



KIM DARE

RYLAND'S  
SACRIFICE

THROWN  
TO THE  
LIONS

# *Ryland's Sacrifice*

*A Thrown to the Lions Story*

By Kim Dare

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Resplendence Publishing, LLC

P.O. Box 992

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Ryland's Sacrifice

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and occurrences are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places or occurrences, is purely coincidental.

*To everyone who has yet to find someone  
who can accept them for who they really are.*

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## *Chapter One*

He wasn't completely naked. Ryland Gilford silently repeated the fact over and over inside his head. Even though it was technically true, it did little to reassure him.

By his careful estimations, sixteen square inches of his skin were hidden away. Unfortunately, neither the leather cuffs wrapped around his wrists, nor the blindfold over his eyes, concealed any of those parts of his anatomy he generally preferred to keep covered in the presence of strangers.

The car lurched to a sudden stop. The seat belt tightened across Ryland's chest as he was flung forward. His bound arms dug into his spine as he was tossed back against the seat again.

Dragging a deep lungful of air into his body, Ryland scrambled for a different, more effective, mantra—one that didn't remind him he was stark bollock naked every two seconds.

*Textbooks cost money?* That was more promising. Maybe, if he concentrated very hard on remembering why he'd agreed to do something so blatantly, bloody stupid, he'd somehow manage to survive the night with some little part of his sanity intact.

Textbooks cost money. Tuition fees have to be paid. Rent money has to be found. Enough spare change to buy a meal or two during the next academic year would be nice, too.

Remembering those facts helped a little, but it wasn't enough. Ryland still felt sick to his stomach. The car turned a sharp corner. He swayed in his seat before finally managing to right himself. The chauffeur's driving really wasn't helping his efforts not to give way to nervous nausea.

Still it was better than being driven around by one of Jason Burrows' drivers...

Ryland took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. Yes, that was what he really needed to remember. Sacrificing his principles this way might make his skin crawl, but it was still better

than putting himself into the hands of the only man at the university who might be willing to lend money to a doctoral math student whose scholarship had vanished into the murky depths of the recession.

He'd heard all about the way Jason Burrows called in his debts. The rumors made him out to be very inventive in certain areas. Anything had to be better than that—even this.

The car jerked to a stop once more. Silence filled the world as the driver killed the engine. Ryland's breath caught in his throat as he realized this wasn't just another set of traffic lights.

From the darkness behind his blindfold, he heard the driver get out of the car. The door next to him was thrown open. Cold air rushed into the claustrophobic little space. Clothes brushed against his bare skin as someone leaned in and undid his seatbelt. The driver's breath caressed his neck.

Ryland tried to press himself further back against the seat. The buckles on the leather cuffs stabbed him in the back. A second later, a calloused hand caught hold of his arm and dragged him unceremoniously out of the car. He stumbled as he tried to get his balance. The chauffeur took no notice.

Gravel crunched under the other man's shoes and bit into Ryland's bare feet as he was marched forward. They stopped as suddenly as they started. A yank on Ryland's arm kept him upright when he'd have stumbled. It damn near wrenched his shoulder out of the socket too.

A doorbell rang in the distance. The driver let go of his arm. Ryland rolled his shoulder as much as his restraints would allow, as if the fact someone had set his shoulder on fire was the only thing he needed to be worried about right then.

Footsteps stomped over the gravel once more, growing fainter as they moved further away from him.

"Where are you going?" Ryland silently cursed himself. He really hadn't intended to sound that way, but the words already hung in the cool evening air. It was too late to wish they'd been braver.

A car started up. Ryland turned toward it. "What the—" He opened and closed his mouth a few times. No other words materialized.

No one had said anything about him being left on a doorstep like a sodding parcel. Some frightened little part of him knew there were a hell of a lot of details he probably should have

checked before he launched himself into this stupid mess. If he'd believed himself capable of finding out those sorts of particulars and still going through with it, he was sure he'd have asked every single one of the right questions.

Pity, then, that he was well aware that he wasn't that kind of man. If he'd let himself find out too much about the horrible little charade, he wouldn't have entered into it calm and well informed. He'd have run away before anyone had a chance to strip him down and lock those idiotic cuffs around his wrists.

And what would he have done then? Borrow the money from Jason Burrows? Drop out and prove his parents had been right when they'd said he'd never get through his degrees without crawling back to them and begging for their help.

A cool breeze danced over Ryland's skin, reminding him it was far too late to wish things were different. A shiver raced down his spine. The evening air seemed to have a mind of its own. It concentrated all its efforts on blowing against his exposed cock, apparently rather amused by the fact that he couldn't put his hands in front of his body, that he couldn't even see and find a bush to hide behind. Silence surrounded him, leaving him in no doubt he was alone in some nameless person's driveway.

"Please, God, let it be the right house," he whispered to himself. That wasn't too much to ask for, was it? *Please, don't let it belong to some nice little old lady who's going to phone the police and demand they come and arrest the flasher lurking in her front garden.*

"Don't worry, sweetheart, you're in the right place." The words were purred just a few inches from his ear. Ryland spun around, as if the blindfold might conveniently disappear and allow him to see his...his attacker? One of his owners for the rest of the night?

The heat radiating from a warm body confirmed the speaker stood within inches of him. He barely had time to register that fact before a naked body brushed against him. Ryland stumbled away from it. An embarrassing little yelp escaped from the back of his throat as he discovered another, equally naked, man behind him. Surrounded by bare skin, he twisted around, searching blindly for an escape route.

"No playing in the driveway!" someone yelled from the direction of the house. "Inside, all of you—now!"

Strong hands wrapped around each of Ryland's bound arms and led him forward.

Tile flooring replaced the gravel. Wooden floorboards replaced tiles and in turn gave way



to thick carpet. A door slammed behind him. The room they'd led him into was stiflingly hot after the chill of the driveway. The rapid change in temperature sent a shiver through him.

As the hands gripping his arms disappeared, silence surrounded him once more, broken only by the sound of logs crackling on a fire. For a few seconds, Ryland managed to focus on his actual surroundings rather than all the horrible possibilities that tangled themselves together his mind. The heat from the fire warmed the right side of his body.

Fire on the right. Door on the left. He knew where he was. Sort of. Even if he didn't, pretending he did made him feel a little bit better about the world. And it had to be better than thinking about the eyes he could feel roaming over his bare skin. No one laid a hand on him, but disturbed air caressed his skin. Ryland got the distinct impression someone was circling him, that he was being judged.

Against all reason, he found himself hoping whoever it was, would be pleased with what they saw. He wasn't under any illusions. Guy's weren't exactly queuing around the block in the rain for him. But he wasn't so bad. Some guys seemed to like him. Some guys liked blond hair and blue eyes on general principle. The guy who'd agreed to send him there that night had certainly seemed to like staring at him when Ryland had stripped down to 'audition' for the part he was about to play in this stupid little game.

Ryland swallowed several times as his nerves threatened to get the better of him. A slow breath in and out failed to calm his rush towards full out panic.

"No one's going to hurt you." Once again, the words came from just behind his ear, but this time they made him freeze rather than spin around. It was a different voice, deeper and richer than the one that had spoken to him outside.

"You were told we have no interest in unwilling men?"

The silence demanded an answer.

"Yes," Ryland admitted. And he'd been desperate enough to believe it. Bloody fool...

Something touched his cheek. Ryland let out a terrified little whimper before he realized it was nothing more frightening than another man's hair brushing against him. Impossibly soft lips placed a gentle kiss on his shoulder. A rough tongue rasped against his skin.

Ryland bit back another whimper as the sensation rushed straight down his spine and lodged in his cock.

"You know what's expected of you?"

“Whatever you want.” Ryland cleared his throat. “I have to do whatever you want for the rest of the night.” He had to. If he didn’t, he’d probably be expected to give the money back—which would be pretty difficult, considering he’d already spent every last penny of it paying the remainder of his tuition fees.

The man behind him made a vague noise, half way between agreement and disagreement. Lips trailed up Ryland’s neck. The heat from a man’s body standing close behind him overpowered the warmth from the fire, rendering the blaze insignificant.

“Tell me what you want me to do?” Ryland asked.

The request was ignored.

Long strands of hair brushed against his other cheek. “Have you ever taken a lion before?”

Ryland shook his head. But that didn’t mean he hadn’t heard all the tales that were whispered around the university. Werelions lived on campus. A man could make easy money being thrown to the lions. Oh, yes, he knew all the rumors. It was gossip like that that had landed him in this mess in the first place.

Strong. Dominant. Insatiable. Werelions. Half man, half cat. They hunt in groups and share their prizes with the rest of the pride. In that moment, Ryland really wished he hadn’t heard the stories, almost as much as he wished the guy hadn’t said the L word. He’d sounded so human. It would have been so easy to pretend...

The lion closed the gap between them. A hard cock brushed against Ryland’s skin. Against all reason, he felt his own cock twitch in response. The shifter moved closer still. Lining his body up behind Ryland’s, he ran his tongue over his shoulder once more.

Large hands settled on Ryland’s flanks, holding him still, but it didn’t feel like the lion was trying to stop him from escaping. His touch was strong, confident, it seemed to aim to reassure rather than restrain.

The rough tongue’s caress sent a shudder through Ryland’s body. He bowed his head as an image of a kneeling shifter invaded his mind. The possibilities of that tongue turning its attentions to his cock made him whimper.

Warped. Ryland mentally rolled his eyes at himself. He was so warped. Not to mention delusional. Like there was a hope in hell he’d be the one looking down at another man on his knees that night.

Even knowing that, logic proved a poor match for fantasy. His cock hardened further. Ryland tried to bring his hands in front of him to cover his embarrassment. The chain linking the leather cuffs rattled. His hands stayed where they were.

Muffled whispers reached him from some distant part of the room but he couldn't make out the words. Heat rushed to his cheeks as he realized there was no way he could hide how much he was enjoying the other man's touch.

The hands on his flanks slid down and settled over his hipbones. The lion's palms were rough against his skin. It was easy to believe they had seen a great deal of work as paws. The tiny bit of air that remained between him and the other man disappeared. Ryland felt the lion's body move against him with every breath. He was taller than Ryland, broader, obviously stronger.

And he was just as obviously hung like...like every other lion on the planet for all Ryland knew. Strangely enough, student gossip hadn't had anything to say on that point. It was possible that huge for a human only represented normal to a lion.

All Ryland really knew was the cock nudging against his skin was hard and ready to play. Pre-cum smeared against his left buttock as the lion rocked his hips. His own cock curved enthusiastically back towards his stomach in response.

Biting down hard on his bottom lip, Ryland tried not to squirm within the lion's hold on him. The grip on his hips tightened anyway, as if the shifter knew exactly what was in his head. The other man's tongue traced a line across his neck.

"There are rules."

The voice sent another shudder through him. Ryland automatically leaned back against the scorching skin behind him. That earned him a pleased noise, almost like a purr—or how a purr might sound if it emanated from someone twice Ryland's size. Lips vibrated against his skin, pulling a moan from Ryland in response.

"Repeat what I just said."

"I..." was all Ryland could manage.

"Rules," the lion reminded him.

Ryland nodded. "Rules."

"The word 'spear' ends it all. Until you say that word, I will do whatever I want with you. Understand?"

Ryland nodded.

“What do you need to say?”

Ryland licked his lips. “Sp—” He cut himself off. “I don’t want to stop.” He didn’t understand just how true the words were until he’d already said them. *He didn’t want this to stop.* Every sensible thought in his head scatted at the realization.

“Good boy.” Rough palms against his abs and pulled him back tighter against the other man’s skin, trapping Ryland’s hands between their bodies. The lion felt entirely human, just very hot. Against all logic, Ryland found himself feeling soothed by the were’s strength rather than scared by it.

*Lions!*

The word screamed around inside his head, but it failed to freak him out the way he was sure it should. When the shifter stepped back and took his warmth away from Ryland’s skin without any warning, he clutched at the empty air behind him, scrabbling to find the other man with his limited reach.

He froze as he realized someone was standing in front of him now. There was no way to tell if it was the same shifter who’d stood behind him. All he could do was stay very still and pray.

Something touched the back of his head where the buckle held the blindfold tight against his face. The strip of leather fell away.

Ryland blinked his eyes open. He’d been trapped in the darkness behind the blindfold for so long, he couldn’t focus. Rumors of the way the lions looked swirled inside his head. By the time the blur before him morphed into a clear image of a man, he was half expecting to find himself face-to-face with some sort of feline cartoon character.

He blinked again when he saw the reality staring down at him. His mouth opened and closed several times. “Professor!”

The older man’s lips twitched into a small smile.

Ryland stared up at the other man for what felt like a minor eternity. An honest to God lion would have been a hell of a lot easier to wrap his mind around.

“Who were you expecting?” The amusement drained out of the professor’s expression. A predatory light sprang into his eyes.

Ryland had seen him look at students that way before, usually when someone was

suicidal enough to try to argue about a rough grade. He'd never realized how it would feel directed at him.

His breath caught in his throat as he automatically tried to pull his brain into gear just in case a complex question about Medieval History was about to be fired off at him. His success was limited. Ryland couldn't bring himself to feel too surprised.

Professor Arslan was standing right there in front of him, hard and naked and...and his limited historical knowledge be damned. The fact Arslan was right there among the shifters was all Ryland had room in his head for.

Part of him wasn't the least bit worried about the absence of other thoughts. Nothing could ever be as important as Professor Arslan being there. And him being naked, the bit of Ryland's brain that connected directly to his cock reminded him. The naked part of the equation was significant too.

Ryland swallowed rapidly. Very significant. As his eyes begged to be allowed to look down, Ryland forced himself to keep his gaze on the other man's face.

He'd always wondered what the professor would look like if all that long dark brown hair weren't caught back by a strip of leather at the nape of his neck. Now he knew. It looked like a lion's mane. Ryland took a shaky breath. Behind his back, his hands clenched into tight fists as he fought against a sudden spike of panic at the reminder of the L word.

"I asked you a question."

Ryland nodded. Arslan had asked him a question, and everyone who had ever attended one of his lectures knew that when the professor asked a question, you'd better bloody well know the answer.

Who had he been expecting? Quite frankly, someone who looked like they needed to pay for sex.

"I..." There was no way in hell he could say that. If he said that, then he'd end up blurting out something even worse—like the fact Professor Arslan would never have to pay for sex because damn near every student in the university who was the least interested in men would happily drop to their knees for him for free. And if he told him half the student population had a crush on him, then he'd soon be telling him which half he fell into and...

"I didn't know what to expect, sir," Ryland whispered.

The older man studied him for a long time before he finally nodded his willingness to

accept his answer.

Ryland let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"He's one of your students?"

Ryland jumped at the reminder that other people existed in the world, existed in that very room. Before he had a chance to turn toward the voice or descend into panic, Arslan's hand was on the back of Ryland's head, his fingers tangling in his hair. As he held him in place, the professor somehow managed to ease Ryland's need to look over his shoulder, to see who asked the question.

"No," Arslan said, his voice brooked no argument as he looked past Ryland and glared at whoever interrupted them. "He's not one of my students."

Ryland stared up at the older man, wondering how a sentence that disclaimed all knowledge of him could also manage to sound as possessive as hell.

"You're a...?" Ryland trailed off as he realized he had no idea what to call the other man.

Arslan raised an eyebrow. "A shifter? A were? A lion? Yes."

Ryland swallowed and nodded as if that was nothing to worry about. His wrists pulled nervously at his cuffs.

Since Arslan could never need to tie someone up to ensure they did as he wished, the bondage was obviously there because he liked it. The professor wasn't just a lion. He was a kinky lion. Ryland wasn't sure if that was better or worse.

Arslan reached behind him. In a second, the cuffs were unbuckled from his wrists. The older man held the combination of leather and metal up as he studied them.

"Very dramatic," he said, apparently more to himself than to anyone else. He tossed them out of Ryland's line of sight, perhaps to another lion. Ryland didn't hear them land. He didn't try to look in the direction they disappeared to either.

Ryland's freed hands remained behind him as he waited for the other man to give him permission to move them. The professor had always been able to make him sit still through a two-hour lecture with nothing more than a glare in his general direction. No one in their right mind tapped his pen against his desk or fidgeted with his textbooks when Arslan was in charge of the room.

Ryland tried to tell himself that standing there naked with his hands behind his back was no different to minding his manners in a lecture hall. But it wasn't the same. It felt far more

natural.

“I thought you didn’t do students.”

Arslan’s fingers tightened in Ryland’s hair. Nails that suddenly felt long enough to resemble claws scraped against his scalp. The professor snarled at someone outside Ryland’s field of vision.

The harsh, angry little noise wasn’t directed at him, but Ryland still felt his heart hesitate before taking its next beat.

The lion’s snarl morphed into words without any clear line being drawn between the two. “You have something to say, Blaine?”

Professor Joseph Arslan searched the gloom that lingered outside the bright circle of firelight. As he met the younger lion’s eyes, Blaine took a step back and dropped his gaze. Arslan watched the other lion’s posture change as he appeared to realize he’d misjudged the situation.

Arslan wasn’t inclined to be sympathetic. It was well past time the younger lion learned to show due respect to the leader of his pride. Blaine was old enough to learn how to tell when he might be allowed to play silly games and when the moment was too serious for such foolishness to be tolerated.

If the younger lions couldn’t look at the man in their midst and tell that this offering from the humans was different to all those who came before, it was about time the cubs were called to heel and reminded of their respective places in his pride.

Blaine kept his eyes down. Satisfied for the moment, Arslan looked at each of the other lions who lurked around the edges of the room, daring each of them to speak.

No one said a word. No one held his gaze for longer than a second before they looked down either. Arslan turned his attention back to Ryland. The younger man quickly dropped his eyes too.

It was a far more instinctive reaction than most of the other lions had demonstrated. It screamed a natural inclination to submission rather than anything like an understanding of what it meant to be part of a pride.

Arslan gentled his grip on Ryland’s hair and stroked his fingers through the ruffled strands. Putting the fear of Arslan into the other lions was one thing. There was no reason for

him to scare his new pet.

Ducking his head, Arslan brushed his lips across Ryland's temple. Even that little hint of a kiss seemed to ease his anxieties. His breathing became steadier. His pulse ceased to race so quickly. Part of the younger man seemed to realize that the leader of the pride was pleased with him, that he was safe.

His improved understanding of the situation didn't wipe away everything that existed in the previous moments. Arslan could still smell the younger man's desire. That hadn't changed.

Half a step brought them together. Ryland was still hard. He let out a little mew of unexpected pleasure as the tip of his cock brushed against Arslan's hipbone, sounding for all the world like an eager cub.

Still, however enthusiastic he was about feeling their bodies rub together, he didn't reach out and try to pull Arslan closer. He seemed to appreciate that he'd given control of such decisions over to someone else.

Arslan smiled slightly. He'd been right to see the potential in him. And he'd been right to wait and watch the younger man sit in the back row of his lecture hall, he'd been right to let Ryland eavesdrop on a subject he wasn't even studying. Patience had its rewards. Ryland rocked forward ever so slightly, leaning into his master's touch.

"Do you know what it means to belong to the pride, pet?"

Ryland shook his head.

"If you don't wish to know what it means, say your word."

Ryland blinked up at him. His eyes were half closed, hooded with a depth of pleasure that seemed unfamiliar to him. Even as he stood there, he appeared to pull together the rough edges of tattered human instinct and mould it into something that might one day resemble a lion's ability to do as his nature intended.

Arslan saw his answer reflected in a pair of mesmerizing blue eyes long before the smaller man managed to frame a single syllable. He still waited for the words.

"Please, sir?" Ryland finally whispered.

And as easily as that, the silly human games were over. Ryland was his.

Arslan tugged at the short blond strands of hair, tilting Ryland's head back. Their mouths met. Arslan ran his tongue over the seam between Ryland's lips. They immediately parted, welcoming him. The younger man moaned into the kiss. The hands he'd kept behind his back for



so long, finally broke their invisible bonds. He clutched at Arslan's shoulders, pulling himself onto his tiptoes as he tried to match their heights.

His new pet was apparently far too used to dealing with young men his own age. He didn't seem to know what to do with a fully-grown man, let alone a lion. Arslan wrapped his arms around the smaller man, pulling him closer. Claws crept out as he ran his hands over Ryland's back, scratching his skin and leaving their mark to show any other lion who might catch sight of his new pet that Ryland had already been claimed.

As they traced their way down the younger man's skin, Arslan's hands stretched out to their full span, ensuring that any man who saw the scratches would also know just how large a shifter had claimed him.

Ryland bucked against him as the gentle scratches seemed to set off a cascade of adrenaline under his skin. He pressed against Arslan, rubbing their cocks together as he once more tried to climb up his lover's body and make them the same height, to make their bodies fit together the way he wanted them to.

Arslan broke the kiss and spun Ryland around. Without a pair of bound hands in the way, he was able to line himself up against the younger man's back properly. Ryland instantly murmured his approval. Pushing his buttocks back against him in encouragement, the smaller man dropped his head back to lean against Arslan's shoulder.

His eyes were closed as if to better savor each sensation his master offered him. Arslan ran his tongue over the younger man's neck. His new pet might not have been able to see the other lions watching them, but Arslan knew how closely they were being observed.

As Arslan looked up, he found Blaine and Luther staring back at him, just as he'd expected. Their own desire for Ryland was obvious. Arslan met their eyes, each man in turn. Tonight, the pair would have to make do with each other. Even as he saw the realization dawn, he noticed Luther reach out to stroke his fingertips down Blaine's spine.

Instinct demanded that he deal with his pride as well as with his new pet, Arslan met another set of watchful eyes, then another. Bowing his head over Ryland's throat, he placed a gentle nip to his neck.

Ryland couldn't have truly understood the significance of it, but he seemed to thrive on the tender touch of teeth regardless. His hand shot up to bury itself in Arslan's hair, trying to pull him back to his neck apparently desperate to feel the scrape of canines across his skin again.

Arslan let the sound of his pleasure vibrate against Ryland's throat instead. The younger man was quick to whimper his enjoyment of that too.

Placing his hand on the other man's shoulder, Arslan pressed gently down. Eyes still closed, Ryland frowned, as if he didn't understand. His expression cleared as he seemed to realize what his master wanted him to do and why. He dropped to his knees on the rug before the fireplace without any further hesitation. Reaching out, he settled his hands on the floor in front of him.

