

Sharon Maria Bidwell



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Del Fantasma: A Slow Fuzzy Screw

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Aspen Mountain Press

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PO Box 473543

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A Slow Fuzzy Screw

“I’d like a slow screw, please.”

Rumour said that Cody Warren, bartender at Del Fantasma, had seen it all. The man was also known for his matchmaking skills. Shayne’s immediate desires focused on a one-night stand or weekend fling rather than anything long-term, but he still wanted to make use of such talent. The idea of flirting with Cody Warren was well intended, designed to leave the man with no doubts as to what he wanted, so the slight flicker of surprise in the man’s eyes startled Shayne. He wanted to open his evening with a remark that would make the man laugh. He wanted Cody in the right frame of mind to help him find a companion for the night. Shayne didn’t expect the surprise. Surely, the man heard better lines often enough.

Shayne stifled a groan. The man probably heard too many asinine remarks and such a blatant comment fell into the abyss of silence. That silence might only exist here at the corner of the bar between him and Cody, but Shayne could almost hear crickets rubbing their legs together. He’d foolishly tried to be clever with the one man with whom he wanted to make a good impression.

The buzz said that something happened to Cody Warren during his time in Afghanistan, and that he knew more than a thing or two about the supernatural world. The stories proclaimed him a vampire. Having an interest in the paranormal, even though commonsense and everyday logic told Shayne he was wasting his time, he’d hung out in a few chat rooms and forums. He’d caught an interesting comment

by one guy who confirmed in a private message that Del Fantasma was ‘the’ place to hang out. Amused but interested, Shayne researched and read so many good reports he decided that even if the place was full of superhero-worshipping geeks, a trip here was worth the effort.

In truth, his interest was probably more of a case that if he didn’t experience the atmosphere for himself, he’d always wonder. What he felt was a bit like wanting to have sex with a man for the first time; it made his coming here all the more desirous. Shayne didn’t know if he could believe half the things he’d heard about the bar—no doubt the truth was that the guy was just shell-shocked or something and imagined these things—but he’d come here anyway. The look in the man’s eyes while he polished a glass from the other side of the bar almost made Shayne change his mind, but he’d traveled a long way and paid in advance for a motel room for a couple of nights.

At the very least, he wanted to get laid. He wasn’t about to let a mere bartender put him off. Reports that were more credible said that Cody Warren wasn’t just a bartender or a vampire; he owned Del Fantasma, but why would the owner of such a place tend the bar?

Shayne couldn’t be certain if there was any truth to the rumours, but he’d planned this trip for months. The U. S. of A. was a big place and he lived more than half the country away from Point Loma, California. His interest in the area stemmed from his love of all things paranormal and nothing was going to chase him off until he’d spent one fun-filled night in the bar.

Not the red glint in Cody Warren’s eye as the light struck his pupil in an odd way, or the glimpse of fang he was certain the bartender flashed him on purpose. Those teeth were likely plastic.

A tinge of disappointment and embarrassment came over Shayne. Of course the bar was all fake. How could he have expected anything else? Still, he’d put on his best dating outfit, the trousers hugged all his best attributes and his dark, soft curls were a perfect backdrop to his wide, dark eyes. A touch of eyeliner and the mere hint

of colour on his lips was all he needed. Perhaps even this hint of glamour was too much for a bar like this. He'd get lynched in some places turning up with lipstick on, even if the tinge of colour was faint.

Cody's gaze flickered to the right before returning to his face. Shayne frowned. For a moment there, he could have sworn the guy glanced over his shoulder at someone, but who? Shayne was about to turn his head to look, when Cody put down the glass and leaned on the bar.

"What kind of slow screw would you like?"

The question came loaded with more than a hint of suggestion. One thing he hadn't heard about Cody was that the man was gay, and once more Shayne felt uneasy. He was fit and lean, but he was miles away from home and he didn't want to insult the man who could be the owner of this place. You never knew about these places. He started to imagine what could happen to a lone soul lost in one. He'd watched 'From Dusk 'Til Dawn' often enough.

Maybe Cody wasn't a vampire, but that didn't mean he wasn't some sort of mobster. Shayne hadn't told his family where he was going because he knew they'd laugh. They'd really laugh now if they heard his thoughts. His mother was always telling him that he let his imagination run away with him. If he turned down the man's advances, there was no knowing what might happen to him.

That is, if the man was even making an advance. Maybe Cody's glance was his signal to someone to escort him out of here, or worse, take him out back and show him that gay men weren't welcome. Not that he couldn't take care of himself. By no means huge or muscular, Shayne still knew a thing or two about self-defense. The trouble was, his height often made other men think they could best him. So far, no one had beaten him in a fight. He didn't want to fight, but for some reason guys just always wanted to get rough with him. That was fine, to a point. They never took the roughness in the direction he wanted though. He possessed the almost uncanny ability to pick up seriously violent guys, which was partly the reason he was here.

He'd heard other things about Cody Warren besides the stories of him being a

vampire; things about his matchmaking skills. Shayne never looked for trouble, but all too often, trouble appeared to search him out. Some would say coming to a bar such as this was definitely in the category of seeking trouble.

Shayne dismissed the thought. He need only look around to see patrons far weirder than he was. He'd arrived quite early, but already a few more people entered and Shayne quickly saw that his fears about the slight make-up he wore were unfounded. A woman who reminded him of Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, pushed him aside with her breasts, blew a kiss at Cody and then moved on. Maybe Shayne looked too normal.

"What...kind?" Shayne replied to Cody's question about the drink and let his confusion show on his face.

"Well, you see," Cody settled against the bar a little more comfortably, leaning on his elbows. Despite his misgivings, Shayne leaned forward before he realized what he was doing. "There's your simple Slow Screw. That's one shot vodka, half a shot of sloe gin, and a splash of orange juice. Pour it all into a double shot glass, mix it together and voila."

"Voila," Shayne repeated.

Cody nodded as though he imparted some worldly advice. "Then you have your Slow Comfortable Screw. You make that in a highball glass. That takes Sloe Gin, Southern Comfort, and Orange Juice."

Shayne nodded as though this information was very important. The distance between them closed. When had he leaned across the bar? Cody hadn't moved so it must have been he that leaned forward.

"Then you've got your Slow Fuzzy Screw up Against the Wall."

"Fuzzy?" Even Shayne heard the surprise in his voice. What he couldn't understand was the look of amusement that crossed Cody's face. The sudden certainty that Cody didn't let anyone see something on his face unless he wanted them to washed over him. Shayne didn't think the amused look was for his benefit. Still, although some instinct told him to look over his shoulder, he couldn't move.

"A Fuzzy Screw has vodka, peach schnapps, sloe gin, Galliano, and orange juice. And don't forget ice."

Something in the way Cody said 'ice' made Shayne shiver. "Ice," he repeated, feeling somewhat intoxicated, although he hadn't touched a drop of alcohol yet.

"Ice," Cody repeated.

Shayne felt heat, in his face, in his groin, but mostly at his back. A conviction that someone stood behind him washed over him while he was gathering enough nerve to ask for one of those fuzzy screws but another voice broke in on the conversation.

"Make him a Slow Screw Against the Wall In the Dark Side of Mexico City," a deep, resonant voice said.

Grinning, Cody picked up a glass, he moved along the line of bottles on the shelves behind the bar.

"What does that have in it?" Shayne asked Cody, ignoring the stranger at his back. Every muscle in his body wanted to turn around. Every instinct made him want to flinch away. He couldn't understand why he felt this way. Why every nerve in his body screamed in alert confused the hell out of him. Show no fear his mind silently shouted.

"Sloe Gin, Southern Comfort, Galliano, Tequila, Brown Rum, Orange Juice and Cola."

"The works then," Shayne laughed, fighting the urge to look behind him. He was partly afraid to look at the newcomer and partly afraid to take his gaze off Cody Warren. Whatever the cause, Shayne felt a little unsteady and if he'd already imbibed, he would have thought that someone had slipped something into his drink. He watched Cody prepare the alcoholic mix in front of him and stared into the liquid when Cody set it on the bar. He didn't pick it up to try it.

"I thought you wanted a screw," Cody said, and something teasing tinged his voice.

"H-How much?" Shayne stammered.

“Already taken care of.” Cody nodded somewhere behind him but Shayne fought the urge to look. He ignored the stranger at his back hoping the guy would get the message. There was something in the man’s voice that he didn’t like. If he just ignored him, maybe he would go away.

“I can pay,” Shayne insisted, putting some money onto the bar, leaning forward as he did so. He lowered his voice as much as he could and still hope that Cody would hear. He’d had enough messing about and being intimidated. Maybe he should make his desires known rather than resorting to silly drink titles. “I heard you’re not adverse to a little matchmaking.”

“Already taken care of,” Cody repeated, moving away and ignoring the money on the bar.

“Wh-what?”

“Try the flavour,” Cody added as a parting comment then he moved on to another customer, ignoring Shayne’s attempts to get his attention, leaving him with the awareness that a strange man still stood at his back. He suddenly felt even more vulnerable. He never felt vulnerable. Intimidated perhaps, maybe a little tired of men turning a good fuck into some kind of macho bullshit supremacy game, but he never felt...nervous.

Instinct and the direction from which he’d heard the sound of that voice already told him the man behind him was large and muscular, definitely taller than he was. Shayne liked big men, the trouble was all big men wanted to control him. Dominance—the right kind of dominance—was one thing, but control was something else. The problem with that was he liked dominant guys too much and the dilemma there was he always attracted guys who didn’t know how to dominate without causing the wrong kind of pain.

He’d given up on long-term relationships when he vowed his last abusive relationship would be just that—the last. That’s when he’d taken self-defense classes, and that was how he came to know how to take care of himself. He’d felt confident and safe for a long time, up until now.

Though he'd broken his vow of celibacy—a vow he'd made to keep until he thought he could defend himself—some time ago, he still didn't seek out another guy regularly. He was as careful as life taught him to be. He always opted for safe; now he didn't feel safe at all.

Staring down at his drink, Cody's words returned almost to haunt him. *Try the flavour.* Cody said it as though he knew exactly what Shayne would like.

Picking up the glass, Shayne took a gulp. The flavour wasn't too bad. Not his usual sort of drink but palatable, something he could possibly get used to. He turned to face the man at his back, drink in one hand.

He didn't know what he expected, but this man wasn't it; his muscles weren't overly pumped but they were evident. Nice as his body was, what arrested Shayne's attention was the dark, smoky look in the man's amber eyes, not to mention the thick mane of honey-blond, almost ringlet curls crowning his head. Shayne wanted to say lion, but that was ridiculous.

Something about him caused Shayne to puff himself up as though he suddenly needed to make himself look bigger. He barely resisted the urge to move his elbows off the bar and stand up straight. The gesture wouldn't increase his height by much; the guy would still stand a head taller, at least. All through the ruminations about his height, he was still thinking *cat* as a backdrop to his thoughts.

Shayne shook his head and looked down the bar, his gaze seeking out Cody Warren, trying to ignore the feeling that he should shout for help. Maybe Cody had slipped something into his glass. Maybe he coated the glasses with his drug of choice and that was why people believed supernatural beings visited the bar.

He looked back in time to see the other man shoot a look of...he didn't know what, in Cody's direction. That expression surely didn't convey disgust. Shayne tried to maintain a modicum of modesty. He was far from ugly and despite his misgivings, at least one part of him was definitely interested. The idea that the stranger failed to find him attractive just plain hurt and he couldn't think of another reason this man would have for casting such a disagreeable glance towards the

bartender.

