in black velvet. Not a sound could be heard. "You said this is a club?" Aleksei asked. "What sort of club doesn't have any members visible?"

"Oh, there are members," Gabriel replied. Suddenly, he couldn't wait to hand over the file and enter one of the rooms this very special club was famous for. "At least, so I've heard. My client is a rich guy. He bought this house five years ago, and ever since, his business has flourished. He offers... well, you'll see what this club is all about once I've delivered the news about his mom."

A broad-shouldered, tall woman with short, spiky blond hair awaited them at the top of the staircase, a sheet of paper in her hand. Looking from the paper to Gabriel and back, she finally nodded. "Did a bit of Internet research when you took the job for Mr. Taylor," she said. Her voice was deep and mellow, like liquid caramel. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Jordan." Then she looked Aleksei up and down. "And you would be?" She held her hand out encouragingly so Aleksei would give her his name.

"Bill Bonnetemps," he said curtly as he took her hand and shook it heartily.

Gabriel suppressed a grin. Aleksei had given a false identity, as usual. Some things never changed. He beamed one of his more charming smiles at the woman. "He's with me."

"Yes, I can see that," the woman replied dryly. "Still, I need to know who he is before I can let him anywhere near the boss's office. Mr. Taylor'd slay me alive if he turns out to be a mass murderer. See my problem, Mr. Jordan?"

"You go ahead," Aleksei said smoothly. "I'll keep Miss...what's your name?...company until you are done. If that would be okay with you?" His raised eyebrow seemed to do the trick. The woman relaxed...not much, but enough to make it clear Aleksei would be allowed to keep her company.

A surprisingly soft smile appeared on her full lips. "Name's Tanith. Afraid you've got to stand. No seats out here, see. No one usually wants to stay on this side of the doors for long. All eager to get in ASAP." She indicated the corridor with a nod. It was about fifty feet long. On each side, there were five doors. Thick, solid doors, and soundproofed, by the looks of them.

"There are members of the club currently present?" Aleksei asked.

Gabriel could tell he was really curious. He always was. That's why it was practically impossible to keep a secret from him. For long, anyway.

He sighed. Later. Right now he had to deliver a file.

Tanith was, not surprisingly, already answering each and every one of Aleksei's questions when Gabriel turned his back to them. He was pretty sure she'd also give him her phone number before long. Although with the necklace on Aleksei looked anything but appealing, it was just what people did when the fae set his mind to being charming. Aleksei could turn his charm on like a switch, and he did so shamelessly if it served his purpose. Whatever his purpose might be at the moment.

"You coming in sometime tonight?"

The voice ripped him out of his thoughts. He hadn't even realized he'd opened the door to his client's office.

One last glance at Aleksei. The fae was clearly flirting with Tanith, and witnessing it was harder than Gabriel had expected.

Gabriel left Aleksei in the caring hands of Tanith, hoping what she told him about this club wouldn't make his lover leave before he was done. Aleksei could be strangely old-fashioned at times. Gabriel wasn't entirely sure he would be open to the surprise he had in store.

"Close the door behind you, Mr. Jordan. I do not want my employees to know what you have to tell me. You do have something to tell me, don't you?"

The man behind the large desk tapped his fingers impatiently against the smooth surface. He was in his thirties, relatively young to own one of the most expensive private clubs in town. Not massively tall, he was good-looking in an uncommon way, with a shock of black hair and warm brown eyes. Or at least they could appear warm, if he so chose. When he'd asked Gabriel to find out about his mother, they had been warm until he'd made it clear he wouldn't accept a negative response. At that point, they had developed a hard, nearly cruel glitter that told Gabriel the man would stop at nothing to get what he wanted.

Closing the door and stepping up to the desk, Gabriel shook his hand. "Mr. Taylor. Thank you for seeing me this late. I do hope it is not a problem I brought my partner?"

Taylor nodded to a small screen on his desk. "I saw you arrive. Had it been a problem, he wouldn't have been allowed in. What do you have for me?"

Patience was definitely not one of the man's virtues. Fine.

Gabriel took the file out of his knapsack and placed it on the desk. "Would you like me to summarize what I found?" he asked. Usually, people didn't much like having to read through twenty or more pages in search of a long-awaited answer, and Taylor was no exception.

The man behind the desk nodded. His attention was fully on Gabriel, a somewhat unnerving experience, as Gabriel usually avoided being noticed in any given situation.

Guess I haven't been in the business long enough or I would have got used to it by now Gabriel thought and cleared his throat.

"Well, I have found your mother," he began.

The only reaction he got was a curt nod.

"She lives in Nebraska. You will find her name and address in the file. Should you consider contacting her, please know she is willing to meet you only under the condition her family doesn't learn of your existence."

"Family?" Taylor leaned forward ever so slightly in his chair.

"She is married and has two kids, ages twelve and seventeen."

"I see. Continue."

Admittedly, Gabriel had expected an outburst. Or at least some well-placed swear words. Brian Taylor was known as an impulsive man who never shied away from a fight, be it with fists or money. He usually won. Even now, while sitting motionless in his chair, he radiated energy and a raw sexuality that were breathtaking. His reacting so calmly to the news his mother had built a new family after she'd left him and his father was nothing less than a huge relief.

"After she left you, your mother traveled the world, spending substantial time in Italy and Southern Germany. She speaks both languages fluently. In Spain she met her husband, Carlos Fuegares. They married, they moved to the States, and now she seems to have settled down. I spent an afternoon with her once I tracked her down. She doesn't regret having left your father. She regrets having left you, hence her offer for a meeting."