As Arslan lowered himself to his knees behind the smaller man, he reached out and stroked his hand down his spine. Ryland arched into his touch like an enthusiastic cub. He shifted his knees further apart on the rug without needing to be prompted, offering himself to his lover through pure instinct.

No lion in his right mind could be expected to resist such a beautiful invitation. Arslan snatched up the tube of lubricant from beside the fireplace and smeared it on his fingers. It was warm from the blaze, and Ryland murmured his appreciation as his new master circled his hole with the tips of his fingers.

"Do you like that, pet?" Arslan whispered to him, his voice rough with his own desire, even as he fought to speak softly to the younger man. It needed every bit of his human side to remind the lion within him, that words were important when dealing with those who hadn't been raised to understand their instincts, to follow their intuition like a lion.

If he let Ryland get too lost in his newfound instincts, he'd be scared when he looked back over their time together and tried to understand what had happened. That wasn't acceptable. Lions looked after their human pets—they didn't let them get scared.

Several seconds passed before Ryland seemed able to process his master's question. He nodded rapidly. At the same time, he pushed back against Arslan's fingers, impatiently trying to squirm his way onto the digits. Arslan slid one finger inside him, quick to reward him for providing his master with such an honest answer. The younger man's breath caught in his throat, but he didn't stop trying to push back around the finger.

He might not have taken a lion before, but he obviously had some degree of experience with human men. Arslan forced a surge of jealousy aside and worked another finger alongside the first. Ryland jerked and groaned his pleasure as Arslan rubbed the tips of the digits against his prostate.

Then, as Arslan watched, his pet seemed to muster his self-control. He fell still, giving every decision, every movement over to his master. Arslan stared down at him, mesmerized by the pure beauty of the other man's submission. No lion who saw him could fail to realize exactly who Ryland belonged to right then.

Crooking his fingers, Arslan coaxed a purring little noise out of his lover. Ryland remained very still as the fingers continued to work inside him. Arslan stroked his other hand across his back, soothing him down, praising him for digging up instincts humans always seemed to bury too deeply.

Ryland seemed to like that gentle kind of caress. He murmured his pleasure, but he stayed very still, as if scared that even the tiniest movement might break some sort of spell surrounding them. Arslan thrust his fingers further inside him, encouraging him to relax, until his pleased little noises formed a constant stream of audible delight.

Ryland's head dropped forward. "Please," he whispered. "Please." It was the only word he seemed to be able to remember. Then he found another one. "Please, sir."

The two words formed a plea that couldn't be refused. Taking his fingers away, Arslan quickly slicked his shaft with extra lube. When he glanced up, Ryland was looking over his shoulder, naked craving burning in his gaze.

All thoughts of human words and traditions faded from the shifter's mind. All he could do was let the lion inside speak. The look in Ryland's eyes, every line of his body, his scent, everything about the younger man screamed his submission and his need for his master.

He offered the tip of his cock to Ryland's hole. As he pushed forward, very slowly sheathing himself inside the younger man, Ryland gasped. Arslan ran a palm down his lover's back once more, before stroking around the younger man's torso to wrap his hand around his lover's cock.

Gently squeezing the hard shaft in his hand, he rubbed his thumb back and forth over the tip. Ryland clenched around his master's shaft. His head dropped forward as if the combined sensations were too much for him. Arslan continued to push forward as the pleasure Ryland took from his master's touch slowly relaxed him. Finally, he was sheathed inside him to the hilt.

For a long time, the only thing that moved was Arslan's hand underneath Ryland's body as he continued to stroke his cock, slow and simple. He took his pet to the edge and held him there as he waited for Ryland's body not just to relax around him, but to truly welcome the feel

of a hard shaft stretching him open, filling him completely.

Another minute passed. Ryland began to shift within his master's grasp, not so much pushing himself forward into Arslan's hand, as pushing himself back onto his cock, silently begging his lover to move.

Arslan stopped his teasing. He removed his fingers from where they played. Steadying his lover with one hand on either side of Ryland's body, he began to rock his hips back, ready to thrust forward again. At first, the movement was tiny, a test of what his new pet was able to take.

The younger man gasped. His head was bowed so low his forehead almost touched the carpet, but it didn't seem to be an expression of submission as much as he appeared to be completely overwhelmed by his own pleasure.

Arslan pulled back further, until almost his entire shaft was cocooned in nothing but air. Ryland held his breath, as if he thought his master might leave him entirely. At the last moment, he pushed back into him. Ryland sighed his relief.

Again, and again, one slow, controlled thrust, then another, until Ryland's breaths took up the same rhythm his master's movements, and Arslan was half-sure he'd hyperventilate before he could take his pleasure from their mating. Leaning forward, he let the younger man feel his master's chest pressed close against his back as he offered him another, safer rhythm to follow.

"That's right, pet. Follow your master."

He wasn't sure if Ryland consciously understood the words, but his burgeoning instincts seemed to know what was being offered to him. The younger man's breaths fell in time with his. Arslan ran his tongue over the smaller man's shoulder as he felt Ryland arch his back, looking for more contact, more everything.

Slow measured thrusts could only last for so long. Arslan wasn't sure which of them was more of an inexperienced cub right then—the man who had never been touched by a lion, or the lion himself. His responses to Ryland were so far beyond his control, it was impossible to believe that anything he'd done with another human had in any way prepared him for this particular man.

He reached under Ryland's body and took him in hand once more. A few quick strokes and the younger man bucked underneath him. It took all of Arslan's control to ride out the waves of the other man's bliss as Ryland clenched around him and yelled his pleasure into the room.

As he stilled, Ryland's muscles seemed to give out on him. He collapsed forward on to the rug. Arslan went with him, keeping their bodies joined snugly together. The younger man rested his temple against one of his forearms as he struggled to catch his breath. His face was turned to the side. For the first time since he looked over his shoulder, Arslan saw his expression.

Such peace, such perfection. Arslan froze, still buried deep inside the younger man's body.

"Don't stop, sir," Ryland whispered. "Please, don't stop..."

Arslan rocked his hips, very slowly.

Supporting most of his frame, he let just enough of his weight rest on Ryland to ensure the younger man would be able to feel every movement—not just feel his master's shaft inside him, but feel skin moving against skin and the heat of his master's body covering his too.

Ryland continued to murmur his pleasure, but they were slow sleepy sounds now, as if his connection with his master provided quiet contentment now, rather than the waves of ecstasy that shot through him as he came.

Arslan didn't want to stop either, but as slow and careful as all his movements were, each one still pushed him closer to the edge. Even a lion couldn't last forever.

He thrust deeper inside the other man's hole and barely held back a roar as his orgasm tore through him and he spilled inside Ryland's body. The younger man gasped. His eyes fluttered open before falling closed again as the professor fell still.

Arslan let a little more of his weight rest against the younger man's body, as he offered a lick to his shoulder. He forced himself to pull away far enough to separate their bodies, but couldn't convince himself to move any further than that from his lover's side. They remained in contact, allowing him to feel every breath Ryland took as they lay there, sensing every little change in his mood while his body half covered the other man's smaller frame.

"Hush," Arslan whispered to him. "That's right, rest now."

He couldn't ever remember feeling so protective of any human who had come to them, or of anyone at all—not even the lions in his own pride. He laid one more gentle lick on Ryland's neck. His human pet made a sleepy sated noise and curled slightly on one side, arching his back as he invited Arslan to spoon behind him more comfortably.

The shifter smiled against his lover's skin. He'd been right to keep an eye on Ryland. He stroked his hand over the younger man's body. Even stretched out in front of the fire, he had that

very slightly cold feeling humans always seemed to possess. Arslan molded their bodies more closely together, automatically seeking to keep his pet warm and content.

A sudden bang on the other side of the room made Ryland jerk and gasp. Arslan reached over him and set his palm on the rug the other side of his lover protecting him with his body as he turned and snarled at the disturbance.

## *Chapter Two*

Ryland lay very still as Arslan's larger frame covered his, holding him down against the rug before the fireplace. When some semblance of control over his muscles returned to him, he closed his eyes. Moments passed. Even after he re-opened his eyes, Ryland kept his gaze on a small patch of rug a few inches in front of his face. He had no inclination to look up and face the world.

Perhaps somewhere in the back of his mind, he'd been aware that they weren't as alone as he and Arslan tended to be in his fantasies. Except, of course, for that one daydream where the professor called him down to the front of the lecture hall and...

Ryland closed his eyes again. There were important differences between that fantasy and this reality. He wasn't at the university. He was in the lion's den. It wasn't his fellow students watching him, it was an entire pride of lions. And he wasn't being called to account for letting his mind wander during a lecture, he was whoring himself out so he could finish his degree.

It wasn't fair. His mind raced in a dozen different directions, but there was one thought that stood out from the others clear and pure. It wasn't fair. All he wanted to do was stretch out in front of the fire and drown in afterglow with his lover. It wasn't fair for reality to intrude on such a simple, honest desire. It wasn't fair that he should have to face the fact that Professor Arslan wasn't the only lion he'd agreed to be thrown to that night.

Unable to close his eyes any tighter, Ryland bit his bottom lip to keep back the sudden and overwhelming need to shout out at the injustice of it all.

"Everything's fine," Arslan said. He sounded pissed off at the return of reality too.

As Ryland considered that line of thought very carefully, his toothhold on his lip drew blood. He had no actual reason to assume Arslan believed that he was indulging in anything

more significant than a quick screw in front of the fire, a bit of fun with a willing human sacrifice. He had no proof that Arslan had ever felt anything other than reality as they lay together.

Ryland dropped his head forward to rest his forehead against the rug once more. When the professor pulled away from him, Ryland stayed where he was, resigning himself to staring at the carpet and waiting for whatever would happen next to happen. It wasn't as if he could turn back now. It was far too late for that.

Even though he didn't move, the entire world still changed around him. The pleasant ache in his muscles stopped feeling pleasant. It felt far more like weakness that he couldn't afford.

The comforting weight of Arslan resting against him quickly became little more than a distant memory. With each second that passed, the heat from Arslan's body faded a little further from his skin.

The warmth from the fire couldn't compete with that of a lion pressed intimately against him. A shiver ran down Ryland's spine. Whatever magic had let him lose himself in the sheer rightness of being with Arslan was truly gone. His head felt hollow, as if he had lost something that had been right on the edge of his reach for just a little while.

A hand touched his shoulder. A gentle tug demanded he rise from the floor. Ryland turned and sat up, hoping the other man wasn't going to order him to stand. He wasn't sure he could if he tried. Lifting a hand, he pushed it through his hair and tried to make his brain work through a fog of confusion. Apparently ascending into a fantasy world wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Reality was a real bitch when it came back and bit down hard.

Arslan crouched in front of him. He tucked a knuckle under his chin and coaxed him to look up. Ryland put off the moment for as long as he could, but even naked on a hearth rug, Arslan was too imposing a presence to consider disobeying for too long.

Ryland met the lion's eyes as Arslan's other hand settled itself in his hair, supporting his head as he tilted it back to stare up at the shifter.

A question flickered in the older man's gaze. Ryland desperately tried to work out what it was. His thoughts scattered as an unexpected noise from the back of the room made him jump.

"They can't hurt you," Arslan promised, not looking away from him for a moment. "They're just foolish cubs—harmless."



A little grumble of discontent came from one side of the room as someone heard what he'd been labeled.

“Something to say, Luther?” Arslan demanded, still not breaking eye contact with Ryland. “Speak up.”

Ryland half expected him to say that there were people at the back of the lecture hall who would love to hear what he had to say on the topic. He'd heard those words in that tone of voice so often, he could easily imagine that he was safely back in one of the professor's lectures.

“No.” The younger lion sounded like he was pouting, but Arslan seemed to have already dismissed the other lion's existence from his mind. He continued to study Ryland until he felt himself blush under the scrutiny.

“If you're not going to let us have any fun with him, can we at least eat?” someone asked.

“Fine,” Arslan told the other lion with something that sounded suspiciously like a long-suffering sigh. “Bring in the food.”

The shadows in the corners of the rooms morphed into lions, more than a dozen of them. As he remained on the rug with the professor, the other men...the other shifters who made up the pride...moved around them. Doors opened and closed. A handful of different conversations started up above their heads. The scent of food drifted across to them.

As Arslan stood up, he casually stroked his fingers through Ryland's hair. Ryland found himself leaning into the other man's touch. The professor smiled when he noticed. As he reached his full height, he took Ryland's hand to help him to his feet as well.

The older man was all muscle. Ryland had been half-sure of that when he'd stared down the lecture hall at a man in a suit. Now that he'd seen him without the suit, now that he'd felt that body pressed intimately against him, there was no room left for any doubts.

Arslan pulled him easily to his feet and close within the circle of his arms at the same time. The shifter's hand settled on the small of his back, strong and certain about everything, as if he had no intention of ever letting Ryland take a step away from him again. Suddenly, Ryland felt safer than he'd ever believed possible.

Frowning slightly, he tried to catch hold of a thought that fled onto the edge of his consciousness. As soon as he reached for it and tried to study it, it slipped out of his grasp. It was almost as if it wasn't really a true thought at all. Maybe something that was more like a feeling, an instinct that dated back to a time before thoughts truly existed.

A rough palm slid up Ryland's spine, calling his attention to more important things. Thin lines of sensitized skin ran along his back. Ryland tried to look over his shoulder, but Arslan shook his head, stopping him short.

"A few scratches. They won't do you any harm."

Ryland nodded, as if made perfect sense for the professor to have left those sorts of marks on his body. And it did make sense to part of him. In a way he couldn't explain, even to himself, it felt...good.

When Arslan led him across to the food, the older man kept his hand resting casually on the small of Ryland's back, almost like a mark of ownership over him.

Ryland glanced up at the taller man as it occurred to him that Arslan really wasn't the kind of man who'd leave scratches on his lover by accident. He was too controlled for that, too careful. If there were scratches there, it was because Arslan made a decision and put them there on purpose.

A slight heat stole to Ryland's skin as he dropped his gaze. Maybe it wasn't so strange that something inside him liked the idea of those marks after all. As they walked into the middle of the group of lions, Ryland found himself staying close enough to his lover that it would be easy for Arslan to keep his hand resting against his skin.

When he looked up from the various plates of food, he saw the other lions waiting for Arslan to take his share first. His taking something off one of the trays seemed to act as silent permission for everyone else to do the same. Arslan was obviously in charge in some shape or form, and not just in charge because he was the type of person who took charge, but because he held some sort of official rank in the group.

When Arslan left alone him by the table, Ryland hung back a little, not willing to take anything for himself until he had a better understanding of the situation. Watching the other lions very carefully, he did his best to work out if there was some sort of order of precedence after that and who was next in the shifters chain of command. If the signs were there, he wasn't able to spot them.

Only one of the other lions stood out from the group. He was smaller than the rest, his hair shorter and fairer compared to the manes that fell around the other lions' faces. He caught Ryland's eye and nodded to the trays of food, silently encouraging him to take whatever he wanted, but even he didn't actually go so far as to speak to Ryland.

No one said a word to him. Ryland wasn't sure if it was a personal comment or if it was merely the custom among lions not to speak to humans unless they were having sex with them at the time. The thought made Ryland look over his shoulder.

Arslan had taken his platter over to the fireside. He lounged back on one of the big leather sofas, completely naked and completely unselfconscious about that, just like all the other lions in the room. He glanced across to Ryland and met his gaze.

A slight motion of the older man's head called Ryland to join him. The seat next to him was vacant, but Ryland somehow found himself lowering himself down to sit on the rug at his feet instead. Arslan stared down at him slightly curiously, but he didn't order him away.

He'd never struck Ryland as the kind of man who would allow someone to do something that displeased him because it would be easier to let things stand as they were. If the lion side of his personality was anything like the professor part of his psyche, he was apparently happy for him to stay there, maybe he was even a little bit pleased with his choice.

Ryland relaxed slightly. He relaxed even more when it became clear that the other lions intended to keep their distance. Every one of them chose to sit on the opposite side of the fire.

Balancing his plate on his knees, Ryland ate a little of the meat he'd taken from one of the trays and attempted to follow what went on around him. As far as he could tell, he was now in the middle of some sort of social gathering for lions. Arslan's attention moved from one lion to another. Ryland's gaze followed his questions, settling first on two lions who sat close together in a tangle of limbs on the sofa opposite them.

Luther and Blaine, the lions Arslan had spoken to earlier, when they were... Ryland felt his cheeks heat at the memory of exactly what those lions had watched him and Arslan do together.

When he looked up, he realized that he wasn't the only one making observations. Several of the other lions were studying him in return. He wasn't sure if they were remembering his time on the rug in front of the fire with Arslan, or not. For all he knew, the entire feast was just supposed to be some sort of mid-orgy snack and they were actually thinking of what they were going to do with him after they'd satisfied a different sort of hunger.

Whatever their reasons for studying him, Ryland found himself sitting up a little straighter, squaring his shoulders back, trying to make the best of himself. He wasn't sure what he wanted them to think of him, but he was very sure that he didn't want Arslan to be ashamed

of him.

He glanced up and he saw Arslan watching him. The older man nodded once, as if in approval, before guiding Ryland to sit even closer to his feet and rest his head against his thigh.

When Ryland had settled in a position that seemed to please him, Arslan went back to his conversations with the other lions, but his hand remained buried in Ryland's hair. As he spoke, he stroked his fingers through the strands with casual tenderness. Ryland felt his eyes drifting closed as the gentle rhythm soothed him and encouraged him to just relax and let his lover take care of everything for a little while. As tempting as the proposal was, Ryland forced his eyes to stay open.

The last man the professor turned his attention to was the smallest, youngest lion, the one who had nodded to him by the food tables. "And what do you have to say, Kefir?"

Kefir looked to Arslan first, but he soon dropped his attention to Ryland. Their eyes met. The younger lion smiled slightly before he looked away again.

"It's going well," he said very softly. His voice had more of a purr than a roar to it. Ryland's hand itched with the desire to reach out and stroke him just as he would a kitten.

Looking back up at the professor, Ryland was just in time to see Arslan nod his approval to the younger lion. Whatever was going well, it was obviously something that everyone present knew about, something that had no doubt been discussed on other nights when the pride met, perhaps while other human sacrifices sat at Arslan's feet.

Swallowing down a sudden rush of uncertainty, Ryland stared at the empty plate resting on his lap.

Arslan's fingers tugged gently at his hair, prompting him to look up. Ryland offered the older man a small smile, but the professor didn't look convinced by it. He seemed to sense something was wrong, but he didn't appear inclined to press the issue in front of the other members of his pride.

Ryland turned his attention back to the other lions. They sat as close to each other as he sat to Arslan. Bare limbs crisscrossed each other as they sprawled together. Blaine and Luther were obviously lovers, but he didn't get that sense from any of the other lions. They just seemed very friendly and comfortable with each other with no understanding of personal space.

Like a sleeping heap of puppies, or perhaps like a litter of newborn kittens. They were big cats after all... Ryland's lips twitched as he imagined their reaction to the comparison. Blaine

and Luther would probably be particularly furious with the label. They certainly hadn't liked Arslan calling them to heel. They were all swagger and bravado, or at least they seemed to be that way, whenever they weren't casually stroking each other or butting their heads against each other's bodies.

As Ryland watched, Blaine rubbed the top of his head against his lover's shoulder. Luther responded by licking the other man's temple and squirming his way down the sofa to steal a kiss.

Ryland looked up at Arslan. The professor was studying him very carefully. His eyes flickered across to Blaine and Luther for a moment, as if he was tracing Ryland's line of sight to see what he'd been staring at. Color rushed to Ryland's cheeks at the realization he'd been pretty much spying on the other lions making out.

The fact that they'd watched him do far more didn't matter right then. Bad manners were still bad manners. When Arslan looked back to him, Ryland tried to think of the right words to frame an apology, but there was no time for that.

Arslan had already turned his attention back to the other lions. Ryland's input obviously wasn't required right then. He closed his eyes and concentrated on Arslan's fingers as they trailed through his hair over and over again. If he had a choice between panicking and feeling quietly content, there seemed to be little point clinging to his worries. He'd made his choice. He belonged to the lions until morning.

He belonged to *Arslan* until morning. That was an even better statement. Arslan would make sure everything was fine. Taking a deep breath, Ryland let it out very slowly and shifted even closer to Arslan's side, wanting to keep as much contact with him as possible. The sex, the food, the heat from the fire, the comfort of somehow accepting the fact that he didn't have any decisions left to make all wrapped around him, snug and secure.

For the first time since he was eighteen years old and standing in the middle of his parents living room confessing to the one sin he knew his family would never forgive him for, he felt perfectly at peace, perfectly at ease inside his own skin.

Sleep snuck into the corners of his mind. Ryland found himself too lethargic to push the instinct away again. He took the chance to rest until something more was required from him.

*"What type of human do you think he is?"*

The words picked at the edges of Ryland's mind, but he couldn't quite shake off the sleepiness enough to focus in on them properly until he felt Arslan tense. Some of his peace

deserted him. He focused in on the conversation.

“Type?” the professor echoed.

“Every shifter knows there are three types of humans who want to be thrown to the lions.” Ryland placed the speaker as Blaine. “Adrenaline junkies looking for a quick thrill. Nymphos who don’t care who screws them. And whores who’ll do anything for a price.”

The snarl started low in the back of Arslan’s throat and echoed through his entire body. The atmosphere in the room changed. Ryland sensed a change in the other lions too. Every one of them froze in place as they waited for the professor’s reaction.

“He’s nothing like any of the other humans who have been thrown to us.”

The possession in Arslan’s voice, combined with the certainty that he was right in his assessment of him, was more than enough to take Ryland’s breath away. When it reached the center of his brain and collided with the fact Arslan was actually wrong to stand up for him that way right then, the idea of ever taking another breath was suddenly impossible.

He might not have come there looking for a thrill or the chance to screw as many men as possible, but he wouldn’t have set foot through the door if he hadn’t lost his scholarship and found his every other option destroyed.

Even if he hadn’t thought about that payment since he set eyes on Arslan, it still existed, and it was suddenly obvious that its existence would still have to be explained to the professor at some point.