Shayne went from wanting to walk away to disappointment that the guy might not be interested in the space of a moment. Maybe he was reading the signs wrong and Cody hadn't just set him up with this guy.

* * * *

When Cody had called him over to the bar with a flick of his gaze, at first Leon just sat there, stubbornly glued to the seat at his table. He'd glanced around but then did a double-take. He wasn't mistaken. Cody talked to a guy and he definitely signaled Leon to wander over to the bar. Leon had shaken his head slightly but Cody ignored the refusal. Knowing that if he didn't at least go over there he risked annoying the man beyond reason, Leon weighed the possibilities; Cody was a great matchmaker but Leon had been known to refuse Cody's help as many times as he gave it. Of course, more usually, Cody matched people up without them knowing. Sometimes in desperation a few people sought out the vampire asking for his help.

All this went through Leon's head in a few seconds and he was already standing by the time he accepted that he would go over there.

What other choice was there? He'd asked Cody to help him find a companion. Leon was the one of the few left of the family Felidaeia. There weren't many of his kind in existence. He joined up with the pride occasionally to mate, but the rest of the time... Damn it! He was lonely.

Despite his misgivings and doubts as to whether he deserved someone in his life, the fact remained that he longed for someone. He rather feared that if he didn't allow himself the luxury of a companion, one day he might wake up with the feeling that life no longer had anything to offer. Some humans might consider suicide a sin, but among his kind such an act was considered anathema for a perfectly good reason; their numbers dwindled.

Looking for another of his kind on a long-term basis proved an unreasonable

wish. He could look for a lifetime, but the trouble was, few of his species wanted a monogamous relationship. They possessed the same instincts as he, to do everything to keep the bloodline going. Despite this, Leon finally accepted that his kind were a dying breed.

Now, he vowed to settle for someone to share his life with, to keep his bed warm at night. He'd asked Cody to help him find someone strong enough, both emotionally and physically.

Standing behind the newcomer—Leon had never seen him in the bar before—he'd joined in with the joke over the drinks, glaring at Cody over the man's shoulder. Like always, Cody paid him no mind. Then the man had wandered off, leaving him with this stranger...Leon sniffed. Yes, this human!

The other man turned around, wide dark eyes lifting slowly upwards until his gaze settled on Leon's face, flicking left and right as he took in his appearance. Then the man's expression changed, remaining wary but something else—expectation, maybe.

Leon looked down the length of the bar to where Cody stood serving drinks. He couldn't believe it, the vampire didn't even look his way. What was he supposed to do? Just take this guy home and...and...fuck him?

He wasn't gay. He was altogether male.

He was...the king of the damn jungle, that's what!

* * * *

"Cody." The name emerged from the man's mouth in a growl. His lips drew back in a snarl; hands fisted at his sides. Shayne wasn't the only one to witness this display as Cody finished with the order in front of him and then calmly wandered back down the bar.

Before the large, fierce man could open his mouth, Cody said, "He's tight yet graceful; what you asked for and what you need. Try the flavour. Besides, it's not

uncommon, so stop complaining.”

To Shayne’s amazement and slight amusement, the other man blinked in evident surprise. He had no idea what Cody meant by that, but the other man apparently did. The power he felt coming from the large man in waves dimmed a little. Already Cody moved away, seeing to other customers. Whatever the bartender meant, the remark toned down that sense of hostility.

Shayne looked back to the other man, regarding him with different eyes. If the size of him indicated the size of his cock, he could be in for a rough ride. His wanton little ass knew no fear apparently—at least, not with his ability to protect himself no longer a question in his life. He smiled at the stranger before he considered whether the welcoming gesture was wise. The larger man scowled. “I’m Shayne,” he said, hoping to break the ice.

Seconds ticked by before the large man replied. “Leon.”

Shayne couldn’t help wondering if the man was messing with him—whether Leon was the man’s genuine name, or he’d taken it to suit his appearance. That mass of curls, the somewhat square face above a broad expanse of shoulder filled his vision. He wanted to cast his gaze down to take in the rest of the man’s form, which he’d only viewed briefly, but he daredn’t. Time for that...later.

* * * *

They’d moved from the bar to a more private table, although the privacy mainly existed because the noise level rose as the evening wore on and no one cared to listen. People came to Del Fantasma for very individual reasons and none looked inclined to eavesdrop. Leon withstood the man’s prattle as long as he could, then his mind wandered although he continued to survey him.

Shayne spoke about nonsensical things—his trip down here, his job at home, which sounded boring and his first impressions of California. He went on about the bar, what he liked about the establishment, what he wasn’t sure of, what he thought

of Cody Warren.

That last comment finally got to Leon, almost making him smile. He stopped his lips from curling, puzzled over the sense of accomplishment that came with refusing to smile. Then again, he couldn't remember the last time something in his life made him *want* to smile. In a sense, Leon could understand why Shayne liked the bar and now that he'd spent a bit of time in it, the other man claimed he liked it very much. He certainly appeared more relaxed. Many regulars piled in by the second, but there were as many wanderers. Human and supernatural creatures frequented the bar searching for something, or someone. Sometimes they didn't even know what they were looking for.

Leon suppressed a sigh. No way was he looking for...Shayne, was it? Yes, Shayne. No way was he looking to spend the night with a guy, but when Cody caught his eye during their second round of drinks he could read nothing but determination in the vampire's gaze. Cody was often more subtle than this. Tonight, he was practically throwing a man into his lap.

"So, what about you? What brings you here?"

"The great weres of the Panthera once roamed Africa and Asia much as our animal counterparts do. Now, like them, most are subject to the whim of man. Many live in sanctuaries. We live among men, pretending to be human. Each year more of us die and we are so widely scattered, we seldom come together. Our young dwindle. We meet to mate, arranging sessions of copulation through the Internet then leave the females to rear our young and each year there are less of us. This means we spend much time alone and I sought companionship."

Silence met this little speech. Leon ran what he'd just said over in his mind, then sighed. To his astonishment, he actually sighed aloud. "You have no reason to be afraid of me."

Those dark eyes betrayed Shayne as a newcomer to the bar in his now turbulent emotions, although Leon wasn't sure if the expression truly conveyed fear or the man just thought him a lunatic. He preferred fear. Then again, no, he didn't

like the idea of anyone being afraid of him. Too many had found reason to fear him in the past. "I am..." he searched for the correct expression, "pulling your leg."

A look of uncertainty crossed Shayne's face, and then he smiled, laughing a little. "It's part of the act." He waved a hand. "This place."

Although he felt shock rush through him, Leon managed to give no outward sign. Shayne sat in a supernatural bar, looking for some kind of fix—sex being the man's drug of choice if appearances were anything to go by—and yet, clearly, Shayne didn't believe any of it. He clearly didn't believe Cody was a vampire and had no idea that he sat at a table with a shape-shifter.

Despite his misgivings, Leon couldn't help the tingling current of amusement that sped his pulse and lightened his heart. Maybe he would take Shayne home with him. He'd never been with another man, but as Cody said, such things were not uncommon among the Panthera.

* * * *

A second drink finished and Shayne stood outside the bar staring up at the night sky. Despite the awkward attempts at conversation, now that he was out here with the stranger, he felt oddly calm. Perhaps this feeling was because the fluctuating waves of hostility Leon gave off eased even more out here in the night as though he felt more at home under the night sky than he did inside.

What Shayne couldn't understand was what they were still doing together. He'd never felt anything like this, never experienced this odd blend of aversion and attraction. On his part, he could dissect his emotions. The man was good-looking. He couldn't lie and say he wouldn't enjoy a night in the sack with him, but the menacing scowl that appeared permanently etched into the man's face he could do without. At times Leon appeared entertained by him and claimed to be joking when he said some rather peculiar things. Still, Shayne just didn't know how to take him. The man appeared to like him yet was annoyed with him, even aggressive and growled every

time Shayne even hinted he might wander off. The whole situation was so perplexing that Shayne didn't know what to think.

The man stood at his side now, and Shayne cast a furtive glance in his direction. That face contained a weathered, lined mien that spoke of age and wisdom far older than the man's apparent years. Shayne usually went with at least slightly younger men but he wasn't adverse to this one at all.

If he could only remove that scowl from his face, they might have a good time. Cursing his ever-hopeful heart, Shayne resolved to stick around and see what the night brought. He'd been with aggressive men more times than he liked to admit, but for some peculiar reason he didn't get the same warning signs with this one. Of course, he'd been wrong too many times before to trust his instincts totally.

Leon breathed in, filling his lungs deep if that expanse of chest was anything to go by. His nostrils flared and Shayne's thoughts turned even more to images of great cats against an African backdrop.

"War is in the air," Leon muttered.

The cryptic comment both surprised and encouraged Shayne to bravado. He asked, "What do you mean?" fighting to keep any timidity out of his voice. Every instinct told him to recognize this man as dominant, but he also sensed that being too weak would make the man see him as prey. The very idea that he was thinking of Leon as an animal disconcerted him. Maybe those drinks were stronger than he realized.

"There's always war somewhere in the world between people. Even sex, the very act of mating can be a struggle."

Shayne couldn't help smiling. "Isn't that part of the fun?"

The other man's lip curled, but he didn't appear to be entirely in disagreement. "My kind was strong once. Man started the wars. If shape-shifters had banded together, the world might be a very different place now."

Shayne swallowed, his good humour fading. "Shape —"

"Shifters," Leon supplied, turning his head to look at him.

"You don't expect me to believe..." Shayne began, but his voice trailed away as some trick of moonlight cast shadows across Leon's face. "What are you?" he asked, speaking barely above a whisper.

"That," Leon told him, "you already know."

Lion.

The shadows seemed to superimpose the great cat's face over the man's, then the clouds drifted and the man's face predominated. Still, Shayne could see the cat-like features contained in that expression. "You said the world would have been a different place."

"It would. Man would not exist, at least not in the manner that he does now. Wars would be territorial."

"They already are."

Leon almost grinned and Shayne wasn't sure if he found the expression alarming or a relief. Some of the malice faded as Leon relaxed, but he was aware of the man's underlying power. "True, but shape-shifters are the ones hiding in the shadows, making homes wherever we find a welcome."

Shayne swallowed once more and it pained him. "You...must hate my kind, then."

He could be in danger and here he stood, out in the darkness with a stranger. Even if Leon wasn't some kind of shape changer, he had bulk and muscle. Allowing his gaze to wander, Shayne took in the man's form. He estimated...he didn't know. What did the guy weigh? Now that he gave some thought to Leon's size, three hundred pounds didn't seem out of the question and none of it looked as though it were flab.

Doubt crept into Shayne's mind. Despite his acquired skills, he might not stand a chance in a fight with this guy. What was he thinking?

He cast the same question in the direction of his dick, reminding it that they needed to be careful. His dick twitched almost shrugging in response, aggravating as hell.

"Not at all. The world is how I have always known it. I speak only of stories, things I have heard over the years. Things I smell on the wind."

"You...how do you get on with humans?" Shayne struggled to ask the questions which he wanted answers to without angering the man. He still dithered between belief and the more realistic notion that this man was a lunatic.

"I live among you, have friends among you." Leon, who had looked away, now turned his gaze back. "Lovers."

Shayne couldn't keep the frown from his face.

"What?" Leon asked of him.

"Surely, aren't human lovers too...fragile?"

Leon laughed. "That makes them compliant and I like that in a mate."