Brian Taylor placed his palms flat on the desk. It was, apart from the file he hadn't even touched yet, completely empty. "Tell me in which of the hidden worlds she's been. Tell me about her parents; tell me what race's blood runs in my veins."

Gabriel frowned, then slowly opened the folder and took out a single sheet of paper. "I had her blood tested, Mr. Taylor. Your mother is 100 percent human. She's never visited the hidden worlds and is only vaguely aware of the other races. In any case, she's never been interested in meeting one of them. She met Carlos, fell in love, and that was it. If you want to know why she left your father, she said you'd have to ask her yourself if you want to find out. But in her family runs no other blood than human."

Seeing Brian Taylor's mouth sag open nearly made Gabriel smile.

"I'm.... Are you saying there are no traces of non-human blood in me?" Taylor sounded dumbstruck. And disappointed. He certainly wasn't as relieved as he should be. All of Gabriel's former clients had been scared of the answers he would bring back. All of them had feared the same thing: that they weren't human, not fully, that they therefore were disqualified from being called good Christians, that they were suddenly sub-human, dirt on the shoes of everyone else with a clean genetic code.

Tainted blood.

Most of those he'd told about their non-human heritage had cried. Or cursed.

"I thought she'd run away because there was something else in her blood, something driving her away from us," Taylor said thoughtfully. "I truly believed she'd gone to one of the hidden worlds, living with her true family and finding herself a husband more fitting for her needs. But a Spaniard? That's ridiculous. It doesn't explain..."

He broke off in midsentence. His fists were clenched, his jaw set, and after a moment of controlled fury, he banged his hands hard on the desk. "Fuck," he hissed. "I thought... I'd hoped...."

Gabriel looked at the man behind the desk. He was a smart guy. He'd made it far in a very short amount of time by outwitting his opponents, by ruthlessly getting them out of the way, and by putting everything he had into each bargain he made. There was no holding back once he'd set his mind on something. Taylor was a killer when it came to business. Gabriel was certain this man was one of the few people who knew himself inside and out. There were no hidden secrets buried inside him. Taylor could look into a mirror unblinking for hours as only a man who is not afraid of the darkness in his soul can do.

Disappointed. That could only mean there was a part he knew existed but couldn't name.

A non-human part.

"Would it help if I told you that you are part vampire?" Gabriel had to suppress a grin when he asked; grinning would definitely not have been good for the business.

Taylor jerked his head up. "What?"

In a calming gesture, Gabriel raised his hands. "I wasn't finished with my report. Usually, I have to break the news a bit more carefully to my clients. You seem to want to have non-human blood running through your veins. Well, here it is. Your grandfather was a full-blooded vampire. Your father's father, to be precise. Which makes you..."

"Which makes me one-quarter vampire."

Gabriel wasn't surprised to see the man close his eyes with relief. "You were suspicious?"

Taylor's nostrils flared, the only visible sign of his obvious inner turmoil. "Damn fucking sure I was. The way I live...at night...and the way I act, even how and what I eat were strong indicators. I love to hunt, and although I rarely shed blood in business, I still kill my opponents with a few well-placed words. Vampire, yes? Does that mean I have an unnatural craving for virgin blood?"

Gabriel shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Do you?"

Taylor was completely at ease now, and for the first time, he picked up the file and leafed through its contents. "I like my steaks bloody," he mused. "But my women have to be of age as well as experienced. My current girlfriend is a year older than I am and certainly hasn't been a virgin for over a decade. Is there anything else I need to know?"

Gabriel recognized when he was being thrown out, even when it was being done politely. He got up and picked up his knapsack. "Should you decide to have children, make sure the mother-to-be knows about your heritage beforehand," he said. "I have seen many families destroyed because either father or mother was shocked by the newborn's appearance. Vampire babies are nearly translucent at birth, with black eyes and very sharp nails. Do yourself a favor and tell the lady in question what you are should you ever desire to become a father. Given you are only one-quarter vampire, the telltale signs in your children will vanish about an hour after birth, but they will be there."

Taylor nodded, then frowned. "My mother gave birth at home. My father wasn't there, he was held up in a plane over New York."

Gabriel saw him take a deep breath.

"She was alone. She cut the umbilical cord with nail clippers, then wrapped me in a blanket, put me on the bed, and left." He looked at Gabriel. "My mother knew something was wrong with me."

Again, Gabriel shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing wrong. Just different. And according to the file, she was nineteen when she gave birth to you. I cannot even imagine the shock when she set eyes on her newborn. If your unexpected...and unusual...appearance was really the reason for her leaving, do not judge her too harshly."

The silence stretched for a few heartbeats, during which Gabriel pondered the possibility of Taylor finally losing his controlled manners and beginning to shout at him for the unwanted advice.

Taylor opened a drawer, took out a check, and signed it. Holding it out to Gabriel, he said, "The outstanding fee. I will recommend your firm."

Gabriel took the check and stored it in the inner pocket of his leather jacket. Monique would cash it on Monday. Time to get out of here.

"One more thing," Taylor said. "Last time, you asked one of my employees if there's a chance of using one of the club rooms."

Gabriel sighed. Damn. It seemed his plans for the night had just been cancelled. "They're for members only. I know," he said. "I thought asking wouldn't hurt."

Taylor's attention was on the file. "The information about my mother and my grandfather is valuable. You may use room number eight tonight. For free."

Gabriel blushed ever so slightly. "Look," he said, "I didn't have any intention of prying favors from you. Of course I will pay for..."

"Have fun, Mr. Jordan. And goodnight."