Arslan rose from his chair, snatching away all the comfort Ryland had found sitting at his feet without even the slightest warning. He stepped past Ryland without a word and stood proud and tall in the center of the room. Not sure what else to do, Ryland remained on the floor by the base of the chair.

Degrees, money, the rest of the world—as Ryland stared up at the professor, it all became irrelevant. Suddenly, only two things were important—working out how to tell Arslan he’d been wrong to stand up for him and believe he wouldn’t whore himself out for the right price, and finding a way to convince the professor to forgive him for it. Nothing else mattered.

Inch by inch, Ryland dragged his gaze up the professor’s body. The older man’s eyes flickered from one lion to the next. He seemed to wait for each lion to lower his gaze in response, before he moved on to the next shifter. When he looked to Ryland, he lowered his eyes too.

“Stand up, Ryland.”

He quickly stumbled to his feet and, all at once, he wasn't a naked man sitting in a room full of likewise naked men. He wasn't just another student who didn't step out of line when the professor glared at him. He was back to being the human who'd agreed to be thrown to the lions in exchange for his tuition fees.

He wasn't sure his knees would hold him when he finally pulled himself up to his full height. By some miracle, they did.

“Come here.”

Ryland took a step forward.

Arslan stared down at his new pet.

Ryland's nerves had apparently come back full force. The shifter wasn't entirely surprised that being called to stand before the pride should make him wary. Even if he did have very fine instincts, it wouldn't be fair to the younger man to forget that this was his first time among lions.

As Arslan watched, his pet swallowed rapidly, fighting to keep control of his emotions. If he'd caught Blaine's words, that couldn't have helped him realize he was safe with his new master. It couldn't have helped him believe that being taken under a lion's protection was anything more than an insult either.

Reaching out, Arslan stroked his fingers through the smaller man's hair, encouraging Ryland to lift his gaze and look him in the eye.

A noise floated across from Blaine and Luther's part of the sofa as one of the two idiots fidgeted. Ryland's gaze didn't falter. Whatever interest he'd displayed in the other lions during the meal appeared to have drained away now that he had something more important to focus upon.

Arslan nodded his approval. He was tempted to believe his lover already had the sense to recognize the other lions' nonsense for what it was. Even so, he wasn't willing to let even the slightest doubt about his opinion of human men, nor his intentions towards Ryland in particular, linger in anyone's minds.

He'd been very patient for a very long time while Ryland sat quietly in the back of his lecture hall, but the idea that they could go back to that now was laughable.

“Focus now, pet, this is important.” He took great care to keep the words tender and between them, in spite of the other lions listening in.

Ryland nodded.

“You will answer every question I ask you, completely and honestly.”

Ryland’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he made another attempt to swallow down his nerves. He nodded again. “Yes, sir.”

He wasn’t sure what any of it meant, Arslan could see it in his eyes. The answer was little more than a leap of faith in his direction. If it proved anything at all, it was merely that he trusted his new master enough to believe he wouldn’t ask him an unfair question.

Arslan nodded his approval, content to let the details wait for a more private moment, when he could explain the pride and Ryland’s rightful place in it to him properly, without any interruptions from the others. For now, a public answer given to a simple offer was all that was actually required. He stroked his fingers through the other man’s hair one last time.

“If you come to us willingly and of your own free will, with no thought for your own gain and only wishing to add to the pride, then you are welcome.”

The words slipped off his tongue as if they had been practiced for hours. They were familiar, in that he had known the form the questions should take for as long as he could remember. At the same time, he couldn’t help but be intensely aware that this was both the first and the last time he’d say them—the first and last time he’d need to say them.

“If you wish to belong to the pride, to take your rightful place in the pride, you are welcome.”

Ryland stared up at him with far too many emotions swirling in his eyes for Arslan to have any idea what he was actually thinking.

“If you come to us without lies or secrets, you are welcome.”

Arslan could feel the gaze of the younger lions intensify against his skin as they finally seemed to realize that he was inviting the younger man to join the pride, not just as a temporary pet, but his permanent mate. Taking a deep breath, he pushed forward through the last part of the offering.

“If you are who we believe you to be, say that you wish to take your rightful place in the pride, and you will be welcomed.”

Ryland’s lips moved. They began to form a yes. Arslan had no doubt about that. Then, he



stopped short. His lips closed. His gaze lost both its focus and its certainty. He looked down.

Silence.

“Ryland?” Arslan prompted.

The younger man’s rib cage rose and fell as he took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. He closed his eyes. A movement at Ryland’s side drew Arslan’s attention. The younger man’s right hand had formed into a fist.

Any indication that Ryland was more capable of trusting his instincts than all the other humans Arslan had ever known, was long gone—if it had even existed to begin with.

The shifter held his breath, but no words came. The only answer he received was a rapid little shake of the head.

“Ryland?”

The younger man finally looked up and met his gaze, pain filling his deep blue eyes. “I’m sorry, sir.”

It took the hearing of a lion to make out the words.

Arslan stared down at him, desperately trying to work out what had gone wrong. No one could have accepted the touch of a lion more easily or more naturally. No human could have shown better instincts or such a strong desire to follow them. No man had ever felt so right against his skin.

A frown gathered on Arslan’s brow as he realized that was all Ryland intended to say. He dropped his hand away from Ryland’s hair and took a step back from him. His head swirled with just as much confusion as he saw in Ryland’s eyes.

If he hadn’t been right about anything else that night, he’d been right when he said Ryland was different to all the other humans who’d been thrown to them over the years. No other human could have ever inspired him to make such an impossibly rash offer.

Anger at his own stupidity flared inside Arslan. He was old enough to know that there was no such thing as a human who was that good at following his instincts. Forgetting that when he was with the only human who would ever actually matter to him, was inexcusable.

“Sir, I—”

“No explanation is necessary,” Arslan cut in. A moment’s foolishness didn’t mean he needed the details of his error explained to him as if he was a cub who didn’t know better.

The other lions were still watching them. Even if he’d made a spectacular fool of himself,

he was still the leader of the pride. He was still responsible for what happened to any human who was thrown to them. The most important thing, the only thing now, was to get Ryland out of there while he still had retained enough of his human side to remember that was the only acceptable thing to do with him.

“The car will be waiting for you outside.” His voice came out calm and level, as if the world hadn’t suddenly fallen down around him.

Ryland stayed exactly where he was.

It didn’t seem like refusal to obey as much as a temporary inability to do anything it all. Seeing no other option, Arslan led the way, walking out of the room ahead of him.

It worked. Ryland snapped back into reality. He followed the professor into the hallway. Then he stopped in the middle of the room, his arms wrapped around his torso in some effort to keep himself warm in the cooler space. Arslan paused by the front door and turned back to him.

“Sir, if I could just—”

Arslan silenced him with a shake of his head.

Ryland took a step forward—towards the door, towards him, Arslan wasn’t sure which.

“I believe the humans have some arrangement where they return you to wherever you left your clothes.” Arslan had never really thought about it before. That was between the humans. His responsibility for the men who came to them ended when they were returned to the vehicle. He forced himself to pretend the same standard still applied to Ryland.

The younger man looked past him to the car. He didn’t look enthusiastic about leaving the house with whoever was driving it.

If he didn’t want to be in the car with the man, he wasn’t going to be in the car with him. Arslan didn’t need to think about it—all the decisions he needed to make were made long before the thinking part of his brain had even processed the facts of the matter.

The traditions surrounding being thrown to the lions were all well and good for other men, but Arslan would be damned before he saw Ryland thrown back into the hands of a human who made him even the least bit uncomfortable.

Striding out into the darkness, he watched the driver’s look of boredom turned to one of horror as Arslan pulled open the driver side door and glared down at him.

“Your presence is no longer required.”

“Kershaw said I was to stay here and take the kid home when you were finished with

him.”

“And I’m telling you to leave. Kershaw isn’t here. I am. Who do you wish to obey?” He made no attempt to keep the snarl out of his voice.

The man backed away so far, he was half way into the passenger seat. “Right. No problem. Leaving right now.”

Arslan stood in the driveway until the car navigated the corner at the end of the road. When he turned back to the house, Ryland was waiting in the doorway. Arslan caught hold of his wrist as he stepped past him into the hallway. Ryland made no objection to being led to the seat next to the coat rack. “Sit there. Don’t move.”

Resisting the temptation to take the stairs three at a time, he left Ryland alone in the hall and made his way to his bedroom on the floor above. Alone for a moment, he closed his eyes.

He’d watched Ryland so patiently, for so long. Somehow, he’d allowed himself to start believing that meant he knew the boy. But he didn’t—not on a human level—not in any way that might allow him to predict how Ryland would react to the instincts that being with a lion had raised inside him.

Arslan’s nails morphed into claws as he gripped the edge of the old-fashioned dresser. The lion inside him didn’t care if it was realistic to expect the younger man to trust his instincts the way a lion would, to agree to join the pride after bare a few hours in their presence.

Ryland was his mate. Arslan didn’t just know him—he owned a part of him that no man would ever catch sight of. The pull toward Ryland was so strong, so undeniable, it was almost impossible for him to feel patient toward the younger man’s...toward his what exactly? Arslan had no idea. His sudden loss of confidence in his burgeoning instincts?

Arslan’s inner lion roared, demanding to be freed and allowed to call his mate back to him properly, snarling against the pain of doing the ‘right thing’ for his human lover when all he wanted was to be close to his mate.

His claws bit into the wood, not pretty little scratches like those he’d left on Ryland’s back, deep gouges appeared in edge of the dresser, marks that would never be polished away, no matter how much wood filler and varnish were applied.

Arslan snatched his hands away from the marred wood. Those sorts of scars would never heal from human skin either.

Gathering up his clothes, Arslan pulled them on, trying not to tear the fabric, trying to

remember that he should care about being in control enough of his lion side to keep the garments whole as he pulled them over his skin. By some miracle, they remained intact.

Forcing his inner human to the fore, Arslan turned toward the bedroom door. He'd already spent too long feeling sorry for himself. He didn't have any more time to waste. The only important thing was to take his pet home, safely out of the way of his new master's impatience.

Back in the hall, he found Ryland sitting exactly where he'd left him. He'd pulled his feet up onto the seat of the chair and wrapped his arms around his legs in some effort to keep warm. Arslan frowned at his own lack of foresight. Grabbing his coat off the rack, he tossed it to the younger man.

"I thought..." Ryland looked from the coat to Arslan's clothes, then to the room where the rest of the pride was waiting.

If he thought his temporary refusal of his new master's offer meant Arslan was willing to stand around and watch the other lions take their turns with him, as if he was no more important than the other men who had been thrown to them over the years, he had even less understanding of the situation than Arslan could have ever guessed.

"I'm taking you home. It makes no difference to me if you prefer to undertake the journey nude." It was a barefaced lie, but Arslan wasn't about to admit that the sight of Ryland's naked skin had any effect on him right then. The other lions weren't his only form of pride.

Ryland hurriedly pulled the coat on. "Thank you, sir. I—"

"Come on." Arslan strode out of the house. Ryland scurried after him, but the gravel in the drive way seemed to slow him down. By the time Arslan reached his car, Ryland was several yards behind him. The older man waited by the side of the car until his new pet reached the passenger side door.

It had been so many years since he'd taken anything other than a feline lover, he'd forgotten how fragile humans were. For several long moments, he stared at the gravel to the side of the car and watched the scene they had played out in front of the fire repeated itself on the rough surface.

He'd been careful with him, kept his strength to himself. He hadn't hurt him. Arslan let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Sir?"

Arslan pulled his mind back to the present and got into the car. Ryland hesitated for a

second before he got into the passenger seat. He didn't try to speak again, except to give directions to a shared student house situated close to the center of the university.

Thrown to the lions...

Arslan shook his head at himself. He'd had more sense than to play silly games like that for what felt like a lifetime. It had been more than long enough to forget that humans usually saw it differently. He couldn't help but wonder what it was supposed to have been for Ryland, why the younger man had agreed to take part in the tradition in the first place.

It certainly hadn't been because he knew his master would be there waiting for him. His shock when the blindfold had been removed was proof enough of that. Arslan's grip on the steering wheel tightened as he moved on to far less palatable options.

Ryland had never struck him as an adrenaline junkie, so that was unlikely to be what brought him to the pride. He wasn't as formal as the human who had been trained to a human version of submission tended to be—so he hadn't come to them seeking a lion for a human-style master. He certainly wasn't the kind of human who would take a lover for money, Arslan dismissed that idea the moment it entered his head.

Curiosity? He'd certainly been fascinated with watching the younger lions playing together. Arslan held back a sigh. Better than any of the other reasons, he supposed. He glanced at the other man from the corner of his eye, wondering if he regretted indulging his curiosity now.

He'd enjoyed himself at the time, Arslan harbored no doubts about that. But it was never that simple with a human. If nothing else, Arslan remembered that clearly enough from his experiments with them when he was younger. It was *never* simple with humans.

When Arslan stopped outside the house Ryland indicated, the younger man didn't make any move to get out of the car. The professor leaned over and pushed the door open himself. The moment his hand left the door handle, he forced himself to straighten up and retreat to his own side of the car.

Ryland fingered one of the buttons on his borrowed coat, twisting the piece of plastic back and forth. He still didn't show any inclination to get out of the car.

"Keep the coat." His voice sounded the same way it did in his lectures. Not a trace of emotion, not a trace of lion, crept into the brief order. Arslan couldn't take much comfort in that right then.

Ryland seemed to give up on whatever excuses he kept trying to make. He got out of the car. Arslan watched him step safely into the building before he made himself put the car in gear and pull away from the curb.

Alone in the car, he took the opportunity afforded by being out of the sight and hearing of any lion, any human and let out a string of curses. Maturity might bring its rewards. He might not be as foolish as the other lions in his pride, but there were moments when he was as stupid as any lion had ever been, and when he had to pay the price like anyone else.

There were reasons why the tradition of willing sacrifices existed. There was a reason why lions needed the opportunity to learn how to be patient with humans, to learn to see them as pets that needed to be protected and humored rather than as equals that could be held to the same standards as a lion.

It was because humans didn't make any sense. They didn't do what their instincts commanded. Arslan sighed as he turned a corner and steered his way back to his empty den, his empty bed.

Human men couldn't be trusted. A lion would have to be a fool to fall for one the way he might fall for another lion, to expect the same from them as he would from a feline lover. A professor would have to be a fool to fall for a student too, a man who was practically half his age. A man who agreed to be thrown to the lions as if it was some silly little game, a man who had no idea what the tradition was supposed to mean, what it had meant back in the mist of time.

Of course, it didn't make the least bit of difference if he was an idiot, or if Ryland lacked what could be expected of a lion. Ryland was his mate—Arslan had never been more certain about anything in his life. Neither of them would rest comfortably apart for very long now. All he could do was give the other man whatever time he needed in order to face those facts and accept the instincts that lying with his mate would have raised inside him.

Stopping at a traffic light, Arslan dropped his head back and snarled at the roof of his car and the world in general.

\* \* \* \*

Ryland re-opened the front door and peeked out just in time to see Arslan's car turn the corner at the bottom of his street and drive away. He stood on the doorstep and stared after it for a long time, his arms wrapped tight around his body, hugging Arslan's coat against his bare skin.

"You're letting the cold in!"

Ryland sighed and closed the door.

One of his housemates peered out of the living room at him. He looked at the coat and the bare ankles and feet poking out of the bottom.

“Good night?” Fred asked.

Ryland took a deep breath and let it out as another sigh. Leaning against the wall by the door, he tried to make his brain work. He failed miserably.

Fred’s eyes opened very wide. “You didn’t...”

Ryland closed his eyes.

“Bloody hell! You did!” Fred said. “You actually did it.”

Ryland forced his eyes open and stared down at the coat. It was far too big for him. The sleeves covered his hands. But it smelled like Arslan. For all he knew it could have been months since Arslan had worn it. But it still seemed to hold some of the lion’s warmth as well as his scent. Ryland pulled it even tighter around him, clinging to the faint echo of the shifter’s touch.

“Did you get paid?”

Ryland nodded, swallowing down the bitter taste at the back of his mouth.

*If you come to us willingly and of your own free will, with no thought for your own gain and only wishing to add to the pride, then you are welcome... If you are who we think you are...*  
He closed his eyes, but found it impossible to hide from that horrible moment when he’d realized that not every man who went to the lions went there as a cheap whore.

“How much?”

“Two thousand,” Ryland whispered. Maybe not cheap, but still a whore for all that. It had been just enough to pay the remainder of his tuition fees. When he lifted his gaze, Fred was right there in front of him.

His friend put one hand on each of his shoulders as if he thought he needed steadying.  
“You okay?”

Ryland nodded. It wasn’t as if he could tell him the truth.

“They didn’t want you to do anything really weird, did they?” Fred asked, huge green eyes opening wider than ever

Ryland shook his head. “No, it was...” Good? Perfect? The best night of his life? Fantastic because it was Arslan? Ryland closed his eyes for a second. What could he really tell his friend? “It wasn’t a problem.”

Fred didn't believe a word of it. Ryland saw that the moment he re-opened his eyes. Stepping to one side, Ryland moved out of his friend's reach and headed for the stairs.

"Ryland?"

"I'm fine," he said, not looking over his shoulder. "Just tired. I'll see you in the morning."

Fred said something, but Ryland couldn't listen to the other man right then. He closed his bedroom door behind him and leaned against it for a few seconds. In the darkness of the room, he walked blindly across to his bed. His feet kicked against a discarded pair of shoes. Fumbling at the bed, he pushed all the clothes he'd changed into and out of before his appointment with the lions, onto the floor.

He bit back a sad little laugh. All that worrying about what he should wear had been a truly spectacular waste of time. Lying down on the bed, he curled into a small ball, Arslan's coat still wrapped around him. The movement of the cloth against his skin brought his attention back to the scratches on his back. Arslan's marks...

Biting down on his bottom lip, Ryland closed his eyes very tight and did his best not to fall apart, not to give in to the deep sense of despair that swirled inside him.

Arslan would never have forgiven him if he said yes to him based on a lie, if he'd said yes while playing the part of a whore. He knew that with a sort of certainty he couldn't ever remember feeling before. There were things a lion would forgive and things he wouldn't—just like there were things a family would forgive, and things they wouldn't.

When he said yes to Arslan he had to mean it. He had to be able to look him in the eye and see that the older man knew it was the truth. He hadn't been able to correct that part of him that his family hated so much, but he could fix this. He could be the person Arslan had thought he was when he invited him to join the pride.

Ryland tasted blood as his teeth cut into his lip. No matter how logically he tried to think about it, something inside him screamed that he needed to be back with the professor now. He wasn't where he belonged. He had to be with Arslan. Then everything would be okay. It was like a stabbing pain in a part of his mind he hadn't even realized existed a few hours ago.

He didn't know where the lion's den was. A frantic scrawl through his memory of the journey home yielded glimpses of dozens of shadowy houses and scores of left and right turns. But there were no street names, no road signs, nothing that could help him make his way back



there. His breath caught in his throat as the full implication of that sunk in. He didn't know how to find Arslan.

It wasn't as if he could go there, it wasn't as if he could just turn up on his doorstep and announce that he'd spent his first night with him as a whore and simply beg his forgiveness. But he should still know where the other man was. It was important. In that moment, it was vital.

Even if he couldn't go back to his family, he knew where they lived. As the thought flashed through his brain, he couldn't help but fall into thinking it meant he had even less chance of being accepted back by the lion than by his parents.

He shook his head against the pillow. The line of thought made no sense, but somehow, it still crept under his skin, sending a shiver down his spine. Ryland frantically repeated that not knowing was a good thing over and over inside his head, as if that might make it true. Anything that stopped him from running back to the other man was a blessing.

When he went to him, he had to be able to tell the shifter he wasn't the same man who screwed everything up before. Ryland might not have felt like he had a clue what was going on, but he knew with an undeniable sort of certainty that he couldn't let himself set eyes on Arslan again until he'd worked out a way to fix the mess his life had spiraled into.

That was his only chance. His family would have accepted him back if he'd been able to change his answers to certain questions. Maybe Arslan would too, if he begged hard enough. Ryland ran his tongue over the cut on his lip. It didn't help it heal, it just made it bleed more.

Wrapping Arslan's coat even more securely around his body, Ryland closed his eyes very tightly and tried to keep his mind from shattering into a hundred different scared little pieces.

## *Chapter Three*

“What do you want, Ryland?” Arslan kept his back to the younger man as he said it.

He was being sensible. He was giving his pet time to get his thoughts in order and his newly developing instincts under control. He was keeping his distance, no matter how much he ached to do otherwise. And if Ryland wasn't ready to join the pride, the least the boy could do was to let him go back to his office and throw himself in his work in peace.

After he'd spent the entire lecture ignoring Ryland's existence, he thought the other man would understand all that. But no, Ryland had to stay behind after a lecture he'd had no business attending in the first place, he had to make it even harder for Arslan to keep his lion side under control.

Finally, when it became obvious Ryland wasn't going to answer his question until he faced him properly, Arslan turned around. It took every ounce of self-control he could muster not to step forward and make everything very simple between them.

Ryland took a shaky step closer to his master and put a neatly folded coat on his desk.

Arslan looked at the coat, then back to Ryland. His pet was scared. Arslan could smell the fear on him. Every instinct made him want to wrap his mate in his protection. The lectures he'd been giving himself about allowing the younger man time and space faded from his mind. The only thing that actually succeeding in keeping him on his side of the podium, was several years worth of practice at never letting himself give in to the temptation to lay a hand on a student.

Admittedly, this was the first time he wanted to hold one of his students close rather than give one a sharp slap across the back of the head to encourage him to stop acting like a toddler, but the habit still held him in good stead. Arslan had never been so grateful for having dealt with

so many brats over the years.

Ryland looked down, then away, then back to him, as if he wasn't sure what he was doing there himself.

"Is something wrong?" Arslan asked.

Ryland swallowed several times in quick succession.

Arslan's eyes narrowed. Something was wrong. Ryland wasn't just uncomfortable with his new instincts. He wasn't even merely afraid. He was half-terrified.

"I..." Ryland met his eyes properly for the first time. "I'm sorry, this was a mistake." He fled from the room, the door slamming behind him as he disappeared into the hallway.