Compliant. Disappointment washed in. Despite all the changes he'd made in his life, this man clearly saw him as all men did—a victim. What was it about him that made men see him this way? "Why me?" Shayne let the word slip out before he could prevent it.

"I didn't choose you. Cody did." Leon ran a hand through his ringlets, but the hair was so thick the gesture possessed the appearance of a struggle and made the movement convey less impatience than the action implied. "I told him a few nights ago that I grew tired of my current lovers, or lack of them, between mating seasons. He said he would..." Leon grinned and gave an almost self-deprecating laugh. "He said he would find me another flavour."

Shayne's eyes opened wide. "You've not been with a man." The words slipped out before he truly considered them and he wanted to take them back the moment he saw Leon's scowl return.

Some men could become abusive just because they feared their own desires. He didn't know if this applied to Leon or not. The big man hunched his shoulders but didn't seem to know what to do with his anger. He growled then slumped almost. Disappointment, fear, and now confusion; Shayne was going through a gamut of emotions tonight. He just couldn't make this guy out.

"No," Leon admitted. "No, I haven't. As Cody said, it's not uncommon. As lions do in the animal world, males and females share homosexual relationships. Males will spend a few days together, nuzzle, caress, mount..." Leon looked into Shayne's eyes, "and thrust. Come on, let's get out of here." He took a couple of steps then stopped to turn back, a look of surprise on his face when Shayne made no move to follow. "Don't worry. Whatever I decide to do, or not to do, I won't hurt you or punish you for it."

Shayne hesitated just a moment. Not knowing precisely why, he followed.

* * * *

Leon drove. Strokes of light from other vehicles flashed across his vision. One light danced as though someone shone a flashlight into his face.

A rattling rhythm that reminded him of rain on the great Serengeti transported him into a waking dream. The dream was one of his ancestors'; Leon had never set foot outside of America. A memory forced its way into the dreamscape and he tried to turn it aside. A growl threatened to tear free of his throat and even without a sound Shayne now looked at him, aware something had raised his hackles.

"Wakey, wakey. I never said you could sleep." The voice slurred with drink. The rattling sound was the man's stick running back and forth across the bars of his cage. Leon shook his head, trying to clear his confused mind, shake off the dream and reality both. "Look at him, the great beast of the jungle." The man on the outside of his cage tipped back the bottle in his hand and drank deep. "If they could see you now, others of your kind, sitting in your own filth."

Leon only sat in filth because the man hardly ever had someone clean out the cage. It would do Leon no good to say so though and nothing would come of his complaint. If it weren't for the shackle and chain that bound his ankle, he'd make the man eat his shit along with the matted straw that served for a bed. The cage stunk, as did Leon.

"You pull a stunt like that again and I'll make you sorry." The man leaned in; close

enough that Leon might have been able to reach him untethered, but even drunk, the man, his owner, knew the length of the chain fastened to Leon. He did this to tease. "I'll knock that pride out of you yet." He said this on a sneer but then giggled. "Pride. Get it? Hahahahahaahaha!"

He lurched away, leaving Leon alone in his desolation. Tonight, he'd refused to perform, so he'd gone without dinner and, apparently, his owner decided to punish him with an intermittent night of sleep. Small tortures in the grand scheme, but torture enough and if given the right incentive, the man dreamt up other things. Leon experienced enough of them over time. Still, moments of rebellion came upon him while he waited...

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Leon tried to keep his reply reasonable after Shayne's voice broke into his thoughts. Driving under the influence of such memories might prove fatal one day; usually he could deny them. Why should such things return to haunt him this night of all nights?

Only Shayne's presence explained the assault. Aware that he as good as growled out the words, Leon glanced at man beside him. So many reasons to hate humans crowded into his mind. He shoved them aside. This human had done nothing to hurt him and Leon usually trusted Cody. He would see how he felt come morning.

* * * *

Something about the place told him an animal lived here. Shayne quickly realized that what gave that fact away was a scent, but it was so scant that he likened it more to pheromones. The underlying aroma belied what his eyes could see. The apartment belonged to a man with wealth. Everywhere, light glinted from highly polished and reflective surfaces. He felt rather than saw Leon watching him and turned his head to meet that gaze, remembering not to look sheepish. He might not be a wolf, but the man was some type of creature with teeth. Just what manner of

danger he represented remained for him to discover.

Those nostrils flared again, but the expression on Leon's face was difficult to read. Several moments ticked by before Shayne decided on puzzlement.

"Seldom does a human detect my scent."

"What scent?" Shayne asked, pretending ignorance. Another lip curl from Leon made him blush and squirm beneath that catlike stare.

"I saw your reaction, just as I can tell your heartbeat quickens from fear...and excitement."

Wanting to deny every accusation, Shayne was lost for words. Somehow, Leon would know he lied. He was afraid. This dwelling belonged to someone who might not want to admit he was supernatural. Leon could easily kill him; the man probably had easy means to dispose of his body and none would be wiser. Yet...yet the more time he spent in the man's company, he couldn't quite hold on to the true substance of that fear.

Something existed in Leon's movement, almost languid and lazy. The way the man moved made Shayne want to lie down, stretch out. He stood staring into the man's eyes as Leon moved closer. Soon, the slight aroma that existed in the apartment drew back. Other things took over Shayne's senses; the sight of those eyes, which he could see were an almost amber yet smoky brown set into a tan face. Leon overwhelmed his mind. Those eyes and a stronger scent. The musk of the man carried over to him, invading the heat and natural beat of his body, a beat that spoke of his heart's rhythm as well as sex.

"Such eyes."

Feeling hot, Shayne became aware that he blushed, knowing too well what the other man could see.

"Such dark eyes. Such skin." Leon lifted a hand to touch Shayne's face and the hand resembled a huge paw with thick, fleshy fingers, yet those fingertips drifted over his skin as though they were a whisper personified. Leon stared with an expression of wonderment.

Shayne couldn't move, feeling as though the shape-shifter wove some spell over him. Then the expression changed. That great hand lowered to the man's side.

"This is madness. I admit the idea is intriguing but I have never wanted a man."

"Then why did..." Shayne hesitated to say the man's name now. "Why did the bartender call you over to me?" He was fairly certain that was what Cody Warren had done. "Why did you come when he called you?"

"He's usually trustworthy. He knows...things."

Leon didn't look inclined to provide more information. Shayne felt cold suddenly. He hugged his arms around himself. "So what are you going to do with me?" Maybe that wasn't the most prudent question, but he couldn't stand here all night.

"That I have yet to decide upon, but I promise you safety if you will join me in my bedroom."

Uncertain if that was a question or an implied order, Shayne asked, "What if I say no?"

"Then I might just drag you."

Amusement and the heat of some far deeper emotion warmed the voice. Some emotion lit those strange eyes, but Shayne couldn't be certain if it was teasing or not. None of that mattered. Despite his question and doubts, Shayne already knew his answer was yes. Sometimes you stepped on a path and just needed to go where it led. He could only hope this path wasn't as familiar as it felt.

* * * *

Wild lions lived in coalitions, with a very small group of males mating with the adult females. Leon's kind accepted open relationships. Females mated with more than one male during a mating bout.

Unlike their wild counterparts, these bouts required organizing. What he told

Shayne earlier was true. Due to the increasing threat of extinction, his race signed into a secret network. Their pretended interest in wild lions was partly true. They studied what was happening to their wild cousins in order to compare it to their own problems.

A few monogamous couples proved to mate very well and they oversaw many of the organized mating bouts. There, they would change and mate as wild lions. The female would try to maintain her animal form for the gestation period and the cubs of one litter shared more than one father. The trouble came if a female could not maintain her animal form during this time. Then she could lose her children. She might die in childbirth.

They could not pass on their lineage as easily as a wolf. A bite was no guarantee of turning a human, though many came to them, often due to an emotional attachment and sometimes they would attempt to bring one over. He didn't know why he told Shayne all this, but he did on the way to his bedroom. Leon paused at the threshold to look back at the man behind him, aware that he would have questions.

"I'm not saying I believe you and please, don't be angry with me," Shayne's eyes said that he very much didn't want to face Leon's anger, "but has it occurred to you that maybe it's simply your time and your race should fade away?"

Leon strove for anger but the emotion escaped him. "Some of us feel the same way. Just as scientists argue that some cases of extinction in the animal world are natural, some of us feel we have had our time and that the world should be left to humans or stronger shifters."

"Then why?"

Much existed in those two simple words. "It's not entirely our choice. You know how strong the urge is to mate in humans, with us it's almost an imperative. Even lesser males and females get their share and for those who cannot hold animal form, we mate as humans, as passionately and as many times as we would if we were solely wild creatures. Twenty to forty times..."

"Twenty to forty times?" Shayne's eyes went wide and wild.

Leon couldn't keep the grin from his mouth no matter how strange the smile felt on his lips. He watched Shayne swallow, digesting this information.

"Wait a minute. You said you strive for animal form."

Leon nodded.

"Can you only...I mean, is it required?"

The other man sounded as though he found the idea distasteful. He wouldn't feel that way if he was a shape-shifter too, but Leon understood how the human felt. He reached out to stroke Shayne's cheek. "Yes...I need to remain in animal form if I want to mate forty times. In human form, I can manage only half that at most." He waited for Shayne's expression to show that he had worked through the small maze of words and then chuckled. "Don't worry, Shayne. I will stay as you see me, if that is what you want."

* * * *

If that is what you want. Those words hardly comforted him, and twenty times in one session... He wouldn't be able to stand up in the morning. Despite his hesitation, Shayne's face split into a grin. He looked at the bedroom to distract his wavering libido.

This room suited the man more than the chic, yet somewhat impersonal elegance of the rest of the apartment. Barren in its simplicity, Shayne entered a bedroom intended for two things: sleep and fucking. The few items of furniture arranged around the room at once set Shayne's imagination alight with the numerous positions for which he could use them. Nothing kinky existed here—the room was no rich man's den of inequity so maybe it was just him, but something about the choice of items in the room made him think of sex. Simple, unadulterated, very energetic sex. The bed lay low to the ground. Someone had chosen the covers for comfort. A reclining chair could constitute sleep or a number of sexual positions,

as could any other item in the room. Leon kept his clothes elsewhere. Those he wore, he began to shed on his way to the bed as though peeling off skin or a disguise. Shayne's throat grew dry as the jacket slid from the man's back. Leon dropped it to the floor and started to remove his shirt.

The distance from the door to the bed could not have been that great, but for Shayne it felt as though the room expanded. By the time Leon reached the bed, he stood in all his nude magnificence. Shayne could do nothing but stare.

To call that skin tanned was like comparing stiff hide to soft suede. Leon gleamed in the soft light coming from the wall lamps. His eyes appeared even more unnatural in this light, glinting now as though they contained little flickering flames. Those eyes stared at him above a wide nose atop a full lip. Leon's lips were pinker than the surrounding skin and their fullness was perhaps the only remotely feminine thing about him. Only the natural crests and rises of his muscles gave his body darker areas.

That great mane of hair tumbled over his shoulders and down his back. The dark honey-blond hair on Leon's head was something he wanted to fall into, to caress and roll in. Maybe Leon would even let him do just that, but the hair on the rest of his body was the same—dark and golden. Curls of hair encircled his nipples, leading in and growing thicker towards the center of his chest, then thinning out and leading down to his navel. Sparse here, the hair continued, thickening into that full bush that cradled his manhood.

Shayne couldn't bring himself to look. As much as he wanted to look between those heavy-set thighs, he was afraid to. Leon was so solid, stocky...large.

"Come to the bed," Leon demanded.

Shayne couldn't pretend those words were anything less than a command. He shook his head, aware that his heart sped up. To his horror Leon breathed in, closing his eyes. His fear was spice to the beast. Alas, the idea only made his heartbeat grow more rapid.

"You'll hyperventilate," Leon told him. "Calm down." He made the remark

sound perfectly reasonable as though it was the easiest thing in the world to do.

“Strip.”

Shayne turned his back, obeying the order even though the command both aroused and disgruntled him. There really wasn't anything else he could do and the activity changed his fear, moved the emotion towards excitement. If he knew that he was safe, he'd feel only excitement. He still wanted to get laid tonight.

He almost laughed. He'd come out here looking for something out of the ordinary and he couldn't say he hadn't found it.

* * * *

The fear changed Shayne from mate into food and Leon didn't want that. A little fear added to the experience but even though Shayne clearly wanted to go through with this, his pulse sped. Too rapid; it spoke to other things inside Leon. That racing heartbeat called his anger forth. The beat also called other things.

Frustration, loneliness, despair—all these things could feed his anger if he let them.

The meat was raw, bloody. Left too long in the heat, the flesh would turn. In fact... Leon sniffed and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“It's all you'll get.”

“I want it cooked.”

“Why? So you can pretend you're human?”

“No. Because I want fresh meat that isn't starting to decompose.”

The man on the other side of the bars laughed. “Lions in the wild eat carrion.”

That was true and he could, but he wouldn't give Maxwell the satisfaction. “I won't.”

“You could if you have to.”

“You want me to perform then do something for me in return.”

“Bargain?” The idea appeared to amuse the man; at least he wasn't readily discarding the suggestion. Leon nodded. “Very well. I'll have them bring fresh, but I know you can eat

raw meat and you'd better get used to it."

Despite trying to keep his expression constant, Leon's puzzlement tightened his brow before he could settle his emotions into order and take control over his face. He didn't need to ask. That slight slip in nonchalance asked the question for him.

"I want to change the show. We've got this woman and she's going to wear an animal suit, something tight and clinging to make her look like a gazelle. You'll bring the gazelle down and pull open the garment. At her belly, we'll fasten fresh meat. You're to rip it out, pull it apart as though you're eating her."

Bile rose to Leon's throat. "I will do no such thing."

"Then you'll starve."

Leon shrugged as though it didn't matter. Maxwell leaned in against the bars.

"It's pretend. Just a show. The woman knows this, though I wouldn't be surprised if the first few times being in the ring with you doesn't speed up her pulse a little. Or are you afraid that you'll touch that wild side of yours? Scared you'll lose control and eat her for real?"

With a roar, Leon rushed him. Arms reaching, hands curled ready to claw; he threw himself up and forward. The chain stopped him in mid-motion. He'd forgotten the chain in his anger but was reminded of its presence now as it brought him crashing to the floor of the cage. He could rip up the boards but would find bars beneath. The chain at his ankle extended through the bars, fastened to various stakes and poles outside and at a distance.

Truly, the chain rather than the bars kept him caged, though he'd need to change to break loose of them and Maxwell would never allow that except in the ring under the right circumstances when people paid to see him altered. Drugs and diet could control many things including a shape-shifter's ability to change and Maxwell hardly cared if Leon bore the pain that resulted from this.

While he was in the ring, men stood around with tranquilizer guns. These precautions were by no means foolproof but Leon was patient. He'd rather bide his time and succeed than rush an escape attempt and fail.

Besides, there were others who would pay if he failed.

Of course, if Maxwell died, that would change matters. His rag-tag bunch of followers

wouldn't care. They were almost as bad as Maxwell. The man laughed and Leon looked up sneering. Quickly Leon reached out, his fingers almost touched Maxwell's jacket where he'd leaned embracing the bars with the curl of his arm. The man had flinched back at the last moment. Another inch and Leon could have taken his arm. So close...

Maxwell stared at him and he returned the gaze. So close, they both knew it, but the man still stood on the other side of the cage. For the moment, Leon could do nothing but endure. For the moment...

Shayne wasn't meat. Leon turned his anger inwards. He fought the roar of his blood and forced it downwards letting it expand his cock and his need for release in equal measure. His reservation fled. Nature, or whatever force allowed his existence, made the choice for him. He could fuck or feed. He wasn't going to hurt this man, not with his teeth anyway. Unable to wait any longer, he stalked forward.

* * * *

Leon lifted and carried Shayne to the bed before he could cry out in either surprise or horror. The man moved with catlike stealth when he wanted to and Shayne no sooner stepped out of the last of his clothes and muscle surrounded him. He expected Leon to fling him onto the bed, instead, the big man laid him down with surprising gentleness. He lay back, silent, waiting for whatever other strange things would unfold this night.

"You are beautiful," Leon said, though he made the statement sound more quizzical than complimentary. Those large fingers fiddled with Shayne's dark curls, petting, patting, as though Shayne were some kept creature. "Your scent is sweet even when your fear eases."

"I didn't think fear would have a sweet scent."

"It doesn't. Not exactly. It's sour, but to a predator what it means is sweet."

"And what does it mean?" Shayne became aware of his pulse jumping in his neck. The fear eased back but the anxiety never left him completely as though it

couldn't.

"It means that you are a victim to my desires."

Shayne knew Leon was about to dip his head and kiss that jumping pulse even before the man leaned in towards him. Leon did more than he expected though. He took the flesh in his teeth and licked the skin. Shayne cried out, spine bowing, his hands rising instinctively to push Leon away and encountered...solid muscle. He pushed and nothing happened except that tongue licked again.

Leon feasted, and Shayne, aware that this man could rip out his throat, writhed under him as the feeling edged into pain. The pain never quite became unbearable. The pain became something other, something he didn't know how to endure yet wasn't entirely sure he wanted the sensation to stop. He wanted something to change because Shayne knew now that he would get his wish.

Whatever the morning brought with it, tonight Shayne was going to get laid. If the man kept biting him like this though, he would bruise. Again, his conflicting emotions assaulted him. On the one hand, he loved this, but he'd loved things such as this before and look where they'd led him—always to the wrong type of pain.

Leon drew back and uttered one word, "Delicious."

The lion's eyes traveled down the length of his body. Gooseflesh rose in the wake of the man's gaze.

That was how Shayne thought of him now. The Lion. The idea of watching this beast shift both intrigued and alarmed him. Did a werelion need to shift with the moon as legend said werewolves did? So many questions tumbled through his mind, not the least of which was, what was Leon thinking as he gazed down at him that way?

Almost as though he read his mind, Leon spoke. "I like your pale skin. I like how you look so small, so vulnerable in my bed."

Shayne wasn't small. He wasn't what you'd call tall and his body was lean, but he possessed solid, sinewy muscle. Most people look shocked when they saw him minus a shirt for the first time. Leon didn't look in the least surprised and still he

called him small, vulnerable.

Those words did strange things to Shayne, as did Leon's gaze drifting up from his body to his face. Shayne met that stare, unblinking. Now Leon's fingers moved over skin where before only his gaze had touched. An all too familiar alarm crouched like a predator in the back of his mind. Every fiber of his being told him he shouldn't have come here. He'd willingly put himself in danger yet again, and he was sure that if there was some sort of organization for men with sexual addictions, he should attend. Something like alcoholics anonymous but for those who repeated the same abusive pattern in their sex lives would be handy.

This guy could kill him. He knew that now, though he couldn't say why he felt so certain. He'd put up a fight even knowing he couldn't win.

He might not need to though. As obviously dominant as Leon was, something in the man's expression, the way he moved, hesitated, all this said that the other man battled emotions of his own. Shayne wanted to shake his head to clear his thoughts. He could hear too many things in the other man's voice. Doubt apparently waged war with his decision. Leon had apparently decided they would fuck yet he still looked uncertain. It was just Shayne's luck to get a reluctant bisexual.

Yet there was more to this situation than that. Something else fed Leon's hesitation—something sorrowful. Shayne almost tasted despair and loneliness as though the emotions contained acidic spices. Those eyes stared into his as though they not only saw him, but looked through him into someone else, or some place distant. Shayne wanted to reach up in that moment to stroke Leon's face in a gesture of comfort while he asked who had hurt him. He couldn't.

Failed relationships weren't his business—at least, other people's weren't. Enough failed relationships darkened his past. He'd traveled all the way to Del Fantasma to find some excitement, not another man's anguish and pain.

Lion. Shape-shifter. He needed to remember that. He wanted to laugh off the notion but couldn't. The longer he spent in this man's company, the more he felt as though he were indeed in the presence of something 'otherworldly'.

Then thoughts fled as Leon leaned forward. Those lips fastened to his just as bruising as when they'd fastened to his neck. Something sharp that felt akin to fangs nipped him, made him squeal.

Shame washed in. He couldn't believe he'd cried out like that. Leon pulled back and Shayne stared up into the man's face. "Delicious," the other man said again, and much to Shayne's horror the certainty that he referred to the squeal along with the taste of his skin swept through him. He watched a long, very pink tongue flick out to sweep over the man's lips. His gaze followed its course as though mesmerized.

Shayne swallowed. Was he really about to be fucked by a lion-man?

* * * *

Leon couldn't help himself any longer. If he were going to do this then the best thing he could do for both of them was to get on with the sex. That strange blend of belief and doubt, coupled with the combined fear and excitement produced a scent that wafted off Shayne that was as intoxicating as the aroma of a female of his species in heat.

None of his kind would find this situation surprising. Sex was sex. To rut with another male never raised an eyebrow, though he'd never heard of one of his kind doing this with a human male. They didn't talk about their sex lives with humans. Sex with those that considered themselves 'normal' was just necessary on occasion. Such things never required discussion.

Leon pushed such thoughts aside. It might have been helpful if his species did discuss their relationships with humans; he couldn't change the way things were and nothing could help him tonight.

All he could do was follow where his desire led and it led down into those dark eyes, that dark gaze that followed the sweep of his tongue, traveling down his torso in the gap between their bodies. Leon, on his hands and knees, watched Shayne's face as his gaze wandered and knew just at what moment the other man's

vision came to rest on the sight of his straining erection. Those dark eyes widened and the sight caused more blood to pump into Leon's already impressive erection.

Shayne swallowed, his eyes moving as though he was trying to tear his gaze away from that protuberance. "Are you...are you going to tear me to pieces?" he finally whispered.

"I told you I wouldn't hurt you. I certainly won't eat you." If Shayne implied he was some sort of monster... Well, he might not be human but he was no walking nightmare. At least...not anymore.

"I... That's not what I meant," Shayne said on a breathless whisper.

"Oh." Despite wanting to remain somewhat detached, Leon couldn't fight his amusement. He chuckled. "I've never met anyone who couldn't manage. I'm sure you'll do fine."

Shayne licked his lips. His hand reached out but hesitated just shy of stroking that massive organ. "I'm sure I will," he murmured.

Leon, head tilted to one side, looking down at him, realized a moment later that the comment was Shayne's way of telling him that he'd made his decision. Good. Because Leon had decided he was going to fuck this human senseless.

* * * *

"Fur."

"What did you say?"

Shayne shook his head. He hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud. "I said fur, but it's not fur, it's..."

His hands ran over Leon's massive shoulders and pecs, arms straight, braced, almost as though he was trying to keep the other man away. Shayne almost laughed at such a ridiculous notion, for if Leon just leaned forward there would be no stopping him.