Arslan stood stock still as he watched him go. If he moved a muscle, he knew the instinct to chase would overpower everything. He'd learned that years ago. When the prey ran, all a lion could do was stay very still and concentrate on his human side. It was the only way to keep the predator's instinct under control, to keep humans, who didn't understand such instincts, safe.

Taking a deep breath, Arslan ran his hand over the coat. Ryland had left his scent on it, mingled in with the lingering traces of his own scent. The combination was a humiliating mockery of the way things should have been between them several days after he offered his pet a place in the pride. He still took another deep breath and took what he could from it.

As his hand rested on the coat, his claws crept out to replace his fingernails. It was several minutes before he wrangled himself back under his own control. The claws morphed back into something that was indistinguishable from the kind of nails that would be found on an entirely human hand.

Outwardly calm, the professor picked up the coat, draped it over his arm, and gathered up his papers in his other hand. He walked slowly back to his office on one of the upper floors of the history department building. Coat hung neatly on the back of his door, he sat down at his desk and did his best to ignore the garment's presence, to ignore the scent that reminded him with every passing second he should be with his mate.

Three hours later, Arslan frowned across his desk, his mind once more wandering away from the history student sitting in front of him to a math student who could be anywhere by then.

His mate had obviously had something to say to him. Ryland wasn't yet acquainted with the ways of a pride. Arslan couldn't be sure he knew he could bring his worries to the leader of his pride, no matter how things stood between them, no matter if he didn't have the courage to

accept a formal place in the pride.

Whatever his pet wanted to say to him, it had to have been important. As the last undergraduate in his appointment book left his office, Arslan made his decision. Two minutes later, he was out of the history building and walking up to the information desk in the lobby of the math department building opposite.

“I’m looking for Ryland Gilford. I believe he has an office here?”

The man behind the desk was familiar. Arslan was sure he’d seen him in some of his lectures. The receptionist glanced up from the computer and met his eyes. Yes, Arslan placed the face. Not a bad student, but a very bad speaker when called upon to answer questions in a tutorial. Far too many ums and ahs to be considered adequately understandable.

“Room four-two-seven, sir.”

“Thank you.”

The professor heard the student give a little sigh of relief as he walked away from his desk. He smiled slightly to himself. It was wonderful what the fear of Arslan could do for a young man’s education. If the student-receptionist continued with that sort of improvement, he might actually yet become capable of an entirely articulate sentence by the time he graduated.

A knock on the door to room four-two-seven yielded no reply. Arslan didn’t get the sense that anyone was in there ignoring the knock. Ryland’s scent clung to the space on the other side of the door, but it was the trace of someone who had been there rather than someone who was there right then.

When the professor tried the handle, the door swung open with a quiet creak. The cluttered little room was as unoccupied as he’d expected, but a steaming cup of tea on one side of the desk hinted that its owner intended to return soon.

Closing the door behind him and switching on the light to make up for the absence of windows in the poky little space, Arslan moved an apparently random collection of note books and text books off the chair in front of the desk and sat down to wait.

There was barely room to fit his shoulders between an overloaded bookcase and a pile of books balanced precariously on the edge of Ryland’s desk. If he stretched his legs out, the door wouldn’t have room to open. Pacing was out of the question. Arslan looked around the room instead.

There were math books shoved into one corner that had to be relics from Ryland’s

undergraduate days. Arslan could make sense of the titles. Those that seemed to be in current use were way beyond him. Smart boy, he mused, a smile touching the corners of his lips.

He turned his attention to the work on the desk. At least the scribblings in the notebook Ryland had left open looked simple enough. The handwriting was appalling, but Arslan could just about make out the numbers. It looked like straightforward arithmetic, as if someone was checking the same series of calculations over and over again in the mistaken hope that the answer might change at some point.

Arslan sighed and tried to be patient. As he rolled his shoulders and tried to work some of the tension out of his muscles without knocking anything over, a familiar looking book caught his attention. Closer inspection revealed that the shelf was full of very familiar books—the entire recommended reading list for his undergraduate course on Medieval History. A battered folder was wedged in between the books. Arslan reached across and extracted it from between two well-thumbed reference texts.

A quick flick through the file showed it to be full of hand written reports. Arslan scanned the first page. It was the beginnings of a history essay, one of those he'd assigned to those students who were actually supposed to attend the lectures that Ryland seemed so fond of sitting in on. A more detailed inspection of the file's contents showed that all the essays he'd assigned on that course so far were tucked away in there.

Arslan looked at his watch and across at the cup of tea. Steam no longer curled above it. With a silent sigh, he settled as comfortably as possible into the undersized chair and turned his attention to the first essay.

An hour later, he was well into the third essay when he finally heard someone fumble with the handle on the other side of the door. Arslan pulled his feet out of the way to give it room to swing back. The door still faltered half way. Arslan could almost hear the warning flag go up in Ryland's brain as he remembered that he hadn't left the light on when he left the room.

“Your tea's gone cold.”

Ryland pushed the door open a little further and peeped into the room. He seemed to consider his options very carefully before he stepped inside and elbowed the door closed behind him. He was weighed down under a huge pile of paperwork.

Arslan stayed where he was, waiting to see what his new pet would do next. Ryland merely stood there, just inside the door, as if waiting for permission, for an order, for anything

his master might be willing to offer him.

“Picking up some extra cash?” Arslan asked.

The blood drained out of Ryland’s face.

“Sit!” Arslan ordered.

Ryland just stared back at him as if he’d seen a ghost.

Arslan stood up, caught hold of both Ryland’s elbows and guided him onto his chair behind the desk. Taking the pile of marking out of his arms, he put them on the visitor’s chair, out of the way.

“I…”

Arslan placed his hand to Ryland’s forehead. Cold for a lion meant normal for a human. There was no fever, but he didn’t know enough about humans to be sure that meant all was actually well. “Are you ill?”

Ryland stared at him. It was several seconds before he seemed to snap back into reality. He dropped his gaze. A blush rushed to his cheeks, making him look both far healthier as well as more than a little embarrassed. Even so, he still looked exhausted.

“Do you really think you should be looking for more work?” Arslan asked. Not that there could be any real debate about the answer. A lion might be able to work all the hours God sent without feeling too many ill effects from it. A human couldn’t. That was why they needed lions to look after them.

Ryland followed his gaze to the pile of marking. His blush deepened, but he seemed to relax a little. “I’m fine, sir.”

Arslan wasn’t convinced. His pet didn’t look fine. He didn’t feel fine. He was on edge and struggling to cope. Not acceptable.

“I just didn’t expect you to be here, sir,” Ryland offered. “I…”

Arslan straightened up from his crouch at Ryland’s feet, hoping that putting some slight distance between them might help him to keep his fingers to himself when he itched to run his hands over the other man’s body, just in case the pain in his eyes was caused by wounds he couldn’t see.

“Do you want some tea?” Ryland rushed out. He glanced at the cold cup on the desk. “I’ll make you a fresh cup.” He stood up, obviously about to go and do just that.

Arslan put his hand on his shoulder and nudged him back into the chair. It took all his

strength of will to take his hand back as soon as the task was accomplished.

“I wasn’t asking you to leave,” Ryland rushed out, rising to his feet again the moment the professor broke contact with him.

Arslan studied him carefully as he saw a pet’s need to be close to his master shining bright in the younger man’s eyes. “I wasn’t leaving.”

Ryland nodded. He looked relieved. Arslan stared down at him, wondering how much of a fool he was for still being glad of that. It wasn’t the quick understanding he might have hoped for, but seeing that the instincts were there, even if Ryland didn’t recognize them properly, was still something.

Stepping back, Arslan put a little bit more space between them, but there wasn’t much further he could go without walking into an overstuffed bookcase or one of the piles of books that Ryland hadn’t managed to fit on any of the shelves.

And no matter how far he went, the tiny room was still full of Ryland’s presence. It was impossible not to be aware of every nuance of his emotions. The room swirled with his nerves and his uncertainty. Looking away from his pet, trying to clear his head, Arslan ran his fingers down the edge of Ryland’s folder full of history essays. He wasn’t a natural historian, but the effort he’d put into each of the essays was obvious. He’d even managed to make his handwriting quite legible.

Arslan looked up just in time to see Ryland’s gaze follow his to the history essays.

“Someone said that you don’t let people attend your lectures if they’re not prepared to learn. I thought you might throw me out if I didn’t,” Ryland whispered.

“You never handed them in.”

“You never threatened the throw me out,” Ryland said, his eyes still lowered to stare at the folder.

Arslan smiled at the logic.

“Professor?”

“Yes?”

*Do you want a blowjob?*

The words hovered on Ryland’s lips, but he didn’t quite have the balls to say them. He looked up and caught Arslan’s eye, but he couldn’t hold his gaze for more than a few seconds.

His attention dropped back to Arslan's crotch.

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. He considered the merits of just dropping to his knees and not bothering with small talk. That would make everything very clear, wouldn't it? If he could just skip every part of the process that involved speech, he wouldn't need to feel guilty for speaking to the other man without telling him the whole truth right away.

His knees almost took over the entire decision making process and buckled of their own volition. Ryland put his hand on the desk to steady himself. He closed his eyes, but that did more harm than good. He could so easily picture himself on his knees in front of Arslan, his lips wrapped around his cock, his tongue flicking over the head as he stole a taste of him and discovered whether or not a lion tasted the same as a human.

"Ryland?"

He opened his eyes. The floor in front of Arslan's feet remained empty. Ryland took a step forward, but he didn't dare drop to his knees without an invitation. Swallowing rapidly, he frantically tried to work some moisture into his throat so he could force a word or two out.

"Sir?" He sounded impossibly calm considering the situation.

"Yes?"

"If you found out that..." Ryland looked up and his courage deserted him. He couldn't tell him why he'd been there. He couldn't watch the expression in his lover's eyes change as he realized what he was, what he'd made himself that night—he remembered that seeing that change in someone's eyes before. Never again.

Ryland once more took refuge in the darkness behind his eyelids. It took him a lifetime to pull himself together enough to think of another ending to his sentence. "If the same man were thrown to the lions twice, would you be disappointed, sir?"

Arslan didn't say anything for so long, Ryland had to look up and find out the worse.

"No," the older man said very softly. "I wouldn't be disappointed." Reaching out, he pushed Ryland's hair back from his face.

The younger man let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He nodded his understanding, careful not to dislodge the hand that settled in his hair. His gaze settled on the lion's mouth. His tongue snuck out to moisten his own lips in invitation.

"Do you remember your human word?" Arslan asked.

Ryland stared up at him in confusion for a moment, before he caught up. "The safe



word?”

“Yes,” Arslan said slowly. “I expect that’s what humans call it.”

“I don’t want to say no to you.”

Arslan smiled and stroked his fingers down his cheek, stroking the blush that Ryland knew still lingered there. Remembering what he’d seen the other lions do at the house, he butted his head gently against Arslan’s shoulder.

Arslan slid his fingers under his chin and tilted his head back. Before Ryland had a chance to worry over the very real possibility that he’d made a fool out of himself, Arslan’s lips covered his. His tongue demanded entry. Ryland grabbed at the larger man’s shoulders as his head spun in relief.

There could be no doubt over the intention behind the kiss. Arslan took complete possession of his mouth. Rough and demanding at first, as soon as Ryland was thoroughly out of his depth, the other man’s mouth gentled against his. The surface of his tongue was still rough, but his lips became the softest thing Ryland had ever known, as the older man guided him to kiss him back and coaxed him to bring his own tongue out to play.

Something hard pressed against his back. When Arslan broke the kiss, Ryland looked around to find that he had been walked backwards a few steps. They’d reached a bookcase He was effectively pinned in the corner.

There wasn’t much room, but he began to lower himself to his knees anyway. Logic suggested he was making a huge mistake, but suddenly the only important thing was that he do something for the other man for free. If he did something for free, he’d become something slightly closer to the man the professor thought he was inviting into his pride.

Arslan caught hold of his arm and stopped him short.

“Let me, sir?” Ryland blurted out, hoping like hell Arslan wouldn’t ask him why it was so vital that he be allowed to go down on him.

The lion studied him for a moment before he let go of his arm and nodded his permission. Ryland dropped heavily to his knees on the bare floorboards. At least from his new vantage point, there was no need to worry about whether or not Arslan was enthusiastic about the idea or merely humoring him.

The professor was hard, straining against his fly. Ryland reached for the zip and drew it carefully down. He hesitated for a second, wondering how much less history he’d have learned

over the last few months if he'd known that the professor was going commando during his lectures.

The other man's cock curved enthusiastically up towards his stomach as Ryland freed it from the fabric. He glanced up at the professor as he ran his fingers along the length of his shaft. The shifter's skin was hot to the touch. It hadn't been Ryland's imagination or the fire burning next to the rug clouding his memories and making him think that.

It wasn't a huge amount of evidence to support the fact that he wasn't actually losing his mind, but right then it was enough to convince Ryland that everything he remembered about that night in the lions' den was accurate. The perfection he'd felt there had been real, and it was there waiting for him, once he sorted out the mess he'd made of things.

Steadying the shaft with his fingers, Ryland leaned forward and wrapped his lips around the head. Pre-cum leaked into his mouth as he rubbed his tongue against the glans, stealing his first taste of his lover. A moment later, Ryland murmured his pleasure around the other man's cock. Arslan was hot in his mouth. He was saltier than a human, and he was perfect.

The thick shaft stretched his lips, turning them into a thin pink line as he sealed them tightly around satiny smooth skin. Desperate to please, he swirled his tongue rapidly around the tip of Arslan's cock in a complex little maneuver it had taken him months to master when he first came out of the closet.

Arslan stared down at him, attentive but entirely calm. Ryland didn't truly believe he was God's gift to every man he got down on his knees for, but he'd thought he was pretty good—good enough to make a man moan and jerk his hips if not throw back his head and scream.

The professor stroked his fingers through his hair and offered him an encouraging little smile as their eyes met. Ryland dropped his gaze. Polite and patient wasn't quite the reaction he'd been hoping for.

All at once, he found himself wondering if it was far easier to make a man scream than it was to make a lion roar. Worse still, what if lions didn't suck each other off? What if that was just a human thing? What if Arslan had no idea why he was even down on his knees in the first place?

Ryland rubbed his tongue back and forth across the head of Arslan's cock as he frantically tried to convince himself that he hadn't made the worst mistake of his life by damn near begging to be allowed to do this without knowing what he was really doing with a lion,

before he'd even thought to find out what lions did with each other.

Closing his eyes, Ryland tried to keep some sort of grip on reality. It wasn't easy when so many unfamiliar thoughts and ideas kept creeping around the edges of his mind, only to rush off when he tried to study them. All he knew for sure was, this had to go right.

It had to, because he was doing it for free, and he'd really screwed up everything last time he was with him. And if he screwed everything up all over again, even when he was doing it for free, it wouldn't matter if Arslan would let him be thrown back to the lions once he had it all sorted out, because by then, the professor would have probably given up on him and—

Arslan gasped. The hand resting on the back of Ryland's head tightened its grip on his hair. Ryland glanced up at him as he scrambled to repeat his last action. Lapping delicately at the head produced another gasp.

Pulling back, Ryland let the shaft slip from between his lips before quickly leaning back in and flicking his tongue lightly against the tip. He stared up at the older man, hope shining bright in his eyes.

Arslan didn't meet his gaze. The lion's eyes had dropped closed. He made a noise in the back of his throat. Ryland didn't know what to call it. It fell half way between a purr and a quiet roar. It was also the single most erotic noise he'd ever heard. Right there and then, he promised himself that he was going to spend a substantial part of the rest of his life making sure he heard it as often as possible.

"That's right, pet." Arslan blinked his eyes open and stared down at him. His gaze seemed to feast on the sight of his licking tongue as if it was the most amazing thing he had ever seen in his life.

Ryland felt something settle inside him. Arslan was different to a human. That meant he had to learn. It didn't mean he couldn't please his lover if he learned quickly enough. The professor liked people who were willing to learn. Everything was fine. He was with Arslan, and everything would be fine now.

"Good," Arslan rasped.

Ryland whimpered his pleasure at the praise and set about learning everything there was to know about the other man's cock. It didn't take him long to discover that running his tongue all the way along the underside of the shaft and up over the glans produced the best reaction.

Arslan gasped. A low moan escaped from the back of his throat. It wasn't exactly the

screaming Ryland had secretly been hoping for, but he was willing to believe it was probably the equivalent of an ear splitting Halleluiah from a man with less control of his emotions than Arslan.

The hand on the back of his head cradled him close as he continued to explore the lion with his lips and tongue, doing everything he could to please the other man as he kissed and licked.

When the hands buried in his hair guided him back to the tip of Arslan's cock and encouraged him closer, Ryland gave control of everything over to the lion without hesitation. As he opened his mouth and let Arslan guide his cock between his lips, he looked up.

Arslan stared straight into his eyes and Ryland found he was trapped by his gaze. The lion didn't say a word, but Ryland saw the possession flaring in his expression. He'd never felt more like he belonged to someone. He'd never known it was possible to feel so right in his skin, to feel as if he was exactly where he should be.

For all its perfection, it was also too much, too intense. He tore his gaze away and let his eyes drop closed.

"Look at me."

It was an order. Ryland obeyed it. He looked back to the professor.

A slight tightening of Arslan's hands in his hair was his only warning before the lion's hips thrust forward and he buried himself deeper within Ryland's mouth as he came.

The moment Ryland tried to pull away, Arslan's grip on his hair relaxed, allowing him to retreat as far as he wished. Ryland leaned back just far enough to catch Arslan's taste on his tongue. He looked back up to his lover in time to see the pleasure flood into the professor's eyes as the other man seemed to realize that he didn't want to avoid swallowing as much as he wanted the chance to taste him properly.

Arslan rocked his hips slightly, making a series of shallow thrusts into his mouth, as if he was unable to fall completely still as he came, no matter how hard he tried. His breaths were uneven, a strand of hair had escaped from the tight tie holding the mass of hair back from his face. For the first time, Ryland saw the professor not perfectly calm, composed and in charge of the world, and he was glorious.

As Arslan fell still and his shaft began to soften in his mouth, Ryland forced himself to pull away and let the older man's cock slip from between his lips. He reached out to straighten

the professor's clothes, but his hands shook so badly he couldn't manage to do up his fly.

When the lion politely moved Ryland's hands aside to finish the job himself, Ryland didn't object. He let Arslan take over and didn't even have it in him to feel embarrassed about his clumsiness. Sitting back on his heels, he put all his effort into not reaching for his own fly.

*Give without thought of what you might receive in return.*

Getting off himself wasn't part of the plan. It wasn't important in the grand scheme of things—every bit of him, bar his cock, agreed with his assessment of the situation.

Arslan held out his hand. Ryland reached out to him in return. A second later, he was up on his feet, standing before the other man.

The lion's lips covered his as if they'd been kissing each other forever. As Arslan's tongue dipped into his mouth to taste, his hand slid down Ryland's body and cupped his cock through his trousers. Whimpering, Ryland pushed himself helplessly against the other man's palm.

A second later, Arslan took his hand away as suddenly as he offered it. Ryland shook his head. Pulling away from the kiss, he began to stutter his plea for both Arslan's hand to be returned and for the older man to understand that he wasn't whoring himself out for a hand job, he just really needed his hand back there so badly and—

He didn't get more than two or three words out.

“Hush.”

Ryland obediently hushed. He just stared up at the taller man and prayed.

“Hush, pet,” Arslan whispered again.

The hand that had left Ryland's cock undid the button at the top of his fly and slid the zipper down. Ryland held his breath as deft fingers pushed denim and cotton boxers aside, and wrapped themselves snugly around his shaft.

Ryland dropped his head forward onto Arslan's shoulder as his mind spun. The professor's hand was hot, the palm rough against his erection. There was no inter-species learning curve—Arslan obviously already knew everything there was to know about how a human man craved to be touched.

“Please don't stop, sir,” Ryland whispered. A few strokes would be all he needed. He knew he'd be embarrassed to look back on that fact later, but right then, the only important thing was for the other man not to take away his touch before he came.

“Hush, pet. I’ve got you. Just let your master take care of you now.”

Ryland nodded against the other man’s shoulder.

Arslan’s grip tightened around his cock. The strokes sped up. Ryland thrust forward, rubbing himself against the other man’s skin. Arslan’s other hand slid down his spine and settled on his backside, encouraging him to move however he pleased.

Ryland’s grip on the professor’s shirt tightened as he buried his face in the other man’s shoulder to muffle the sounds of his pleasure. He wasn’t sure how successful he was at concealing his moans and gasps, but right then it was hard to care if every mathematician in the building heard him. Bucking between his lover’s hands, he came hard and fast into the shifter’s palm.

The force of his orgasm stole all the oxygen out of the room. Ryland couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move, couldn’t think. He couldn’t even bring himself to care about his inability to do any of those things. Arslan was there, the ache that had been building inside him since he’d left the other man’s car had dissolved, and the world was a bloody brilliant place.

Arslan brushed his lips back and forth across the top of his head as Ryland fell still within his embrace. The shifter’s hand stayed tucked inside Ryland’s fly, holding him in his palm as his shaft softened and he finally remembered how to make his lungs work.

They remained there, standing in the middle of his tiny office for so long, Ryland stopped doubting that he was the only man who didn’t want to step back and return to reality. Eventually, Arslan moved. He took his touch away. Ryland looked up at him and received another gentle kiss for his effort.

It should have been awkward, Arslan retrieving a sticky hand from inside his fly, tidying up his clothes, a scrambled search for tissues. It should all have been very embarrassing. In spite of everything Ryland was sure he should be aware of, he could never remember feeling so safe, so right in himself, so accepted.

Reaching out he touched the lock of Arslan’s hair that had escaped from the leather tie at the nape of his neck. He wasn’t sure if it was an appropriate time to ask exactly what Arslan meant when he’d called himself his master, when he’d called him his pet. Back in the den, the term hadn’t seemed so strange. Even now, when they were in the real world, it felt strangely rude to need to ask what he meant by it. Something inside him nodded its acceptance of it all, as if it made perfect sense, leaving the rest of him to shuffle its feet and feel appallingly slow on the

uptake.

The shifter turned his head and pressed a kiss onto the back of his knuckles. Ryland blushed. That sort of romantic little gesture wasn't at all what he expected from the older man.