There was no getting away from it; fine hair covered the man of the sort that

one found on the back of one's arm, the type of hair that felt silky to the touch and allowed skin smooth passage against skin. He liked the feel of that fur but found its presence a little scary. As nervous as he felt, Shayne still fluctuated between two conflicting emotions. Something in Leon's gaze told him that the other man knew this.

Capturing Shayne's right hand, Leon entwined their fingers and then tugged his hand downwards, opening the hand again, making the limb press against his skin. Shayne's hand encountered more of that strange sensation of skin—not quite human, not quite animal. He gave a little moan as his fingers ran into the soft curls of hair at Leon's groin. This pelt felt softer, more like fur than hair. What would it feel like to thrust against one another, cock against cock and groin plastered to groin?

Seeking the nerve to do so, it took Shayne a moment to look down. If anything, the length and width of the man's cock grew before his gaze. The flesh glared at him, red, angry-looking. A few soft curls glistened with Leon's evident excitement.

A soft rumbling sound distracted Shayne from the visual stimulation. He blinked in surprise: the man purred. When Leon dipped his head to kiss him, this time Shayne opened his mouth in reaction, only realizing that he did so when that long, insidious tongue swirled into his mouth, curling around and down as though the man wanted to swallow his tonsils.

Those huge paws stroked and caressed, kneading flesh, while the beast feasted at his mouth. Hands lifted him, taking him upwards. He'd expected Leon to lean down over him, to engulf him. Rather, his body left the bed, Leon's strong limbs picking him up and pulling him into all of that hard muscle. Shayne cried out; the sound shooting up into the man's mouth, swallowed, taken down, devoured. The soft brush of pelt against a backdrop of so much hardness made him shudder. The sensation also did strange things to his desire.

The man's tongue rasped against his and once more, a word burned brightly in Shayne's mind: *Cat*.

He just had time to wonder what that tongue would feel like against his skin when he got his wish. Leon tilted him back, lowered his head to his chest, and lapped at his nipples. The sparks that action produced across his skin made Shayne bow his spine. He flung his head back, writhed, and the true power of the man holding him broke through the shivery excitement. Few human males could have lifted him like this. He doubted anyone could have held onto him while he writhed in pleasure.

“Oh crap. You’re real.”

Leon continued to lick, turning Shayne’s body into one long Popsicle. He managed to speak between each long stroke of his tongue. “Male real, or shape-shifter real?”

“I dunno. Both, I guess.” Shayne moaned. He tried to raise his head but each lick seemed to have sapped his strength, or maybe the position was just awkward. He let his weight ease, trusted Leon’s strength. Gooseflesh rushed over his skin in the wake of those long licks. His habitual fear remained, although at a distance. “I feel as though you’re tenderizing me.”

“Maybe I am,” Leon replied and Shayne couldn’t mistake the man’s amusement this time. When Leon tipped him backwards, the movement caused Shayne to cry out as he put his hands down to brace his body into something just short of a handstand. Leon practically held him vertical and inverted, working with his mouth, directing his licks into increasingly more intimate areas, spreading his limbs as necessary.

When that tongue set to work opening him, Shayne’s blood rushed from his head to other areas despite Leon holding him virtually upside down. He squealed in such pleasure that he forgot, just for a moment, to be afraid.

* * * *

Shayne was ready and open, gasping, shuddering, but Leon wasn’t ready to

mount him yet. He lay the man down and looked into those dark eyes as they wandered, unfocused. Shayne's chest heaved; it was nicely formed and pleasant to look at. Leon couldn't resist. He licked those small, pebbled nipples until Shayne writhed one more time. Those dark eyes swam back into focus and in his direction, almost in desperation. Shayne gave him such a pained, helpless look that Leon grinned at him.

Aware Shayne stared at an impressive set of teeth and that the sight sped the man's pulse due to apprehension, Leon snapped his teeth together. Normally, he didn't like to cause fear in anyone, let alone something so weak as a human, but fear and excitement appeared to exist in this man in equal measure. He didn't understand the contrasting emotions entirely, but he couldn't deny their existence. He breathed in. Ahh...that was just the right amount of seasoning. Shayne was afraid but not too afraid. Leon hadn't encountered that flavour before.

Try the flavour. Cody Warren's advice echoed in his mind.

Taking Shayne's hand, Leon guided it to his throbbing member, breathing in the scent as Shayne's fear skyrocketed once again. That fear receded almost immediately, but Leon's cock twitched all the same. It twitched so hard that Shayne lost his grip on it.

Not losing a beat, Shayne's fingers traced downwards, taking Leon's heavy, hanging testicles into his hand. From the way the man moved his fingers, Leon could tell that he enjoyed the feeling of their weight and the soft, warm skin covered in even softer and warmer fur. Leon dipped his head and nibbled Shayne's neck.

* * * *

Shayne was just wondering how he could ever hope to go down on the man let alone take him inside when Leon caught his hips in those large paws. Leon managed to convey something else in the movement, something almost possessive. Shayne wasn't looking for anything long-term and he certainly didn't foresee a

future with such a peculiar...man? Creature? Whatever Leon was, Shayne wasn't about to argue, not with a more insistent problem probing where he was sure it couldn't possibly go. He forgot about worrying over the outcome of the evening, turning all his attention to worrying how he could be accommodating.

Expecting pain, Shayne could almost feel the spike of agony already. He struggled. "I can't take you." He hated how full of fear and anguish his voice sounded but he couldn't help it.

"Yes, you can." Leon's voice sounded confident. All very well for him to say...

Shayne threw back his head, a garbled sound erupting from his throat. One finger pierced him, swiftly followed by a second. He didn't know when Leon reached for something to help, but something cold and slippery eased the way. *Sweet...* Leon's fingers were large. Two of them were the equivalent of Shayne's first lover, who'd been a nice introduction to gay sex. The smarting pain shot up his body, but the shock pulled to other sensations. The smarting discomfort faded to a throbbing ache that called to other things such as want and need. Then suddenly, Leon twisted those fingers inside him, corkscrewed up into his body. Shayne's body took over and he screamed around the growing, snaking delight of the intrusion.

Shayne let go of his worry and gave in. If his mouth said nothing, his body certainly conveyed what he wanted. He opened his legs, entwined them around Leon's waist, gasping at the bulk of the man and the expanse of those hips that opened him so thoroughly that he couldn't keep that eager part of his body from quivering. He maintained just enough sense to say, "Wait. We need..." He was going to say condoms but Leon already shook his head.

"Lycanthropes don't carry disease the way humans do."

That was all very well if you actually believed in lycanthropes, but then he did believe deep down where something instinctual overrode logic. Then he forgot everything except that tight, slowly expanding ring of muscle. They battled, Leon pushing in regardless and Shayne's mind waging a war with his body, which was trying to convince his body that it could cope. He didn't know at what point his body

went into overload so that his mind blanked out, but when he regained his senses, Shayne was aware of being full in a way that told him he'd never known the true meaning of *taking it like a man* before in his life.

* * * *

Leon wanted to ram home, even though his cock lay deeper than it ever had a human's body before. He watched Shayne's face for signs of discomfort. That expression conveyed many things but Leon couldn't read what they meant. That expression could be a smile or a grimace. Shayne faded even as he watched, growing slack, then trembling with tension, fainting almost, though Leon didn't know if he sought oblivion from pain or pleasure.

Unable to resist any longer, Leon's instincts took over. He began to rock his hips, no longer caring that a man lay beneath him. All his cock knew was that it lay embedded in heat and slickness. Small sounds issued from his throat as his delight mounted. Echoing moans slipped from between Shayne's lips.

* * * *

Something raked him inside and his world tilted. *What on earth was that?*

The sensation came again, overwhelming, and Shayne wouldn't have been surprised if he passed out. He tried to clear his mind. *Think*. Cat. Lion. He'd once watched a documentary about big cats and now he remembered watching a male lion mount a female. The narrator had said that the male lion's penis possessed backward pointing spines. The commentary expressed doubt, but the belief was such that they thought the spines brought on ovulation in the female by raking the vaginal walls. He might not have a vagina and he might not be able to ovulate, but his body wanted to do *something* in response. He'd never felt anything like this. He went insane.

Oh sweet Heaven and Hell! Shayne welcomed such madness. He wanted this. He did. He wanted to...*fuck. Please fuck me, please lick me, screw me, eat me...*

He wasn't sure what he actually meant by that last thought but he was too far gone to care.

* * * *

When Shayne first whispered, "Harder," Leon blinked, uncertain he'd heard him correctly.

Those dark eyes opened. That dark gaze wandered, seeking, until it found Leon's. Staring at him, Shayne spoke more clearly. "Harder. Faster."

Leon shook his head. "Not yet."

"Yesss." The word practically hissed out of Shayne's mouth.

"No." Aware he now fought his own body, his desire answering Shayne's call to plunge in and pull out with increasing ferocity, Leon gritted his teeth and held onto his resolve. "You're not ready."

"I can take it."

"No one ever has."

Shayne's gaze had wandered as they moved together but now the man looked back to his face. "I can. Harder. Deeper."

Shayne's cock largely went ignored. Even now, neither of them touched it, but it reared and twitched from the onslaught. Leon reached for the man's member and Shayne shook his head. "You touch me, I'll go."

Leon's eyes narrowed. "Just from this?" He gave his hips a little twist as he finished the sentence and plunged in just that little bit deeper. Shayne writhed once more. His gasps filled the room like sweet whispers until he recovered enough to nod. Leon grinned but this time Shayne didn't seem to mind the sight of his teeth. The shudder and thrill that went through the man tasted quite different. Leon drew the scent down until he could taste the full flavour, rolled the tang around on his

tongue and taste it fully, sticky and thick, in every one of his senses. He was just getting off on this deluge, about to explode, when the crafty little sod had the audacity to squeeze him, *hard*, with those strong internal muscles.

Could it be? Having slept with many human females, experience told him that as many were likely to gasp in delight over the sight of his cock as they were to scream and run from it. Enough spent the night with him to know that he wasn't completely out of a human's league but most women complained that they ached come morning. Some even ached during sex. Anyone in his life needed to be emotionally and physically strong. He'd not once considered Shayne in the running for such a position despite bringing him home, but now he wasn't so certain. Physically, at least, they appeared to be a good match.

Leon looked down into Shayne's eyes, making sure they were focused enough so he could be certain he heard and understood him. "You're a right little slut, aren't you?"

He almost laughed aloud when Shayne nodded an eager yes. He twisted his hips and Shayne cried out. Leon set to, intent on drawing more shouts out of Shayne's mouth every time he pulled back.

He lifted up onto his knees, taking Shayne's body with him, holding the man at the perfect angle. He drew figures of eight with his hips and circled his cock to one side on the outward stroke, to the other as he went down, *in*. Shayne's body fought him, but in such a way that it strove to take more than commonsense dictated. He didn't want to hurt Shayne. He wanted to bury his length but he didn't want to tear apart this body to do so. Only when he suddenly realized that his balls bounced against flesh did Leon know that Shayne had got his wish and he needn't have worried. He'd taken his progress slow and all things considered, he'd been wise to do so. Shayne's body opened, sucked him in and down, tightened, squeezed, pulsed and beckoned.

Much to Leon's consternation, he cried out just before Shayne, but once again, he didn't have to worry. They came together and he gave up trying to work out

which one of them screamed the longest or hardest even as their cries echoed off the walls around them.