Arslan wasn't the kind of professor who wanted to be friends with his students. He was damn near the only one of the staff who didn't invite them to call him by his first name. It was hard to put the image of him standing in front of the lecture hall, scaring fact after fact into the students' heads with someone who would offer such a sweet little gesture.

Then, an image flashed into the front of Ryland's mind, reminding him of the way the other lions had kissed and nuzzled each other. It wasn't romantic, it was feline. Ryland felt his blush deepen at how far out of his depth he really was.

Ducking his head, he nudged the older man's shoulder with his temple, pretty sure that was considered a friendly gesture between lions. Arslan slipped his hand into his hair and held him close, encouraging him to rest against his body. He pressed a kiss into his hair as if he was as pleased with that little nudge as he had been with the blowjob.

Ryland smiled against the other man's shoulder, resting his hands carefully on his lover's waist as he tried to remember what else he had seen the other lions do, tried to work out what to do next.

"Your instincts exist for a reason, pet," Arslan whispered, making an obvious effort to soften his voice. "Trust them."

Ryland nodded.

His instincts told him that nothing more was required of him right then than to lean against the other man and feel content. They also repeated to him exactly what they'd been telling him ever since Arslan made his offer—the only way he could ever convince Arslan to take him seriously was to be able to look him in the eye and tell him why he'd had to say no to him in front of all the other lions, to be able to tell him that he'd fixed the problem and beg his forgiveness properly.

He could do that. This time, he could fix things with the person he loved. Ryland closed his eyes a little tighter and tried to re-write the thought into something that didn't involve that particular word. When it became obvious no other word made sense there, he pushed the entire idea out of his head.

"This Saturday, when someone is thrown to the lions. You'll be there, sir?" he asked,

barely able to make the words a whisper, let alone anything louder.

“Yes.”

Ryland pulled back a fraction and looked up at the older man.

Arslan nodded as if he understood why he'd asked, as if he realized who he hoped he would accept being delivered to the den that night. There was also a certain light in his eyes that made Ryland reasonably sure the other man was merely humoring him by letting his pet come back to him that way.

That was okay. Ryland's instincts told him that the lion would understand why it was so important once he heard the explanation. With Arslan's encouragement still fresh in his mind, all he could do was hope that instinct was as right as the others.

Nothing else was said before the professor left. A few minutes later, Ryland was alone in his little office, staring at the space his folder of history essays had occupied.

Sitting down at his desk, he ran his hand through his hair. Dropping to his knees the moment a man walked into his office shouldn't make him feel *less* like a whore, but it in some way it did. He'd done everything that day for no other reason than he wanted to give. He'd done exactly what Arslan said a man who wanted to join him would do. Ryland nodded to himself.

He'd made a little bit of progress. He felt a little bit better about the world. For the first time since he was eighteen, it felt possible for him to be the person someone he cared about wanted him to be. And that was worth anything.

Saturday. Five days. He looked at the pile of marking he'd picked up. It would earn him a pittance compared to the money he needed to return to the man who'd arranged for him to be thrown to the lions the first time around.

Spending all the hours God sent tutoring undergraduates probably wasn't going to scratch the surface either. If he couldn't get the tuition fees back from the university, couldn't get a bank loan, couldn't earn the money legally and he sure as hell couldn't crawl back to his parents and borrow the money from them, there really was only one option left open.

He rushed out of the office before he could remind himself exactly why he had chosen to be thrown to the lions rather than borrow money from Jason Burrows in the first place.



## *Chapter Four*

“What do you want?”

Ryland took a deep breath. The guy who’d answered Jason Burrow’s door had obviously seen way too many bad mafia movies. He was wearing sunglasses indoors. It wasn’t even sunny *outside*. For some reason, it was that stupid little detail that brought it all home to him. He was effectively doing business with the kind of men who thought guys who put dead horses’ heads in other people’s beds were role models.

The man at the door parted his lips.

Ryland didn’t give him a chance to repeat the question, or to tell him to sod off and stop wasting anyone’s time either. “Two thousand pounds.”

The guy stared at him as if he’d lost his mind.

“I want to borrow two thousand pounds,” Ryland rephrased, desperately trying not to sound as freaked out by that fact as he actually was.

The guy stepped back and let him in. A few seconds later, Ryland stood in front of Jason Burrows. He’d seen him around the university. Politics, Philosophy and Economics. He was supposed to be a genius in all three subjects—on those occasions when he had his mind on his studies rather than his sideline occupation of lending money to all the other students. And of making sure he got the money back, of course. Rumor had it that was the part of the business Jason really got off on.

Right then, the guy seemed to have things other than money on his mind, principally the man who was kneeling in front of Jason’s chair with his mouth wrapped around his cock.

Ryland wasn’t sure what expression passed across his face as he realized exactly what he was walking in on, but it made Jason laugh. The moneylender took a sip of his beer and rested

his head against the deeply cushioned back of his chair, obviously enjoying his visitor's discomfort. Ryland automatically took a step away from the scene. He jerked and spun around as he backed into the muscleman who'd answered the door.

"Wants to borrow money," the doorman grunted.

Ryland swallowed down his nerves and forced himself to meet Jason's eyes and ignore what was going on lower down. Technically, he knew that they weren't doing anything he hadn't done back in his office with Arslan. He was also aware, in a strictly theoretical way, that it wasn't any more public than what he'd done with a lion in front of a fireplace not so long ago.

The comparison didn't help, it just reminded him that he was as far as any man could get from how he felt when he was with Arslan.

"Two thousand," he repeated. "I need to borrow two thousand pounds, please."

"On what terms?"

Ryland's eyes dropped on their own accord. He dragged his gaze back up to the other man's eyes. "Whatever percentage financial interest you usually charge a man who can only pay back a little at a time?" he suggested.

There was a brief pause in the negotiations when Jason's hands clenched around the arms of his chair and he came into the mouth of the man kneeling at his feet. Ryland turned his attention to the carpet and didn't look up until Jason spoke.

"Come here."

To his intense relief the man had straightened up his clothes before he called him forward. Ryland stepped closer, until he stopped a few feet from Jason's chair.

A huge hand landed on his shoulder and pushed him down onto his knees in front of Jason. Ryland struggled to clamber back to his feet. It took less than a second for him to realize there was no way in hell he was going to shake off the doorman's grip on his shoulder. Jason caught hold of his chin and held his face still.

Ryland froze.

"Pretty enough," Jason observed.

Ryland stared back at him, trapped where he knelt, not even able to drag enough breath into his lungs to hyperventilate properly.

"You can have your loan." Jason dropped his hand from his face, but the other man's hand on his shoulder kept him kneeling where he was.

“I can’t...” Ryland swallowed. “This isn’t what I...” He’d never be able to explain it to Arslan if he agreed to pay back the loan that way.

“Don’t flatter yourself, pretty. I’ve never seen the point in renting boys by the hour when I can get much better for free.”

Ryland’s gaze flickered to the man sitting on the floor a few feet away from him. He didn’t look like someone paying off a debt. If anything, he looked very happy with the world as he leaned back against the base of another armchair. He also looked remarkably like Mark Jefferies, one of the second year undergraduates Ryland had seen wandering around the math building, usually with a rather lost expression on his face, as if he was venturing into strange and unfamiliar territory.

If the marking he’d flicked through while he was collecting it from one of the junior math professor’s office was anything to go by, the guy was also about a week away from completely flunking out of his course.

Ryland breathed a little sigh of relief as he realized the rumors surrounding Jason were just student gossip. Then, before he could work out how to frame an apology for simultaneously calling one man a whore and another a sexual blackmailer, Jason went on.

“Still, you’re pretty enough that if you can’t keep up with repayments, they’ll be plenty of men who’ll be happy to help you earn the cash.” His voice was completely expressionless. It wasn’t a joke. It wasn’t a rumor.

Jason nodded to the other math student. Mark walked out of Ryland’s field of vision. When he came back, he tossed two thick wads of notes to him. He didn’t look as lost here as he did in the math building. He looked deep in thought as he seemed to study Ryland very carefully.

“Interest is two hundred a month,” Jason told him. Ryland snapped his attention back to him. “First payment due at the end of this month.”

Ryland nodded his understanding, as he clutched the notes tight in his hand. “I’ll make the payments on time.”

Jason shrugged as if it made no difference to him either way. Ryland guessed that it really didn’t matter to Jason if he had to call in the collateral on the loan. The doorman finally took his hand off his shoulder, allowing him to rise to his feet.

As Jason’s henchman deposited him back on the pavement outside the house, Ryland made a conscious effort to push all thought of Jason and how he managed to get hold of the

money in his pocket out of his head. It was done. It couldn't be undone. There was no point worrying about it, or about the repayments.

Jason might scare the hell out of him, but Arslan was the one he had to concentrate on now. When it came down to it, he could cope with Jason thinking he was some sort of rent boy in waiting, as long as it gave him the means to make damn sure Arslan knew he wasn't one.

On the bus journey to Kershaw's pub on the other side of the university, he kept that thought in his mind, and his right hand in his pocket, clutching the bank notes as if they might evaporate if left unattended for the briefest second.

This time, there were no agonized minutes wasted pacing along the pavement outside the pub debating if he should go inside or not. With the need to have everything settled between him and the professor burning inside him, there wasn't a second to waste. He marched straight up to the man sitting in one of the booths along the back wall of the building.

"I want to be thrown to the lions."

Kershaw looked up from his newspaper. Glancing over the top of his glasses, he ran his eyes over Ryland's body. The last time he'd done that, Ryland had been standing in one of the back rooms of the club stark bollock naked. It wasn't a particularly nice memory. He waited impatiently for the other man to say something, but Kershaw merely looked back to the article he was reading. Ryland frowned. "I said, I want—"

"I heard you."

Ryland took a deep breath and tightened his grip on the money in his pocket.

"Come back next week."

"What?" Ryland shook his head. "No. I can't. It has to be—"

"You'll come back," Kershaw told his newspaper as he turned the page, licking his thumb to get a grip on the stubborn broadsheets.

Ryland hesitated, wondering if the guy only took notice of men who weren't wearing any clothes. If he couldn't get to Arslan without 'auditioning' again, he really wished the other man would just spit it out so he could get it over with.

"Either you liked the money or you liked getting done by the lions. Either way, you'll come back next week, and the week after that, and the week after that too. Your sort always do, once they get a taste for it."

"I don't—"

“Join the queue.” The older man put his fascination with his newspaper to one side for the moment and scanned Ryland up and down again, lips pursing as he weighed him up. “If I run out of fresh blood for them, you might get another shot at it sometime. Leave your name and number at the bar and—”

Ryland shook his head. “You don’t understand. I spoke to...to one of the lions, and...” The look in the man’s eyes made it look like he’d heard it all before and wasn’t the least bit interested in hearing it all over again.

Desperation rushing through him, Ryland couldn’t think of anything else to do, he pulled the money out of his pocket and dropped it on the table in front of Kershaw.

The other man stopped reading his newspaper and set it aside.

“That’s the money you paid me for last time. You can have it back. I don’t want to be paid for this week either. I just want you to take me to the lions’ den and leave me there.”

“I’ve been offered a lot more than that for the information about the den.”

All the oxygen rushed from the room. Ryland closed his eyes as the very real possibility he wouldn’t be there when Arslan expected him turned his blood cold.

Someone tugged at the money under his hand.

Ryland flung his eyes back open and tightened his grip. He met the man’s eyes.

“This and the money you would have paid me for another night, that’s four thousand. Four thousand pounds that your employers will believe you’ve paid out. Money that you can keep for yourself, free and clear.”

Kershaw considered the equation for a little while.

Ryland swallowed down a bitter taste in the back of his mouth. He’d been willing to whore himself for half that. The idea that the man in front of him wasn’t even willing to throw him in a car for twice his price turned his stomach, but somehow he managed to push his revulsion aside.

“I can get more money if I need to,” Ryland whispered. His tone of voice was little short of begging. As much as he hated to admit it, even inside his own head, he knew he’d get down on his knees and beg if that was what it took.

The man studied him very carefully. He looked back to the money.

“There might be a space available *next* week,” he mused.

Ryland held his breath. Arslan might understand the need to wait a week. Next week felt

like a lifetime away, but it didn't feel like the same death sentence as an outright no. He might survive another week.

Kershaw glanced up, then back to the money.

"How much more do you need?" Ryland asked.

"There's two thousand here?" the guy asked.

Ryland nodded.

The man stared at the money for a long time. "It'll do."

Ryland tightened his grip on the notes again. "When I get to the house, I'll give the money to the driver."

The other guy's lips twitched into a little smile. "Not as stupid as you look." He nodded his dismissal. "Next Saturday. Same time as before. If you're late, you don't get another shot."

Ryland nodded. He had the horrible feeling he was stepping into some sort of trap, and an even worse feeling that, even knowing that, he was going to keep right on going regardless.

"You're obviously in love with one of them. Means I won't get a bit of peace until I toss you to the kitty-cats again."

Ryland dropped his gaze, but he didn't bother to argue with the older man's assessment of the situation. He'd never been a very good liar.

"Kid?"

Ryland stopped and looked back over his shoulder.

"You're the one who didn't get driven back here last weekend, right?"

Ryland nodded.

Kershaw studied him for a moment before he nodded his dismissal.

Ryland shook his head as he walked out of the room. Peace and quiet? Right. More like Kershaw didn't want to risk pissing off the lions if Ryland had been telling the truth about having an arrangement with one of them.

As Ryland stepped out of the pub, he stood on the pavement looking one way down the quiet road, then the other, as if a flashing neon sign might appear shouting it was this way to the lions' den.

No sign appeared, not even a little tiny unlit one.

Not knowing what else to do with himself, Ryland automatically retraced his steps to the bus stop. As the battered old thing pulled away twenty minutes later, he tried closing his eyes

and traveling blind in the hope it might jog some memory over which way his blindfolded ride to the lions had taken him.

It didn't help. It just meant that by the time he opened his eyes, everyone else on the bus was giving him funny looks. Sinking down a little in his seat, he tried to look as inconspicuous as possible. It didn't help. They were still staring at him when he got off the bus at the stop nearest his house.

He walked as quickly as he could, eager to get the cash tucked away somewhere safe. Fred waved frantically to him through the living room window as he walked up the path, his spiky blond hair fluttering around his head as his movements became more and more dramatic. Ryland hesitated. He never had been good at playing charades and he really wasn't in the mood.

If Fred had another man in there, fair enough. Ryland was very happy for him, or at least willing to nod and smile and pretend he was happy for him. But if he thought there was any way in hell he was going to get away with locking out his house-mate so he could have some privacy to get laid—today of all days...

The waving hands became even more frantic.

Ryland sighed and walked the last few paces up to the front door. "What's got into you?" he demanded as Fred rushed into the hall to greet him.

"You've got a visitor," Fred said. "I'm really sorry. I tried to get rid of him, but he didn't listen to a word and he really freaked me out, and he said I wasn't to phone you and warn you he was here, and—"

Ryland was half way up the stairs before his friend could get out another word. He only knew one man who could put someone into that much of a panic just by turning up and glaring at them. He pushed open his bedroom door, fully expecting to find Arslan and a marked folder full of history essays sitting on his bed.

"Jason doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Ryland just stared at the guy who'd let him into Jason's house. *What the hell are you doing here? Get out of my room!* The words stayed inside his head. "I haven't kept him waiting," he rushed out. "I've got until the end of the month to make the first repayment—"

The guy caught hold of him by the shoulder. "It seems you've got a talent you forgot to mention to Jason when he was calculating the interest on your loan."

"What are you talking about? Let go of me." Ryland squirmed within the other man's

grip. His struggles made just as little difference then as they had when he'd been kneeling at Jason's feet.

\* \* \* \*

Arslan leaned back in his seat, listening to the idle babbling of the younger lions with half an ear, while he strained to catch the sound of a car pulling into the driveway.

“What's put you in such a good mood?” Blaine demanded as he moved to stand foursquare in front of him.

Arslan raised an eyebrow.

Blaine didn't take the least bit of notice. He seemed to sense that the leader of their pride was in a good enough mood to put up with his brattiness for once. Arslan smiled slightly. If he had that good a read on him, maybe the boy was finally starting to learn a little after all.

Luther came up behind the other lion and wrapped his arms around him. Blaine leaned back and murmured his approval of the way his lover licked his neck.

“Can't you two even wait for the damn human to get here?” another lion called across to them. Blaine held two fingers up to the other lion, not even bothering to turn around and glare at them.

Arslan settled himself more comfortably on the sofa and let them bicker.

“Figures you would hold up *two* fingers,” the other lion snickered. “Neither of you can keep a human happy on your own, can you?”

Luther snarled and leapt at the other lion, knocking him to the ground and rolling around on the rug with him. There were no yowls or real roars. Arslan was content to let them work it out on their own.

Blaine seemed to reach the same decision. His attention stayed on his leader. “Is there any point in us waiting for the human, or is this sacrifice already claimed?”

Arslan knew nothing showed in his expression. He was far better at hiding his thoughts than that. But he let a rueful smile slipped through on purpose.

“Go play with the others,” he told the younger lion. “There'll be time enough to speak about the sacrifice later.”

Blaine grinned at the tiny acknowledgement that he had been right to guess why Arslan was so mellow. Arslan let him have his moment to relish his success. The younger lion deserved it. He was showing signs of growing up—even if he hadn't yet worked out that a man didn't



need the company of another lion to enjoy accepting the submission a human offered him.

Gravel crunched in the drive. A car engine fell silent outside the house. Arslan forced himself to stay in his seat while Blaine and Luther stopped tumbling with the other lions and rushed out to see what their arrangement with the humans had brought to their door that night.

Seconds stretched into a lifetime. A naked figure was led into the room. The breath stalled in Arslan's throat as the young man was nudged onto the rug in front of the fire.

Pale skin. Blond hair. Lean lines of muscle. An apparently inexhaustible supply of nerves. But it wasn't the right skin, the right hair, the right nervous energy.

Luther cleared his throat.

Arslan's attention snapped toward him. He waved a hand dismissing his right to have first claim to the stranger.

Still, no other lion moved closer to the human in their midst. The whole room held its breath. There were few secrets in a pride at the best of times. There wasn't a man there who'd believe him if he tried to tell them he hadn't been expecting Ryland to re-join them that night.

Well aware that every nuance of his reaction was being observed, would be remembered, he turned to Blaine and Luther and calmly nodded for them to play out the game if they had any interest in it.

Neither needed to be invited twice. They both stepped forward, one behind the bound man, one in front of him. The moment he'd heard them go through the forms of checking that the man knew how to end the game if he no longer wished to play, Arslan turned his attention away from them. Staring blindly at the opposite wall, he mentally scrambled to work out what had gone wrong now.

"I'm sorry."

Arslan glanced to his left. Kefir occupied the other end of the sofa, curled into a neat little ball, more like a kitten than any lion Arslan had ever known. Concern echoed in the younger lion's words. Arslan made no comment.

"He was to become your mate tonight?" Kefir asked softly.

Arslan clenched his teeth. The youngest lion in his pride hadn't shown the slightest interest in any of the offerings the humans sent them. As far as Arslan was aware, he hadn't shown any sort of intimate interest in the other lions either.

He forced a deep breath into his lungs as he played for time. Leaders led even when it

wasn't convenient. That knowledge had been part of his psyche for so long it was no longer something he even thought about. Leaders taught the lions in their pride the right way to live their lives, and they answered their questions—even when it hurt.

“It was a possibility,” he finally acknowledged.

“But not anymore?” Kefir asked.

Arslan took another deep breath and let it out very slowly, but he already knew what a leader was supposed to say. “Humans are not like us. Allowances must be made for them.” It was almost word for word what an older lion had told him when he was much the same age as Kefir. “They can't be blamed for not acting like lions—for not acting in a way that a lion might expect.”

Kefir nodded. He didn't look entirely convinced. Arslan couldn't truly blame him. He wasn't at all sure the words sounded believable on his lips. Talking of waiting was one thing, but the moment the other lions were out of the den at the end of the night and his duties to the pride had been discharged, Arslan's clothes were on and his car turned toward Ryland's house.

The man who opened Ryland's door was young and blond and similar to Ryland in a great many ways. But he wasn't Ryland.

“Is Ryland here?”

The guy shook his head. The motion was jerky, like a puppet whose strings weren't quite joined up in the right formation. He appeared to be one step away from a nervous breakdown.

“Where is he?” Arslan demanded.

“I—” the guy cleared his throat and apparently put a lot of effort into remembering how not to speak in soprano. “One of your associates collected him on Tuesday.”

Arslan frowned down at the younger man. “What?”

“Guy built like a brick wall. Tattoo of a snakey-thing on his arm. Ryland left with him and—”

“Where?”

“Didn't say,” Ryland's housemate squeaked out.

“If this is some sort of joke,” Arslan warned.

Ryland's housemate wasn't so full of fear that he was unable to squeeze in a healthy dose of anger, given the right incentive. “You think I'm joking about this? If he doesn't turn up, who the hell do you think is going to be left telling his family that their son's disappeared off the face

of the earth?” he yelled. “Just because they won’t have anything to do with him, that doesn’t mean they aren’t going to be really pissed off with me for—”

“Enough!”

The other man fell silent.

“Do you know where Ryland is?”

The guy shook his head. “He left a message saying he was fine and not to worry about him. He didn’t sound fine.”

Arslan grabbed the younger man’s arm and pushed him back into the house. Spotting a living room, he shoved Ryland’s friend down onto a battered old sofa. “Start again—from the beginning.”

\* \* \* \*

“I’m sorry I can’t make it to the...to the...” Ryland closed his eyes for a moment. If he said lecture, then it would be obvious he was talking to a professor. “That I can’t make it today, sir. Everything’s fine. I’ll explain it all next time I see you.” He hung up before he could make the mistake of saying more.

It might have been a slightly more coherent message than the last one he’d left for Arslan. He wasn’t sure any more. He rubbed at his temple. The longer he was staying away from the other man, the fuzzier his thinking seemed to become.

With every day that passed, it was harder to be conscious of anything except how much he wanted to be back with the professor.

“If you want some privacy to make another call?” Mark Jefferies offered, looking from him to the phone and back again, sympathy shining in his eyes.