* * * *

"Tell me about yourself," Shayne whispered into the darkness. He lay curled up, an arm flung across the other man's body, his head buried into the heat and warm scent of skin. A slight acrid scent lay beneath that comforting smell, but the aroma spoke of the right kind of sweat, the sweet kind of exertion and shared enjoyment. Feeling lazy and unwilling to move, Shayne wanted to hang on to the moment. He wanted to share something besides sex with the strange man, no matter what he was. He'd never felt so at peace and content. A lot of that was to do with the considerable but not unpleasant ache in the lower part of his body, but what did that matter? He'd not been able to lie like this, in bed with a man for a long time. Too long in fact, and he didn't want to think of giving it up. The night was young by his standards. He needed rest, but he didn't want to sleep and longed to recover quickly. He wanted another bout of sex with this delectable man.

"What do you want me to tell you? I lived with my family until I was old enough to leave the pride. That is, old enough by your society's standards. I went to college. During the holidays we went hunting in the woods but we didn't use rifles. I got a job. I now run my own business. I go to bed at night. I sleep. I eat. I need nothing else."

Shayne heard the words and he also heard something else beneath them, something melancholy, but he couldn't hold on to what that meant. He struggled to hold on to the waking world. He mumbled. "If you need nothing else, why were you looking for someone?"

He waited but Leon remained quiet and by the time Shayne recalled that he awaited an answer to his question, he realized that he dozed. He struggled to keep eyes open, making some sort of protesting sound, but his eyes closed despite his

wishes. Sleep dragged him down and for a split second he grew afraid. This felt more akin to unconsciousness. His body felt heavy, drugged almost. The darkness rose up to claim him. He thought that maybe Leon moved away from him, slipping off the bed, but he couldn't be certain and then he knew nothing.

* * * *

Leon stared down at Shayne for a moment before leaving him in the comfortable, safe cocoon of sleep. He left the room and wandered out into the apartment, padding through the rooms naked. He stopped in the kitchen to pour fresh cold water. Tipping back his head he drank from the glass, first as a human would, deep swallows until the first glass was gone and then he poured a second glass full. This time, his tongue curled backwards and lapped up the first few drops of water. He moved on, taking the glass with him, heading into the room he used as an office. There he switched on a small desk lamp, set the glass down and swiveled the lampshade so that it cast the light up to where he wanted. On the wall, on the far side of his desk, there hung a poster. He gazed at the largely orange and black image. Then he read the title. *Le Cirque de Monstres*. Grimacing, Leon slumped into the seat. He let his gaze wander back and forth over the picture, his mind going back in time to another location. The poster vanished. A mirror took its place.

His good eye wept. The bad one hid in a mass of purple and yellow bruises. Blood that had gushed from his nose covered his lips and chin. He'd taken another beating and survived it. The trouble was the owner of Le Cirque de Monstres went on to the other 'residents' if he put up a fight. He shouldn't care, but he did. Some were humans with real or fake deformities, but other shifters lived in similar cages, Carla, a true weregazelle, was held captive merely by the presence of her daughter and Maxwell's threats to harm her. Maxwell had paid a high price for them, knowing that her fear of Leon causing her to shift before the lion-man pretended to rip her apart would be much more entertaining for the crowd. Of course, there was always that slight risk that Leon, overcome with her scent, might one day do it for real.

Maxwell told her that if Leon ever did kill her by 'accident', her daughter would take her place. If she didn't go willingly into the ring and take her chances, her daughter would replace her sooner. Leon did his best to assure her that he would never hurt her.

The trouble was they both knew that for a lie. He would never intentionally hurt her, but in that moment when she changed, his instinct argued with his reason. He smelled animal, sweet and succulent. Her fear drove him to fury, exacerbating the dilemma. He tried to tell her that remaining calm would help them both, but then, of course, if she remained too calm she wouldn't change at all and Maxwell would take that as disobedience.

What Maxwell hadn't told Carla, and what Leon knew, was that the owner simply waited until the worst actually happened. He wouldn't be satisfied until he drummed up enough patrons who wanted to see a real kill. The circus was solely for adults and on occasion, Maxwell had started giving private shows for those who wanted to watch shape-shifters do other things in their animal forms.

Leon closed his eyes but that meant sound took over. Little screams and other cries always filled the circus during the night. He wouldn't survive many more of them. Leon was ready to die.

"What the...?"

Leon came to, turning his head to see Shayne standing in the doorway. Lost to his memories, Leon had lost track of how long he sat there. Morning was still a way off but an hour or two must have slid into the past while he reminisced. The younger man blinked as though trying to clear his mind of sleep, but Leon suspected he also tried to make sense of the image on the wall. Being part animal, part human—though uncertain which rose to the fore—Leon's first instinct was to give into anger. He fought the emotion.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked. Despite his resolution not to get angry, Leon could tell he sounded decidedly grumpy. Shayne flinched and he could hardly blame him. He tried to tone down his irritation. "I don't usually allow people to come in here."

"Because of that?" Shayne made his comment sound like a question but at the

same time, Leon didn't think he meant it as one. The answer was painfully and vibrantly obvious. "I woke and you weren't there," Shayne went on. "Tell me." He edged into the room. "Tell me what happened to you."

"If you're wise you'll go back to bed and forget what you've seen."

The younger man hesitated and then shrugged. "Maybe I'm not wise. Maybe I don't believe you really want me to do that."

Leon widened his eyes, surprised. "And why would that be?"

"You said you wanted a companion."

"And you're it?"

Again, Shayne shrugged. "Cody Warren seems to think so, but I'm not saying I am or I'm not. I only wanted..."

"Sex," Leon said, trying to make the remark sound disparaging. Shayne was clearly made of sterner stuff.

"Yes. And I won't deny that I'd like more." That dark gaze dropped down to Leon's lap only for a moment, towards his slumbering member. To Leon's aggravation, his cock twitched in response.

"You don't want to be my companion," Leon told him. "You don't want to sleep with lions. You want to fuck again and maybe I'll grant that, but in the morning you should get on with your life and let me get on with mine. It's better that way."

"Better for whom?"

As annoyed as he felt, Leon also found Shayne's persistence curious.

"Meaning?"

The other man hesitated. He sighed and looked suddenly tired. "Meaning I've never experienced anything like that. Meaning I don't believe..." again his gaze dropped to Leon's lap for a second before lifting back to his face, "I don't think I'll find another man who can measure up after tonight. Meaning that you don't want me to leave, not really. And I don't know what I want. I don't trust my judgment."

"Why not?"

"Because I've been wrong too often. Usually I meet a guy and I think this time

will be different. This time, things *were* different. Every instinct told me to run from you but I couldn't. I'm beginning to think my instincts are lousy and I always make the wrong choice and I should do the opposite for once." Shayne shrugged. Leon possessed enough sense to know that the other man was considering how much to tell him. "Everything has been telling me I should fear you from the first moment we met, but I couldn't hold on to that fear enough not to stick around to see what happened. Now, even disregarding the fear, part of me thinks you'd just complicate my life too much. Then again, I feel oddly comfortable near you and I don't just mean the sex. As for the sex... I like it rough, but not too rough. I thought..." Shayne looked him in the eye, drawing his body up, squaring his shoulders. If the human were one of his race and possessed a mane, Leon would have expected to see it ruffle out in defense. "We seem compatible. I thought you'd take the rough stuff too far, the dominant thing to the limit, but you're not like that. I mean, being what you are, if I'm to believe that and, well, even if you aren't and you're just a man... Even then, you're gentler than I expected and just rough enough. I tend to pick men who don't know when to stop."

"What makes you think it would be like that every time?"

"I don't. I can hope."

"I thought you just wanted to get laid."

"I did. I do. I wasn't looking for anything long-term."

"Wasn't?"

Once more, Shayne took his time. "I'm not ready to leave. I can't. Not go and leave you like this. I don't get you and I'm too curious just to..."

Leon made a sudden forward motion, before snapping back into his seat. The action was enough. Shayne flinched. "You're still afraid of me."

Shayne swallowed. "Yes. I've been afraid of many men for too long, and you like the fear but you hate it as well. That's what I don't understand and yet, at the same time, I do. I see myself in you."

Something in Leon almost made him laugh but he held back, waiting.

"I see two opposing desires. I like men who dominate me. I want someone I know can hurt me but that I don't believe will."

"You tell everyone your innermost secret desires?"

"No." Shayne shook his head then stood there, appearing confused. "I had some counseling after the last time someone beat me up. Facing what you want is part of the cure of being dependent on it."

Leon grinned. "Didn't take away your wanting it though."

Shayne grinned, ruefully. "No. It didn't do that. Back to the point; if I can be honest, so can you. You tell me you want a companion and then you grouch about it. You tell me go, leave, get out of your life and yet here you sit, with a light on and the door open, beckoning me to enter."

"You were sleeping. I had no idea you would wake."

"No. But how long would you have sat here? Until morning? Would you have still been here when the sun came up and I opened my eyes?"

Leon didn't know. He couldn't answer for certain.

"You invited me in," Shayne insisted. His gaze moved to the poster. Leon tried to read his expression but couldn't, though he sensed that Shayne meant that Leon invited him not just into his home but into his life and his life included a messy, inconvenient past. His past hung on the wall, clearly, for anyone to see. He'd come across the poster a year after his escape from the circus. Leon could recall the shock of finding it even now, flapping in the breeze, ripped, torn at the edges, stuck to an old billboard in some forsaken town. He could remember staring at it, a bottle of beer frozen midway to his lips. Looking around to make sure no one watched, he'd ripped it even more tearing it down, folding it, and stuffing it inside his shirt. He had no idea why he kept it, especially when he hated the idea of anyone else seeing it, yet he couldn't bring himself to throw the poster away. So he kept it hidden. He never let anyone else come in here and yet he'd sat with the door open.

"Don't pity me," he suddenly said.

"I take it you weren't there voluntarily."

Leon remained quiet for a moment and then shook his head. "No. Maxwell, the owner, captured me. I was the star of the show."

"Why didn't you simply refuse?"

For several seconds, Leon just sat there, deciding whether to answer or not. When he started to speak, he couldn't say which of them was the more surprised, him or Shayne. He told his story and slowly Shayne moved further into the room. By the time Leon finished, Shayne stood in front of him, staring up at the poster. Leon realized that he'd been staring at the white round moon of Shayne's butt for sometime. He stood up and walked forward.

* * * *

Shayne became aware of heat at his back, only this time he knew the man standing there. Then another, more insistent heat filled that deep, hidden, intimate valley below. He didn't know if he could take another round of the same so soon. "I don't..."

"Shut up!" Leon barked, and Shayne closed his mouth with an echoing snap.

Hot fingers pawed at his hips, sliding down to cup his butt. Pushed, Shayne staggered, and ended up leaning over the desk.

"I know you want this," Leon murmured. "I can smell it."

He was right. Shayne did want to fuck, or rather, his disobedient body wanted to, and his reckless, willful, immoral ass grasped Leon's groping fingers and then the tip of his cock as the man wriggled into the welcoming gap. He hadn't even touched Leon but the man was rock hard.

"Soft," Leon mumbled, almost in contrast, his large fingers kneading the flesh.

"No." Shayne managed to complain. He slipped to the side, easing out of Leon's grasp, taking the man by surprise. He turned, seeing the shock in the large man's expression before Leon let loose a growl.

"You think you can fuck something wild and leave when you want to. Every

human always thinks they'll get what they want, no less and no more. They forget what they're dealing with. Do you think that you can change your mind and you can get the big pussy to open his heart? I don't curl up in anyone's lap."

Shayne fell, one large paw encircling his arm dragging him forward. His knees hit the carpet and he scrambled forward to avoid carpet-burn as Leon pulled him closer. A hint of his old fears reared up. He not only had a history of suffering abuse at others' hands, but he also beat himself up every time he repeated the pattern of poor relationship choices.

Certain he saw the same thing in Leon, a similar pain, Shayne put up with this abuse, positive the man's annoyance wasn't even aimed at him. Leon wanted to feel pain. Shayne knew because he'd been in the same mental situation too often. Suffer enough and still some part of you thought you deserved even more because you were stupid enough to suffer in the first place.

Leon sat down and that erection, already rising towards Heaven and Shayne's mouth as though they were one and the same, nudged his lips. Shayne shook his head, casting his gaze up to Leon's face. He wanted to take him. He just couldn't. Not yet. Was it even safe to do so, seeing as Leon's cock was a little different from a human's penis? Shayne cast a glance at Leon's cock, trying to see if there were any subtle differences. If those spines existed, he couldn't see them with his naked eye. Just as you needed to see a cat's tongue under a microscope, maybe he needed to examine Leon's cock the same way.

"Did you get your revenge?" Shayne asked, mostly to distract the man from forcing that appendage into his mouth before he had a chance to discuss his concerns. "How did it end? How did you get free?"

"You want a romantic notion?" Leon's lips pulled back into a sneer. "I agreed to pay Maxwell's price. You see, I'd kept my nerve and resolve. I was never going to commit murder by accident. He made me an offer I couldn't refuse. I agreed to kill the gazelle for a private audience."

Shayne shook his head, leaning back as far as the grip on his arm would allow.

He never knew shock could feel so cold. "No. I don't believe you."

For just a moment, the expression on Leon's face said he was going to insist that what he said was true. Then Leon blinked and a single tear fell.

He blinked. The biggest mistake of all, apparently. He blinked and the tears came. He let go of Shayne, hung his head in apparent shame, buried his face in his hands and cried.

Time passed; his shoulders hitched, he sobbed. Shayne wanted to touch him but dared not. When his crying eased, Shayne said. "If you weren't going to kill her by accident, there's no way you'd kill her on purpose."

Leon nodded. "You're right."

"You loved her," Shayne said, the words falling from his lips softly. The sudden realization and conviction that what he said was true, struck him hard. Leon had once loved a woman. Shayne silently sneered at the sheer absurdity of his feelings. Of course, Leon loved women. He'd talked about mating with females, wanting a companion.

Besides, what did Leon's sexuality matter? Shayne was out to have fun; that was all. Despite all this talk of companions, he couldn't possibly stay. Leon's emotions towards him would only matter if he wanted to see the man again and he didn't want to do that. Maybe he'd like to fuck again before dawn, but his job waited for him back home. His family...

Shayne bit back a sigh. He hated his job and his family considered his homosexuality a passing phase. Everything else he did they viewed with disdain. He could just imagine what they would think if he told them he'd fucked a lion-man even if he could prove he told the truth. Many things in his life were wrong. He needed to sort out more than his sexual relationships. Leon's voice called him back from self-pity.

"He got another to do what I couldn't do. Not even someone held captive in chains, someone *willing*." Leon said that as though he couldn't even comprehend such an idea. Shayne, being human, felt little surprise at all, then immediate disgust

that he could all too easily imagine a human screwing another over like that, while Leon, part animal, found the very thought so terrible.

"I believed her screams were part of a dream. By the time I opened my eyes, it was too late. I could smell her blood. My anger and despair brought on the change and that enabled me to bust out of my cage."

Shayne frowned. "I don't understand."

Leon looked at him, one bloodshot eye peering out from between his fingers.

"I often tried to suppress the change. We aren't called by the moon as wolves are. You have to remember, we're an entirely different animal. Many shape-shifters can bring on the change at will or in times of duress, which invariably means there are those of us who can't always control it when we should. Maxwell knew how to control me by the use of drugs. I won't say he didn't make mistakes. He almost killed me once and many a time I felt my heart race when it shouldn't.

"I don't know what happened that night. I think pure rage helped me fight off the drug. The bars on the cage weren't what truly held me, anyway. The chain on my ankle did and it should have held me even after the change. I broke my ankle breaking free and still I walked on it. I didn't feel the pain until much later."

"Did you kill him?"

"I don't know."

Shayne blinked. The certainty that Leon would tell him a sweet, if somewhat hideous, tale of revenge left him feeling cold in its wake. He couldn't imagine any other scenario. Leon evidently saw his confusion.

"I remember nothing but blurred images. I know I fought the shape-shifter that had killed Carla. I know I freed her daughter, but other than that, I recall nothing. I killed and I fear who or what and how many I killed in my fury. Blind rage doesn't cover it. I *was* blind to everything but my anger and I know I spilled blood. I can only hope I was discriminate in my choice.

"The circus caught fire at one point and the heat of the flames was what drove me back. The first thing I remember afterwards is coming to, half way through the

change, crossing a field and looking back. I saw the night sky alight with orange flames and became aware of the pain in my ankle. Other shapes in the darkness passed by me. Other escapees, but I took no notice of who or what they were. I carried on, leaving that part of my life behind. I don't know when I passed out, but I woke up in a ditch, in human form, dirty, covered in mud and blood, naked. The taste of blood lined my mouth and I knew I had killed. I just didn't know who, what, or how many."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Leon sat in silence for a good minute. "I don't know. I thought..."

"You thought what? You want me to see you as some kind of monster? Why?"

Leon's gaze lifted to his. "So that you'll leave."

Shayne frowned. "I never said I was going to stay. Not...exactly."

"You're considering it."

"You've not even asked me to stay."

Leon shrugged. "Cody chose you for me," he said, as though that explained everything; maybe to Leon, that one factor did. Shayne began to get the sneaking suspicion that Cody knew what he was doing. He didn't exactly want to stay, but he couldn't say he wanted to leave.

"Fuck me." The words whispered out of his mouth and Leon blinked at him in surprise.

"What?"

"Fuck me and I'll know."

Leon stared at him in what looked like disbelief for a second and then he laughed. "You're crazy, you know that."

"So my folks tell me."

Leon gave him an odd little double take at that comment, but then grinned. "I thought you said you couldn't manage it again so soon. Think you can handle the king of the jungle do you?"

Shayne swallowed. He had said that. "You're not the king of the jungle

though, are you? The tiger is." Shayne also recalled some argument over this and that some believed the tiger the more dominant species.

* * * *

Leon stood, lifting Shayne as he did, pleased when he heard the little gasp of surprise leave the man's lips. He shoved him back, hard, against the wall, holding him there with the long press of his body. He forced Shayne's mouth open with his tongue and ground his body in against that smaller frame.

The way Shayne sagged told Leon he'd made the man weak at the knees. A flash of guilt gripped him but he chased the emotion back. To Hell with the guilt; he'd lived alone too long and Shayne said he liked sex rough. Time to find out how much rough sex Shayne could handle.

Not waiting for Shayne's agreement, he turned him around, grasping Shayne's hips, tilted his butt back in full possession. The scent of the man told him that Shayne knew just what he meant by that little gesture. A jerk opened Shayne's thighs. The man gasped. Leon growled against the back of his neck as Shayne's fear notched up a little.

"Want to cut and run yet?"

Shayne shook his head. He swallowed and then swallowed again, coughing a little as though he needed to clear his throat. "No."

Leon leaned into him. "You can't hide what you're feeling. I can smell you're scared."

"Scared, true, but I'm not running."

Despite his apparent determination, Shayne's pulse quickened. Leon jolted Shayne by gripping his upper arms, pressed him into the wall so he stood between two equally hard surfaces. When Shayne made no sound, Leon jolted him again, and again, until the smaller man could do nothing but make a small sound of complaint.

"You're angry with yourself, not me," Shayne gasped out, sounding very

positive about that.

Leon snarled, full-throated. The force of it stirred Shayne's hair and the man's heartbeat leapt. Leon leaned in. "Now you smell like food." He made sure his voice sounded satisfied.

Shayne's hands lay flat against the wall, one on either side of him. His face turned to the left, his right cheek pressed into the wall. He looked plastered there. He clearly tried to swallow down his fear but his heart was doing erratic things no human heart should do. It took Shayne a few moments before he clearly forced out the words, "You won't hurt me."

Hurt. Such a little word, four letters. He shouldn't have asked for help to find a companion. He didn't deserve one and this didn't feel like overwhelming love, more like curiosity.

He liked Shayne even though he didn't want to. He could imagine taking the time to get to know him better, acquiring a taste for gay sex, and when you got right down to it, was he truly looking for love or just something like it? Maybe he longed for something more like the type of love and companionship two people acquired when they'd been together a long time and, strangely, he already felt at ease with this man. Shayne truly felt comfortable and he didn't just mean on the end of his cock.

"You're that certain," Leon whispered into his ear.

"I am."

"Funny that. Because I'm not."

Leon grabbed Shayne and turned him around, slamming him back into the wall with brutal force.

* * * *

Everything shook. His bones jarred; his teeth clattered. Stunned, Shayne was only vaguely aware of Leon's hands lifting his legs. Instinct told him to wrap them around Leon's waist. If he had doubted the man's supernatural strength before, no

reason existed for him to doubt it now. He'd seen men do this but Shayne wasn't light. Leon lifted him as though he weighed nothing at all.

Once again, Shayne forgot to worry about what lay ahead and turned his attention to worrying what was happening in the present. He had barely enough time to accept he was going to get fucked against a wall and to feel grateful that this wasn't the first time tonight when Leon slid into him. Or rather, he let Shayne slide down *onto* him. Leon let gravity do the work and Shayne flung back his head, crying out "Ow" when he hit the back of his head against the wall.

That ridiculous moment widened Leon's eyes. He could see him struggling with amusement and maybe there was a spark of irritation woven into it. Leon's expressions waged a war until his face settled on an expression that was altogether serious.

Leon took to fucking him, settling into a deep pumping action with his hips. Shayne could do nothing but hang on. Pleasure mounting, Shayne became slowly aware that with each thrust Leon strove to hurt him. At times he did, but before Shayne could cry out in complaint, he'd withdraw and whatever was different about Leon's cock, caused such delight at each withdrawal that it drove the pain away and made it secondary.

"Scream for me," Leon growled when he apparently wasn't getting the response he wanted.

"No."

Fingers tangled in his hair and forced Shayne's head back at a painful angle. No longer pressed against the wall, his shoulders leaned against that hard surface instead, but his hips drew forward so Leon acquired unrestricted access. His body was almost doubled up and if Leon stepped back, he'd fall to the floor; weight and gravity would drag him from that huge penetration whether he wanted off or not. Something in Leon's eyes said the man wasn't letting go.

"I know I'm hurting you," Leon said on a grunt, doing something with his hips to drive the point home then growing still.

Shayne couldn't help but whimper. Leon hadn't withdrawn, so for the moment no pleasure existed to calm the discomfort he'd caused. Leon stood there, holding him, quite still. Those peculiar eyes searched his as though he looked for something. "Ask me to stop."

Shayne shook his head, unable to talk. Leon jolted him and this time when his head hit the wall, the thump was no accident. Jarred, Shayne swallowed down his fear and pain. "No."

"I'll hurt you for real," Leon warned. There was no mistaking the challenge in that tone.