Ryland shook his head and traced his fingers over the buttons on the phone. “It’s fine. I just wanted to let him know I’m okay.”

“Are you okay?”

Ryland met the other man’s eyes once more. “Of course.” He got the distinct impression that Mark didn’t believe a word of it. “I’ll feel a lot better about it once the debt is settled.”

Mark smiled slightly. “You’re not the only one.”

Ryland managed to scrape up a smile for the other man.

Mark sighed and looked back to the door on the far side of the hallway. “Best get back to it before Jason catches us skiving off.”

With one last glance at the phone, Ryland followed Mark back into the room that had become his new home over the last week.

He tried to push the professor out of his mind and just get on with it, but he couldn't help but think of each day he spent away from the other man as a slightly more horrible form of torture than the last.

\* \* \* \*

*“Um, hi. I just... I can explain why I wasn't there, sir. It's not... I mean...”* The word faded off into a sigh. *“Something came up all of a sudden and...it's all a bit complicated, sir. I'll explain as soon as I get the chance.”*

Arslan pressed the button on his answer phone. The next message played.

*“I'm sorry I can't make it to the...to the...”* Several seconds of silence played through the speaker. Arslan held his breath, just as he had done every single time he heard the blasted message back, just in case this might be the time when nothing more was said after the hesitation. *“That I can't make it today, sir. Everything's fine. I'll explain it all next time I see you.”*

After spending the last two days hunting for the boy and not being able to find either him or anyone who resembled a brick wall with a snake tattoo, the message he'd discovered when he finally checked his answering machine at his office had left a hell of a lot to be desired. The new one that had come through before he'd arrived at the office that morning hadn't been any better.

No concrete information. Just a tone of voice that made it clear Ryland was trying to hide his pain from his master, and failing.

Arslan snarled at the machine, only just resisting the temptation to throw it across the room. It rang, seemingly in fear. Arslan snatched the phone off the hook before the first ring faded from the air.

It wasn't Ryland. It wasn't news about Ryland. Arslan put the phone back in its cradle and ran his hand down his face.

Flinging himself back into the chair at his desk, he glared at the phone. It didn't seem to be inclined to ring on command again.

Two days worth of searching for Ryland had given him the information that the younger man hadn't been seen at his office in the math department or anywhere around the university since their meeting in Ryland's office last Tuesday.

Fred had been ordered to make polite enquiries at his home. He hadn't panicked and gone to ground there either. The only evidence that suggested Ryland hadn't disappeared off the face of the earth were the three answering machine messages. One message for Fred on the day Ryland disappeared. One for his master, which had come through a few minutes after he'd left for the weekend the previous Friday. And now this one warning his professor not to expect him at the lecture that afternoon.

The knowledge that his pet had disappeared to an undisclosed location for an unspecified period of time wasn't a huge improvement on knowing nothing.

All he was sure of was that Ryland had been alive and reasonably well very early that morning. The fact he was alive provided sufficient relief for Arslan to take a deep breath and repeat the information over once more inside his head, just for the joy of knowing it.

The only other detail he was certain of was that someone else had been listening to Ryland's end of the phone call.

The professor looked down at his claws. That someone was going to have a hell of a lot of explaining to do when Arslan caught hold of them. If there was a single mark on Ryland, no explanation was going to prove sufficient.

\* \* \* \*

Four days later, Arslan stormed into the lions' den. The tire treads in the driveway implied that the sacrifice had already been delivered to the pride. The prospect of seeing another beautiful blond boy who wasn't Ryland standing on the hearth rug did little to make him feel better about the world.

He faltered and paused on the threshold, so exhausted he wasn't immediately sure if his mind was playing tricks on him.

He turned very slowly towards the door leading into the library. The other lions were there, just as he knew they would be. A naked human stood in the middle of them, just as he expected.

He watched, frozen in place as several the lions circled the young man in their midst. The other lions were so focused on whatever game they were playing, they hadn't heard him enter the building.

His roar took them all off guard.

## *Chapter Five*

When he launched himself through the doorway, Arslan was entirely human. By the time he landed in the middle of the scattering pride, he was all lion. Shaking out his mane, he impatiently cast aside the torn remnants of his clothes.

Only one man had remained in place while the others fled.

Ryland.

He stood stock still in the middle of the hearth rug, trussed up in the same stupid way the humans always insisted on delivering the sacrifices. It wasn't so much bravery as a prey's instinct to freeze when he heard a predator's roar. Even knowing that, Arslan still found himself feeling proud of his pet for holding his ground when the lions hadn't.

As the leader of the pride glared into the corners of the room, none of the younger lions dared to raise their eyes. Not one of them moved. Even Blaine and Luther seemed to have realized they had gone too far this time. Circling Ryland as if he was just any human, surrounding him when they couldn't have failed to sense his fear...

Arslan snarled as he circled Ryland himself, his claws catching at the hearth rug as a human temper mingled with a lion's instinct to protect his mate, and both demanded to be given free reign. The other lions pressed themselves back into the farthest edges of the room as their understanding of the situation deepened.

A log crackled in the fireplace. Ryland's gasp called Arslan's attention back to his mate. Morphing back into his human shape, he stood behind the younger man. He ran entirely human eyes over every inch of Ryland's naked body. They saw nothing his lion's sight had missed. The pale skin bore no bruises, no scars.

Taking a deep breath, Arslan filled his lungs with Ryland's scent, filled his mind with

Ryland's emotions. His pet was tired and anxious, but that seemed to be the worst of it. Ryland was back. He was safe and to all appearances, unharmed by his time away from the pride. Arslan let out the breath as relief flooded through his veins.

"Sir?" the younger man whispered.

Arslan's relief wasn't enough to wipe away all the other emotions that burned their way through his mind as he searched and failed to find the other man. "You disappeared." The accusation hung between them, each word laced with an anger Arslan wasn't strong enough to keep hidden from his pet.

Ryland swallowed rapidly, but didn't say anything.

"Speak!" He had to hear the other man speak.

A shocked little noise escaped from between Ryland's lips. He swallowed and tried again. "I gave the money back."

Arslan frowned at as much of his lover's expression as was visible to him. It was impossible to get any real sense of what the younger man was thinking while his eyes were hidden away.

A second's work on the buckle and he tore the blindfold from Ryland's eyes. The smaller man blinked up at Arslan, then quickly looked down.

Arslan studied his pet for several long seconds. He was afraid now. Not scared as he had been when the other lions were circling him. His scent made it seem as if he was far more afraid of explaining his actions to his master than he had been of anything else.

"Out. All of you," Arslan ordered the other lions.

He was vaguely aware of the other men as they slunk out of the room and closed the door softly behind them, but he didn't break eye contact with Ryland to watch them leave.

"You're back with your master now, you're safe," he reminded his mate.

Ryland didn't seem to take the reassurance he should have from the statement. Arslan ran his eyes over the younger man's body once more. Every instinct he possessed told him that the younger man hadn't been hurt while he was away from his pride, but right then, his instincts didn't feel like enough—not with a human. The idea that his pet might be hurt and his master was unable to tell clenched around his stomach, and he didn't even know how to ask the other man for the truth.

Humans weren't lions. They had to be protected and cherished and kept safe in the center

of whichever pride took them in. Acutely aware that he had already failed Ryland on that score once, Arslan's determination that it should never happen again doubled over and over inside him. It was exacerbated by his sudden uncertainty over how well he could read a human from his scent.

He couldn't look after his lover the way he should if Ryland was going to disappear. He couldn't retrieve his pet from whatever trouble he'd got himself into if his pet didn't provide him with suitable information when the opportunity presented itself.

"Did you know where you were?" Arslan asked.

Ryland hesitated.

Arslan frowned. The answer should have been a formality. The younger man shouldn't have had to hesitate before letting his master know he couldn't be blamed for what happened. The frown deepened. "When you left your message, did you know where you were?" he pushed.

The younger man nodded, just once, a movement almost too small to be perceived.

"You didn't tell your master where to find you," Arslan tried to keep the anger out of his voice. He wasn't entirely successful. His hands clenched into fists as his sides. Desperate to reach out to the other man, he felt wary with his pet in a way he'd never be if standing face to face with a feline lover.

Ryland had to clear his throat before he could croak out an answer past his nerves. "I'm sorry, sir. I wasn't alone when I made the calls."

Arslan's claws dug into his palms. He'd guessed that he wasn't alone from the message, and even if he hadn't, he had no reason to believe Ryland would lie to him. But something about the way Ryland offered the information was wrong. Every instinct Arslan possessed screamed that he wasn't the only one who thought it sounded like an excuse. Ryland agreed with him.

As he saw the look in the younger man's eyes, any doubts Arslan might have clung to vanished, leaving behind the complete certainty that Ryland had stayed away from the pride for no other reason than he had chosen to do so.

"It won't happen again, sir," Ryland promised, the words tripping over each other as he rushed to get them out.

"It won't," Arslan agreed. "Because I have no intention of allowing you out of my sight again." If Ryland couldn't be trusted not to wander off on his own and put himself in who knew what sort of danger, he'd be kept close and denied the opportunity to do so.



“Yes, sir.” He sounded as if he couldn’t think of anything he’d rather do more than to spend the rest of his life sitting quietly at his master’s side where it would be easier for his lover to keep an eye on him.

Ryland’s shoulders twitched as if he was so eager to reach out to his master, he’d forgotten his wrists were still bound with those cuffs the humans seemed so fond of. Finding himself unable to take his hands from behind his back, the younger man took half a step forward and brought their entire bodies half a step closer together instead. Then he hesitated, as if doubting his welcome.

Arslan lifted his own hand from his side. He unfurled his fist and slid one hand into the younger man’s hair. His other hand followed suit. It stroked along the other man’s back, guiding him to take the last step forward and come properly back to his master.

The professor’s nails tingled and tried to morph into claws as Arslan’s need to mark his territory tried to push all other considerations aside. He closed his eyes and tried to resist the urge, but the instinct to offer Ryland the only sign of possession he had at his disposal was too strong for him to conquer.

His palms slid down Ryland’s back, his claws caught at the younger man’s skin, leaving delicate declarations of protection in their wake.

Ryland gasped. His head dropped back, his eyes fell closed.

As his hands reached the small of Ryland’s back, Arslan forced his nails resume their proper human shape and be content with what he’d already allowed himself to indulge in. He trailed his fingertips over the lines, trying to sooth any discomfort he might have caused the smaller man.

Ryland blinked his eyes open. Their gazes locked. Pleasure sparkled in the younger man’s eyes. Arslan ran his palms over the marks and Ryland’s eyes dropped closed again.

”I missed them, sir.”

Arslan stared down at him.

“When they healed, sir,” Ryland said. “I missed them.”

Arslan nodded his understanding as he traced the scratches on the younger man’s back. Such good instincts for a human. He’d missed them too, knowing they were fading while his lover was away from his side.

Unable to accept even the tiniest distance between them a moment longer, he pulled

Ryland closer to his body so bare skin caressed against bare skin from tip to toe.

His pet shook slightly as he relaxed against him, as if some part of him had doubted his master would accept him back into the pride. Arslan buried his face in his hair and inhaled deeply, savoring his mate's presence. As safe as he undoubtedly was, wrapped within his master's embrace, the scent of fear still lingered.

"Tell your master what you're scared of, pet," Arslan whispered into his hair.

The younger man was quiet for a long time.

Arslan waited him out, silently begging him to trust his master enough that there would be no hedging and claims that he wasn't scared at all—that there would be no lies between them.

"Scared that there are some things a man can't fix," Ryland said so softly the words were barely audible. "That there are some things a lion can't forgive."

"You really thought I'd turn you away?" Pulling back slightly from his lover, Arslan looked down at the younger man's face.

Ryland didn't try to meet his gaze. Once more, his instincts seemed to have deserted him.

"You still think that," Arslan realized.

Ryland's Adam's apple bobbed several times as if he was trying to work some moisture into a throat left dry by nerves. "I gave the money back." The moment he'd forced the words out, he bowed his head to rest on Arslan's shoulder once more. He snuggled as close to his master as he could get.

The move was so instinctive, so kittenish, Arslan couldn't help but smile down at the top of his lover's head. Some part of Ryland obviously trusted him. As wonderful as that knowledge was, it did nothing to help him work out what his pet was trying to tell him.

"Your master can't forgive you for anything if you're going to speak in riddles, pet." He made the words as gentle as he could, but they still sounded loud and harsh next to Ryland's whispers.

The smaller man nodded, but made no attempt to offer his master any information that he could make sense of.

Taking a few steps back, Arslan sat down on the sofa. Ryland followed, lowering himself to kneel on the floor at his feet as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Arslan's hand settled in Ryland's hair and encouraged him to lean forward and rest his head against his leg, to take comfort in their closeness while he fought for his words.

It took more control than the professor expected to be able to push the habits of the lecture hall aside and wait for someone to frame an answer they obviously hadn't properly prepared in advance. It took more patience than Arslan knew he was capable of to accept that he couldn't expect Ryland to say things as easily as a lion would.

"I gave the money back," the younger man told him again.

Arslan waited in silence, stroking his fingers through the other man's hair.

"The money Kershaw gave me for agreeing to be thrown to the lions, sir," Ryland finally managed to specify. "I gave it back."

The words hung in the air between them. Arslan waited for the rest of the story, but that seemed to be it. The professor cautiously felt his way forward, trying very hard to see the situation from a human point of view when all he really wanted to do was give in to his lion side and make everything very simple between them.

"I didn't know," Ryland whispered as he finally looked up and met his master's gaze.

The pain in his eyes stole the breath from Arslan's lungs.

"It wasn't until you stood up in front of everyone and said I was better than some cheap whore that I realized you didn't know he pays men to come here."

Arslan stared down at him.

*"If you come here with no thought of your own gain,"* Ryland quoted back to him. He swallowed again. "I gave the money back, sir."

Arslan studied him carefully. His pet really seemed to believe that any man who'd seen him lie with his lover before the fire could believe he'd been thinking about money rather than his master.

Maybe if he had been a lion, things would have been different. Arslan stroked his fingers through the light blond strands again. If he had been a lion, he could have been held to account for entering into a situation where he could so easily have been hurt. Without the right instincts to sense such danger...

Arslan stared down at him. The advice he had been given so long ago replayed over and over inside his head. Don't expect too much from a human pet. They might live with lions, they may lay with lions, but they are still pets. Perhaps an instinct toward self-preservation was too much to expect.

Taking a deep breath, Arslan let it out very slowly. "The matter is closed," he finally said,

very simply. “You needn’t worry about it anymore.”

Ryland lifted his head and stole a glance up at him. At first, confusion clouded his gaze. As it cleared, he managed a small smile for his master.

Arslan stroked his fingers through his hair. Ryland leaned closer and pressed a kiss to the nearest bit of his master’s skin available to him, just above his knee. Arslan could practically see the tension and the fear drain away as he realized that, whatever he’d imagined his reaction was going to be, his master wasn’t going to be angry at his pet for making a pet’s mistakes.

“No one expects a human to be a lion,” he reassured him as gently as he knew how.

Ryland frowned slightly. “Sir?”

“No one expects a human to live up to the same standards as a lion, to make the same decisions as a lion,” Arslan explained. “Allowances will be made and—”

“No!”

Ryland scrambled away from him as if he’d raised a hand to strike him. Before Arslan realized what he intended to do, Ryland had dragged himself to his feet. He stumbled a few paces back as if he intended to flee, but when he reached the center of the room, he stopped.

Already on the edge of his seat, ready to spring forward and give chase, Arslan stilled.

“That’s not...” Ryland shook his head, his movements sharp and filled with panic. “I’m not asking you to make allowances for me.”

“You don’t need to ask,” Arslan told him “Humans are not lions. I understand that. So do the others.” He might not like it. He might actually hate it. But he knew it in the way a man could only know something when it had been pushed into his mind every day since he was old enough to understand what the words meant.

Humans weren’t like lions. Pets weren’t like masters. Allowances had to be made.

Ryland closed his eyes so tightly, lights flashed across the inside of his lids. When he opened them again, nothing had changed. He was just as screwed as he’d been from the start, except now there was no hiding from that fact.

Seeing no other alternative, he took a deep breath and forced the words past his lips. “I’ll take it.”

“Ryland?”

His mind spun with so many thoughts, Ryland didn’t even attempt to sort those that

should be said out loud from those he should keep locked away inside his head. “If that’s the best I can hope for, I’ll take it, sir.”

“What?”

Ryland glanced at the older man, but his gaze never crept higher than Arslan’s shoulders. He couldn’t bring himself to look the shifter in the eye. He’d been so sure it would work, that the pain of being away from the other man would be worth it because he’d somehow be able to make everything right between them when he came back.

He swallowed down his emotions as best he could, but the disappointment he’d heard in Arslan’s voice stuck in his throat and he choked on it.

A few years ago, in another living room on the other side of the city, he’d have done almost anything to be told that everything would be okay and he’d be tolerated in spite of his proving incapable of living up to the standard of behavior that was expected by those around him.

But right then, standing in the middle of the lions’ den, the realization that tolerance was the best he could hope for made it impossible to believe anything would ever be okay again.

“Ryland?”

“If there’s *any* sort of offer open, I’ll take it, sir,” Ryland repeated. If the pretty words in the other man’s invitation were ever anything more than pretty words, they obviously weren’t any more. From the way he spoke about humans now, it was hard to believe Arslan could have ever thought any human might prove to be worth keeping on his own merit.

Turning away from the older man, Ryland stepped closer to the fire and stared down into the blaze. He heard a movement that could have been Arslan rising from his chair, but he didn’t turn around. Whatever was going to happen between them, it was clear now that it would be nothing like the fantasy he’d spent the last two weeks building inside his head.

“You know, I was going to beg,” he whispered.

“Ryland?”

“When I came here tonight, I was going to beg you to forgive me and give me another chance.” Ryland closed his eyes against the sheer stupidity of it all, at getting his hopes up for no reason.

The air moved. Ryland knew Arslan was standing directly behind him. The professor didn’t say anything. Ryland couldn’t really blame him. There didn’t seem to be much left to say,

apart from, perhaps, for him to apologize for his behavior today as well as on his previous visit to the den. Without knowing about all his stupid little hopes, the other man had to think he was insane.

“I’m sorry, sir. I…” There wasn’t a single explanation or excuse he could think of except the one that was actually true. “I thought you meant it.”

“I’ve meant every word I’ve said to you, pet.” Arslan’s hand settled on his shoulder. For the first time Ryland could remember, the older man didn’t sound completely in control of the whole world. Frustration and confusion filled every word. It had obviously never even occurred to the professor that he was capable of aiming for more than another man’s tolerance of his failings.

“You really think that’s what I wanted when I came here tonight?” Ryland asked very softly. “To be told that I’ll never be good enough for you, but that’s okay because you don’t expect any better from me?”

“Don’t put words into my mouth, pet,” Arslan corrected. “I said expect you to be human—no more no less.” There was a touch of anger in the words. Ryland was willing to bet there was far more of it hidden away out of his sight.

Some of his own pain morphed into anger too, and he wasn’t so good at hiding it. “That’s what all humans are in the eyes of lions?” he asked. “Helpless little whores?”

Ryland gasped as the hand on his shoulder tightened its grip and spun him around to face the larger man. A moment later, his back was against the wall to one side of the fireplace. Arslan held him there with one hand in the middle of his chest.

He’d never seen the professor truly angry before. A minute before, Ryland would have sworn that he’d seen him furious in a dozen different lectures. He knew in that moment, he’d been wrong. He’d never seen Arslan even close to losing his temper before.

With so much pain and desperation swirling inside him, Ryland didn’t have any room left for any thought toward self-preservation. “If I’d been a lion, would you have forgiven me so easily, sir?”

“No,” Arslan snapped, apparently now angry enough to tell the truth as well.

“Because you’d expect better from a lion,” Ryland pushed.

Arslan’s lips began to frame an affirmative, but he stopped himself short with a snarl. “Our traditions exist for a reason. Don’t dismiss them as if they were designed as an insult to

you.”

Part of Ryland wanted to apologize. Part of him wanted to scream that he had no interest in any tradition that meant he had to lose everything he’d thought he was working toward over the last two weeks.

The other man’s acceptance of him had been such a beautiful mirage. He hadn’t even known how much he wanted it until he’d seen it there waiting for him, shining and shimmering just out of his reach. And now... Ryland swallowed rapidly and stayed silent.

“Lions are stronger than humans,” Arslan bit out. “We remember that, because if we forget, we’re not the ones who get hurt.”

“But that wasn’t the sort of allowance you were talking about making for me, was it, sir?” Ryland pushed.

Arslan stared down at him in silence for several long seconds. “If you’d been born with a lion’s instincts, raised within a pride that could teach you how to follow those instincts, you’d have had to be a fool to make the decisions you made over the last weeks. Is that what you want to me say?”

“Yes! And, if it’s the truth, treat me like a fool,” Ryland pleaded. “I’d rather that than have you think the idea I could ever be good enough for you was so laughable there’s no point in me even trying.” His tone was only one step above begging. The other man’s hand holding him against the wall damn near the only thing that stopped him lowering himself to his knees in earnest.

“Not acceptable.”

Ryland closed his eyes as he let his head fall back against the wall behind him, sick to his stomach with defeat. And the worst thing of all was knowing that he’d stay. Even if all he could get were scraps and pity, he’d stay.

“Open your eyes. Look at me,” Arslan ordered.

Ryland bowed his head, turning away from the other man as best he could when held against the wall.

“Now, not whenever you feel like it.”

Ryland blinked his eyes open, more in shock at the sudden change in tone than because his brain was in any condition to process an order and obey it accurately right then.

“You said you wanted to be treated like a lion—held to the same standards as a lion,”

Arslan said.

Ryland nodded, mutely.

“Not acceptable,” Arslan repeated, his eyes searching Ryland’s face as if looking for some clue to some ancient mystery Ryland wasn’t even aware of. “If you were a lion, nothing you’ve done in the last two weeks would be considered acceptable.”

Very slowly, scared to take a breath in case it would somehow cause everything to crumble around him, Ryland nodded his understanding. “Yes, sir.”

As if moving in slow motion, Arslan took his hand off Ryland’s chest and stepped back. He turned and took more several paces away from Ryland before he turned back to face him.