Shayne whipped his head left and right. "No you won't." The other man frowned. "You won't," Shayne insisted. "You're afraid you will but you won't. That's the trouble with trust. Only time proves it worthy so you need to take the chance. I'll trust you won't hurt me and stick around if that's what you want. I'll trust you won't hurt me, but you'll have to trust that you won't hurt me too."

"Don't you understand?" Leon snarled, forcing their bodies together ruthlessly. "I don't know if I killed any humans that night. I don't remember."

Shayne stared into Leon's eyes from inches away, his body forced into an impossible though somewhat lascivious position that threatened to cramp his lungs. "That wasn't you. You were what that man made of you. You're not like that anymore. How long are you going to keep punishing yourself for something that happened to you that you couldn't...control?"

Even as the words slipped out, his voice trailed off. He might as well be speaking about himself. Leon stared at him a moment and then laughed. "Two of a kind," he said. "Cody does know how to mix a strange cocktail."

"We're okay?" Shayne relaxed as Leon eased back, though his mind was awash with thoughts.

"We're okay. For now."

For now. Shayne still didn't know if he intended to stay on a permanent basis but one thing he did know, they would have rather a lot to talk about. So much so,

that the discussion would likely take several days. He'd have to call into work sick.

Oddly, he didn't once doubt that Leon would let him stay during the next few days. The change in the lion-man was sudden. The soft brush of fur from Leon's groin against his buttocks as the other man moved made him writhe just at that moment when he hadn't meant to. Leon stilled.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," he said, and then moved as though he intended to ease out of Shayne's body and set him down.

"No," Shayne protested. "Don't. That is..." He glanced away and then looked back. "I don't suppose you'd care to finish what you started. Only slower, maybe. I only got to try one type of slow screw in the bar."

Leon's expression conveyed puzzlement for a moment and then a grin of understanding split his face. "Like this?" Leon eased his movements.

"Oh, god yes, that's perfect." It was, too. The pleasure rippled through him in waves.

"The question," Leon said, "is just how fuzzy a screw against the wall do you want?"

* * * *

Shayne said he'd fetch them drinks. They hadn't set foot in Del Fantasma for two weeks but Leon said they should let Cody know they were okay and Shayne agreed. They'd not settled everything between them, though Shayne had pitched his job the very moment his boss started giving him grief about taking a couple of days off sick. He'd worked for that jerk for six years without taking one day he shouldn't. Leon owned his own company. He could get Shayne a job if he wanted him to, but Shayne thought he'd look around for himself first. Independence was a good thing to have in some areas of his life. Until he learned how to recover so he could walk straight the next day, he wasn't up to finding any sort of job anyway.

Planning to go out tonight, he'd begged Leon to take things easy on him last

night and then again this morning. The future wasn't written in stone, but the truth was both of them knew Shayne wasn't going anywhere at present. He didn't know what they shared. Leon said it wasn't love exactly and Shayne agreed, but maybe it could be one day. For now, they enjoyed the simple pleasure of feeling good in each other's presence.

A dull, semi-permanent ache that had taken up residence in a certain part of his anatomy reminded him of other perks to this relationship.

"So," Cody said from the other side of the bar, grinning in Leon's direction. "What can I get you? Another Slow Screw Against the Wall In the Dark Side of Mexico City?"

"No," Shayne said, trying to keep the smile from his face and failing. "I think I'll stick to a Slow Fuzzy Screw, thank you very much."

The End

We hope you enjoyed *Del Fantasma: A Slow Fuzzy Screw* by Sharon Maria Bidwell. Aspen Mountain Press is excited to present a series of romances set in the paranormal bar of *Del Fantasma*.

Keep informed of other Aspen Mountain Press releases by joining our newsletter, available at www.AspenMountainPress.com, or one of our yahoo loops at: www.AMP_Community@yahoogroups.com our chat group or www.AMP_Mountaineer@yahoogroups.com a group where you'll receive announcements only approximately once a week.

Just in case you missed it, our first release of this series was: *Del Fantasma: Texas Tea* by Maura Anderson. Read on for an excerpt.

Del Fantasma: Texas Tea

Lara took a few moments to just enjoy the brief peace. The scent of the nearby ocean carried strongly in the mist and, audible even over the noise of nearby traffic, she could hear the rhythmic pulse of the distant waves. "The heartbeat of the earth," as an eloquent ghost once told her.

Finally ready to meet the amusing and helpful Cody Warren in person, she moved to shut the car door then froze at the prickle of awareness that flowed over her skin. The eerie sensation was followed by whispered words that were as much felt as heard. *Get your keys first or you'll be here a long time.*

Sure enough, the key with the rental agency's tag attached sat on the passenger seat next to the printout of Cody's instructions of how to get from her B&B to Del Fantasma. "Damn it."

She shimmied across the driver's seat to grab the key and picked up her purse from the floorboards as well. It's no wonder she was so forgetful, she was so tired she could barely think at all, "Thanks."

Could they hear her? Never quite sure, she always thanked the ghosts anyway. It seemed like the polite thing to do, even if they didn't acknowledge her speaking to them. She'd certainly never found any believable handbook to tell her proper ghost etiquette, so making it up as she went was the best she could do.

The parking lot of the tidy adobe building was nearly empty with only two cars other than her rental. Cody's chatty emails indicated the bar was doing quite well and was packed most nights, so they must not have opened for business yet today.

Near the entrance another sign was posted with the business hours that confirmed her guess. The bar didn't open for an hour yet. About to retreat to her car to wait, one of the doors swung open and a large male figure appeared in the doorway.

"Lara?"

His voice almost mesmerized her. Combine the deep, gravely rumble with the muscular body in the black t-shirt and dark pants and she'd have drooled if she'd been any normal woman. Even the slight scruffiness of his dark hair was attractive. But it didn't do any good to drool over something you couldn't have. She'd finally learned that lesson at great expense.

With a mental shake, Lara reminded herself of why she was here. To meet Cody's friend, someone who could both guide her around the Old Point Loma Lighthouse and perhaps allow her a little additional access to areas that weren't normally open to visitors. She was here to finish her book, that's all. Taking refuge in businesslike formality, Lara extended her hand to the imposing man. "Hi, you must be Cody."

He took hold of her hand and gave it a strong shake. "Good afternoon."

Her eyes widened at the tingle up her spine. Despite his warm, calloused skin, despite his firm grip, Cody was something other than human. He wasn't a ghost either, but something in between. Something with the eerie otherworldly feel of a spirit, but intermingled with a sensation she could only think of as earthy, primal, almost predatory. She'd never encountered anything like it before, anything like him before.

"Ummm... I let my agent know I was on my way here." Lara hoped her voice didn't betray her sudden uncertainty.

Cody gave her hand another small squeeze before he released it. "Don't look so worried, Lara. I'm no threat to you. "

There wasn't any reason to think he was, not really. Although they'd met online, he'd only offered to introduce her to his Park Ranger friend. It wasn't like he was asking her for a date or anything. She gulped and pushed away the niggling fear, then allowed herself to be tugged through the door and into the brightly lit room. Half the chairs were still upended on top of the tables and racks of shiny glasses were set out on the bar surface. An assortment of liquor bottles stood in front of the shelves. Obviously, she'd interrupted the preparations before opening for the evening.

She felt Cody close behind her and spun around, ready to apologize and offer to return later but when she met his gorgeous blue eyes, the words seemed trapped in her throat. For just an instant she was unable to look away or even to move. The slow smile Cody gave her broke the strange paralysis and she struggled in vain to remember just what she'd been about to say.

He gestured toward a table near the bar. "Have a seat. Texas should be here soon. Would you like something to drink while you wait?" A slow wink gave him a rakish air. "Anything you want, on the house."

Confused by what she sensed in Cody as well as her own reactions, she sat and, without thinking, asked for her favorite comfort drink. “May I have some hot tea, please?”

Damn. He probably didn’t keep hot tea in the bar. It didn’t tend to be a popular evening drink. But he’d said anything she wanted, after all. She challenged him with a steady gaze, her sense of control returning a bit as she waited for him to admit he didn’t have her drink.

Instead, Cody just gave her another unsettling smile and pulled a brand new box of Oolong tea from a shelf she could barely see the edge of. At her nod, he disappeared into the doorway behind the bar, tea in hand.

Not only did he have hot tea, but he had her favorite kind? This was just too weird and she should certainly be immune to weird by now.

Neither the situation nor Cody seemed dangerous, at least not to her. The ghosts usually warned her of threats. It was one of the useful side effects of her affinity with them. Too bad their presence also scared off every sane person she spent any time with until she no longer even tried to get close to anyone. Being alone by choice was easier than the inevitable rejection when the ghosts decided to frighten them away from her.

The sounds of clanking and voices from the doorway Cody had disappeared through drew Lara’s attention back to the here and now. The decor wasn’t really what she’d expected—from the name of the bar, she’d almost expected a *Dias De Los Muertos* theme of bright colors, skulls and maybe some skeletons but, instead, it tended toward a modern mission style with a lot of wood and earth-toned Southwestern touches. A warm and cozy bar for such an unusual name.

From the corner of her eye, she caught a hint of movement and whipped her head around to follow it. She caught just the briefest glimpse of what looked like a

dog before it disappeared down the hallway marked "Private". A dog in a food establishment?

Poised halfway out of her chair, she tried to see if she could spot the animal again. Cody suddenly chuckled directly behind her and she leapt sideways. Trying to not fall on her face, Lara teetered, arms flailing in a desperate attempt to regain her balance.

A hard yank from Cody and she was in her chair again, sprawled with legs spread and heart pounding so hard she thought she would pass out. "You scared me." Her voice sounded breathless and trembling, adrenaline already doing a number on her system.

He had the nerve to laugh at her and she forgot her fear, forgot that he wasn't just a human, even forgot that he was nearly a foot taller and much heavier than she was. Her lifelong hatred of being laughed at made her temper flare. Too exhausted to moderate her impulsive reactions, when he set her mug of tea on the table and his arm was within reach, she lashed out and slugged it. Hard.

The force of the impact screamed up her arm. The man must be made of stone. He merely laughed harder while she cradled her now throbbing hand to her chest and glared. A small part of her was appalled at her loss of control over her temper and actions but she successfully ignored it.

"You sure you don't want to act as her tour guide, Code?" The husky baritone voice, sultry, overlaid with a sexy drawl, preceded the man who sauntered from the hall.

Oh. My. God. Attractive as Cody was, this man was stunning. Shorter than her host, he was just as muscular but more compact. Her fingers longed to explore the texture of the glossy black hair he wore cut military-short. His face was tanned and clean-shaven with a tantalizing square jaw and high cheekbones she'd bet spoke of more than a touch of Native American mixed with his obvious Latino ancestry.

Every movement was silent and graceful, nearly soundless, even in his jeans and cowboy boots. The sinuous sway of his hips as he walked reminded her of the calculating, smooth motions of a wild animal, a predator.

And his eyes, his eyes were a bright gold she'd never seen before, framed by thick black lashes that only served to make them more piercing. They were an almost inhuman color, one that would be more at home in the face of an animal.

"Texas, this is Lara Saunders. Lara, this is my friend Matthew Martinez. He's the Park Ranger I told you about."

Lara continued to gape at the newcomer, oblivious to the hand he held out to her until he forcibly picked up her own from the table to shake it.

Even his touch felt wild and untamed. And it carried the unmistakable touch of the spirit world as well.

* * * *

Del Fantasma: Texas Tea

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