“A lion would be expected to explain his actions to the leader of his pride, to answer for them,” he said. His tone was more cautious than Ryland had ever heard, as if he was feeling his way forward in unfamiliar territory and wasn’t sure if he’d be required to change tactic at any moment.

Ryland nodded quickly, not sure he trusted his voice while everything rested on what the other man said next.

“That’s what you want?” Arslan pushed.

He nodded again.

“When you agreed to be thrown to the lions, you had no idea you would be safe with us, yet you agreed to it anyway.”

Ryland managed another nod.

“Unacceptable.” Suddenly, Arslan stood right before him, barely an inch of air between them.

Ryland gasped, staring up at the larger man. The cuffs behind his back were the only things that stopped him from reaching out to him right then.

“You could have been killed... You could have been...” Arslan shook his head at the same possibilities that had filled Ryland’s head before he recognized the professor that night. “You know that, and you agreed to it regardless. Unacceptable.”

Ryland couldn’t make the words much more than a whisper, but he forced them out regardless. “If I were to be held to the same standard as a lion, what would the punishment be, sir?”

“That’s not the way things work between lions.” Arslan turned away from him and strode



back into the middle of the room once more. For several long moments, he kept his back to Ryland as if deep in thought.

As Ryland stepped forward, he saw Arslan's shoulders tense and he knew the lion had sensed his approach. He forced himself to take another step forward. "Tell me how things are between lions, sir?"

The professor turned back to him. "A lion would wait until after his leader has finished with his questions before asking his own."

Ryland nodded his acceptance and fell silent. If there was any chance of being properly accepted by the other man, he knew he'd happily stay silent for the rest of his life.

Arslan reached out, he settled his palm on Ryland's cheek. Not sure what the appropriate lion response should be, he stayed still and took what reassurance he could from the gentle touch.

"Lions aren't permitted to disappear whenever the mood strikes. They aren't permitted to hide their location from the rest of the pride either," Arslan informed him, only slightly less cautiously.

Ryland swallowed several times in quick succession. "Graddage Street," he finally said. "In Jason Burrow's house. I borrowed money from him to pay back Kershaw."

"Lions are expected to learn from their mistakes," Arslan snapped, but he kept his hand where it was as Ryland felt the heat rush to his cheeks. It was the same tone of voice the professor used in his lectures when a student wasn't only failing to learn, but failing to make what Arslan considered to be a reasonable effort to do so. "If there's an explanation, give it."

"Being away from you hurt too much, sir," Ryland rushed out, his toes curling into the hearth rug as he fought to hold his ground in the face of the other man's displeasure.

Arslan's thumb stroked over the top line of his cheekbone, silently encouraging him to go on.

Ryland's hands clenched into fists behind his back as he held onto the desperate hope that the truth would help. "I couldn't come back and tell you I wasn't a whore while I still had Kershaw's money. I wanted to come back to you so badly, sir. Jason was the only way to do that this quickly."

"And what price did you pay for that decision, pet?" Arslan asked him, his voice rough with emotion, even as he made an obvious effort to speak gently to him.

"Mark Jefferies—Jason's boyfriend. He found out Mark was so busy fussing over him he

was flunking out. And he decided I was going to be his new tutor. Neither of us left Mark's study very often after that. I... I agreed to stay there. It was the only way to stay away from you until I deserved to come back and..."

"Neither he nor Jason laid a hand on you?" Arslan asked.

Ryland shook his head.

Arslan studied him for a while longer before he seemed willing to believe him. Ryland didn't miss the relief that flooded into his eyes just before he looked away.

"Very well. The remainder of the debt will be paid off tomorrow."

It took Ryland a few seconds to realize what the older man meant. "No."

Surprise flashed across the other man's face as if it had never occurred to him that Ryland could ever say that word to him.

"No," Ryland repeated, shaking his head, just so there could be no doubts surrounding the matter. "You can't." The other man couldn't pay it off for him. The time he'd forced himself to spend away from the other man had hurt far too much for it all to be wiped away as if he had never even tried to make things right by himself.

"The pride takes care of its own." There wasn't as little room for argument in the other man's tone as there had been in Ryland's. "A master takes care of his pet. I'd settle the debt if you were a lion."

Ryland hesitated. He lowered his gaze. "I'm not asking you to treat me like anything other than a lion, sir."

"It's that important to a human's mind?" Arslan asked, slipping into that slow, feeling his way forward tone of voice again.

"I'm not asking you to treat me like anything other than a lion," Ryland repeated. There was nothing that could ever make uttering that sort of request worth the risk. The other man's acceptance of him was far too fragile.

"You're not a lion."

Ryland couldn't hold back the flinch. The tone wasn't cruel. The words were nothing more than a statement of fact. Somehow, that just made it worse.

"I've never asked you to be," Arslan reminded him.

"I don't want allowances made for me, sir." It was pretty much the only thing Ryland was sure of. He wanted to be the man he'd believed Arslan thought he was when he made his first

offer. He needed to be that man. For once in his life, he had to be the man those around him wanted him to be.

“You wish to have permission to continue tutoring his lover?” Arslan asked. “To pay back the debt on your own.” He stepped closer and settled his other hand on Ryland’s shoulder, as if trying to coddle him with his support and understanding.

Ryland shook his head. Not at that price.

“I’ll speak to Jason tomorrow,” Arslan decided.

Ryland took a deep breath and let it out very slowly, trying not to care, trying not to believe he’d morphed back into a whore as his lover said the words.

Arslan’s fingers slid down his cheek. The older man tucked a knuckle under his chin. “You can pay back your loan in your own time if it means that much to you, but Jason will be made to understand that you’ll do so on terms that *I* deem acceptable. There will be no disappearing. There will be no keeping you away from your pride. Those are the things that matter to us, pet, not who holds the money in his hand.”

Part of him wanted what the other man offered him so badly. But, at the same time, another side of him was equally desperate to be kind of man who never needed to have that kind allowance made for him. Caught between the two ideals, Ryland had no idea what to say.

“A leader takes care of his pride,” Arslan repeated. “But he doesn’t do that by riding roughshod over those he cares for. If it’s important to you, arrangements can be made for you to pay back the money on your own terms.”

Ryland stared down at the floor to one side of them. There were so many thoughts running through his head, he didn’t know which ones to try to catch hold of. Every time he tried to trace one to its conclusion, it spiraled away from him, leaving him more and more lost by the moment.

“Don’t try to think,” Arslan told him. “Your instincts exist for a reason, and I’ve never known a human who takes to his instincts as beautifully as you do.”

“My instincts told me to pay back the debt myself, sir. That you’d be pleased with me for doing that.”

Arslan nodded as if that settled it. Dipping his head, he rested his forehead against the top of Ryland’s head the way he’d seen the other lions do with each other.

Closing his eyes, he relished the contact with the other man.

“Wanting to please your mate is a fine instinct,” Arslan whispered to him. “So is wanting to please the leader of your pride. But you won’t please me by pretending to be a lion.”

Ryland closed his eyes as tightly as he could and prayed the way he had when he was a little child—when he’d believed that praying hard enough would somehow make everything okay.

“You’ll please me by learning to be a good member of the pride, by learning to trust your human instincts,” Arslan whispered to him. “I can teach you how to do that.”

Ryland nodded very quickly. “Yes, sir.”

“Your instinct for self-preservation in particular needs a great deal of attention if we are to bring it up to a standard that a lion can find acceptable.”

Ryland glanced up at the other man. “I’ll work on it, sir.”

Arslan smiled down at him, and Ryland knew he had found the right answer. He smiled back.

“Good,” Arslan pressed a kiss on his temple. “And when you’ve learned what is expected of you, perhaps I’ll reconsider my decision to keep you within constant sight of the pride.”

Ryland hesitated. “You…”

“…meant it when I told you that you won’t be allowed out of our sight?” Arslan asked. “Yes. The leader of a pride doesn’t hand down punishments the way a human leader might, but lessons are given. That’s how the younger lions learn—there’s no reason why a human who joins us shouldn’t learn in the same way.”

For the first time in a fortnight, Ryland found himself able to take a breath without having to struggle for it. His mind settled. He felt the other man’s acceptance of him wrap around him, body and soul. Leaning forward, he rested his forehead on the other man’s shoulder.

“There’ll be many explanations still to come this evening.”

Ryland nodded, even that idea wasn’t enough to shake his newfound sense of peace as he lifted his head and met the other man’s eyes.

Arslan smiled down at him as if he understood. “There’s no reason why those explanations can’t be given after you’re formally made a part of the pride.”

An extra dose of relief raced through Ryland, making him lightheaded. He waited impatiently for the other man to recite the questions once more, but Arslan shook his head. “Such offers are made before the whole pride.” Arslan looked past him to the door leading out into the

hallway. His mood seemed to change slightly as he stared at it. All of a sudden, he was exactly the same man who'd stood in front of a lecture hall full of students or a room full of lions. "First, the others must be reminded of their manners."

"Sir?"

"Their behavior before I arrived was unacceptable." His voice was once more perfectly confident as he turned his attention to a problem he was obviously far more used to dealing with.

Ryland looked up at him blankly.

"Did any of the lions lay a hand on you before I arrived?"

Ryland shook his head, trying to keep up but falling behind as his lover returned to what was familiar to him and took it up as easily as he took each breath. "It was nothing, sir," he offered.

Arslan put his finger to Ryland's lips once more. "I decide what standards are permissible for the lions in my pride. When you know more of us—then you may offer your opinions on what you believe is appropriate conduct between you and the rest of the pride."

Ryland nodded again.

"Stay there."

Ryland did as he was told as the professor strode to the door and jerked open the heavy wooden panel.

The older man nodded to someone outside. "Watch him. He doesn't leave the fireside."

Ryland watched as Kefir, the smaller lion who he'd seen there a fortnight ago, walked into the room. Arslan really meant it. He really intended to provide him with a babysitter until he trusted him to make better decisions. The older man had really meant it when he said he'd make sure his lover reached the standard his leader expected of him.

The professor closed the door. Ryland stared at it for a long time, trying to wrap his mind around everything that had happened between them in the space of one short conversation. Everything was okay. Part of him believed that without really thinking about it. The part of him that had been screaming to return to the professor ever since he'd left the other man's side was silent and content, the rest of him was just as confused as hell.

Arslan actually...forgave him? Accepted him? Ryland swallowed, trying not to hope and not to doubt all at the same time.

A loud bang echoed into the room from somewhere else in the house. After everything

that had passed between him and Arslan, Ryland's nerves couldn't take much more. He jumped. "What—?" He looked across to Kefir.

The lion looked to the door, then back to him. "He asked you what happened before he arrived?" he asked, very softly.

Ryland stared at the door. A roar floated into the room, muffled by the door and distance, but still more than enough to make the hairs on the back of his neck stand up and a shiver run down his spine. "He asked if anyone laid a hand on me," he offered.

"And you said...?"

"I said they didn't."

Kefir smiled and seemed to lose some of his interest in the roar that came from outside the snug little room. "He won't hurt them."

Ryland looked to the lion and met his eyes. "And if I said they had hurt me?"

Kefir held his gaze. No words were required. His expression said it all.

Ryland looked away first. "He said things would be handled as they are between lions. I don't know what that means."

Kefir seemed to think about that for a while. "I don't know what *not* handling things the way they are handled between lions means," he said after a while. "I've spent less time among humans than the others." He walked across to the rug before the fire and sat down there, close to the heat from the blaze.

Ryland lowered himself to his knees, a little clumsy with his hands still tied behind his back. He looked back to the door when someone roared again.

"We're just supposed to sit here while..."

Kefir shook his head. "No. You're supposed to sit here. I'm supposed to watch you."

"And if I try to leave?" Ryland asked.

"I stop you."

Ryland looked to the other man. He was the only lion there who wasn't much larger than him. They would probably be pretty evenly matched if his hands weren't tied behind his back.

The other man's lips twitched into a tiny smile. "Even a small lion is still a lion."

Ryland took a deep breath and let it out very slowly.

"Does it bother you," he asked cautiously. "Being sent out of the room when they..."

Kefir's eyes sparkled with amusement. "I'm here because Arslan doesn't wish you to

disappear again. If I wasn't watching you, I'd be in there with the others. I may not have been one of those circling you, but when one lion in the pride fails, the whole pride fails. Arslan expects better from us."

Ryland glanced to the door. Arslan brought the lions in his pride up to a standard he deemed acceptable. They weren't cast out of the pride if they screwed up. If he could just convince the other man that humans could be treated the same away, it seemed just possible that he'd be able to hold onto that safe, perfect feeling inside him, the instinct that said everything was fine and he had nothing more to worry about.

"I've never seen Arslan scared before."

Ryland's attention snapped back to the younger lion.

"The bonds between a lion and the human he takes as a true mate are strong," Kefir said in the same soft tone of voice that seemed to come so naturally to him. "Not being able to find you scared him."

His tone of voice was unfailingly polite. Ryland was still left in no doubt that the lion wasn't impressed with him worrying his leader.

"The bond, it's what makes you feel uncomfortable when you're away from..." he sighed his frustration. He didn't even know the right words to talk about it with Kefir, let alone to understand it well enough to make things work with Arslan. Imagining that everything would be easy now he was back with the professor was stupid.

He looked up and caught Kefir's eye. The younger lion nodded his understanding that Arslan hadn't been the only one that hadn't been happy when they were apart. It didn't seem to convince Kefir that his disappearance was acceptable, but it seemed to make him ever so slightly less standoffish. It offered a little hope.

"Arslan has agreed that allowances won't be made for my mistakes just because I'm human," he offered.

Kefir nodded slightly, as if he approved. "I think he'll be happier if—"

The door swung open. Arslan strode back in. A nod to Kefir dismissed the smaller lion. He didn't even look at Ryland before he left the room at his leader's command.

Ryland managed to stumble back to his feet.

Arslan closed the door behind Kefir very softly, with obviously emphasized control.

Ryland glanced toward the door. "Kefir said you wouldn't hurt them because they hadn't

laid a hand on me.”

“I didn’t hurt them,” Arslan agreed. “I explained the situation to them, there’s a difference.”

Ryland made no comment.

Arslan’s lips twitched. “Sometimes lions explain things to each other very loudly. You’ll get used to it as you spend more time with us.”

“You explained things quietly to me, sir.” He tried not to make it sound like an accusation. He wasn’t sure if he succeeded, not while the other man’s agreement to treat him like a lion was so new and fragile.

“You’re my mate.”

Ryland hesitated.

“I have no desire to speak loudly to my mate—regardless of his species.”

Ryland looked down as he nodded his understanding.

“Do you have any questions for your master before you give him your answer?”

“You said I should trust my instincts, sir,” Ryland reminded him

“It doesn’t come so easily to humans. A lion might know how he feels about someone the first moment he sets eyes on them. Perhaps it takes humans a long time to work out if they feel the same?”

“I knew,” Ryland whispered. “That first night—if I thought I deserved it, I’d have begged you to let me stay right then.” Ryland looked down. He’d known he was in love with the other man from that first night too, even if he didn’t have the courage to confess as much right then.

Arslan stroked his cheek with the back of his knuckles before reaching around behind him and undoing the cuffs from his wrist. As the bondage fell away, he glanced at the door. “Let the others in.”

Ryland walked across the room and opened the door. Several lions looked up. Real lions. Not men who could theoretically turn into lions. Not men who looked a bit like lions with their hair running wild like manes. Honest to God—the kind of things you see in wildlife documentaries eating wildebeest—lions.

Ryland’s eyes traveled over the pride very slowly, taking in every detail.

Two were lying in a tangled heap of limbs. Luther and Blaine. One was smaller and fairer with a shorter mane. Kefir. He couldn’t recognize any of the others, but as they all stared at him,



Ryland could swear he saw a question flash in all their eyes.

## *Chapter Six*

“Arslan says you may come back in.”

Arslan let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. His pet sounded far calmer than he'd expected, all things considered.

He studied the younger man very carefully as Ryland walked back across the room to him. All the things he'd been taught about human pets still echoed around inside his head, but now they were mixed in with how the pet himself believed a human joining a pride should be treated.

For the first time since he was a cub, he found himself face-to-face with a man he really didn't know what to do with. Lions were easy. Students required a different approach, but after so many years standing in front of a lecture hall, Arslan knew how to deal with them too. A pet who didn't want allowances made for him was a new and unpredictable quantity.

Arslan met the other man's eyes, but found himself unable to read the emotions that raced through Ryland's expression. The most important man in his life and the one he could so easily fail.

Ryland stepped straight into his personal space as if it never occurred to him to do any differently. Arslan's arms automatically went around him. His hand settled on the small of his back, welcoming him even closer. Coming face-to-face with the pride in their other form didn't seem to have fazed him in the least.

“You can do that too, sir?”

“Yes.”

Ryland nodded. His eyes roamed over his face and Arslan knew he was wondering what he'd look like as a lion. “Show me later, sir?”

Arslan nodded his acceptance of the request before he looked past his pet to the younger lions. They looked very guilty now. Little cubs who'd been caught playing games they'd been warned about before. Not one of them tried to meet his eyes.

It took more strength than Arslan knew he had to step back from Ryland and go through the proper forms.

“If you come to us willingly and of your own free will, with no thought for your own gain and only wishing to add to the pride then you are welcome.” This time, the words were far harder to say. Last time he'd said them, it had never actually occurred to him that Ryland might say no.

Last time, he'd known the younger man should belong to him, but it had been a lion's instinct that made the decision. The lion had wanted him from the start, but now, it felt like he had far more to lose. It was one thing to deal with a lion's desire to possess. Then he hadn't really understood that the human man inside him needed Ryland too.

He needed the younger man safe beside him. He needed to feel his skin under his palms and the blood pushing through his veins. If Ryland's time away from him had taught Arslan anything, it was that he couldn't lose Ryland again. Everything rested on the younger man's answer.

“If you wish to belong to the pride, to take your rightful place in the pride, you are welcome.”

Ryland stared up at him. Just like last time, there were far too many emotions swirling in his eyes for Arslan to have any idea what he was thinking.

“If you come to us without lies or secrets, you are welcome.”

He could feel the attention of the younger lions boring into him as the whole room seemed to hold its breath on his behalf.

“If you are who we believe you to be, say that you wish to take your rightful place in the pride, and you will be welcomed.”

As Ryland continued to hold his eyes through the whole speech, the world changed around them. Arslan could still feel the other lions' presence in the room watching him, but they were very far away. The whole world was very far away, as if the only people who really existed right then were him and Ryland.

Jason bloody Burrows. Money. What he had been taught about human pets. It was all just

something that happened to other people. While Ryland stared back up at him, it was almost impossible to believe that he didn't feel the same way.

“Yes, sir.”

And, as simply as that, it was done.

Arslan held out his hand. Ryland took one step forward, and suddenly, he was in his arms, holding onto him so tight, it was hard to believe all that strength came from one small human.

One of the younger lions let out a whoop. Pandemonium descended. Arslan gave into the temptation to grin into Ryland's hair as he held him in return, as tightly as he dared. He felt the younger man smile into his shoulder in response.

When he finally looked up, Arslan shook his head at them all. It didn't take much to induce the younger lions to celebrate, but this time he couldn't blame them.

“Can we eat now?”

Arslan met Blaine's eyes. The younger lion hesitated. Arslan made him wait before he finally nodded his permission. It wasn't easy to resist the urge to throw them all out so he could be alone with Ryland. Still, he somehow forced himself to let them to stay, to let them begin to get to know the newest member of their pride properly. And he let them linger long enough to be reassured that their leader was willing to forgive them too, provided they had learned from their mistakes of course.

“When they are gone, you and I are going to have a very long talk,” Arslan whispered in Ryland's ear. “Then we're going to see what else we can find to do to pass the night.”

The man who'd laid on the rug with him two short weeks ago shouldn't have been able to blush at the suggestion. Ryland managed to. “I'd like that, sir.”

They fetched their food from the table and returned to their seats around the fireplace. Just as he warned Ryland before, he kept the younger man well within his sight. He didn't even let him out of arm's reach. He had the right to keep him that close now. Ryland was his. His pet. His mate. His lips twisted into a smile at the thought.

“Are you to live here now?”

Arslan turned towards Luther's conversation with Ryland as the question caught his attention. “When you need to be informed of our decisions, you will be.”

Ryland glanced up at him.

Yes, he was going to live there with him. No, he wasn't going to make him aware of that fact in front of all the other members of the pride. Ryland smiled slightly and dropped his gaze, as if he understood that, or maybe as if he hoped that would be the case.

As the evening went on, Arslan continued to listen to the rather tentative conversations Ryland had with the other lions. The rest of the pride seemed rather curious about him, but still somewhat unsure what they were supposed to do with him now that he was effectively one of them.

They stared more than they spoke. It was almost as if they had never seen a human before. No one laid a paw on him. A little bubble of clear air existed around the younger man's body that none of the other lions dared venture into right then.

Once they provided evidence that they'd learned their lesson and had been properly forgiven for their behavior that night, he'd have to nudge them in the direction of being able to have real conversations with Ryland, but he quite liked the physical gap between Ryland and the rest of the world. Ryland was his. The smile crept back to his lips.

He'd thought that all the younger lions were staring at Ryland, studying this newcomer in their midst, but Arslan gradually realized that at least one set of eyes was resting on him. He looked up from his study of his new pet. Kefir politely looked down when Arslan caught his eye, but he soon glanced back up.

When Arslan finally gave in to temptation to shepherd them all into their clothes and out of his house an hour later, he stopped his youngest follower by the door.

"He makes you happy," Kefir observed.

"Yes."

Kefir nodded something like acceptance. "I'm glad he came back."

Arslan ruffled his hair and closed the door firmly behind him and all the others. When he went back to the library, Ryland was still sitting in front of the fire where he had left him. Arslan stopped in the doorway and looked him over.

The fire crackled and sent a flurry of sparks up the chimney. The light from the blaze shone onto Ryland's face as he stared into the hearth. Closing his eyes for a moment, he took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. When he looked across to the door, he smiled when he saw him.

Closing them in the room together, Arslan walked across to the fireside.

Ryland got to his feet. “You trusted me on my own, sir,” he observed with cautious pleasure.

“I was between you and the front door the entire time. You have a lot to prove before you’re left completely to your own devices.” He stroked his hair to gentle his words, but Ryland took the correction better than he expected. He took it much like one of the better-behaved cubs who had joined his pride would if they were in his place.

“I live here now, don’t I, sir?” Ryland said after a while.

“Yes.”

His pet nodded his acceptance of that too. “I’ll have to give notice on my room.”

Arslan slid his fingers through the younger man’s hair once more.

“If I start packing my things tomorrow then—”

Ryland seemed to lose his trail of thought as Arslan guided him to tilt his head back and brushed their lips together.

“Pack your things as slowly as you like, but when you sleep, it will be in my bed—in our bed.” That wasn’t negotiable. He’d already waited far too long to have Ryland close through the night. He might not have been exactly sure what allowances and indulgences his pet would need in order to find a contented place within his pride, but anything that took him out of his master’s bed for even a single night wasn’t going to be part of that.

Ryland nodded. “Now, sir?” he suggested.

Arslan brushed their lips together again. Ryland was his mate. It was official, but it would feel even more certain once more than mere words passed between them. Waiting for privacy had been torment enough, now he could barely convince himself to take the necessary time to leave the fireside and make their way upstairs.

Ryland in front of the fireplace was a beautiful thing. Arslan’s memory of the time they had spent there had been the only thing that had kept him sane while the other man had been gone. Still, no matter how much he longed to lay him down on the rug and destroy all doubt of who he belonged to, he needed to see him in his bed, too. It was that instinct that won out in the end.

Turning away from Ryland, he strode to the door.

Ryland didn’t need to be ordered, or even invited to join him. He was standing at his side before any words could leave Arslan’s lips. He shivered as the colder air in the hallway

surrounded him, but he made no complaint.

Arslan made a mental note to see that the whole house be heated to human temperatures. At least the master bedroom was somewhere a human would be comfortable, heated by the warmth from the fire in the room directly below. As Arslan closed the door behind them, Ryland seemed to hesitate for the first time. Arslan stepped behind him and kissed his neck. “It’s your room too, pet. Don’t act like a visitor.”

Ryland turned in his arms. He reached out and settled his hands on Arslan’s skin, but he still seemed more hesitant there than he had been downstairs. Arslan ran his palms over the younger man’s back encouraging him to lean into his master’s body and relax, but his pet remained tense.

“You said there’d be more explanation, sir.”

“Yes.” Arslan rested his forehead on the other man’s temple for a few moments, but whichever way he turned the situation, Ryland was right. Things had to be properly settled between their minds before they could move on to anything else.

“I meant it, sir—no allowances. I’ll learn how to be a lion, learn how to be exactly what you want.” The words were whispered against Arslan’s shoulder, but no matter how hushed they were, both the individual words and their meaning was clear.

Arslan forced himself to pull back far enough to look down into the younger man’s eyes.

“Wanting to please your master is natural. But you need to remember that your master will not be pleased with you if you’re so busy worrying about playing the part of a lion that you forget that he fell in love with a human.”

Ryland looked up at him, surprised.

“Did you think I’d ask you to be my mate on a whim, pet?”

Ryland shook his head. “I just wasn’t sure if...how lions might... I’d rather you didn’t make allowances, sir.”

Coaxing Ryland backwards, Arslan guided him down onto the edge of the bed before sitting beside him. “Because?”

Ryland stared at the rug by the side of the bed for a few long moments. “Because I tried asking someone to make allowances for me a long time ago. I learned from my mistake—I won’t do that again.”

Arslan reached out to the other man. It had been drummed into him from the time he was

old enough to listen that humans were fragile, vulnerable creatures. Staring down at Ryland's bowed head, he could easily believe every word of it was right. He set his hand very gently on his pet's back, offering what comfort he could.

"Your housemate mentioned that you're not on easy terms with your family."

"Bit of an understatement, sir," Ryland muttered.

"Lions have never considered which gender a man is attracted to important. It's not..." he trailed off as he felt Ryland tense.

"That's what everyone thinks," the younger man whispered after a while. "That they chucked me out when they found out I was gay."

Arslan stroked his palm up and down his lover's spine and waited.

"They threw me out when they found out I was applying for math rather than medicine."

Arslan tried to follow. He failed.

Ryland glanced up at him. "In 1518, a small group of doctors petitioned Henry VIII to set up the Royal College of Physicians. One of the group was Harold Gilford. Since then, every single sodding Gilford knew what he was going to be when he grew up—the daughters too, for the last hundred years or so."

"And when they found out you weren't intending to..." Arslan realized.

Ryland gave a bitter little laugh. "I'd guessed they'd be furious. I never thought they'd actually cut me out of their lives." For a few seconds, he was silent. "They said I'd come crawling back once I was broke and had to drop out. But I won't—whatever it takes, I won't do that."

Arslan put his arm around the younger man and guided him to rest against him.

Ryland took a deep breath. His shoulders trembled as he made an obvious effort not to let it out as a sigh. "I should have known how it would be. That's the way it works, isn't it? You have to fit in. I get that now. You don't step out of line. You do what's expected of you, and you don't ask anyone to make allowances. I won't make the same mistake again, sir."

Arslan pressed a kiss onto the top of his head.

"I won't lose this too," Ryland whispered. "I won't."

Wrapping him completely in his embrace, Arslan held him as tightly as he dared and tried not to let on just how irresponsible for his actions he'd be if he set eyes on any member of his pet's family right then. The closeness seemed to help the younger man find the courage to speak.



“You want to know what they said when I finally worked out the courage to tell them I was gay?” Ryland whispered.

Arslan didn't trust himself to speak. He made an encouraging little noise in the back of his throat. That seemed to be enough.

“There's still plenty of work to be done in the field of HIV research.” Ryland gave another of those bitter little laughs. “A gay doctor would have been fine with them. It's just easier to let people think that...”

Arslan pressed another kiss to the top of his head.

“I never did learn how to fit in with them. I was always the cuckoo in the nest. This time, it'll be different, sir.”

Arslan closed his eyes for a moment, as he began to understand just how terrifying it had to be for Ryland to find himself thrown into the middle of another family that he didn't quite fit into yet. Even if his disappearance still wasn't acceptable, he could see why he'd thought fixing everything before he came back to his mate was the only way to keep himself safe.

“You're safe now,” he whispered to his pet.

Ryland nodded. He seemed to make some sort of effort to pull himself together. “And you were right about my instincts, I'll work on them, sir.”

“We'll do that,” Arslan agreed. He stroked the back of his knuckles down the younger man's cheek. “What do your instincts tell you to do right now?”

Ryland tilted his head back, offering his lips up to be kissed. It was a beautiful invitation, a plea for reassurance and acceptance as much as anything else. Arslan didn't hesitate to bring their lips together.

As one kiss turned into another and another, he felt Ryland relax and forget about all his worries. Very cautiously, the younger man began to return the kiss. His actions were impossibly tentative at if he expected his master to pull away at any moment, and he was determined to have his apology ready as soon as that happened. As the minutes passed, his confidence seemed to grow. He leaned into the kiss, his hands sought his master's skin.

As Ryland gained the courage to run his hands up his shoulders and thread his fingers into his hair, Arslan began to turn them, so he could guide his lover to lie back on the mattress. When Arslan finally broke the kiss, Ryland, stared up at him, wide eyed and with his lips slightly reddened. When his pet's tongue flickered out to steal a taste of his master from Ryland's lips,

Arslan couldn't help but think back to the feel of that impossibly soft tongue as it explored his shaft back in the office at the university.

Kneeling on the mattress, Arslan leaned over the smaller man and kissed him again. At the same time, his hands found Ryland's wrists and pinned them to the sheet, wondering if he'd like that as much as some of the other human pets had in the past.

The action only increased Ryland's attempts to wriggle and rub his body against him as he finally let go of his worries and gave in to his instinct to deepen the kiss. Ryland's shaft nudged against his leg as he hardened. Yes, in some ways he was just like other pets.

Pressed so intimately against his lover, Arslan sensed every little change in the younger man's body as Ryland lost himself in pleasure and forgot to worry about anything at all.

Guiding his pet to bring his hands together above his head, Arslan covered both his wrists with one of his own hands. His free hand pushed Ryland's hair back from his face and traced down his neck.

Desire to possess rushed through him. And even more than that, was the desire to have Ryland acknowledge who he belonged to, for his pet to know that he had found where he belonged and that he was safe and accepted there.

"Mine," he whispered in Ryland's ear.

Ryland nodded. "Yes."

"Forever."

"Yes, sir." The word was whispered in that same slightly awestruck tone of voice, as if he still had trouble wrapping his mind around everything that meant.

Arslan brushed their lips together once more before leaning back and putting some space between their bodies so he could look at him properly. Even after he let go of Ryland's wrists, his pet didn't try to move. He lay there and let his master look his fill.

"Please?"

The word had left Ryland's lips before he'd even known he wanted to say it. He wasn't even sure what he was asking for. Arslan tore his gaze away from his body and looked up to meet Ryland's eyes.

Possession and desire filled his expression. Now that he wasn't afraid to make a fool of himself by looking for it, it was easy to imagine he could see a deeper, more tender emotion

mixed in with them.

Arslan didn't strike him as the sort of man who said something unless he was sure of it. If he said he wouldn't ask a man to join his pride unless he was in love with him, Ryland had no reason to believe that was anything less than the absolute truth.

Leaning down, Arslan offered him his lips for another brief kiss. Before Ryland had a chance to appreciate it, his mouth was gone, tracing a line down his neck. Arslan nipped at the sensitive bit of skin just above his collarbone. From there, he trailed his lips down his body, his tongue rasping against his right nipple on the way past.

It didn't just make it easy to think only of that moment and not worry about what a lion would do in his place, it made it damn near impossible for Ryland to think of anything but the scrape of Arslan's tongue and the softness of his lips against his skin.

He gasped as he felt Arslan begin to trace a line straight down the center of his body. Forcing his eyes open, Ryland watched as Arslan reached his cock and took the tip of the shaft between his lips as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

If the sensation of Arslan's mouth on his body had kept him happily frozen in place, the first touch of the lion's tongue on his erection made it impossible to stay still for a moment longer. His hands went to Arslan's hair. He couldn't stop himself tangling his fingers in the long dark strands.

He'd apologize for that later. And he'd apologize for not being able to keep his hips still too. He was quite happy to apologize for everything in the world and beg the other man's forgiveness later. But right then, it was impossible to think clearly about manners or control or anything else, because his entire brain was devoted to processing every single sensation of Arslan's mouth wrapped around his shaft.

The older man sucked around the head as his tongue played with the very tip of his cock, coaxing him to moan and toss his head back against the bed. His fingers tightened in Arslan's hair, and he tugged as gently as he could at the long strands, pulling his lover's mouth away from him.

Arslan let Ryland's cock slip from between his lips as he looked up and met his eyes.

"Come if you don't stop," Ryland managed to explain. And he knew he couldn't come right then, because he wanted to come when his master was buried deep inside him. He wanted to be wrapped in Arslan the way he had been in front of the fire when the whole world had

stopped existing, all except for that very perfect bit of it that contained them.

Arslan didn't question any of it, he just nodded as if he understood it all without needing information that could be broken down into letters and words. Ryland watched as the other man retrieved a tube of lube from his bedside drawer. He slicked his fingers but shook his head when Ryland would have rolled over onto his hands and knees.

Ryland thought he saw what the other man wanted in his eyes, but it was impossible to be sure. Not sure what else to do, he gave his instincts full reign. Lying back again, he pulled his knees back towards his chest. For a few seconds at least, his instincts seemed to have held him in good stead. Within seconds, Arslan had two slicked fingers working inside him. Ryland bit his lip in the hopes he could keep the sounds of his enjoyment to himself.

A look from the shifter was all it took to inform him that he was mistaken in the belief that quieter was better. The instinct to please the other man came back full force and everything else became irrelevant. Ryland released his tooth hold on his lip and let Arslan hear his whimpering responses as the professor's fingers found his prostate. When he saw pleasure flare in the older man's eyes, it was suddenly impossible to care if he was acting like a human or a lion or anything else. His master was pleased with him, and nothing else mattered.

As much as he wanted to just let go and let Arslan do as he wished with him, and as much as he wanted to show that he could follow the other man's lead and not question his decisions—it was impossible to do that forever. Eventually, he had to face the very real possibility that, if he let Arslan's fingers continue to play inside him much longer, he wouldn't just come too soon, he might actually lose his mind all together.

“Need,” he managed to whisper. “Need. Now. Please, sir.”

Arslan leaned over him and touched their lips together as he took his fingers away. A moment later, his body covered Ryland's. The tip of the professor's slicked cock brushed against his hole.

“Please,” was the only word left in Ryland's head. If he had any of those instincts that Arslan wanted him to trust, every one of them was screaming at him that he needed the other man inside him. He reached out and caught hold of Arslan's shoulders, tugging at him, trying to show him what he needed so badly.

As he looked up and met the lion's eyes, Arslan pushed into him, slow and steady, filling him, stretching him and taking over his whole world. His hands tightened around Arslan's

shoulders. His nails bit into the older man's skin as if some part of Ryland really thought he could mark his lover just as Arslan's claws had claimed ownership of him.

All too soon, Ryland felt himself rush to the edge. He scrambled to hold onto any sort of control, but it was impossible. He bucked underneath the other man's body as Arslan thrust into him, and came untouched, between their bodies.

Just like in the den a lifetime ago, Arslan thrust into him, through his orgasm, until Ryland finally fell still. Blinking his eyes open, he gazed up at the other man, mesmerized by the expression on his face.

One more thrust. Another. Arslan tossed back his head and roared his own pleasure up to the ceiling. When the sound died away, Arslan stilled, bowing his head to look down at Ryland.

Ryland stared up at him for a few seconds before he let his eyes drop closed so he could fix every detail in his head before they slipped away. Leaning over him, Arslan brushed his lips across the closed lids as if in praise for giving in to the instinct to do that.

The younger man smiled up at the professor as the older man moved away—just far enough to let Ryland to roll onto his side facing him. They both lay there, still and silent for a long time, just catching their breaths. Finally, the shifter leaned forward and brought their lips together. A second later, he nodded to the door that seemed to lead into a little en-suite, inviting Ryland to make use of it before they settled to sleep.

When he came back into the room, Ryland was left entirely alone as Arslan took his turn in the bathroom. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he looked around the room. It looked like a perfectly normal room, kept by a person who liked order and neatness, but still, a perfectly normal human room. There wasn't a trace of lion in it. His eyes fell on the door that led out into the hallway. There was a large old-fashioned lock just below the handle. There wasn't a key in it.

"Yes, it's locked."

Looking back to the door leading into the en-suite, Ryland saw Arslan standing in the doorway. "Is it wrong that part of me likes knowing that, sir?"

"Knowing that your master cares for you, that he wants to keep you close? It seems to be a very sensible thing for a pet to like."

Ryland dropped his gaze to the rug by the side of the bed.

"That's what a pet is," Arslan said. "A man who likes to be looked after by his master, who likes to be kept close and safe, to know there's someone looking after him, watching over

him.”

“It’s not...it’s not someone who...” Ryland dropped his gaze, not sure what the right words were.

“It’s not an insult. I wouldn’t use the term with you if it were.” There was no room for argument in the professor’s tone.

“You said you would show me what you look like when you’re a...” Ryland blurted out. It was the wrong time. Part of him knew that, but the part that might be an instinct wanted to be able to tell his master that he accepted every part of him, just as the other man had so carefully accepted his mistakes, his humanity, just as carefully as the other man accepted every part of him.

Arslan made no reply, he merely shifted into his lion form, right there in front of him, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Ryland held his breath as a fully-grown lion padded across the bedroom carpet and stopped in front of him.

Ryland watched as his hand reached out and his fingers ran lightly over the dark mane that surround the lion’s face. Swallowing his nerves, he cautiously touched the lion’s cheek. As he stared down at him, the lion turned his head and licked his fingertips.

Frozen in place, Ryland just continued to stare and run his fingers over the mane until he managed to scrape together some words. “Thank you, sir.”

Under his touch, Arslan became a man once more. Ryland’s hand settled into human hair. He couldn’t help but reach out and touch the other man’s cheek again, comparing the human side of him with the lion side of him.

“Your eyes are always the same,” he blurted out.

Right then, Arslan’s eyes looked quite amused. He turned his head and licked Ryland’s hand, just as the lion had.

Leaning down from his seat on the edge of the bed, Ryland brushed their lips together.

Arslan smiled into the kiss, as if just slightly amused with his clumsy attempts to show he wasn’t the least bit freaked out about anything at all. When he pulled back, Arslan nodded at the mattress. Ryland got the hint and shuffled back along the sheet so the professor could join him in the bed.

The professor very gently, very patiently nudged him into a position that pleased him, curled up close against his master’s side. The lion’s skin was wonderfully hot in the slight chill

of the room. Ryland found himself automatically snuggling into his lover's side under the blankets.

"I love you too, sir."

Arslan pulled back a fraction, to look down at him.

"You said earlier," Ryland reminded him.

"Yes, I did," Arslan agreed.

"I just thought... It seemed wrong not to tell you that I do love you too—the lion bit as well as the professor bit. I thought you should know."

"It's a good instinct," Arslan agreed.

Ryland nodded.

Arslan guided him to rest his head back against his shoulder.

"Trust your other instincts too. What do they tell you to do right now?"

Ryland smiled slightly against the other man's shoulder before he curled a little more snugly into his master's embrace and let his eyes drop closed.

His only instinct right then was simply relax and drift into sleep, secure in the knowledge that his master was right there, and for the first time he could remember, he was safe, accepted and exactly where he belonged.

The older man pressed a final kiss onto his temple before reaching out switching off the light. It was all the praise Ryland needed in order to believe his master was right—he really did have good instincts.

## *About the Author*

26 years old, from Wales, UK, Kim writes about kink, love and happy endings. If a story doesn't have those three things, it's not going to be written—at least not by this writer!

Apart from that, Kim likes to write a little bit of everything. So far that list includes Male/Male, Male/Female, a few different varieties of ménage, shifters, vampires, fairytales, time-travel and ghosts. It's anyone's guess what will come next...

A firm believer that there is no “One True Way” for people to kink, Kim likes to let the characters in each book pick their own ways to dominate and submit to each other. As long as they stay safe, sane and consensual—Kim's happy to let them live their lifestyle 24/7, or just open the toy box on weekends—whatever's right for them.

Published since 2008, Kim also writes BDSM erotic romances for Total-e-bound. Kim loves to talk to her readers and can be found at [www.kimdare.com](http://www.kimdare.com).



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### ***Extinction***

Professor of Environmental Science/Wildlife studies at UNLV, Jack McBain has spent his adult life trying to track a legend overheard during his youth. Born and raised in the Canadian Province of Newfoundland, Jack remembers his grandparents telling stories of a race of people eradicated by European settlers in 1829. According to the legend, the Beothuk people didn't die out as first thought, but were transformed into wolf shifters.

When Newfoundland wolves began to appear in great numbers, the European settlers began killing them under the guise of population control. In 1910, the last of the Newfoundland wolves was shot, making them one of the few extinct species of wolves in the world.

Following spotty leads, Jack begins to track what he believes are Beothuk/Newfoundland shifter wolves. His search leads him to the Lake Mead National Recreational Area outside of Las Vegas. There, on Spirit Mountain, he finally comes face to face with not only the shifter he's been looking for, but the man of his dreams he didn't know he needed.

### ***Retribution***

Three lonely souls find each other in the midst of an all out war between the shifters and the Hunters.

Mother Earth gave Ryker Allen rebirth over a century ago, his main purpose to protect Mother's shifter children. Ryker has never begrudged his duties, but the loneliness is something he'll never get used to.

Daniel was the King of the Coyotes until a mistake led to the decimation of his species. Alone and half-dead, he was taken in by a pack of wolf shifters as a pet for the Alpha's mate. When he's given a chance to live as an Alpha once again, he's reluctant to accept, afraid he's no longer worthy to lead.

Hakan is the son of Father Sky. He was awarded rebirth over a thousand years ago to protect the Native American Bird Shifters. When animosity towards Native Americans escalated, Hakan's charges took to the sky permanently, leaving him without a purpose. He's lived his long life alone, waiting for the day he can once again serve his Father.

Three men, three very different backgrounds, one thing in common. Loneliness. Can these three

souls come together to form a family?

## ***Evolution***

Jarek, a young cougar shifter, arrives at Refuge full of hope. He is finally in a place where he can have a lover and his first-ever home. Meeting Mica feels like icing on the cake, but his dreams are quickly shattered by a night of pain and violence at the hands of his Alpha.

Mica, a stone man, is trying to get his emotions under control. He likes Jarek, but isn't sure what to do with the overwhelming lust he feels whenever Jarek is near. After the two of them are caught in a compromising position, Jarek goes missing, and Mica will do anything in his power to track him down.

Suni, the true-blue Alpha of the cougars, doesn't want anything to do with the rest of his kind. He is perfectly content to live out his life in seclusion. When he stumbles across a young cougar shifter near death, he realizes he's found his mate. When Jarek regains consciousness and tells Suni about Mica, the true Alpha is left wondering where he'll fit in.

Three men, one who wants to feel, one who doesn't know how to feel, and one who refuses to feel, come together on the side of a mountain. The resulting clash of personalities and sexually charged energy will change their lives forever.

## ***Resolution***

After an attempt on their lives by an unknown group, the bird shifters are forced to seek shelter at Refuge. Having spent years in their bird-skin, the adjustment for some isn't easy.

Bird shifters Takoda and Enapay have been best friends for years. Enapay knows Takoda is his chosen mate, but Takoda refuses to consider a life living in his man-skin. When Enapay starts to work closely with Dr. Gray Whitmore, he can't understand his overwhelming attraction to the human.

With Takoda's continued rebuffs, Enapay finally gives into his desire for Gray. It is soon apparent, Gray was meant to be Enapay's mate. But when Takoda's health takes a turn for the worse, old feelings resurface. Enapay is left wondering why Father Sky gifted him with two mates, especially when one of them still refuses to live as a man.

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Wyn has spent her life alone, living vicariously through those who love winter. When she learns of Kai's predicament, she knows she must save him. If only she could save herself. She craves his dominance, but there's one tiny thing standing in their way. No human can touch her without experiencing chilly agony. And that might bring any relationship to an icy death.

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